

Liberty's Crisis Crisis

I often remember the parting words of Robert Higgs' *Crisis and Leviathan*:

[W]e do know something – at least abstractly – about the future. We know that other great crises will come. Whether they will be occasioned by foreign wars, economic collapse, or rampant terrorism, no one can predict with assurances. Yet in one form or another, great crises will surely come again... When they do, governments almost certainly will gain new powers over economic and social affairs... For those who cherish individual liberty and a free society, the prospect is deeply disheartening.

That's what Higgs said back in 1987, over a third of a century ago. And how right he has been! The Nineties were almost crisis-free; indeed, the collapse of Communism ended the forty-year crisis of the Cold War. Ever since, however, we've had one exasperating crisis after another: 9/11, the Iraq War, the Great Recession, and ISIS, followed by Covid-19, the crisis that puts all the others to shame. I maintain, of course, that the chief problem in each crisis has been government's hysterical overreaction. Verily, the cure is worse than the disease. Still, that doesn't change the fact that the *net* effect of these crises has been awful.

As someone who, like Higgs, cherishes individual liberty and a free society, the retrospect has been deeply disheartening. But at least Higgs psychologically prepared me to see people panicked and freedom trampled. What I failed to anticipate, however, was the effect of crises on the liberty movement itself.

When I first read Higgs, I figured that when governments used crises to expand their power, libertarians would reliably resist such expansions.

That's not what happened.

Instead, every crisis opened a new libertarian rift. Anti-war versus pro-war libertarians. Anti-bailout versus pro-bailout libertarians. Pro-immigration versus anti-immigration libertarians. Anti-lockdown versus pro-lockdown libertarians.

In part, these were rifts between radical and moderate wings of the liberty movement. Radical libertarians swiftly opposed lockdowns; moderate libertarians, in contrast, largely

waited for vaccines to support a return to normalcy. Yet the radical-moderate divide is far from the whole story. Muslim terrorism led many self-styled “radical libertarians” to bitterly turn against not just Muslim immigration, but immigration in general. Moderate libertarians rarely did the same.

Could the libertarian movement have successfully checked the expansion of government power if we’d only stayed united in the face of crisis? I don’t know. What I do know is that our habitual division during crisis practically ensures failure. We can’t readily take a message of freedom to the broader world if every crisis prompts a vocal wing of the liberty movement to hop on the crisis bandwagon and urge fellow libertarians to “Get with the program.”

The deeper ill, though, is that every crisis dramatically transforms the libertarian conversation. Even libertarians who stay off every bandwagon wind up spending a major share of their intellectual energy doing “damage control.” Externally, we try to downplay each crisis – or blame the government. Internally, we try to convince fellow libertarians to stay off the bandwagon. And before long, another crisis hits.

Upshot: In the last twenty years, the libertarian movement has become almost entirely reactive. Bad things happen; governments claim new powers; we try to get in the way. Repeat. Highly demoralizing.

You could protest, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,” and you wouldn’t be entirely wrong. Arguing against government power grabs is a worthwhile endeavor. I’ve done it myself, especially during Covid. Yet in practice, sadly, crisis management has made libertarians lose sight of our original mission: Cogently making the *affirmative* case for a libertarian society.

If you’ve forgotten what that means, let me refresh your memory. Libertarians don’t believe in holding the line, in keeping policy from getting worse. We favor a radical program of policy reform. We are staunch believers in deregulation, austerity, and privatization. Yes, there are long-running disagreements about *how* radical to be. Milton Friedman personified the moderate libertarian position; Murray Rothbard personified the radical libertarian position. Relative to normal Americans, though, even Friedman had a lengthy list of regulations and programs to *abolish*. Abolish the minimum wage. Abolish tariffs. Abolish Social Security. Abolish conscription. Abolish national parks. Not cut. Abolish. All this and more comes at the end of chapter two of *Capitalism and Freedom*.

Personally, I have tried to carry this torch forward. While I’ve occasionally written about the crisis of the day, most of my intellectual output consists in defenses of radical libertarian positions. *The Myth of the Rational Voter* shows why markets far outshine democracy. *The Case Against Education* defends the abolition of public education in all its

forms. *Open Borders* calls for full deregulation of immigration. My impending *Build, Baby, Build* advocates the full deregulation of the housing industry. Even my *Selfish Reasons to Have More Kids* has a libertarian stealth agenda: To get the people who read me, disproportionately libertarian, to be fruitful and multiply.

Yes, I'm hardly alone in writing books that make an affirmative case for a libertarian society. Yet in the last twenty years, far more libertarian output has been crisis-driven. And that's a big mistake. Libertarians shouldn't just doubt the *answers* of mainstream statist society. We should doubt the *questions* of mainstream statist society as well. Critiquing Covid tyranny is fine, but at this point it's far better to change the subject to the horrors of housing regulation.

Needless to say, if you're not a libertarian, none of what I've said will make much sense to you. That's fine; while I normally try to address a broad audience, I've targeted this specific essay at my in-group. What concerns me here, rather, is how fellow libertarians will react.

The most obvious libertarian objection is, "I made an exception for crisis X because crisis X was genuinely terrible, and necessitated a major government response." The easiest rejoinder is: "And how did that major government response work out? Not so good? You should be more skeptical next time." More fundamentally, a moderate presumption of liberty plus an honest assessment of your own forecasting ability provides a strong reason to oppose any big government response to almost any crisis. The statist says, "Prove it will fail." The libertarian says, "Prove it will work." When disaster strikes, action bias and rally-round-the-leader are human, but not libertarian.

A more thoughtful libertarian objection is, "Our least-bad chance to push policy in a libertarian direction is to focus on the *crises* that everyone else is talking about." Perhaps, but probably not. When everyone else is already talking about an issue, it's hard to make your voice heard. The crowd drowns you out. The moral: If you want attention, don't try to fit in. Try to stand out. Talk about the issues that *aren't* on other people's minds... until *you* put them there. Sure, you can use current events as a hook, but as a means to the great end of selling neglected libertarian ideas. And above all, be persistent in the face of apathy and hostility. Picture libertarian ideas as a battering ram. To succeed, we have to build a great intellectual edifice, then smash it into statist irrationality year after year, decade after decade, until we get freedom. If that fails, we have to count on the next generation of libertarians to finish what we started.

If I'm right, why *do* libertarians spend so much time reacting to the latest crisis? The best answer is: Poor impulse control. When dramatic events happen, humans yearn to engage them... even if, calmly considered, they have better topics to ponder.

Policy change is hard. If libertarians had followed my crisis-avoidant strategy since 2001, we still might have no policy victories to show for it. Still, we couldn't have done much worse than we did. And the decades of moderate libertarian success - roughly 1970-2000 - clearly coincided with my battering ram strategy. At minimum, my approach is better for morale, for recruitment, for retention. Libertarians must get past our crisis crisis. We really do possess a body of timeless ideas for a better world. Those ideas, not the latest moral panic, should be our compass.

P.S. Credit where credit is due: The great Corey DeAngelis really has leveraged the Covid crisis to markedly advance the cause of school choice. Masterfully done, but Corey's still the exception that proves the rule.