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OPINION | COMMENTARY

What Are Republicans For?

An answer to President Biden's question from the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton.

By Joseph Epstein
Jan. 25, 2022 6:39 pm ET

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In President Biden's diffuse, platitudinous and often flat-out erroneous press conference of last week, one question stood out as potent and still awaits an answer. Mr. Biden asked —was it three or four times?—what his opponents, the Republicans, were *for,* apart from denying him credit for any accomplishments he might have had during his first year in office.

We all know what the Republicans are against, which includes the crime currently rampant on our big cities' streets, the want of anything resembling order on our southern border, the melange of progressive giveaway programs and more. But what is the party, what in general, are American conservatives actually for? The standard answer would include free enterprise, freedom from interference from big government, equality of opportunity if not necessarily of results, the wisdom of the Founding Fathers as embodied

in our Constitution, and now, more recently, open schools, an unlocked-down economy, fairness in reporting in the media on politics generally.

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What, though, is the Republican, or conservative, message? The Democratic, or progressive, message is clear. Democrats care about social justice, they care about climate change, they care about women and almost all minorities, they care about voting rights—they, not to put too fine a point on it, care! This message leaves Republicans as the party that doesn't care, or at least doesn't care enough.

In the mind of the general public, Republicans remain the party of the wealthy—the infamous 1%. That the bumptious billionaire Donald Trump at the moment looks to be the party's leader doesn't help. Republicans, in this view, are anti-Democrat, little more, with no appealing positions of their own, no worldview, no philosophy beyond selfishness.

This of course isn't true. But Republican leaders haven't done enough to answer the charges against their party. Which is a pity because answers are at hand. The proponents of conservatism (Adam Smith, Alexis de Tocqueville, F.A. Hayek) have been far more impressive than those of liberalism (Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill, John Rawls). In fact, I wonder if the most recent proponent of conservatism, the late English philosopher Roger Scruton (1944-2020) doesn't provide the message that conservatism, and with it the Republican Party, has long needed.

In an essay titled "Governing Rightly," included in his collection "Confessions of a Heretic," Scruton makes the case for conservatism as the party of freedom. He writes: "Those tasks that only governments can perform—defense of the realm, the maintenance of law and order, the repair of infrastructure and the coordination of relief in emergencies—are forced to compete for their budgets with activities that free citizens, left to

themselves, might have managed far more efficiently through the association of volunteers, backed up when necessary by private insurance."

Scruton adds: "Wasn't it those associations of volunteers that redeemed, for Alexis de Tocqueville, the American experiment, by showing that democracy is not a form of disorder but another kind of order, and one that could reconcile the freedom of the individual with an obedience to an overarching law." America, in this reading, was the land of the free, though today, led by people attempting to impose ideas that feel alien to many of its citizens, it feels less and less free all the time.

For Scruton it is crucial that citizens recognize not only the bad side of government but also the good. Government after all isn't exclusively a "system of power and domination," but "a search for order, and for power only in so far as power is required by order." Order is crucial, "for it is simply the other side of freedom, the thing that makes freedom possible." Scruton's point is that while we may have a deep suspicion of government, we yet "have a deeper need for it."

"Conservatism should be a defense of government," Scruton argues, "against its abuse by liberals." The growth of the welfare state is one notable such abuse, causing people to "turn their backs on freedom and become locked in social pathologies that undermine the cohesion of society." One sees this above all in the countries of the European Union, where government is no longer felt to be owned by the people but is the property of "an anonymous bureaucracy" on which all depend for their comforts. In the U.S., this is still only true of those who depend on government welfare, but their number is growing.

The role of conservatism, and by extension of the Republican Party, is, in Scruton's words, "to map out the true domain of government, and the limits beyond which action by the government is a trespass on the freedom of the citizen." The true message of the Republican Party, then, should be not that it is the enemy of government but the advocate of a far better government, one that is both necessary and yet comports with the freedom of its citizens.

Mr. Epstein is author, most recently, of "Gallimaufry: A Collection of Essays, Reviews, Bits."

Appeared in the January 26, 2022, print edition.

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