

The Blackmailer As Villain

By Gary Greenberg

I would like to register a dissent from Water Block's continuing series of articles in which degenerate scum and social vermin are the subject of articles entitled "— As Hero." His article on the blackmailer as hero will serve as an example.

First, no heroic qualities are displayed by the characters depicted, as in the case of the blackmailer article. A hero is someone you admire, respect and would like to emulate due to the excellence of some desirable trait exhibited by the "hero." The blackmailer is certainly not someone who exhibits any admirable traits. The stock and trade of the blackmailer is to withhold information, the release of which is calculated to bring a devastating blow to the existence of a human being. It is the fear of destruction of reputation, life, or freedom that is affected.

Let us concede for the moment (and I don't in fact) that the blackmailer is engaged in legal activity. That certainly doesn't justify him as a hero. Just because a person engages in acts that are rightfully considered vile, although legal by most humane people, doesn't mean we have to admire the scoundrel. The one virtue alleged for the Blackmailer is that the truth shall make us free or some other such cliché. This ignores the fact that a frequent tactic of a blackmailer is to threaten to expose, false, fraudulent, framed or phony information, calculated to result in harm to an individual if released.

One of the problems of the Block series is to slide in his description of the alleged hero from the general conception of the actor to the specific aspects which Block wants to examine. The Blackmailer is not simply thought of as someone who just withholds information for a fee.

To illustrate my point, let's look at some definitions of Blackmail.

Black's Law Dictionary defines Blackmail as "The extortion of money by threats or overtures toward criminal prosecution or the destruction of a man's reputation or social standing." Webster's New World Dictionary (paperback) defines blackmail as "payment extorted to prevent disclosure of information that could bring disgrace." Notice both definitions use the term "extort" which implies the threat of violence or harm for failure to comply.

While some activities of a Blackmailer may be legitimate, much of his usual practice is not. A frequent target of blackmailers is the person who is guilty of victimless crimes. Our "Hero" then threatens to go to the police with the information. This I think is criminal. It is as wrong as taking money at the threat of shooting. The victim of the blackmailer would be justified in killing the blackmailer to prevent the "Hero" from making such disclosures.

One of the legitimate activities of a blackmailer is to withhold information about a person's criminal activities (robbery, murder, stealing) in return for a fee. While there is no obligation to come forward with information of a crime, I certainly hope that no society of civilized people would knowingly extend friendship and society to such an individual. As to the hero, if the crook chooses to off him, or hurt him, I have little sympathy for him and few tears. The Hero knew with whom he was dealing and what kind of person he was. He choose to accept the risk. I choose not to aid him in seeking justice.

The blackmailer may be Walter Block's type of hero, but he is certainly no hero for the Libertarian. I see little value in Libertarian publications holding him out as one. □

The Blackmailer As Hero: A Reply

By Walter Block

Were it not for Mr. Greenberg's justly earned and widely known reputation as a careful scholar, meticulous researcher, and courteous gentleman, I would be forced to conclude that he had not read my article at all, and was instead replying merely to its title. Let us review the evidence.

1. "No admirable traits?" In the article, I point out several. Blackmailers help reduce the rewards of crime by forcing the criminals to share with them; by tipping off the police about the criminals; and by reducing the scope of crime on the part of the criminals out of fear of possible blackmail by a member of the larger criminal group. Blackmailers help groups such as homosexuals by bringing this deviation out into the open.

2. "False, phony and fraudulent information?" I cover this case in "The slanderer and libeler as hero". The blackmailer, qua blackmailer, deals only in the truth; if he lies or misrepresents, he is no longer a blackmailer, but a slanderer or libeler.

3. "Extortion? The threat of violence?" Greenberg avoids my definition of blackmail as a threat to do something completely legal and legitimate, such as to exercise one's rights of free speech, or, in the case of the boycott (another form of blackmail) as a threat not to buy from someone. In the paper, I take special pains to point out that what is being threatened is not violence, but free speech.

4. "Harm?" It is my view that harming someone should not be proscribed by a libertarian law code since honest competition can harm the loser and this must be allowed. But in the paper I state that if the opponents of blackmail are worried about harm, they should oppose the gossip or blabbermouth even more forcefully, for the blackmailer can at least be bought off, while these others cannot be.

I do not mind that Mr. Greenberg and I do not see eye to eye on this matter: healthy dispute, after all, is good for the libertarian movement, and will hopefully bring us closer and closer to the truth. What I do object to, however, is that Mr. Greenberg chose to avoid practically all of my arguments in support of the blackmailer. Nothing worthwhile can come of a debate where one's arguments are ignored. It is for this reason, as well as out of pique that Mr. Greenberg has stated that he sees "little

value" in my article even being published in a libertarian magazine, that I state: I see little value in the publication of a very poorly written critique which does not even consider the reasons given in the original article.

But I hasten to reply to the substantive points raised by Mr. Greenberg, lest I be accused of violating my own strictures.

1. "Degenerate scum and social vermin" is merely name calling and does not deserve a reply.

2. There is nothing illegitimate about "bringing a devastating blow to the existence of a human being" provided that you do not violate his rights! The man who is jilted may be dealt a devastating blow, but since his rights are in no way violated, there is nothing vile going on. After all, the woman, being a free agent, has a perfect right to pick another suitor or none at all. In like manner, there can be nothing illegitimate or vile about the exercise of one's rights of free speech, no matter what harm results.

3. "The stool pigeon." A person who cooperates with the police in their illicit efforts to stamp out victimless crimes such as homosexuality is certainly acting illegitimately himself. But there is something very illogical indeed, in trying to link up this sort of behavior with honest blackmail.

In posing the dilemma for the advocate of the legitimacy of blackmail, Mr. Greenberg is likening the police who try to stamp out victimless crimes to a bunch of hoodlums. He then tries to link the illegitimacy of these hoodlum police to the blackmailer. I would be the first to admit that blackmail in this case is certainly illegitimate, but I must protest that this argument proves entirely too much. It proves that any legitimate activity is illegitimate, provided only that it can be used to aid those involved in aggression, like our police who suppress rights.

For example, the activities of typing, serving food, washing uniforms, cleaning guns, repairing cars, etc., can only be considered legitimate, and non-aggressive. But they are all utilized by coercive police. Are we then to conclude, as the logic of Greenberg's argument would have us conclude for the case of the blackmailer, that all these activities are

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Heroes And Scapegoats

By Walter Block

Editor's Note: The following is the projected introduction of a book that Professor Block is writing on "Economic Scapegoats", some of the chapters of which have appeared in the pages of the *Lib. Forum*. In it, Professor Block explains the general purpose of his "hero" series; appended is a comprehensive list of these much-reviled scapegoats, some of whom will receive extended treatment in Professor Block's final manuscript.

In this book you will learn three things about the appended list of economic scapegoats: 1) They are guilty of no wrongdoing whatsoever; 2) in virtually all cases, they are responsible for benefiting the rest of society; 3) that if we prohibit their activities, we do so at our own loss.

As the impetus for this book is firmly based on Libertarianism, it may well help to consider this philosophy in some detail.

The basic premise of libertarianism is that it is illegitimate to engage in aggression against non-aggressors. What is meant here by aggression is not argumentativeness, nor competitiveness, nor adventurousness, dynamism, quarrelsomeness, nor antagonism. What is meant by aggression is the use of violence such as that which takes place in murder, rape, robbery, kidnapping, etc. What the libertarian philosophy prohibits is the initiation of such violence upon innocent people or their property; not necessarily pacifists, libertarianism does not forbid the use of violence in defense or in retaliation against the initiation of violence.

Now there is nothing untoward about such a view, nor even anything controversial about it. Most people would give it their whole-hearted support. Indeed, this sentiment is part and parcel of our Western civilization, enshrined in the law, in our Constitution, and in the natural law. There is nothing, then, about this basic premise of libertarianism that stands out in any way.

What is different about libertarianism is the way in which this basic

premise is understood. The uniqueness of libertarianism consists of the rigorously consistent, not to say maniacally rigid manner in which this principle is developed. For example, most people do not see a contradiction between this principle (which they presumably support, or at least pay lip service to) and our system of taxation. Libertarians do.

Taxation is contrary to the basic principle and hence anathema to libertarianism because it involves aggression against non-aggressive citizens who refuse to pay (if you don't believe it, try not paying your taxes, and see what happens). It makes not the slightest difference that the government offers goods and services in return for the tax money. What is all important and crucial is that the so called trade (of tax money for government services) is coerced. It is not a voluntary trade. The individual is not just as free to accept the offer of the trade as he is to reject it. Nor does it make one whit of difference that a majority of the citizens might be mustered out in support of this coercive taxation. Initiation of aggression is initiation of aggression no matter what are the views of the majority. For the libertarian, no tyranny which violates the basic premise can be acceptable, even if a majority supports it. Righteousness can only be found in consistency with the libertarian premise: it cannot be based on a poll.

Another difference between libertarians and the rest of the society is the obverse of the view that initiatory violence is evil. It is the view that anything not involving the initiation of violence cannot be evil! It is this

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intrinsically evil? Hardly. We must rather conclude, I think, that otherwise legitimate activities (like typing, cleaning, etc., as well as blackmail) can be undertaken in the service of evil, and thereby become evil themselves, but only in these cases, not in all cases.

4. What are we to make of the contradictory sentiments expressed in the next to last paragraph where Greenberg first encourages the blackmailer not to withhold information about real crimes, and then praises the crook for "offering him" for doing that very thing? Either one favors blackmailers exposing real criminals, and then opposes the retaliation, or one opposes the exposed, and favors the retaliation, if one desires to be consistent. It is illogical to favor X, and then to turn around and favor punishing someone for doing X.

Mr. Greenberg calls them "degenerate scum and social vermin", but I think that the accompanying list of scapegoats are rather unsung heroes of the economy, for they insist upon working at their chosen professions under the most adverse conditions. Bad publicity, abuse, name calling, and even physical violence at the hands of the police and "outraged" citizens are the lot of these economic actors. Yet we have seen that their only function is to benefit their fellow man!

Although seemingly far fetched, one cannot help be reminded of Prometheus, the Greek god who took pity on the misery of mankind and stole fire from heaven for their benefit, and who was then punished for his heroic deed by being chained to a mountain where a vulture devoured his liver each day. Prometheus was reviled by the gods; the economic heroes are reviled by mankind. But both bring inestimable benefits to mankind.

It must be allowed that but for negative public opinion and the opposition of the law, there would be nothing heroic about any of these tasks. They only become heroic when performed under the most trying circumstances. But the same holds true for Prometheus! Surely there is nothing heroic about bringing fire; people strike matches every day, after all. What makes this deed heroic are the great odds which were overcome in the bringing of the fire. It is, then, in accordance with the odds which are overcome in each of the tasks performed by the economic actors, that we can consider them heroic.

It is tempting to say that if there are any "degenerate scum and social vermin" involved in this question, they are the people who cast aspersions on the economic heroes. Tempting, but incorrect. For we must remember that people who maliciously cast false aspersions on others (libelers and slanderers) are heroes themselves, who are merely expressing their rights of free speech.

The Mayoral Circus —

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appeal is strengthened by indications that he would gain Conservative Party endorsement, and perhaps even the Republican nomination, since Governor Rockefeller has been looking for a conservative "fusion" candidate that he could back for Mayor. Of course, now that Rockefeller's hated enemy Lindsay is out of the race, the governor's enthusiasm for fusion may well have cooled.

The picture in the other primaries is even cloudier at this writing, though not for the same reasons as the multi-candidate Democracy. Among the Republicans, the previous candidate, the powerful State Senator John Marchi, from highly conservative and quasi-rural Staten Island, is anxious to run again. But Marchi's candidacy has many barriers to overcome. One is Rockefeller's desire for fusion, since the chances are nil for Democratic endorsement of the Staten Island Republican. Furthermore, Marchi has lost much of his old Conservative Party support, since he has in recent years endorsed liberal plans for massive low-income housing developments in Staten Island, plans that are bitterly opposed by the conservative masses of that borough. To stop Marchi, Rockefeller might well endorse a patsy candidate, State Senator Roy Goodman, who, as a liberal Jewish Republican from the East Side of Manhattan, has almost no support among liberals, Jews, or Republicans, and therefore could be well calculated to be slaughtered by a Democrat-Conservative Biaggi in November.

And so the New York political stew muddies and thickens. Among the minor parties, the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party will undoubtedly run a candidate, and the Trotskyite splinter group, the Labor Committee movement, headed by the fanatically pro-"working class" theoretician L. Marcus, has already nominated one Tony Chaitkin for the Mayoralty. The Free Libertarian Party of New York is preparing to run a mayoral slate, and will nominate someone at its convention at the end of March. Right now there appear to be two candidates for the FLP nomination, Paul Streitz and Fran Youngstein, but at this writing we have not been able to determine the ideological differences between the two slates. More on FLP doings at a later date.