

What Happened To Our Libertarian Principles?¹

by Michael Badnarik

I have been asked to write about the principles of Libertarian thought, and to comment on John Hospers' book, *Libertarianism: A Political Philosophy for Tomorrow*. Both the Libertarian Party and Hospers' book will be celebrating their fiftieth anniversaries in 2021.

Principle

In order to be effective, I must first define what a principle is. In physics, it is defined as “*a fundamental, primary, or general law or truth from which others are derived*”. In other words, the laws of physics are *immutable*. They cannot be changed—*ever!* There are never places or moments when gravity can be ignored. According to the public's uninformed understanding, gravity does not exist on the International Space Station. They watch videos of astronauts floating from room to room, unsuspected by wires. Their conclusion is that gravity does not exist in “outer space”. However, upon further reflection, they might realize that the moon would not revolve around the earth, and the earth and other planets would not revolve around the sun, if it were not for the *immutable law of gravity*. The astronauts seem to “fly” through their environment because of micro-gravity, not because of the absence of it.

In politics, principles are defined as “*a fundamental doctrine or tenet; a distinctive ruling opinion*”. These “principles” are far more capricious because government administrations change from time to time, and the “principles” they profess are subject to public opinion, and the personal agendas of elected officials. The most significant reason for these changes is that people, like electricity, tend to follow the path of least resistance. Most people are lazy and unprincipled. They declare themselves to be honorable, but they exhibit situational ethics. That means that their concept of right or wrong changes with the circumstances. They almost never adhere to unchanging principle. Ergo, “political principles” are an oxymoron. The prevailing politics must be referred to correctly as government policy.

It is because of this widespread, though not universal, flaw in their philosophy, that I predict men and women will forever be subjected to some level of slavery or coercion. To put it less diplomatically, most people are too ignorant to be free. Allow me to share what has become my favorite quote of all time.

"The fact is that the average man's love of liberty is nine-tenths imaginary, exactly like his love of sense, justice and truth. He is not actually happy when free; he is uncomfortable, a bit alarmed, and intolerably lonely. Liberty is not a thing for the great masses of men. It is the exclusive possession of a small and disreputable minority, like knowledge, courage and honor. It takes a special sort of man to understand and enjoy liberty—and he is usually an outlaw in democratic societies."

H.L. Mencken - Baltimore Evening Sun, Feb. 12, 1923

There is an expression that I've heard many times. It claims that "everyone wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to do what's necessary to get there." Witness the huge surge in health club memberships in January, as many people resolve to become healthier and more physically fit in the coming year. You have to stand in line to use the gym equipment during the first month of every year. However, if you return in March, you will have free rein of any machine you desire. Why? Because most people are unwilling to dedicate the time and energy required to achieve their goal of a body with the physique of a Greek god or goddess. If it was easy, everybody would do it. Most simply assume it is an unattainable outcome.

LP Obituary

I was invited to speak at the 2010 Libertarian National Convention held in St. Louis, Missouri. The invitation came just two weeks before the convention. I was surprised to be invited at all, because for years I had been deliberately ignored by those in control of the party. However, party membership had been declining precipitously since the nomination of the Bob Barr-Wayne Allen Root ticket at the 2008 convention in Colorado. They wanted me to give one of my famous "rah-rah" speeches in order to entice members back into the fold, in order to reinvigorate the party.

I was originally given a thirty-minute time slot as the Sunday lunch speaker. I protested that many of the delegates would have already left for the airport in order to make it home in time for work on Monday. Without my knowledge, my presentation was changed to a fifteen-minute time slot at 8:30am on Sunday morning. I consider myself to be an excellent speaker, but even I can't sway the masses in a quarter of an hour. I was surprised to see so many delegates in the auditorium at that time, in spite of what I'm sure were so many classic hangovers.

My presentation was totally unexpected by the attendees. It was entitled “Obituary for the Libertarian Party”, and I spoke about the LP in the past tense. What I was actually doing was predicting its irrelevance and dissolution. And while the Libertarian Party may not have dissolved completely, only the most deluded can state with confidence that the party still has any relevance. Why? Because Libertarian delegates rarely adhere to party principles when electing their Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates. Instead, they have consistently and dogmatically nominated whomever they perceived to have the most fame and notoriety among the available candidates. The party has lost its relevance because delegates frequently choose pragmatism over principle.

Jack Nicholson’s character in *A Few Good Men* was probably right. “You can’t handle the truth.” But I plan to tell you anyway. The Libertarian Party lacks credibility because a majority of Libertarians are devoid of principle. That is why I have formally removed myself from the party mailing list.

Libertarian Principles

Assuming you have read this far, you may actually be interested to know what those libertarian principles are. What government policies, if held as immutable and unchanging, would lead to a peaceful and productive society? In chapter one of his book, *Libertarianism*, Hospers says, “liberty (or freedom) is the absence of coercion by other human beings”, and that “libertarianism represents a total commitment to the concept of individual rights”. Much like “ $E=mc^2$ ”, these phrases are easily stated, but may require lengthy explanations to comprehend.

Slavery is an example of 100% coercion by another individual or organization. Liberty is defined as the complete absence of coercion by other human beings. You are free to do whatever you want. Most non-libertarians jump to the conclusion that “doing anything you want” includes robbery, rape, and murder. If Liberty is correctly defined as the *complete* absence of coercion, then “doing anything you want” cannot include any of the previous examples of coercion. Of course, it is easy to dismiss libertarian principles as ludicrous if you ignore this logical prohibition.

Coercion is defined as:

1. the use of force or intimidation to obtain compliance.
2. the power to use force in gaining compliance, as by a government or police force.

George Washington is purported to have said, “Government is not reason. It is not eloquence. It is force. Like fire it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master; never for a moment should it be left to irresponsible action.” The concept is valid, even if he never uttered these words. So, if libertarianism is the complete absence of coercion, and the purpose of government IS coercion, does that mean libertarianism equates to anarchy, the absence of government? It is a provocative question that will be answered later.

James Madison expressed the conundrum this way.

“If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”

James Madison, The Federalist, No. 51 (February 8, 1788)

Unfortunately, this describes the same lack of absolutes as the game of “rock, paper, scissors”. There is no right answer.

Before we begin any debate on the virtue or evil of anarchy, we should properly define what anarchy is. Public opinion would point to the Los Angeles riots after the Rodney King verdict as an example of anarchy. The sudden abdication of police protection allowed primitive and uneducated marauders to roam the streets, breaking windows and pillaging local stores. Anarchy is correctly defined as an absence of any government control. And while it is true that government was not in control during that time, what people are actually describing is chaos. That is the state of affairs when government control is suddenly removed. A bottle of carbonated beverage may abruptly overflow when suddenly opened, but that is a very temporary condition. When temperature and pressure are allowed to equalize, the beverage behaves as expected.

If you have ever attended a cocktail party, or a small political gathering, you have experienced anarchy. There are no government agents there to intimidate the participants, preventing them from unleashing their latent aggression on the other guests. Most people can gather together without government supervision, and without any violence taking place. If you’ve never been to one, please believe me when I say that gun shows are places where everyone is on their very best behavior.

They are the most polite people you'll ever want to meet. When you stop to think about it, who is brave enough (or stupid enough) to cause trouble in a room full of people who love guns?

If you are willing to acknowledge that anarchy doesn't necessarily mean chaos, then is that a potentially desirable option? I stumbled upon a great article published in the *Washington Post*, written by Eugene Volohk. I did not get formal permission to duplicate his writing, but if it was posted on the Internet, I assume he was hoping for wide distribution. I apologize if I am taking liberties I shouldn't have.

“The phrase “that government is best which governs least” is often credited to Henry David Thoreau, in his 1849 “Civil Disobedience,” or “Resistance to Civil Government.” (It's also sometimes credited to Thomas Jefferson or John Locke, but although it might well capture some of their thinking, to my knowledge it doesn't appear in their writings.) But Thoreau was drawing on an existing, nearly identical phrase, “The best government is that which governs least”; and he was doing it to actually argue for outright abolition of government rather than just small government:

“I heartily accept the motto, “That government is best which governs least”; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which I also believe, “That government is best which governs not at all”; and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they will have. Government is at best but an expedient; but most governments are usually, and all governments are sometimes, inexpedient.”

Eugene Volohk, The Washington Post, (September 6, 2017)

In 2009 I agreed to debate my friend, Stefan Molyneux, at Drexel University in Philadelphia. The topic was “Anarchy vs. Minarchy”. Zero government vs. the smallest government possible. During our introductions I pointed out that the most difficult task that afternoon would be to highlight the differences between Stefan and myself. Stefan wanted 0% government, and I suggested that I would be happy with 5%. Considering we were experiencing about 95% government at the time, 0% and 5% were going to appear nearly identical from that vantage point.

Stefan argued that the fire department could be privatized. I agreed. He argued that our police force could be privatized, and I agreed again. I even enhanced his argument by pointing out that people who live in Beverly Hills have already privatized police protection by hiring private security guards for their estates. Eventually, one of the students shouted, “Hey, Badnarik! You sound like an anarchist!”

I was actually grateful for the heckling because it allowed me to go on the attack. I studied chemistry in high school, and majored in chemistry in college. In high school, my friends and I spent considerable time making ethyl alcohol —strictly for the purpose of improving our distillation technique, of course. I explained that ethyl alcohol is an azeotrope that cannot be distilled to 100% alcohol because water begins to exit the condenser tube along with the alcohol. Therefore, 100% ethyl alcohol is an unattainable goal of the distillation process.

I compared anarchy to 100% ethyl alcohol. It is an unachievable ideal. I told my college audience that fire and police departments could be privatized, but in that auditorium, I was probably the only person who was willing to experience anarchy. As a Boy Scout, I learned to shelter and feed myself. I also have a reputation for being very, very accurate with the .45 caliber pistol that I carry. I told the young audience that they didn’t have the *cojones* to kill in order to protect themselves. They would rather subcontract that gruesome task to someone significantly more ruthless, and *voilà!* *They* had created government, not me.

The American electorate suffers from the delusion of wanting less government intrusion into their lives, but they are unwilling to give up the government benefits they have grown accustomed to. They want to experience freedom without doing the work necessary to achieve it. Republicans and Democrats both want powerful, intrusive government, and they both want to be the ones controlling it. They only differ in what they want the government to control *first*. These parties are successful because they are unified in what they want. Libertarians are very vocal about what they *don’t* want. They don’t want taxes. They don’t want gun control. They don’t want a war on drugs. To put it bluntly, they don’t want government control of very much at all. As far as the Republicans and Democrats are concerned, Libertarians are unable to win because they have forfeited the game and left the field.

Furthermore, Libertarians can't even agree on what they don't want most. In spite of the fact that they agree on 98% of the issues, they spend all their time arguing vociferously about the 2% they don't agree on. It is little wonder that the party has all but evaporated from the political landscape.

If you are lost in the forest, your survival requires more than just not wanting to be lost. You must have a destination, and you must have a workable plan for getting there. During the American Revolution, we knew we didn't want to be ruled by King George, but we had a plan for how we were going to rule ourselves. That plan was documented in the Articles of Confederation. The French Revolution, which came shortly after, had no such plan. After using the guillotine to eliminate the people who had been in control, there was no coherent plan for what to do next. The French knew what they *didn't* want, but they were unclear on what they *did* want.

Two Fundamental Problems Of Establishing Government

There are two fundamental problems at play here, and both of them are psychological, human problems. The first is that very few people are brave enough—dare I say, smart enough—to want to make their own decisions. If you make a decision, you face the possibility of making a mistake. Because of a fear of making a mistake, the vast majority of the population desperately want someone else to tell them what to do. This is the underlying cause for the popularity of CNN and Fox News. The mainstream media tells you “the right answer” and millions of people accept this dogma as the truth. Americans are not politically correct because the nightly news *forces* them to be; Americans are politically correct because they desperately want to avoid taking responsibility for their lives!

Here is a quick test to see what kind of person you are. There are two ways to make your first skydive. One way is known as Accelerated Freefall, and after six hours of ground school, you jump out of a plane with your own parachute, and you are responsible for pulling your own ripcord...or you die. The other way is to make a Tandem Jump. The instructor wears an oversized parachute, and you wear a harness that locks you to the instructor's chest. You jump out of the airplane together, and the instructor is totally responsible for pulling the ripcord, and responding to any emergency that may occur. You are merely a passenger. As a Tandem Master myself, I consider you luggage. You are simply a minor impediment to my enjoyment of the skydive. If you insist on doing a Tandem Jump, the idea of eliminating government control of your life probably terrifies you.

If you prefer taking responsibility for pulling your own ripcord, you are likely to be sincere in your quest to eliminate government control over your life.
Congratulations.

The second problem is a complete lack of understanding of what freedom looks like. I will often begin a presentation by asking the audience to raise their hands if they consider themselves “good, patriotic Americans”. The response is always unanimous. Everyone judges themselves to be good and patriotic. My second request is for them to raise their hands if they know how many Articles are in the Constitution. Again, the response is always unanimous, but always in its sad and conspicuous absence.

For the last two decades I have taught an eight-hour class on the Constitution and Bill of Rights. People erroneously assume that I am thrilled with, and dedicated to, those documents. Imagine their surprise when I announce my comfort with the idea of burning the Constitution, and shredding the Bill of Rights. I sincerely couldn't care less. It is not the pieces of paper that I revere above all else. It is the principles of Liberty they express that are the cause of my passionate fervor. I do not quote Patrick Henry when I say, “give me Liberty or give me death”. I am expressing my own sincere belief that life without Liberty is not worth living.

Principled Libertarian Governance

So, what are these elusive Libertarian principles that some search for as if they were the Holy Grail? The first is *property*. I tell my students that there is a one word answer to every question about the Constitution, and that word is... property!
Quoting John Adams,

“The moment it is admitted into society, that the law of property is not as sacred as the law of God, and that there is not a force of law or public justice to protect it, anarchy and tyranny commence.”

John Adams, Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States, (1787)

I don't know or care what your religious preferences are, however if the law of property is as sacred as the law of God, then it must be a significant factor in our equation for maintaining Liberty. Property is necessary and fundamental to our pursuit of happiness. There isn't a human society on earth where property is unimportant.

If I go to Paris and I get caught pilfering someone's breakfast croissant, I will know why that person is upset, even if I don't understand a word of French. With very rare exceptions, most people have never traveled to any of the middle eastern countries, but *everyone*, without exception, is aware that the punishment for stealing is having your hand cut off. If an individual takes your property by force or stealth, that is *theft*. If the government takes your property under the guise of "a good cause", that is *government sponsored theft*. It perpetuates an aura of respectability, which makes it the greater evil.

The second principle is *the right to life*. Many will insist that this should be the first, and most important principle, but closer analysis will demonstrate that it is merely a subset of the first. Who owns your body? Most people look at me as if I've lost my mind when I ask this question. However, your body is the first and most important property that you own. If someone else owns your body you are a slave. To be truly free, you must recognize and cherish your body as the very valuable property that it is. This is the philosophical underpinning to your inherent right to self-defense.

The third principle is a derivative of the first two. You cherish *your* life, so in a peaceful and just society, you may not endanger or terminate the life of anyone else. You cherish *your* property, so in a peaceful and just society, you may not use force or fraud to deprive anyone of their property. Therefore, in a peaceful and just society, *you may never initiate the use of force (i.e. violence)*. However, Liberty being defined as a complete absence of coercion, you are completely justified in using lethal force, if necessary, to prevent coercion against you or your property.

These three principles, if held as immutable and unchanging, would lead to a peaceful and productive society. I summarize the principles of the Constitution into seven words for my students. "Don't hurt me. Don't take my stuff." Of course, I occasionally supplement the idea with, "...or I'll have to shoot and kill you." That always generates a nervous laugh from the students when they realize that I am deadly serious.

In order to have the courage and wherewithal to actively enforce these principles, it will be necessary for Americans to reclaim their status as the source of all political power in the United States. There is a maxim of law that predates the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215. In Latin that maxim is *Derativa potestas non potest esse major primitiva*. This translates into "The power which is derived cannot be greater than that from which it is derived."

I paraphrase this for my students by saying “The creator always has more power than the created.” Two metaphors should help clarify the concept.

If I fasten a hook to the ceiling, and then attach a rope to the hook, I can climb the rope to raise myself off the floor. I can climb *to* the ceiling, but I cannot climb *higher* than the ceiling, because it is the ceiling that allows me to climb at all.

Next, assume I have a dozen eggs. I can give you one egg. I can give you two eggs. I could potentially give you twelve eggs, but I can never, ever give you thirteen eggs, simply because I didn’t have that many to give.

Let’s apply this truism to the government. In 1789, “We the People” ordained and established the Constitution. Congress did not exist until we created it. Given that the creator *always* has more power than the created, it is logically impossible for the government to have more power than We the People. In stunned disbelief, many people utter, “Yes, but…” No buts! Your cherished Declaration of Independence states explicitly that we have the power to *alter or abolish* the government. Let’s not stop there. The Declaration also states that, it is your *right*, it is your *duty*, “to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security.” The Founding Fathers dedicated “their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor” to these principles. Most Americans have forgotten what the principles are, therefore they are very unlikely to protect them with their lives.

I will share two more quotes intended to hold your feet to the fire.

“We the people are the rightful masters of Congress and the courts, not to overthrow the Constitution, but to overthrow men who pervert the Constitution.”

“This country, with its institutions, belongs to the people who inhabit it. Whenever they shall grow weary of the existing government, they can exercise their Constitutional right of amending it, or their Constitutional right to dismember or overthrow it.”

The question you are probably asking is, “What right-wing, domestic terrorist said that, and is that lunatic in prison?” Actually, the author of these two quotes is Abraham Lincoln.² Certainly not my favorite president, but I quote the truth wherever I find it.

At a recent speaking engagement, I had several people, men and women, approach me with starry-eyed wonder, awed by my expressions of independence, and defiance of an out-of-control government. “Oooo...” they gush. “I wish I could be like you.” My response is, “Well, then...BE like me! Stop being a wuss!” My admonition is inevitably followed by, “Yeah, but...” followed by a lame excuse why they are too afraid to defend what is rightfully theirs. You only have the rights you are willing to fight for. My mother told my younger brothers and me, “Only floss the teeth you want to keep.” Even as children, we understood the cause and effect she was alluding to.

So, what practical advice can I offer to those who sincerely want to change the circumstances in their lives? First of all, stop being a herd animal. Stop believing that you need a political party to accomplish your goal. You can either ride the bus and let someone else drive—to a destination not of your choosing. Or you can get your own car and arrive at your destination much faster, but alone. Of course, you’ll have to trust your own navigation, and it’s possible that you’ll get lost a few times, but that is the price of freedom.

James Madison, the Father of the Constitution, said “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives.”³ Stupid people always end up as slaves. For several decades Americans have become more ignorant, and more government controlled. If you wish to reverse this disturbing trend, I recommend that you begin by reading *The Law*, by Fredric Bastiat. It is a concise description of what a legitimate government can do, and what a truly legitimate government would never attempt. My only disagreement with Bastiat is where he claims that government “is the substitution of collective for individual forces”. I am willing to accept government force to *supplement* my own, but I will never abdicate my right to defend myself, the government be damned!

Next, read *Common Sense* by Thomas Paine. That document alone influenced the delegates in Philadelphia so much, they finally signed the Declaration of Independence. I strongly urge you to *read and understand* the Declaration of Independence. It contains the most explicit statement of principles necessary for the establishment and protection of a peaceful and just society.

Finally, visit my website, *badnarik.org*, and download chapter two of my book, *Good to be King*.⁴ **All of our political problems stem from the fact that Americans do not understand the difference between rights and privileges.** Once they have a solid understanding of those terms, the government tyranny we face today will melt away like snow in the Spring.

Many years ago, I was invited to speak at a Libertarian State convention. The chairman wanted me to give a motivational speech. He explicitly asked me to “kick the delegates in the ass so they’ll get up and *do* something!” The convention was sparsely attended. Perhaps twenty-five people showed up, and they didn’t even sit together at the tables. They didn’t speak to me, or to each other.

I began my presentation by defining ‘motivational’ as something that generates a sustained action. I explained that if they stood or applauded my speech when I was finished, my speech would have been *inspirational*. I told them if I returned six months later, and they had not accomplished anything, then my speech was certainly not *motivational*, because I hadn’t said anything that had generated a sustained action.

That is equally true of this humble chapter. While I have no doubt that many people will consider it inspirational, and recommend it to their friends, it is yet to be seen whether or not it will inspire future Libertarians or Americans to actively pursue the Liberty they so adamantly claim they desire.

When I die, Liberty is no longer my problem. Good luck!

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[This commentary was originally intended to be included as a chapter in a book being published to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Libertarian Party. The editors were told they would have no editorial authority. Either print the chapter as I’ve written it, or do not print it at all. After several months, they have chosen not to print it at all.]

2 Speech to Cooper Union, New York City, February 27, 1860, and First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861.

3 James Madison to W. T. Barry, August 4, 1822.

4 https://badnarik.org/downloads/chapter_two.pdf