

# The War of the “We” against the “Me”

by P. J. O’Rourke

**E**d told me to be upbeat tonight. It’s our 25th anniversary; everything is going great. We’re a successful think tank. We’ve got a big building. We’ve got a lot of generous donors. We get quoted in the newspapers—just today in the *Washington Post*’s Style section. And when we get quoted, newspapers hardly ever refer to us anymore as the nutty Ayn Rand disciples who want dope and machineguns legalized.

So I’m supposed to be upbeat tonight, but I say, no. Upbeat is for sissy, do-gooder organizations, like Brookings and the UN and the Democratic Party. Cato is not a do-gooder organization. We’re libertarians. We’re not here to do good; we’re here to do anything we damn well please—and take the consequences. Because we are real advocates of freedom, and freedom has consequences.

Freedom, as we real advocates of it know, is mostly about responsibility. And I speak to you as a man who freely contracted to pay a very large mortgage, who freely got married, freely fathered kids, and, of my own free will, bought an SUV that has to go to the gas station every 11 miles. There are times when it seems that freedom is *all* consequences.

I say the hell with upbeat because I’m not upbeat about the cause that Cato represents. Upbeat is for people who want to feel good about their cause—the reformers, the progressives, the revolutionaries, the idealists, the utopians, the collectivists, and the rest of the altruistic scum of the earth.

Now, why do those people want to feel good? They want to feel good in order to convince themselves that they are good people. They want to be good people in order to be better than other people. And they want to be better than other people in order to push the rest of us around. That’s all that it’s about.

Our cause is not a good cause. Our cause is a grim cause. We are the front-line soldiers in the endless war of the “we” against the “me.”

You and I did not become libertarians because we’re altruists. In fact, there is a certain selfishness to libertarianism. (“Enlightened self-interest” is the euphemism that we use.) My house, my car, my family may be a lot of responsibility, but I would rather take that responsibility than have any of you dating my wife or backing my car into phone poles or leaving your dirty socks on my bedroom floor. (Although when it comes to the kids, if any of you want to baby-sit for free, I’m willing to share.)

But it’s common sense, really, more than common selfishness, that drives the libertarian philosophy. We hold the individual to be self-evident. We believe in the pri-



**P. J. O’Rourke, best-selling author and Cato Mencken Research Fellow, addresses the guests at Cato’s 25th Anniversary dinner.**

our welfare system that lets all the less famous and less beautiful Elizabeth Hurleys put the cost of their children on my income tax tab.

There is such a thing as mass jubilation—among young idiots at N’Sync performances. There is such a thing as mass death—Hiroshima and Auschwitz. But atomic bombs, genocide, and boy band concerts are not things that bring joy to the heart of a libertarian.

Whenever a libertarian hears the word “masses,” he knows that those masses are in for something rotten—mass hysteria, mass movements, mass murder, mass starvation. Notice how, when collectivists are speaking, mass poverty is always paired with individual wealth. Draw your own conclusions. There is only one happy phrase that makes reference to the masses, and that is mass exodus, when everybody is on his own two feet, trying to get the hell away from everybody else.

I say that logic leads to libertarianism. But also, in libertarianism there is, frankly, an element of despair, because we know that people aren’t good. Some of the religious among us believe in the doctrine of original sin. The rest of us watch Maury Povich. We know that people are sneaky, people are greedy, people are cruel. Yet we, as libertarians, want to turn people loose to do whatever they want. We want that because we also know that no matter what bad things individuals do, they are better than the things that get done to individuals by the collective will.

And I don’t even mean the really gross manifestations of the collective will such as totalitarianism or public television. I mean, imagine a rich farmer going door to door in your suburb, trying to get huge subsidies from you, out of your grocery money. Imagine a steel tycoon down at the docks in Long Beach trying to impose a one-man tariff on cheap foreign steel. Imagine someone trying to inflate his own currency with a Xerox machine at Kinko’s. Imagine Enron trying to cheat the whole nation without the help of an impenetrable tax code, obscurantist accounting principles, and the dark

macy of the individual, the sanctity of the individual, the freedom and responsibility of the individual because we are individuals. We are not ants or bees. We do not reason or love or live or die collectively.

I may say, like President Clinton, that I feel your pain. But, like President Clinton, I’m lying. Though I will admit, on the subject of feeling the pain of others, that the Clinton administration was collectively a pain in the butt.

Anyway, when Elizabeth Hurley has a torrid love affair, I don’t get the pleasure. So why should I get the bill for child support? And that’s a good question, given

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powers of the Securities and Exchange Commission. It couldn’t be done.

Libertarians don’t expect miracles from individuals. We just expect individuals to be individuals, with the limited scope for evil that individuals enjoy. Real evil is coercive, and an individual does not have the power of coercion that a government has. Real good is voluntary, and no government, however democratic, is fully voluntary—as Florida voters discovered in November 2000. Only individuals have free will; systems do not. Voluntary good is done by individuals, for the benefit of individuals. Some of that voluntary good is going to be tasteless and dumb and shortsighted, of little value to mankind as a whole. But the ugliest strip mall is better than the most beautiful gulag.

This gives libertarians hope. But I’m not sure that it’s wise for us to be hopeful. The individual has powerful enemies. Over the course of history those enemies have, in most times and in most places, defeated the individual utterly. Libertarians have a lot of things to fight. Libertarians must fight the herd instinct. This is a powerful instinct: witness the lemming. (Although we should thank the lemming for the wonderful weapon of simile that it gives libertarians when it jumps off cliffs—something, incidentally, that lemmings always do in masses.)

Libertarians must fight not only instinct but ideas. And two of the most ingrained ideas in the human mind are the idea of collective entitlement and the idea of zero-sum outcomes.

Collective entitlement is the notion that I am owed something, not because of what I made or did but because I belong to a category. I am owed something because I’m a member of the proletariat who deserves the fruits of capital, a member of the female sex who deserves affirmative action, an African American who deserves slavery reparations, an American Indian who deserves the whole darn country, or, in my case, a middle-aged white guy who deserves some peace and quiet when he comes home from work (and some sports on TV).

Notice how the idea of collective entitlement is much more popular than the idea of collective forfeiture. Very, very rarely does somebody volunteer to go to jail because



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the other members of his ethnic group have been running the protection rackets in Brooklyn for decades.

And then there are zero-sum outcomes—the notion that whatever it is you’ve got, you’ve got it because you took it from me. Like all bad ideas, this has some basis in reality. For millions of years humans were dependent for their livelihood on land, and there’s only so much of it—unless you’re Dutch and you’ve drained your own. (And I think we should note that the Netherlands went from being a swamp on the outskirts of Belgium to being a very wealthy nation.)

It’s easy enough to see where zero-sum thinking comes from, but the era that it came from is over. Everybody in America who didn’t arrive via the Bering Straits ice bridge stole his land from somebody else. And speaking for myself, they can have it back if they promise to mow it. The heck with all land. I would rather be up in the air in my Gulfstream jet, playing the market with wireless technology.

Libertarianism comes from a different place—a place that most people don’t understand and other people don’t believe in. Libertarianism comes from the place that is in between taking and being given. And hardly anybody wants to go to that place. It’s full of work and worry.

Lord Acton said that the true friends of liberty are always few. They may all be here in this room. We’re here because nobody loves us.

And yet, although I say that we shouldn’t be hopeful, that isn’t really how I feel. I do feel hope. I do think there is a future for the free individual, whether he wants it or not. And the reason that I say so is because of something that’s right outside this ballroom—America.

Hardly anyone wanted to come to America. Even the original inhabitants were just following a mammoth farther than they meant to. The rest of us were dragged here as slaves and bondservants. We were exiled here as heretics and criminals. We were chased here by poverty and oppression. And we came here because no place else would take us. We’re a bunch of losers and bums, the off-scourings of the planet. And now we are the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Why? Is it because we’re collectively good? No. It’s because we’re individually free.

Freedom is tough. We’re tough. Freedom is difficult. We’re difficult. Freedom is a heavy load to carry. We’ve got baggage. And one more thing—freedom is messy. So I think we should make a mess. To end on a fully upbeat note, I suggest that we all get drunk. ■