

Thinking Libertarian Paternalism: Benefits for the Third Generation SAF in Management and Leadership

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Abstract:

The idea of Libertarian Paternalism first came out in *Nudge* by the authors Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein. It was originally intended as a paradigm shift in thinking for political philosophy and public policy making, among others. This article intends to draw attention to this big idea and illustrate the similarly huge potential it holds for the Third Generation Singapore Armed Forces (SAF). The article starts by elucidating Libertarian Paternalism as a political-philosophical idea and follows up by explaining the rationale for its introduction into the SAF. It presents two particular manifestations of Libertarian Paternalism in action—both in management and leadership—and ends off with the hope that the idea will catch on and truly benefit the organization.

Keywords: Paternalism; Individual Liberty; Peer Pressure; Human Resource Management

INTRODUCTION

What is Libertarian Paternalism?

Libertarian Paternalism as an idea appears oxymoronic at first glance. For most people, the two root concepts of libertarianism and paternalism conveys almost opposite intuitions. It is therefore of fundamental importance that we clarify definitions before we proceed. This will enable us to better appreciate its relevance to the Third Generation Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) when we delve deeper into the topic later in the article.

LIBERTARIANISM VERSUS PATERNALISM

What is Libertarianism?

Libertarianism is a particular form of political philosophy. Generally speaking, political philosophy concerns itself with analysing how political systems and societies ought to be organised. Issues of whether governments ought to exist, what governments can do to their citizens, the rights of the citizenry, who should rule, etc. all belong to the realm of political philosophy. Big concepts like *anarchy*, *democracy*, *dictatorship*, *communism* all express particular value judgments on how our political systems ought to be run, and are therefore different forms of political philosophy.

One of the most famous libertarian political philosophers of modern times, Professor Robert Nozick, wrote in the preface to his book, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974) that “individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them (without violating their rights).”¹

The root word of libertarianism is liberty. It is therefore not surprising that libertarianism is first and foremost a concept about individual liberty. When one speaks about liberty, or freedom, one usually associates them with rights. A person is free if his rights (to certain actions) are not compromised. For example, I may say that I am free if no one violates my right to vote.

Professor Michael J. Sandel sums up the primary concern with individual liberty for libertarians best in his book, *Justice: What's The Right Thing To Do?*, in that their central claim is that each of us has a fundamental right to liberty—the right to do whatever we want with the things we own, provided we respect other people's rights to do the same.”²

In summary, if I am a libertarian, my central concern is that people's rights are respected, and their individual liberty is protected. Examining what

these rights are would require another article, but it will suffice here to note that such rights generally include the right to freedom of expression, the right to freedom of religious practice, the right to vote, the right to life, the right to possession of private property, etc.

What is Paternalism?

Paternalism on the other hand has considerably less coverage as a particular form of political philosophy. Generally speaking, it has acquired a relatively sinister reputation. The objective in this section is to delve deeper into what paternalism really is, and remove any value judgments that could sub-consciously affect our perspective.

The root word of paternalism is paternal, which in turn is defined to be “of, or pertaining to, a father.” It may have its roots in Eastern thinking. The latter half of an abridged ancient Confucian teaching goes, “修身, 齐家, 治国, 平天下” (*xiu shen, qi jia, zi guo, ping tian xia*). A translation which hopefully does it justice is as follows: “In order for one to rule the world well, one ought to govern one’s country well. In order for one to govern one’s country well, one ought to keep his own family affairs in good order. In order for one to keep his own family affairs in good order, one ought to first achieve personal mastery.”

The basic idea is that there are parallels between the management of self, of family, and of the state. This relationship between family and state is actually not unique to Eastern thinking. Aristotle wrote in the *Politics*, “the government of a household is a monarchy, since every house is governed by a single ruler.”³

The rough idea is as follows: The state is modeled upon the family unit. The head of the family is the father. It follows therefore, that since the head of the state is the government (or king), the latter ought to behave in a manner characteristic of a father to his citizens.

When we hear the term paternal, we think of strictness, superior knowledge, and genuine concern for welfare. A father knows better and always wants the best for his child. A paternalistic government is therefore similar—by virtue of its belief in its own superior knowledge (of what is good for its people), it prescribes its policies on its people (whether they like it or not) due to its genuine wish that the people benefit from it.

With a greater emphasis on respecting the liberty of others, we may actually enhance individual job performance. This is precisely the reason why there is a need for an alternative perspective on the link between respecting individual liberty and the armed forces.

To summarise therefore, if I am paternalistic, I believe that I both know better and want better. I think and act like how a traditional father would with regards to bringing up his child.

What is Libertarian Paternalism?

It is therefore (hopefully) obvious by now as to why the concept of Libertarian Paternalism can be viewed as oxymoronic. A libertarian is concerned first and foremost with individual liberty. A paternalist, on the other hand, has no qualms with disrespecting individual liberty and acts as he sees fit. If I am a libertarian who believes in the right to be protected from bodily harm, I am surely inconsistent (in principle at least) when I, as a father, cane my child so as to educate him about the wrongness in stealing (for example).

Nevertheless, whilst both forms of political philosophy are genuinely different in nature and focus, I would like to draw attention to the particular tenets of each which form the core of Libertarian

Paternalism. When I speak of Libertarian Paternalism, I refer specifically to the non-liberty-violating part of libertarianism and the know-better-and-want-better-for-my-people part of paternalism.

So, what is actually Libertarian Paternalism? Can it actually work? I will use the classic example from *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* to better elucidate this big idea.⁴



The above picture shows a typical urinal in the Amsterdam Airport toilets. If you look carefully, you may notice a sticker of a fake fly in the urinal. Statistics tell us that putting the fake fly in the urinals reduces spillage by 80 percent. In terms of achieving results, it is an extraordinary success.

Putting the fake fly in the urinal is a classic act of Libertarian Paternalism. As a designer of such a urinal, I am being paternalistic—I want the men who use the urinals to act in a manner that is better for everyone, i.e. to aim properly into the urinal when they use them. I want this for the good for everyone—the cleaners who clean the toilets can do less, the men who use the toilets can have a cleaner environment in which to relieve themselves, etc.

I am also being libertarian because I do not interfere with the individual liberty of anyone, at least not in the manner that they genuinely care about. Unlike using fines and punishment, I do not (at least in the traditional sense of the word) force anyone to do anything against their individual

wishes. These men still possess the right (if you like) to urinate aimlessly (pardon the pun). However, by designing the urinal such, I exploit the sub-conscious desire of (most) men to target the fly when urinating, and therefore achieve the results I desire.

The idea of Libertarian Paternalism is so powerful because I achieve the result I desire whilst keeping everyone happy. It is a win-win situation for all, and by virtue of it being win-win, there is no need to constantly deal with unhappy people who may thereafter hinder me from achieving the results I so desire.

WHY LIBERTARIAN PATERNALISM?

In this section, we clarify the relevance of Libertarian Paternalism to the SAF. I argue that it has implications both in the way we think about leadership and management in the SAF. I will also argue that thinking Libertarian Paternalism has immense benefits for the organization, especially in the modern globalized world we live in.

Individual Liberty and the Armed Forces – The Traditional View

When we speak of individual liberty and the Armed Forces, we tend to think along this line—the SAF exists to protect the sovereignty of our land, and hence by extension, the individual liberty of our people. There is also an implicitly accepted irony—one regarded as inevitable—namely that soldiers have to sacrifice their liberty so as to protect the same liberty in times of war.

As soldiers, we are expected to sacrifice certain rights in order to protect our homeland. In times of war, we do not enjoy the right to life—at least not in the international arena. Countries are justified by the rules of war to use force and kill if necessary. Also, in times of peace, we have to follow the orders of our commanders to the very word, whether we agree with it or otherwise. One may not avoid turn up for in-camp training (ICT) if he does not feel like doing so; skipping ICT would result in a formal punishment for being Absent Without Official Leave (AWOL). In other words, a soldier has no true individual liberty

to speak of, at least not in the sense that he may truly care about.

The irony is deemed inevitable because discipline and regimentation is of the utmost importance in the armed forces. A military with no discipline possesses no ability to fight effectively and therefore would certainly fail in its mission to protect the sovereignty of its land. So the traditional argument goes.

Individual Liberty and Motivation – Why an Alternative View

I have briefly outlined the traditional view to liberty in the SAF. My aim here is to propose an alternative.

The issue of new media is a good starting point. The example here would hopefully show how respecting one's individual liberty can be part of a better solution to certain problems. It is an issue up for debate whether we should ban our servicemen from talking about their work—especially the negative aspects—on Facebook, where millions of people can read and comment on their views. It is the view of this author that we should not ban this practice precisely for the reason that banning it will not solve the fundamental problem of having unhappy servicemen at work. Even if we do, these servicemen would find other alternative means to air their views in public—on forums, through friends, etc., and we would be faced with ultimately the same phenomenon in a different form. The fundamental problem remains unsolved.

It is obvious from this example that a ban would be a violation of individual liberty. It should also be obvious that such a solution will not be enough.

When one speaks of “enough,” it is *vis-à-vis* the satisfaction of one's aims. In this example of a Facebook ban, a solution that is enough is one that would stop the publishing of negative comments in public totally. Thus defined, a ban is “not enough” because the bad comments will eventually emerge elsewhere in the public domain. A policy that aims at finding out why these servicemen are unhappy—and

then to address their concerns accordingly—would, if successful, be “enough.” By not violating any individual liberty, we ensure that the problem does not emerge elsewhere in a different form.

Note again that I am not arguing that any policy that does not violate individual liberty would *inherently* be better than one that does. I am, however, arguing that, by virtue of the simple tenet of human nature—people do not like to have their own liberty trampled upon—it is *instrumentally* better to respect the liberty of our servicemen in our polices. It is only when one does what one truly wants to do (and therefore believes in it), and not when forced, that one does truly well.⁵ With a greater emphasis on respecting the liberty of others, we may actually enhance individual job performance. This is precisely the reason why there is a need for an alternative perspective on the link between respecting individual liberty and the armed forces.

Individual Liberty and the Third Generation SAF

I argue here that respecting individual liberty is all the more important for the Third Generation SAF.

We live in a modern world of globalization. Our servicemen are now all highly-educated individuals with free and easy access to the internet. Being highly-educated, they have no qualms and problems with seeking alternative forms of employment outside the SAF. Having free and easy access to the internet, they have the latest world news at their hands as well as the ability to freely air their own views (and to hear the views of others). Being also relatively wealthier, they now possess the financial muscle to travel more widely. What all these mean is that the typical SAF serviceman is now wealthier, more knowledgeable, more opinionated and more employment mobile.⁶

It then logically follows, therefore, that these servicemen are less likely to put up with a world where their individual liberty is constantly violated, especially in matters that they care deeply about. In cases of human resource retention at least, a continued lack of consideration of individual liberty may not be the wisest way forward.

The Third Generation SAF is also one that asks more of each individual soldier. Everyone is a crucial piece of the whole, and each soldier is given more responsibility (and the skills) to carry out their tasks to complete the entire mission. The reason for this is multifold—our soldiers are now more educated and hence would be able to carry out more complex tasks individually;⁷ an increased emphasis on technology makes our jobs more capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive;⁸ a drop in retention and recruitment numbers due to demographic phenomena, resulting in a renewed need for less people to now do more in order to meet mission requirements.

With more responsibility to be placed on each soldier, it is all the more important that each individual soldier does his job well. The motivated soldier—one who believes in the task he is given, and one who truly wants to achieve it—is much more likely than one who is forced by his superior via military orders to achieve mission success.⁹

It is therefore imperative that the SAF starts examining this issue more vigorously. There are potential benefits to be reaped in terms of recruitment, retention and enhancing job performance. Simply depending on military orders may not be enough. We will need to get people to “buy-in” more, and that can only start by appreciating and respecting what matters to them, individual liberty being one of many.

Why Paternalism?

The above three sections address the issue of why libertarianism ought to be examined with greater rigor in the SAF. In particular, I have argued that an increased respect for individual liberty—all the more required in the times we live in now—benefits the organization.

This section, on the other hand, examines the question of paternalism. The basic answer is that the SAF has a given mission to achieve. We are to deter potential aggressors, and in the event that deterrence fails, to achieve a swift and decisive victory. The mission can be in no doubt, and therefore, like-it-or-not, our soldiers must be commanded in the pursuit of mission success.

The SAF ought to be paternalistic about its mission, but it can be libertarian in how it decides to achieve it. The author argues that being libertarian, in certain specific contexts later expounded upon in the article, increases the potential for mission success.

This also answers why the approach is libertarian paternalism, and not paternalistic libertarianism. Fundamentally, SAF commanders, or any other leaders in armed forces, have to be paternalistic. By virtue

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of the fact that they command troops and are leaders of men, they simply have to know (and to want) better. They, however, need not be “dictatorial” in their style of leadership or management. They can be libertarian, in that they show more respect for the individual liberty of their troops in their approach. This author has argued that such a style reaps benefits on many different

levels, individual job performance being one of the most important.

Table 1 below provides a better understanding of the interaction between Libertarianism and Paternalism.

HOW TO THINK LIBERTARIAN PATERNALISM IN THE SAF?

In this final section, I devote my attention to outlining certain fields in the SAF that could benefit from thinking Libertarian Paternalism. My focus

will be ultimately on management and leadership. By showing two particular examples of Libertarian Paternalism in action, I hope to draw attention to the potential benefits from implementing such a philosophy in thinking.

Decentralization in itself is really an act of Libertarian Paternalism. When I decentralise, I allow my subordinates decision rights. They thus have the individual liberty to do what they want to do. But I retain the right to decentralise, i.e. I can

LIBERTARIANISM		PATERNALISM	
		NO	YES
	NO	N/A	"Old-School" <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get things done• Possible unhappiness• Possibly no ownership• "I say, you do"
	YES	"Chaos" <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Things not done• Anything goes• No leadership• E.g. Unplanned decentralization	"New-School" <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get things done <i>well</i>• Creates "buy-in"• Shared ownership• E.g. Planned decentralisation

Table 1: Interaction between Libertarianism and Paternalism

Management: Decentralization and Human Resource Allocation

When we speak about decentralization, we tend to think that it is a wholly management issue. In some sense it is. In the management literature,¹⁰ the decision to decentralize can be a science. There is a need to examine the requirement for speed in response times (be it for a firm or an individual platoon), the capability of lower-level people (in particular the leaders) especially in decision-making, the need for centralised, coordinated action (for example a concentrated attack on a particular position), among others.

In the military context, the decision to decentralise or otherwise is really a matter of command and control. When a commander decentralises much of the decision rights, what he is really doing is to allow his subordinates to make the relevant decisions. He nevertheless retains the responsibility for their actions in himself.¹¹

choose who to decentralize to. Therefore, my choice to decentralise (or otherwise), and if I do, who to decentralize to—is a paternalistic action.

Decentralization, when conducted properly, does wonders. When our soldiers are given more room for individual thought in their actions, they tend to be more motivated to do their best because more ownership is now given. They wish for the success of the mission more because of the independent part they are now playing. They now own their mission.

In the complex, uncertain, and dynamic environment of warfare, it is to be wondered if the overall commander back in HQ can make the best decisions to deal with whatever is happening on the ground. It can be argued that the man on the ground, if armed with the proper considerations from higher HQ, may be in a better position to make the decision.¹² In fact, it has been argued that the decentralized decision-making culture of the German Army, termed *Auftragstaktik*, was one of the reasons leading to its initial successes in World War II.¹³

As such, thinking Libertarian Paternalism in the form of decentralisation can reap immense benefits. Indeed, one of the reasons attributed to Nelson's spectacular victory at the Battle of Trafalgar was his ability to decentralize (libertarian act) whilst ensuring his intentions were made clear in his orders (paternalistic act). I quote one of Nelson's messages to his subordinates, highlighting the paternalism and libertarianism (respectively): "I send you my Plan of Attack, as far as a man dare venture to guess at the uncertain position the Enemy may be found in. But, my dear friend, it is to place you perfectly at ease *respecting my intentions* and to *give full scope to your judgment* for carrying them into effect."¹⁴

Sound human resource allocation can further fortify the benefits reaped from decentralization. The act of human resource allocation can then also be seen as the paternalistic part of the decision, whereas the subsequent act of decentralisation can now be viewed as the libertarian part.

In order for the right decisions to be made when I decentralise, I have to make sure I have the right people making the decisions. One way is to only allow the people I trust to make the decisions—this refers to the above-mentioned choice of who to decentralize to. The other way is to put quality people in the positions where decentralized decision rights will be given. This refers to the choice of sound human resource allocation. Both are manifestations of paternalism.

Leadership: Culture, Peer Pressure and Team-Building

Whilst human resource allocation and decentralisation are chiefly management concepts, it can be shown that it is possible to think Libertarian Paternalism with regards to leadership.

Dealing with culture is one of the fundamental challenges of leadership. Individuals are generally affected by the culture of the unit they join, this phenomenon being more commonly known as peer pressure. In order to achieve good performance, a unit certainly gains a head start by having good culture. Whilst it is generally hard to pin down good culture, one can loosely define it as the existence of good habits and practices. A good leader would therefore start his work by fostering good culture, or eradicating bad culture.

It is the belief of this author that peer pressure is a more effective system of reward and punishment than the traditional approach. When one joins a unit blessed with good culture, one cannot help but pull up one's socks in order to keep up with the performance of his fellow soldiers. One possibly risks being looked down upon, or ostracised, if one alone tarnishes the good name of the unit. Such peer pressure is likely to encourage one to work harder, as compared to being punished by the commander. It is also less likely to result in resentment, as the individual is not directly subject to the whim of a single person.

It should hopefully be obvious by now how fostering good culture as a means of peer pressure is actually Libertarian Paternalism in action. The leader (or commander) is being paternalistic in his decision to foster a good culture or eradicate a bad culture. He is however being libertarian, in allowing the system to correct bad behavior by the subtle process of peer pressure. He does not step in via traditional punishment, and hence does not violate any individual liberty (at least in the sense people see and care about most).

It should hopefully be obvious by now how fostering good culture as a means of peer pressure is actually Libertarian Paternalism in action.

A unit's culture, on the other hand, is mainly defined by its people. Good culture exists because of a majority of good people and vice versa. Culture tends to persist because people do not change in droves. This has implications on team-building and the fostering of good culture and eradication of bad culture. When one wishes to correct bad culture, which usually results due to bad people, there would be a need to purge large numbers of these people. When one wishes to foster good culture, there would be a need to bring in large numbers of good-quality people (and not just a few). It is only after this paternalistic act of human resource management that peer pressure can then work its course to preserve good behavior in a libertarian manner.

This idea of culture as a system of informal punishment devices—hence shaping human behavior—has its academic roots in the game theory modeling of human interaction.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

In the realm of political philosophy and/or public-policy making, the big idea of Libertarian Paternalism has shown itself to be somewhat of a positive paradigm shift in thinking.¹⁶ It is the hope of this author that by this essay, enough attention has been drawn to the similarly huge potential this big idea holds for the Third Generation SAF. Two specific examples have been chosen to illustrate how thinking Libertarian Paternalism can benefit the organization in both the management and leadership fields. Hopefully, more positive examples would appear in the near future to prove the benefits presently hypothesized in this article. 🌐

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