

# Rothbard's Case for a Libertarian Institution

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

Dear Baldy:

I have been considering with a great deal of interest the ideas that you mentioned to me a few months ago of an institute for libertarian research and scholarly activity. For the past 15 years, I have believed that a scholarly libertarian institute is one of the great needs on the American scene, and I now believe that the time is particularly ripe for such an endeavor. I am therefore enormously enthusiastic about the idea.

There are many reasons why such a center of libertarian thought and research is vitally necessary. One is that no sharp transformation of social philosophy, such as we have been trying to effect these past years, has ever come about without such active centers.

Over the past years, libertarian thought has been able to filiate and cross-fertilize by informal and haphazard methods. When the "members" of an ideological "movement" are small in number, it is possible, for a time, to subsist and advance purely through friendly contact and discussion. But it should be evident that such

haphazard methods can only be temporary and will be ephemeral unless superseded by centers of research and activity. Without such centers, there will be an inevitable and tragic tendency for individual libertarians to fade away into the surrounding cultural climate.

Without an institute, in short, libertarians, particularly libertarian scholars, remain completely isolated amidst largely hostile, or at best indifferent, colleagues and publics. An isolated libertarian professor is in danger of being ridiculed by his colleagues, and hence, by the student body. Moreover, he is in danger of losing his libertarianism by failure of steady and fruitful contact with like-minded thinkers.

Individual research grants are of course vitally necessary to advance libertarian research and thought. But they do not supply the need for a center of study. In such a center, or institute, the best libertarian scholars should meet, exchange ideas, cross-fertilize, publish their views, and, in general, to exercise a "multiplier" or leverage effect on the advancement of libertarian ideas. In an institute, each will stimulate the productivity of the other, hostility or indifference will be replaced by encouragement, and libertarians will make it their goal to become appointed to the institute.

Furthermore, and especially important, a scholarly, interdisciplinary journal published by the institute would further advance libertarian thought, and would bring the knowledge of the existence of such a stream of thought to college students, faculty members, and the intellectuals generally throughout the country. A magazine of opinion is an extremely important instrument to stimulate a school of thought, to develop productivity, to generate a stream of ideas, etc.

A libertarian scholar, for example, who might now be interested in writing a journal article on some important but unfashionable phase of libertarian thought is not now inclined to write it because he knows full well that it would probably not be published. Every person involved in this situation is the loser; all of us are the losers because we do not receive the benefit of the article, and therefore lose the contribution to libertarian thought which could have been made; and he — the would-be author — is the loser because his thinking along these lines has not been stimulated. The Volker Fund's establishment of its Humane Studies Series has already taken an excellent similar step in establishing a center for book publication; what is also needed is an open center for publication of articles, and for personal contact.

There is another phase of this topic, the importance of which cannot be underestimated. It is vitally important to stimulate libertarian ideas in young people. We all recognize this. It is similarly vitally important to be able to find and welcome young libertarians. There is no way now of doing this; an institute by providing a publicized, open center of activity, would serve as a beacon of light for young potential libertarians, and its scholarly journal would serve as the messenger in libraries and newsstands over the country.

This means that an unknown libertarian student in Keokuk or professor at Sioux City has a place where he can write and go and meet his true intellectual colleagues. There is no place now where this most important function can be performed. The fellowship programs of the Fund for studies with Mises and Hayek are fine and very important; but it is still true that a libertarian scholar who does not happen to be interested in economics at NYU School of Business or in the Committee of Social Thought (and, after all, the number of fellows even if he is interested is necessarily limited), is not able to find his way into the libertarian picture.

A libertarian institute, then, could provide a center, a place where the best libertarian scholars could go and exchange ideas and develop their ideas, where budding libertarian scholars could be instructed through personal contact and through a scholarly journal, where the present repressive isolation of the libertarian scholar would be ended, and a leverage effect would be produced both on the state of libertarian thought itself and on the number of newcomers into the fold. I can see no more important activity than this, no better way to advance this stream of thought and its adherents. I believe firmly that until such an institute be established, libertarian thought in America will never be on a firm foundation.

I said before that I thought the time particularly ripe for a libertarian institute. There are, roughly, two reasons for this. First, there are enough able libertarian scholars now to staff such an endeavor, something which might not have been true 15 years ago. Second, the growth of the "conservative" movement provides a

challenge as well as an opportunity; for there is a very great danger that young people who are inclined in a libertarian direction, but who have no channel for developing this direction, will get lost in the general conservative picture, will expend their energies picketing for Goldwater or some such ephemeral activity.

Thus, while the present climate of opinion offers young people who are inclined toward libertarian views, it also offers temptations to go off on other, less important paths, which may end in such mass diversion that the libertarian movement will be swamped altogether. So much the more reason for launching a libertarian institute now and offering an intellectual center for nourishing libertarian youth and other newcomers, as well as advancing the knowledge of the already-extant libertarians.

There are, I believe, several critical prerequisites for a successful libertarian institute. One, that the staff members be scholars and libertarians, and not people who are vaguely "right wing." There are enough [Thomas Molnars](#) and [Willmoore Kendalls](#) in existence without deliberately creating a new institute for them; and putting such "conservatives" in these positions would defeat the entire purpose of establishing an institute in the first place. This matter of selection is very important but I think can be successfully surmounted.

Second, the institute should be a center for research, and not a graduate school granting degrees; the latter objective is too grandiose, too impractical, and would not even furnish the "respectable license" which is the major purpose of the student obtaining the PhD degree. No, a research institute with a staff of libertarian scholars would be simpler, cheaper, and far more suitable and effective. I should think that the institute could function somewhat like the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton: comprising a permanent staff, and then also nourished by a temporary staff of likely prospects who would be fellows for a year period, perhaps on a postdoctoral level, although there would be no reason why promising predoctoral students should not have fellowships as well.

Third, it is most important that a scholarly journal be published by this institute on a regular basis. Again, it is important that the editorial staff be selected carefully, but this will be the same point as selecting the institute staff itself. I envision the best type of journal as being interdisciplinary, covering all libertarian-individualist disciplines: economics, history, government, philosophy, even science if need be. Such interdisciplinary work would be fruitful in the highest degree, for in America today intellectual and scholarly work is so narrowly specialized that no one is familiar with the other man's field. A scholarly journal could function, in short, as a sort of permanent interdisciplinary symposium such as the Volker Fund has been fruitfully sponsoring in recent years.

While interdisciplinary there is also no need for such a journal to function on an ultratechnical level, such as happens to many of the articles in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, or the *American Economic Review*. Much of this sort of thing is jargon which regards rather than promotes advance, anyway. The level I am thinking of is something like the *Review of Politics*, which Notre Dame publishes, or *Science and Society*, the Marxist-oriented theoretical quarterly. The individualist-libertarian philosophy would give a unique framework to the selection of articles which characterizes, in reverse, the latter journal.

So enthusiastic am I about such an undertaking that I would be willing to devote as much time as would be needed, full time if necessary, in working for such an institute. I can think of no more important project, no project which could, like this one, be of such potential significance in the history of human affairs.

Cordially,

Murray