



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

CASCADE COMMENTARY

October 2003

No. 2003-29

Summary

The international best-selling Harry Potter series is a tribute to a gifted writer. The books, particularly the fifth installment, *The Order of the Phoenix*, have a liberty and limited government flavor to them. Beyond entertaining to read, Harry Potter serves as a vehicle for discussing the principles of freedom with children around the world.

Word count: 697

“There is a formal government, but its purpose has been primarily to hide the wizarding world from muggles (i.e. you and I) and to control abuse of magic that could harm others.”

Harry Potter: The new *Atlas Shrugged?*

By Eryk Boston

There is a pure joy in seeing libertarian principles expressed by unexpected sources in a world teeming with those who love power. This is especially true when the expression is focused on the next generation. Thus, I am almost rapturous about book five in the Harry Potter series, *The Order of the Phoenix*.

The first blessing of the Harry Potter series is that it is an example of a gifted writer making a fortune by creating a product people love. It has recently been confirmed that J. K. Rowling is now wealthier than the Queen of England. That alone is enough to warm my capitalist heart.

But far more important is that the first printing of *The Order of the Phoenix* was 8.5 million copies. Millions, both children and adults, will read this book repeatedly and absorb every detail. And this is one of the best limited-government books I've read since *Atlas Shrugged*.

I'm not the first person to point out that the Harry Potter books have a libertarian flavor. The wizarding world in the series has a private banking system and no apparent zoning laws. Wizards have the right to carry a wand—more dangerous than any firearm—at all times for the express purpose of self-defense. The schools are largely independent (until this book). Dumbeldore, the most powerful wizard alive, actively avoids a position in government. Independent action is celebrated. Notably absent is any mention of a system of taxation.

There is a formal government, but its purpose has been primarily to hide the wizarding world from muggles (i.e. you and I) and to control abuse of magic that could harm others. Until now, the high-ranking government ministers in the tales have generally been either pompous jerks or bumbling fools. With the exception of the time when the Minister of Magic knowingly put an innocent man in prison, the authorities have mostly been comic relief.

In this book, they cross the line into being dangerously corrupt. They deliberately conceal a mortal threat to the world. They engage in campaigns of character assassination against political enemies. By the end, the Minister's personal assistant,

Dolores Umbridge, resorts to torture to retain power and reveals that she sent assassins to take out Harry Potter.

While Lord Voldemort is the great evil of the series, Dolores Umbridge, the aforementioned government assistant, is the true villain of the book. She becomes the new Defense against the Dark Arts professor and institutes a government-approved curriculum—ostensibly intended to teach defense, but really designed to create helpless and dependent students. She becomes a case study in power lust as she seizes control through the assumption of titles, rituals of obedience, censorship, personal enforcers, and the issuance of new decrees whenever her intentions are thwarted.

But the joy of the story is how the students and professors respond to this tyranny. The very title of the book, *The Order of the Phoenix*, refers to a private organization formed to fight Lord Voldemort.

I won't include any spoilers, but I can say that kids who read the book will get a fine lesson in civil disobedience, passive resistance, occasional active resistance, and the price of seeking power by state fiat. Faced with classes designed to rob them of an education, Harry and his friends organize to educate themselves in clear violation of the new decrees. State interference with freedom of the press is foiled. The official effort to silence a news story results in the entire school reading it in one day!

And that news story is the key to Umbridge's downfall. As a believer in natural consequences, I found great delight in seeing her plans collapse under their own weight as soon as she got the power and control she wanted.

If you haven't already, read the books. Just get the first book and start reading. You'll soon have read all five, and find yourself happily spellbound in Harry's world—waiting eagerly for book six. Better yet, Harry Potter, particularly *The Order of the Phoenix*, can serve as a vehicle to discuss the principles of liberty and limited government with children around the world, in a way they will understand and enthusiastically enjoy.

Eryk Boston is an associate to Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland, Oregon think tank.

“Faced with classes designed to rob them of an education, Harry and his friends organize to educate themselves in clear violation of the new decrees.”

Attention editors and producers

Cascade Commentaries are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic. Electronic text files are available online at www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/.

Please contact:

Kurt T. Weber
Vice President
Cascade Policy Institute
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900
Fax: (503) 242-3822

www.cascadepolicy.org
kurt@cascadepolicy.org