

Murray Rothbard's **Strategies For A Libertarian Victory** was condensed from a longer paper dated April, 1977 and entitled "Toward A Strategy For Libertarian Social Change". The 178 page, double spaced, typewritten manuscript was written for an informal private symposium, out of which grew the Cato Institute and several activist organizations, as well as an energized Libertarian Party, which had been founded a few years earlier. The original paper, which has never been published, contains Rothbard's analysis of several libertarian and non-libertarian political movements in addition to the conceptual framework outlined here.

This condensed version appeared first in *Libertarian Review*, August, 1978, which was published by the Cato Institute. Rothbard also condensed some of these ideas into Part V of *The Ethics of Liberty*, a section entitled "Toward A Theory of Strategy for Liberty."

After a simmering dispute over strategy, starting with the 1980 Clark for President campaign, and ending with a bruising battle in 1983 over the party's presidential candidate, the Cato contingent left the LP, never to return. A few years later Rothbard also left the LP as a result of his own dissatisfaction with its strategic direction. For details, see *An Enemy of the State*, by Justin Raimondo (Prometheus Books, 2000), the illuminating and inspiring story of Rothbard and his life's work. Also see <http://www.mises.org/mnr.asp> for an outline of Rothbard's prodigious lifetime output.

My own small role in the LP at the time included membership in the Central Committee of the Libertarian Party Radical Caucus, founded in February, 1979 by Raimondo and Eric Garris, and dedicated, at least in part, to applying the Rothbardian insights to party strategy. Rothbard himself was a member of the Central Committee until the LPRC was torn apart at the 1983 presidential nominating convention (see Raimondo's book for the full story). Earlier, after I became editor of the LPRC's publications, it was decided to reprint this essay; here you see a faithful reproduction of the pamphlet that was produced. The epilogue was almost certainly written by Raimondo.

In the fall of 2003 it came to my attention that a member of the platform committee of the Libertarian Party has not read this essay, this in a year when the

committee is attempting a major rewrite of the platform in order to accommodate both "idealists" and "pragmatists". Taking my cue from Rothbard's beloved Mises Institute, which has made so much valuable material readily available, I dug out the essay and fired up my scanner. Murray never warmed to the idea of using a computer himself, but I'm sure he would have approved of these important ideas being spread as far and as widely as possible via the network of computers that is the Internet. So if you think others should see this, please pass it along.

This important essay has been inaccessible for too long. I believe that every libertarian, capital "L" or not, who hopes for an actual libertarian victory, should use these concepts as the basis for his or her own analysis of strategy. Does this mean that all will then agree on what strategy to follow? Certainly not, but the discussion of strategy will be clarified and enhanced to the extent that these Rothbardian insights are not ignored.

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**Essays In
Radical Libertarian Thought**

Strategies For A Libertarian Victory

by
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Libertarians have given considerable thought to refining their basic principles and their vision of a libertarian society. But they have given virtually no thought to a vitally important question, that of strategy: Now that we know the nature of our social goal, how in the world do we get there?

To the extent that libertarians have thought at all about strategy it has simply been to adopt what I have called “educationism:” namely, that actions rest upon ideas, and therefore that libertarians must try to convert people to their ideas by issuing books, pamphlets, articles, lectures, etc. Now, it is certainly true that actions depend upon ideas, and that education in libertarian ideas is an important and necessary part in converting people to liberty and in effecting social change. But such an insight is only the *beginning* of arriving at a libertarian strategy; there is a great deal more that needs to be said.

In the first place, ideas do not spread and advance by themselves in a social vacuum; they must be adopted and spread by *people*, people who must be convinced of and committed to the progress of liberty. But this means that liberty can advance only by means of a developing libertarian *movement*. We must therefore be concerned not only with the ideology but also with developing the people to carry the principles forward. *Webster’s* defines “movement” in a way clearly relevant to our concerns: “A connected and long continued series of acts and events tending toward some more or less definite end; an agitation in favor of some principle, policy etc., as the Tractarian *movement*; the prohibition *movement*.”

Some libertarians have criticized the very concept of “movement” as “collectivist,” as somehow violating the principles of individualism. But it should be clear that there is nothing in the least collectivist in individuals voluntarily joining together for the advancement of common goals. A libertarian movement is no more “collectivist” than a corporation, a bridge club, or any other organization; it is curious that some libertarians, while conceding the merits of all other such “collective” organizations, balk only at one that would advance the cause of liberty itself. Neither does joining a movement mean that the joiner must in some way submerge his individual sovereignty to the movement or the organization, any more than the bridge club member must submerge his individuality in order to advance the playing of bridge. The individual libertarian, who places the triumph of liberty high on his value scale, decides to join a movement which is requisite to the achievement of his goal, just as does the member of a bridge club or the investor in a steel manufacturing corporation.

If the advancement of liberty requires a movement as well as a body of ideas, it is our contention that the overriding goal of a libertarian movement must be the *victory of liberty* in the real world, the bringing of the ideal into actuality. This may seem a truism, but unfortunately many libertarians have failed to see the importance of victory as the ultimate and overriding goal.

But why should libertarians *not* adopt what might seem to be a self-evident goal? One reason for not making such a commitment is that a person may prefer the libertarian ideal as an intellectual game, something to be merely contemplated without relevance to the real world; another reason for weakening a person’s desire to pursue the goal of victory may be a profound pessimism that he may feel

about any future prospects for victory. In any case, holding the victory of liberty as one’s primary goal is only likely in those persons whose libertarianism is motivated and molded by a *passion for justice*: by a realization that statism is unjust, and by a desire to eliminate such glaring injustice as swiftly as possible.

Hence, the utilitarian, who is concerned not for justice and moral principle but only for increased productivity or efficiency, may believe in liberty as an ideal, but is not likely to place passionate commitment into achieving it. The utilitarian, by his nature, is far more likely to remain content with partial success than to press on to complete victory. Indeed, such a weakening of the will toward victory was partly responsible for the decline of classical liberalism in the nineteenth century.

It *necessarily* follows, from our primary goal of victory, that we want victory as *quickly* as possible. If victory is indeed our given end, an end given to us by the requirements of justice, then we must strive to achieve that end as rapidly as we can.

But this means that libertarians must not adopt gradualism as part of their goal; they must wish to achieve liberty as early and as rapidly as possible. Otherwise, they would be ratifying the continuation of injustice. They must be “abolitionists.”

The objection is often raised that abolitionism is “unrealistic”, that liberty (or any other radical social goal) can be achieved only gradually. Whether or not this is true (and the existence of radical upheavals demonstrates that such is not always the case), this common charge gravely confuses the realm of principle with the realm of strategy. As I have written elsewhere

...by making such a charge they are hopelessly confusing the desired goal with a strategic estimate of the probable outcome. In framing principle, it is of the utmost importance not to mix in strategic estimates with the forging of desired goals. First, one must formulate one’s goals, which . . . would be the instant abolition of slavery or whatever other statist oppression we are considering. And we must first frame these goals without considering the probability of attaining them. The libertarian goals are “realistic” in the sense that they could be achieved if enough people agreed on their desirability . . . The “realism” of the goal can only be challenged by a critique of the goal *itself*, not in the problem of how to attain it. Then, after we have decided on the goal, we face the entirely separate strategic question of how to attain that goal as rapidly as possible, how to build a movement to attain it, etc. Thus, William Lloyd Garrison was not being “unrealistic” when, in the 1830s, he raised the glorious standard of immediate emancipation of the slaves. His goal was the proper one, and his strategic realism came in the fact that he did not expect his goal to be quickly reached. Or, as Garrison himself distinguished: “Urge immediate abolition as earnestly as we may, it will, alas! be gradual abolition in the end. We have never said that slavery would be overthrown by a single blow; that it ought to be, we shall always contend. (*Egalitarianism as a Revolt Against Nature*, p. 150)

From a strictly strategic point of view, it is also true that if the adherents of the “pure” goal do not state that goal and hold it aloft, *no one* will do so, and the goal therefore will never be attained. Furthermore, since most people and most politicians will hold to the “middle” of whatever “road” may be offered them, the “extremist,” by constantly raising the ante, and by holding the pure or “extreme” goal

aloft, will move the extremes further over, and will therefore pull the “middle” further over in his extreme direction. Hence, raising the ante by pulling the middle further in his direction will, in the ordinary pulling and hauling of the political process, accomplish more for that goal, even in the day-by-day short run, than any opportunistic surrender of the ultimate principle.

In her brilliant study of the strategy and tactics of the Garrison wing of the abolitionist movement, Aileen Kradt-tor writes:

It follows, from the abolitionist’s conception of his role in society, that the goal for which he agitated was not likely to be immediately realizable. Its realization must follow conversion of an enormous number of people, and the struggle must take place in the face of the hostility that inevitably met the agitator for an unpopular cause . . . The abolitionists knew as well as their later scholarly critics that immediate and unconditional emancipation could not occur for a long time. But unlike those critics they were sure *it* would never come unless it were agitated for during the long period in which it was impracticable . . .

To have dropped the demand for *immediate* emancipation because it was unrealizable at the time would have been to alter the nature of the change for which the abolitionists were agitating. That is, even those who would have gladly accepted gradual and conditional emancipation had to agitate for immediate and unconditional abolition of slavery because that demand was required by their goal of demonstrating to white Americans that Negroes were their brothers. Once the nation had been converted on that point, conditions and plans might have been made. . . .

Their refusal to water down their “visionary” slogan was, in their eyes, eminently practical, much more so than the course of the antislavery senators and congressmen who often wrote letters to abolitionist leaders justifying their adaptation of anti-slavery demands to what was attainable. The abolitionist, while criticizing such compromises, would insist that his own intransigence made favorable compromises possible. He might have stated his position thus: If politics is the art of the possible, agitation is the art of the desirable. The practice of each must be judged by criteria appropriate to its goal. Agitation by the reformer or radical helps define one possible policy as more desirable than another, and if skillful and uncompromising, the agitation may help make the desirable possible. To criticize the agitator for not trimming his demands to the immediately realizable—that is, for not acting as a politician, is to miss the point. The demand for a change that is not politically possible does not stamp the agitator as unrealistic. For one thing, it can be useful to the political bargainer; the more extreme demand of the agitator makes the politician’s demand seem acceptable and perhaps desirable in the sense that the adversary may prefer to give up half a loaf rather than the whole. Also, the agitator helps define the value, the principle, for which the politician bargains. The ethical values placed on various possible political courses are put there partly by agitators working on the public opinion that creates political possibilities. (*Means and Ends in American Abolitionism*, 1969; pp. 26-28)

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If the primary and overriding goal of the libertartan movement must be the victory of liberty as rapidly as possible, then the primary task of that movement must be to

employ the most efficacious *means* to arrive at that goal.

To be efficacious, to achieve the goal of liberty as quickly as possible, it should be clear that the means *must not contradict* the ends. For if they do, the ends are being obstructed instead of pursued as efficiently as possible. For the libertarian, this means two things: (1) that he must never deny or fail to uphold the ultimate goal of libertarian victory; and (2) that he must never use or advocate the use of unlibertarian means—of aggression against the persons or just property of others. Thus, the libertarian must never, for the sake of alleged expediency, deny or conceal his ultimate objective of complete liberty; and he must never aggress against others in the search for a world of nonaggression. For example, the Bolsheviks, before the revolution, financed themselves partially by armed robbery in the name of “expropriating” capitalists; clearly, any use of aggression against private property in order to finance the libertarian movement, in addition to being immoral by libertarian principles, would cut against those principles themselves and their ultimate attainment.

At this point, *any* radical movement for social change, including the libertarian movement, has to face an important, realistic problem: in the real world, the goal—for the libertarian, the disappearance of the state and its aggressive coercion—unfortunately *cannot* be achieved overnight.

Libertarians must not adopt gradualism as part of their goal; they must wish to achieve liberty as early and as rapidly as possible. Otherwise, they would be ratifying the continuation of injustice.

Since that is the case, what should be the position of the libertarian toward “transition demands,” i.e., toward demands that would move *toward* liberty without yet reaching the ultimate goal? Wouldn’t such demands undercut the ultimate goal of total liberty itself?

In our view the proper solution to this problem is a “centrist” or “movement-building” solution: namely, that it is legitimate and proper to advocate transition demands as way-stations along the road to victory, *provided that* the ultimate goal of victory is always kept in mind and held aloft. In this way the ultimate goal is clear and not lost sight of and the pressure is kept on so that transitional or partial victories will feed on themselves rather than appease or weaken the ultimate drive of the movement. Thus, suppose that the libertarian movement adopts, as a transitional demand, an across-the-board fifty percent cut in taxation. This must be done in such a way as *not* to imply that a fifty-one percent cut would somehow be immoral or improper. In that way the fifty percent cut would simply be an *initial* demand rather than an ultimate goal in itself, which would only undercut the libertarian goal of total abolition of taxation.

Similarly, if libertarians should ever call for reducing or abolishing taxes in some particular *area*, that call must

never be accompanied by advocating the increase of taxation in some other area. Thus, we might well conclude that the most tyrannical and destructive tax in the modern world is the *income* tax, and therefore that first priority should be given to abolishing that form of tax. But the call for drastic reduction or abolition of the income tax must never be coupled with advocating a *higher* tax in some other area (e.g., a sales tax), for that indeed would be employing a means contradictory to the ultimate goal of tax abolition. Libertarians must, in short, hack away at the state wherever and whenever they can, rolling back or eliminating state activity in whatever area possible.

As an example, during every recession, Keynesian liberals generally advocate an income tax cut to stimulate consumer demand. Conservatives, on the other hand, generally oppose such a tax cut as leading to higher government deficits. The libertarian, in contrast, should always and everywhere support a tax cut as a reduction in state robbery. *Then*, when the budget is discussed, the libertarian should *also* support a reduction in government expenditures to eliminate a deficit. The point is that the state must be opposed and whittled down in every respect and at every point: in cutting taxes or in cutting government expenditures. To advocate raising taxes or to oppose cutting them in order to balance the budget is to oppose and undercut the libertarian goal.

But while the ultimate goal of total liberty must always be upheld and the state must be whittled down at every point, it is still proper, legitimate, and necessary for a libertarian movement *to adopt priorities*, to agitate against the state most particularly in those areas which are most important at any given time. Thus, while the libertarian opposes both income and sales taxes, it is both morally proper and strategically important to select, say, the income tax as the more destructive of the two and to agitate more against that particular tax. In short, the libertarian movement, like everyone else, faces a scarcity of its own time, energy and funds, and it must allocate these scarce resources to their most important uses at any given time. Which particular issues should receive priority depends on the specific conditions of time and place.

Within any radical ideological movement for social change there are bound to develop two broad and important “deviations” from the correct, centrist, movement-building position we have been discussing. At one pole is the deviation of “left-sectarianism” and at the other the deviation of “right-opportunism.” Each, in its own way abandons the hope of victory for the radical goal. The left sectarian, in brief, considers *any* transition demands, any use of strategic intelligence to determine priorities for agitation, any appeal to one’s audience without sacrificing ultimate principles, in themselves a “sellout” or betrayal of radical principles. In the above example, a left sectarian, for example, would consider the transition call for repeal of the income tax per se a betrayal of the principle of the abolition of taxation, even though that transition demand were clearly coupled with the ultimate goal of a tax-free society. To take a deliberately ludicrous example, the left sectarian might consider *not raising* the problem of denationalizing lighthouses in our current society a betrayal of the principle of privatizing lighthouses.

In the libertarian movement, sectarians will simply reiterate such formulas as the nonaggression axiom, or A is A, or the need for self-esteem, without grappling with detailed

issues. The centrist position, in contrast, is to begin agitation around currently important issues, examine them, show the public that the cause of these problems is statism and that the solution is liberty, and *then* try to widen the consciousness of one’s listeners to show that all current and even remote problems have the same political cause.

One form that left-sectarianism sometimes takes is that of advocating immediate armed revolution against the existing state, without sufficient support to be able to succeed. In the modern libertarian movement, this deviation was pervasive during its early stage, at the time of the New Left “revolution” in the late 1960s and 1970. The collapse of the latter “revolution” as soon as the state began its armed counteraction at Kent State is testimony to one of the most important lessons of history: that *no armed revolution* has ever succeeded in a country with free elections. All the successful revolutions, from the American and the

To the “left sectarian,” *any* transition demands, any use of strategic intelligence to determine priorities for agitation, is a “sellout,” or betrayal of radical principles.

French in the eighteenth century, to the Russian, Chinese, and Cuban in the twentieth, occurred in lands where free elections were either nonexistent or severely restricted. Until or unless the United States changes from free elections to dictatorship, the question of armed revolution is, at the very least, totally irrelevant to the American scene.

In contrast to left-sectarianism, which spurns immediate gains toward the ultimate goal, right-wing opportunists openly believe in hiding or working against their ultimate goal in order to achieve short run gains.

Right-wing opportunism is self-defeating for ultimate goals in several ways. The major reason for putting forth transition demands is as a *way-station* to ultimate victory; but, by studiously avoiding the raising of ultimate goals or principles, the opportunist, at best, short-circuits the ultimate goal, and betrays it by failing to raise the consciousness of the public in the *explicit* direction of the final goal. The ultimate goal will not be reached automatically by itself; it can only be reached if a large group of adherents continues to hold high the banner of that ultimate, radical objective. But, if *libertarians* refuse to examine and put forward their ultimate goals, *who will?* The answer is no one, and therefore that objective will never be attained. Indeed, if libertarians fail to keep their ultimate objective in view, they will themselves lose sight of the objective, and descend into another gradualist, *nonlibertarian* reform movement, and the main purpose of having a movement in the first place will be lost. Secondly, opportunists often undercut the ultimate objective, and libertarian principle as well, by openly advocating measures that undercut the principle—such as a higher sales tax to replace an income tax (as did the Mid-Hudson chapter of the Free Libertarian Party in early 1976), or a gradualist Four-Year Plan to advertise their moderation and alleged reasonableness.

Even in the short run, opportunism is self-destructive.

Any new ideological movement or party, in order to acquire support—as in the case of new products or firms on the market—must *differentiate its product* from its established competitors. A Libertarian Party which, for example, sounds almost indistinguishable from right-wing Republicanism (as did the Tuccille campaign for New York governor in 1974), will fail if only because the voter presented with no clear alternative will quite rationally remain with right-wing Republicans.

In sum, *both* strategic deviations are fatal to the proper goal of the victory of liberty as soon as it can be achieved; left-sectarianism because it in effect abandons *victory*, and right-opportunism because it in effect abandons *liberty*. Both sides of this “equation” must be continually upheld.

One obvious propensity is that of a certain number of individuals, in the libertarian and other radical movements, to shift rapidly from one diametrically opposed deviation to the other, without *ever* passing through the correct, centrist position. Apart from psychological instability among these individuals, there is a certain logic to these seemingly bizarre leaps. Take, for example, someone who for years confines his activities to stating pure principle, without ever doing anything in the real world to transform reality. After several years, discouragement at the lack of progress may set in, after which, desperate for *some* gains in the real world, the person leaps into right-opportunism and accomplishes little there as well. On the other hand, someone mired in short run opportunism for years, disgusted with the compromises and immorality of *that* form of politics, can readily express his disgust and his yearning for pure principle by leaping straight into sectarianism. In neither manifestation, however, is the individual willing to engage in a protracted, lifelong commitment for victory in the real world *for* principle and as quickly as the goal can be achieved.

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I have touched on the concept of “cadre.” Let us now consider the concept in more detail; specifically, who make up the cadre, how is it generated, and what are the proper relations between cadre and various groups of non-cadre?

The cadre are simply the consistent libertarians. In the first place, libertarianism is a *set of ideas*, and hence the original cadre are bound to be largely intellectuals, people who are professional or semiprofessional dealers in abstract ideas. Mises and Hayek have pointed out how ideas filter out from original theoreticians to scholars and followers, to intellectuals as dealers in general ideas, and then to the interested public. Thus the body of intellectuals is of prime importance in influencing the general movement and, ultimately, the general public.

It is to be hoped that the cadre begins as a tiny few and then grows in quantity and impact. But what should be the proper relationship between cadre and noncadre? First, we might put forward the concept of the “pyramid of ideology.” For while “cadre” and “noncadre” may be a first approximation to the real world situation, the actual condition at any given time is akin to a pyramid, with the cadre at the top of the ideological pyramid as the consistent and uncompromising ideologists, and then with others at lower rungs, with varying degrees of approximation to a consistent and comprehensive libertarian vision. Since people usually become cadre by making their way up the various steps or stages of the pyramid—from totally nonlibertarian

to completely libertarian, some rapidly, some slowly, this implies that the stages will assume a pyramid form, with a smaller number of people at each higher stage.

The major task of the cadre, then, is to try to get as many people as high up the pyramid as possible. From this task, there follows the importance of ideological *coalitions*, of working with allies on various ideological issues.

A coalition accomplishes several things. In the first place, it maximizes the influence of the numerically small cadre on important social issues, and does so by allying oneself with people who agree *on that particular issue*, albeit on few others.

On *which issues* the cadre chooses to form alliances and work depends on a judgment of importance in relation to the real world context at the given time and place. Thus, it would be an evident waste of time and energy for libertarians today to find shipping interests with whom to make a united front agitation in the cause of denationalizing lighthouses. But coalition strategies for abolishing OSHA or the income tax, or legalizing marijuana, or (in the late 1960s) pulling out of the Vietnam War or repealing the draft, might have a high priority in the agitation of the libertarian movement.

While using coalitions with numerically larger allies on concrete issues, the libertarian cadre is also pursuing another strategy—recruiting more people. These recruits can come from the allies themselves, or from the mass of the public who are being informed about the specific issues. Normally, the proper tactic will be to *begin* with the concerns of the people being worked on, to show that you are with them on this particular issue, and *then* to “widen their libertarian consciousness” by showing them that to be *really* consistent on the issues they favor they must also adopt the other libertarian positions. Thus, while working with left-wing civil libertarians in support of commonly held positions, it can be pointed out to them that libertarians are the only *consistent* civil liberties advocates, that personal freedom cannot exist without private property rights, etc. Similarly, conservative advocates of free enterprise can be shown that outlawing pornography or drugs violates the very system of private property and free enterprise that they *profess* to favor.

Of course, there are pitfalls in a coalition strategy that must be guarded against. In the late 1960s, I issued a call for a libertarian affiance with the New Left, on the twin vital issues of the day: opposition to the draft and to the Vietnam War (with subsidiary emphasis on opposition to the public school system). I still think that this basic thrust was necessary—especially to generate a sharp and radical break with the conservative movement. But the problem was that many of our young, tiny cadre, upon cooperating with the left, *became* leftists, losing their libertarian grip.

The libertarian movement at that time had two grave weaknesses that left us wide open for such defection: (1) it was very small, and therefore had no self-conscious cadre, no organs of opinion, no mutually reinforcing cadre to talk to and deal with, and (2) partly as a result of this tiny size, the libertarian movement of that day had no *activity* with which to attract young and eager libertarians. Many is the time when a new convert to the libertarian system would ask: OK, now I’m a libertarian, what can I *do* about it? What *activity* can I perform? There was no answer. If a person were a budding young scholar he could go to graduate school and join the educational wing of the

movement; but what if he were not? As a result, the defections from cadre, not just to the New Left but to dropping out altogether, were legion.

And this is one of the main reasons why the Libertarian Party has been such a vital and important development in the last few years: It has given to eager young (and older) libertarians a wide and open-ended field for continuing an energetic *activity*. In short, because of the LP, we have become a genuine *movement* rather than just a small group of thinkers and talkers (as important as the latter functions may be).

This is also why it is very important to have “open centers” for libertarians—organizations for budding libertarians to visit and study, institutions which demonstrate the existence of an organized ideology and movement. For I am convinced that, for many reasons, including the libertarian heritage that is partially imbibed by most Americans, there are many people who are “instinctively” and inchoately libertarian and don’t know it, and who need only a few open reiterations of the pure radical creed to join us. *Finding* the movement becomes extremely important for isolated actual or potential cadre. In the late 1940s and for years afterwards, for example, FEE provided the enormous service of being the only open center for *laissez-faire* in existence, and I vividly remember the vital importance to me and other young libertarians of discovering libertarian ideas and persons through FEE, and the effect this stimulus and reinforcement had in radicalizing our own positions.

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One of the most important problems for any minority radical movement is the question of long run optimism or pessimism. Namely, while the short run prospects for victory may be nonexistent, does the movement believe that, *in the long run*, it will win? In my “Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty”, I pointed out that the conservative, here and in Europe, is always a long run pessimist. The conservative believes that the inevitable march of history is against him:

Hence, the inevitable trend runs toward left-wing statism at home and communism abroad. It is this long run despair that accounts for the Conservative’s rather bizarre short run optimism; for since the long run is given up as hopeless, the Conservative feels that his only hope of success rests in the current moment. In foreign affairs, this point of view leads the Conservative to call for desperate showdowns with communism, for he feels that the longer he waits the worse things will inelectably become at home, it leads him to total concentration on the very next election, where he is always hoping for victory and never achieving it. The quintessence of the Practical Man, and beset by long run despair, the Conservative refuses to think or plan beyond the election of the day.

That conservatism rarely attracts youth is explainable by Randolph Bourne’s incisive comment that “our elders are always optimistic in their views of the present, pessimistic in their views of the future; youth is pessimistic toward the present and gloriously hopeful for the future. And it is this hope which is the lever of progress . . .”

Furthermore, conservatism, with its attachment to the feudalistic, theocratic and militaristic Old Order, *deserves* to be pessimistic. Many libertarians also have tended to be long run pessimists, partly in imitation of conservatism

(with which some once were allied) but partly because it is easy to be pessimistic in the twentieth century if one focuses on the continuing advance of state power. But to adopt this position is to fall prey to what the Marxists call “impressionism”—i.e., responding only to the journalistic, surface march of events without analyzing the underlying laws and essences of the real world.

It should be obvious that long run optimism is important for the success of any radical movement. In the libertarian movement, pessimism has led either to despair, dropping out, confinement of the ideology to an intellectual game, or to the opportunistic hankering for short run gains that leads to betrayal of basic principle and which has governed the conservative movement. On the other hand, long run optimism leads both to a buoyant spirit and to the willingness to engage in a protracted and determined struggle for ultimate goals.

All this is psychologically clear. But, if libertarianism is to be grounded on a rational apprehension of reality, is long run optimism the *correct* stance to take, or is it only a psychological placebo?

It is my contention, which cannot be elaborated here, that libertarianism *will win*, and therefore that long run optimism is not only psychologically exhilarating but also rationally correct. In “Left and Right: The Prospects for Liberty” I elaborated the basic reasons for this contention: that, *given* the commitment by everyone, since the Industrial Revolution, to industrialism and to mass consumption, the free market is the *only* economy which enables the industrial system to survive and flourish and continue to provide above-subsistence living standards for the growing mass of population. In short, moral and economic truth is of course on our side; but, in addition to this sometimes not very comforting fact, freedom is *necessary* to the survival and prosperity of the industrial world of the modern age.

But this, of course, can still be *very* long run, and might be cold comfort to impatient spirits. In various writings since 1973-74, I have concluded that Mises’s long run prediction of the “exhaustion of the reserve fund”—that the unfortunate consequences of government interventionism will one day become glaringly evident—has now come true. We have seen in the past few years a host of crises: inflationary recession, the breakdown of Keynesianism, crippling tax rates, the failures of Vietnam; the revelations about the CIA, FBI, and Watergate, the crises in crime and the public schools, and much more. At least in the United States, the objective conditions are now and will continue to exist for an accelerated leap forward in libertarianism and for a rapid speeding up of the “timetable” for victory.

I cannot believe that the visible great leap forward in the quantity and quality of the libertarian movement since about 1973 is unrelated to this new, continuing crisis of the American state. In short, the growth in the “subjective conditions” for libertarian victory (the libertarian cadre and movement) is partly a function of the objective breakdown of statism.

As the Marxists point out, pessimism stems from impressionism and the failure to think *dialectically*. In short, in libertarian terms, while statism may be marching onward, this march inevitably leads to a growing breakdown of statism which in turn leads to a growing *reaction* in favor of libertarianism and against the state.

The difference here between libertarians and Marxists

stems from their different theories. Thus, while the Marxists believe that capitalism will founder on its “inevitable contradictions,” giving rise to a proletarian movement for its eventual abolition, libertarianism holds that *statism*, government interventionism, will founder on its inevitable “contradictions,” and that this breakdown will give rise to a libertarian movement among the public for its eventual abolition—and, further, if my analysis of post-1973 is correct, that this breakdown of statism *has already begun*.

Libertarian victory is thus inevitable *in the sense* that objective breakdowns of statism are bound to intensify, and also that such breakdowns will *tend* to give impetus to the growth of libertarian ideas and activists, but, with our belief in individual freedom of will, it is clear that the free and voluntary adoption of libertarian ideas is not *determined* and therefore cannot be inevitable in the strict sense. But victory *can* be achieved if the libertarian movement continues to increase in quantity and quality, and if libertarians continue to learn about current political issues, bringing their analysis to bear on problems which the American people face.

Many libertarians tend to be long run pessimists, partly because it is easy to be pessimistic in the twentieth century if one focuses on the continuing advance of state power.

It is important for libertarians to realize that most people are, in normal times, not *interested* in political affairs, and therefore willing to continue passive or active support for the status quo. It is only the development of “crisis situations” (like skyrocketing property taxes in California), crises that result from the breakdown of the existing system and with which the system cannot cope, that the radical movement can accelerate its strength and possibly achieve victory (as it did in the case of Proposition 13 in California). It is such periods of breakdown that stimulate a massive willingness among the public to think deeply about the social system and to consider radical alternatives. Such crisis situations might be economic ones (such as depression or inflation or skyrocketing taxes), a losing or a stalemated war, or political repression of free speech and activity, or any combination of these.

These crisis situations, as well as the basic soil that prepare them, constitute the necessary “objective conditions” for a successful radical triumph. In addition to these requisite objective conditions, there are also the “subjective conditions”—namely, a movement of sufficient strength and influence to take advantage of these objective conditions: specifically, to prepare in advance by predicting the crisis, to point out how the crisis stems systematically from the political system and is not simply an historical accident, and to point to the radical alternative by which these crises and others like them can be surmounted.

The ruling elite of America and elsewhere is beginning to lose its self-confidence, to suffer a decay of its will. And

this indeed is another condition of victory. As Lawrence Stone has pointed out in an analysis of the failure of the ruling class, “The elite may lose its manipulative skill, or its military superiority, or its self-confidence, or its cohesion; it may become estranged from the non-elite, or overwhelmed by a financial crisis; it may be incompetent, or weak or brutal.” (*Causes of the American Revolution*)

Thus, the objective conditions for the triumph of liberty have now, in the past few years, arrived at last, at least in the United States. Furthermore, the nature of this systemic crisis is such that government is now perceived as the culprit; it cannot be relieved except through a sharp turn toward liberty. Therefore, what is basically needed now is the growth of the “subjective conditions,” of libertarian ideas and particularly of a dedicated libertarian movement to advance those ideas in the public forum. Surely, it is no coincidence that it is precisely in these years, from 1971 and particularly since 1973, that these subjective conditions have made their greatest strides in this century. For the breakdown of statism has undoubtedly spurred many more people into becoming partial or full libertarians, and hence the objective conditions help to generate the subjective ones. Furthermore, in the United States at least, the splendid heritage of freedom and of libertarian ideas, going back beyond revolutionary times, has never been fully lost. Present-day libertarians, therefore, have solid historical ground on which to build.

The rapid growth in these last years of libertarian ideas and movements has pervaded many fields of scholarship (especially among younger scholars) and the areas of journalism, business, and politics. Because of the continuing objective conditions, it seems clear that this eruption of libertarianism in many new and unexpected places is an inevitably growing response to the perceived conditions of objective reality. Given free will, no one can predict with certainty that the growing libertarian mood in America will solidify in a brief period of time, and press forward without faltering to the success of the entire libertarian program. But certainly, both theory and analysis of current historical conditions lead to the conclusion that the current prospects for liberty, even in the short run, are excellent indeed.

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Epilogue: July, 1982

Since the above essay was written in 1977-78, events have provided the libertarian movement with new problems and new opportunities. The triumph of Reagan was partially the result of a popular backlash against Big Government, mixed in, however, with very different thrusts for moral theocracy and a war-hawk foreign policy. The Reagan Administration has maintained the rhetoric of its free-market and other conservative supporters, while betraying them down the line in action. It has talked massive budget and tax cuts, while bringing us the highest budget, the biggest deficit, and the largest tax increase in American history. The abject failure of Reaganomics, including its consequence in economic stagnation, chronic depression, and periodically accelerating inflation, provides both a danger and an opportunity. An opportunity if libertarians can convince the public of the Reagan betrayal and that libertarians are the only ones who can sincerely lead an

anti-Big Government movement. A danger if the public becomes convinced that free-market and libertarian ideas have already been tried and failed. In any case, the major political task of libertarians is to separate themselves, as sharply and as caustically as possible, from Reaganism, Reaganomics, and the Reagan Administration. If not, libertarianism will be discredited along with Reagan.

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