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First Principles for Guatemala

In his Aug. 8 letter regarding Mary Anastasia O’Grady’s America Column, “A Guatemalan Free-Market Reformer is Under Fire from the U.S.” (The Americas, Aug. 3), Lawrence E. Harrison justifies his labeling me “an archetypical, far-right Latin American oligarch” because I don’t share his views. So much for tolerance.

His argument affords an intriguing glimpse of the mindset of many who have made a career dispensing advice to foreign countries on U.S. taxpayers’ dime. Mr. Harrison writes, “I also find Mr. Ayau’s repeated references to ‘freedom’ unsettling. . . when he says, ‘I am one who believes that, since the principal function of government is to protect people’s freedom, it follows that it is proper to use the coercive power of government to maintain freedom.’” From this Mr. Harrison concludes that I believe “people who dissent from the ideas of Hayek and von Mises had better watch out.”

My words may unsettle Mr. Harrison, but others may recall the words of John Stuart Mill in “On Liberty”: “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” Does Mr. Harrison believe that Mill was a far-right oligarch, too?

Mr. Harrison also thinks my credibility wanes for having said, “. . . most of the [Latin American] coups d’état are well received by the people.” On the contrary, denying the facts of history would destroy my credibility. The coups d’état I have witnessed in my long life have been carried out when unbearable circumstances provoked them, and were received with jubilation by all but those who were overthrown. That doesn’t mean that the new rascals did any better, which is another story.

On the other hand, perhaps it would be more in keeping with the spirit of civil discourse to simply confess. I guess I am just an incorrigible, politically incorrect right-wing Guatemalan oligarch. Just make that a far-right oligarch on the model of your founding fathers, who expressly forbade income taxation and thought that the only purpose of government was to protect life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

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