

The War of the We Against the Me

BY P. J. O'ROURKE

At the Cato Institute's 25th anniversary gala last May 9, P.J. O'Rourke offered some after-dinner comments on both the state of the institute and human liberty. We have chosen to reprint those comments for this issue's "Final Word."

ED CRANE TOLD ME TO BE UPBEAT TONIGHT. Everything's going great. We're a successful think tank. We've got a big building. We get quoted in the newspapers. And when we get quoted, the newspapers hardly ever refer to us anymore as the "nutty Ayn Rand disciples who want dope and machine guns legalized."

So I'm supposed to be upbeat. No. Upbeat is for sissy do-gooder organizations like Brookings, the U.N., 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. I speak to you as a man who freely contracted to pay a very large mortgage, who freely got married, who freely fathered kids, and who — 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. And if Ed Crane would care to come to the podium and give a joyous, rousing accolade to house payments, private school tuition bills, a wallet full of maxed-out credit cards, and the ire of a wife who is about to be reminded that what I gave her for our wedding anniversary was a gas-powered string

trimmer — Ed, if you'd care to do that, I yield my time to you.

The hell with upbeat. 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 utopians, the collectivists, and the rest of the altruistic scum of the earth. Why do these people want to feel good? They want to feel good in order to convince themselves that they are good. They want to be good 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.

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."

We did not become libertarians because we are altruists. In fact, there is a certain selfishness to libertarianism. ("Enlightened self-interest" is the euphemism we like to use.) My house, car, and family may be a lot of responsibility. But I'd rather take that responsibility than have any of you dating my wife, backing my car into tele-

phone poles, or leaving your dirty socks on my bedroom floor. Although, when it comes to the kids, if you want to baby-sit for free, I'm willing to share.

But it's common sense more than common selfishness that drives the libertarian philosophy. We believe in the primacy of the individual, the sanctity of the individual, and the freedom and responsibility of the individual, because — we're individuals.

People 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. Libertarians do not believe in "the masses."

That's not to say the masses don't exist. There is such a



P. J. O'Rourke is a Cato Institute H. L. Mencken fellow and the best-selling author of such books as *Parliament of Whores*, *Eat the Rich*, and *CEO of the Sofa*.

KEVIN TUMA

thing as mass jubilation — among young idiots at an N'Sync concert. There is such a thing as mass death — Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Whenever a libertarian hears the word “mass,” he knows the masses are in for something awful: mass hysteria, mass murder, mass starvation. There’s only one happy phrase that makes reference to masses, “mass exodus,” with everyone on his own two feet getting the hell away from everybody else. Notice how, when the collectivists are speaking, “mass poverty” is always paired with “individual wealth.” Draw your own conclusion.

So logic leads to libertarianism. But there is also in libertarianism an element of despair. We know that people aren’t good. Some of us believe in the doctrine of original sin. The rest of us watch Maury Povich. People are sneaky, greedy, mean. And yet we, as libertarians, propose to turn these people loose to do whatever they want.

We do so because we know that no matter what bad things individuals do, they are better than the things that get done to them by the collective will. And I don’t mean the really gross manifestations of collective will, such as totalitarianism or public television. I mean, imagine a rich farmer going door-to-door trying to get huge subsidies from you and your neighbors. 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.

Libertarians don’t expect miracles from individuals. We just expect them to be individuals, with the limited scope for evil that individuals enjoy. Real evil is coercive. And an individual does not have the power to coerce that a government has — even if dope and machine guns are legalized.

And real good is voluntary. 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 the voluntary good will be tasteless, stupid, shortsighted, and of little value to mankind as a whole. But the ugliest strip-mall shopping development is better than the most beautiful gulag.

This fact gives libertarians hope. But I’m not sure it’s wise for us to be hopeful. The individual has powerful enemies. And over the course of history those enemies have — in most times and in most places — utterly defeated the individual.

Libertarians must fight the herd instinct. This is a powerful instinct; witness the lemming. And let us thank the lemmings for the wonderful weapon of simile that they give to libertarians while they jump off their cliffs — something that lemmings always do in masses.

Libertarians must fight not only instinct but also ideas. 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 means that I deserve something, not because of what I made or did, but because I belong to a category. I’m a member of the proletariat who deserves the fruits of capital. I’m a member of the female sex who deserves affirmative action. I’m an African-American who deserves slavery reparations, an American Indian who deserves the whole country, a middle-aged white guy who deserves some peace and quiet in the house and some sports on TV when he gets home from work.

Notice how the idea of collective entitlement is more popular than the idea of collective forfeiture. Very rarely does someone volunteer to go to jail because other members of his ethnic group have been running the protection rackets in Brooklyn for three generations.

And zero-sum outcomes mean that whatever you’ve got, you’ve got it because you took it from me. Like all bad ideas, this has a basis in reality. For a million years, humans were dependent on land for their livelihood — and there’s only so much of it. But the era of land-based wealth is past.

Everybody in America who didn’t come over the Bering Strait ice bridge stole his land from somebody else. Speaking for myself, I say they can have it all back, if they promise to mow it. (My wife has an almost-new string trimmer.) I’d rather be up in the air, in a Gulf Stream jet, playing the market with wireless technology.

Libertarianism is not based on land, or on any finite resource. Libertarianism comes from a place that most people don’t understand and the rest don’t believe in. Libertarianism comes from the place that is between taking and being given.

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 we shouldn’t be hopeful — that’s not really how I feel. I do think there’s a future for the free individual. And the reason that I say so is right here, outside our banquet hall: America. Hardly anyone wanted to come to this place. Even the original inhabitants were just following a mammoth further than they meant to. The rest of us were dragged here as slaves and bondservants, exiled here as heretics and criminals, chased here by poverty and oppression. 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’re the richest and most powerful nation in the world. Why? Because we’re collectively good? No. Because we’re individually free.

Freedom is tough. We’re tough. Freedom is difficult. We’re difficult. Freedom is a heavy load to carry. And we’ve got baggage. One more thing: Freedom is messy. So let’s make a mess. To end upon an upbeat note, I respectfully suggest that we all get drunk. **R**