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Free to Die

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

Back in 1980, just as America was making its political turn to the right, Milton Friedman lent his voice to the change with the famous TV series "Free to Choose." In episode after episode, the genial economist identified laissez-faire economics with personal choice and empowerment, an upbeat vision that would be echoed and amplified by Ronald Reagan.

But that was then. Today, "free to choose" has become "free to die."

I'm referring, as you might guess, to what happened during Monday's G.O.P. presidential debate. CNN's Wolf Blitzer asked Representative Ron Paul what we should do if a 30-year-old man who chose not to purchase health insurance suddenly found himself in need of six months of intensive care. Mr. Paul replied, "That's what freedom is all about — taking your own risks." Mr. Blitzer pressed him again, asking whether "society should just let him die."

And the crowd erupted with cheers and shouts of "Yeah!"

The incident highlighted something that I don't think most political commentators have fully absorbed: at this point, American politics is fundamentally about different moral visions.

Now, there are two things you should know about the Blitzer-Paul exchange. The first is that after the crowd weighed in, Mr. Paul basically tried to evade the question, asserting that warm-hearted doctors and charitable individuals would always make sure that people received the care they needed — or at least they would if they hadn't been corrupted by the welfare state. Sorry, but that's a fantasy. People who can't afford essential medical care often fail to get it, and always have — and sometimes they die as a result.

The second is that very few of those who die from lack of medical care look like Mr. Blitzer's hypothetical individual who could and should have bought insurance. In reality, most uninsured Americans either have low incomes and cannot afford insurance, or are rejected by insurers because they have chronic conditions.

So would people on the right be willing to let those who are uninsured through no fault of their own die from lack of care? The answer, based on recent history, is a resounding "Yeah!"