

Libertarians of Will, Intellect, and Action

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

I am honored and delighted to be here, and particularly happy that the theme of this convention is Turning Point, 1777/1977. For one thing, it means that the Libertarian Party is, to my knowledge, the only organization in the country that realizes that the Bicentennial does *not* merely apply to 1776/1976. The official governmental Bicentennial Commission has just shut up shop, convinced that its task is done.

The left-wing People's Bicentennial Commission has not been heard from for the entire year. It seems that only the Libertarian Party understands that the American Revolution did not end in 1776; in fact, the Revolution began a year before the official Bicentennial, in 1775, and it ended eight grueling years later, in 1783. We should be celebrating the bicentennial for eight years, and not just for a few months of hoopla.

But there is greater significance to the Libertarian commemoration of 1777 than the mere fact that we are better historians than everyone else. There is something unfortunately symbolic about *confining* one's celebration to 1776, the year of the Declaration of Independence. For as noble, as exciting, as profoundly *libertarian* as the Declaration was, it was still the necessary *but not sufficient* first step in the victory of what we have correctly identified as the First Libertarian Revolution. The Declaration was the rhetoric, the ideology, that set the stage; but the American revolutionaries, our libertarian forefathers, were *not only* interested in setting forth a glorious set of principles; having done that, they were *also* interested in action, in putting these principles into practice in the real world, in transforming the real world to give those principles life.

The American revolutionaries set themselves a goal: to transform reality so as to bring the rhetoric of the Declaration into living practice. The American Revolution was the process of struggle by which the revolutionaries pursued their goal and achieved their victory. It is only because of their dedicated actions that we, their descendants, can celebrate the 4th of July and the Declaration of Independence.

I have long been convinced that the process of becoming a libertarian — whether it happens gradually or in a blinding flash of conversion — is a twofold rather than a single process. If we may use a now familiar rhetoric, we might say that the true libertarian is "born again," that is, that the process of conversion to liberty takes place in two distinct — though sometimes rapidly succeeding — stages.

The first conversion is what we might call the "baptism of reason" — the moment or moments when the person becomes convinced that liberty is the best, and the only just, social system for mankind. He or she realizes that liberty is the true, the good, and the beautiful. But I have become increasingly convinced that this realization is only the first step to becoming a full-fledged libertarian. To be truly "born again," the libertarian must experience what we might call a second baptism, the "baptism of will." That is, he must be driven by his rational insight to dedicate himself to the mighty goal of bringing about the victory of liberty, of libertarian principles, *in the real world*. He must set out to transform reality in accordance with his ideal vision. In short, the truly complete libertarian, the "born again" libertarian, if you will, is not content with recognizing the truth of liberty as the best social system; he cannot and will not rest content until that system, that set of principles, has triumphed in the world of reality.

Reason and will are thus fused in a mighty and unflinching determination to carry on the struggle until the victory of liberty over statism has been achieved. The American revolutionaries pledged "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor" to their struggle for liberty and independence. They were not parlor libertarians; they were determined to settle for nothing less than victory, regardless of how long or how arduous the task. And one thing is certain: they never could have won without that iron determination; for otherwise, they would have wilted very early: after Long Island, or Fort Washington, or Valley Forge. The American revolutionaries would settle for nothing less than victory; can we fail to follow their glorious example?

I am convinced that our primary task, now, as libertarians, is not to hassle with each other on the precise role of the courts or the police in the eventual free society, nor over the proper detailed strategy or tactics of achieving it. As important as these questions are, our most vital task is for each and every one of us to achieve the baptism of will, that is, to adopt and hold high — forever — the victory of liberty as our primary, overriding political goal. *This* is what we are all about, we libertarians.

To paraphrase a very different ideologist, our task is not simply to understand the world but also to change it. And that is why we libertarians call ourselves a "movement"; *Webster's* defines "movement" as a "connected and long continued series of acts and events tending toward some more or less definite end ... as, the Tractarian *movement*; the prohibition *movement*." *Our* common end, of course, is the victory of liberty over statism.

I used to think that adopting the victory of liberty as the overriding goal must be almost self-evident to all libertarians — until I began to find those who turned pale and fled when the word "victory" was mentioned. For there are all too many libertarians who apparently believe that the point of the whole enterprise is not triumph in the real world, but all sorts of other motivations, ranging from contemplating the beautiful intellectual edifice of the libertarian system to selling each other dried beans to bearing moral witness to the rightness or righteousness of the libertarian worldview.

There is, I suppose, a certain satisfaction in knowing, or even proclaiming, that we are right and that everybody else is wrong and misguided. But, in the long run, this and the other motivations are only

frivolous; they are simply not worthy of respect. They are not worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as the American revolutionaries who pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to the cause.

The major serious objection to holding victory as our goal is that such a goal can only be hopeless and absurd. The state, it is said, is mighty, pervasive, and all-powerful; and who are we but a tiny handful of men and women, dwarfed by the legions of the state? But this sort of thinking is impressionistic and superficial; geared to the range of the present moment, it overlooks the underlying trends of historical events.

Here, in particular, we can take hope and inspiration from the Founding Fathers and the American Revolution. For, I can assure you, to the observers of that day, the American cause looked totally hopeless. How could a handful of ragged, untrained soldiers hope to defeat the mightiest state, the mightiest Empire of the eighteenth century? To all knowledgeable people, the American cause seemed hopelessly quixotic and absurd, Utopian and unrealistic. For, think of it: In all of history there had never been a successful mass revolution from below against a strong ruling state. So how could this American rabble possibly succeed? And yet — we did it! We won! We performed the impossible.

The first libertarian revolution succeeded, and we can do the same — but we, too, must have the will to triumph, to accept nothing less than total victory.

Of course, in the immediate present, any existing state may look all-powerful, while opposition movements may seem small and puny. But, in a few short years, how the tables may be turned! State after state has seemed all-powerful almost to the day of its collapse and demise, while numerous successful ideological movements have flowered from a tiny handful to triumph a few short years later.

And no state has seemed more powerful than did the British Empire at the start of the American revolutionary war. It was easy to look superficially at the first two years of that war and conclude that all was inevitably lost. Washington's Continental Army had almost been wiped out in New York; Howe's army had conquered the American capital at Philadelphia. Washington's forces froze and starved through the winter at Valley Forge and St. Leger and Burgoyne were marching down from Canada to meet at Albany and then proceed to New York City and cut America in two.

As everyone knows, the turning point of the war came in late 1777, when Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne's once mighty British army was surrounded and forced to surrender at Saratoga. But what were the factors that brought about this fateful turn and that carried the Americans through the rest of the lengthy conflict to victory?

There are many causal facts that we could mention, including the overweening self-confidence of the British, who contemptuously dismissed Americans as a militarily untrained rabble; there is also the determination and dedication of the Americans, civilian and military. But what I would like to concentrate on here is the fact that the American revolutionary leaders adopted and developed what would nowadays be called a "mass line." That is, in contrast to conservatives, whether of 1777 or 1977, the American revolutionaries were not afraid of the mass of the American public. On the contrary, they realized that the great bulk of Americans were being oppressed by the British, and that the public could be brought to see this and to act upon that knowledge.

And sure enough, the great strength of the American armed forces is that they relied upon, indeed blended with, the civilian population. In a deep sense they *were* that population. The Americans were a people in arms, a mobile people that knew their particular terrain, and who were imbued with a deep sense of their rights and of the iniquity of the British invasion of those rights. When combating Burgoyne, the Americans, led by British-born libertarian General Horatio Gates, shrewdly avoided,

until the very end at Saratoga, direct confrontation with the superior firepower of the highly trained British invasion force.

Instead, Gates, aided by influxes of armed civilians who joined the fray as their own counties and districts were being invaded, wore down the British forces by guerrilla harassment. An example particularly heart-warming to libertarians, is the case of General John Stark, who had resigned from the American army and retired to his native New Hampshire in pique at shabby treatment by his superiors. But when a troop sent out by Burgoyne invaded southwestern Vermont, Stark rose up, mobilized the militia and other volunteers from New Hampshire and Vermont, and clobbered the British troops at the Battle of Bennington.

Gates and Stark, and later the victor of the decisive final Southern campaign, General Nathaniel Greene, were following the theories and the vision of their mentor, the forgotten and unsung hero of the revolutionary war, General Charles Lee, second in command of the American army during the first years of the war.

Lee was a fascinating character, an English military genius and soldier of fortune and a radical laissez-faire libertarian, who, as soon as he heard of the events leading up to the Boston Tea Party and the developing break with his native country, rushed to America to take part in the revolution. It was Lee who fused the political and the military together to develop the principles, strategies, and tactics of revolutionary guerrilla warfare, which he called "people's war." Every American military victory in the war was fought on people's war, guerrilla principles; every defeat was suffered when America tried to play the age-old game of inter-state warfare between two disciplined state armies marching to meet each other in open frontal combat.

Thus, Lee and his disciples worked out and applied the military implications of a mass line, of a people rising up against the Leviathan state.

There were other vitally important features of this overall mass line. One of its important aspects was that the American revolutionaries blended all the arguments against British imperialism into a harmonious and integrated structure. Historians have argued whether the revolution's thrust was economic, constitutional, moral, religious, political, or philosophic — without realizing that the revolutionaries' libertarian perspective integrated them all. No vital aspect went neglected. The revolutionaries understood — and pointed out — that the British government was injuring the economic well-being of the Americans through taxes, regulations, and privileged monopolies; but they also knew that, in so doing, the British were aggressing against the natural rights of person and property enjoyed by Americans and by all men. For the American revolutionaries, there was no split, no disjunction, between the economic and the moral, between prosperity and rights.

As a corollary to their mass line, the American revolutionaries and their leaders were not afraid to be radical. In current rhetoric, they dared to struggle and dared to win. There were three features of that radicalism that I would like to explore today. First was their willingness, indeed their eagerness, to desanctify, to demythologize the state, to strip it of its ancient encrusted armor of justifications, alibis, and rationalizations. The last and vital remaining act of this process was desanctifying the king — a revered mystical symbol of state sovereignty which was far more powerful, to Americans and to Britons, than Parliament or the unwritten British constitution.

This final act was necessary to any outright American break for independence; it was first launched tentatively, very early in the revolutionary agitation, by Patrick Henry, but the mortal blow was delivered by the unknown, impecunious pamphleteer Tom Paine, another English-born laissez-faire radical who performed this feat in his runaway best-seller, *Common Sense*. Paine realized that this final act of demystification had to be couched radically, in no mincing or uncertain terms, thus cutting the final umbilical cord not only with Great Britain, but also with the age-old established principle of monarchy. And in so doing Paine also pointed out the piratic origins of the state itself.

He referred to King George as "the royal brute of England," and to kings in general as "crowned ruffians," whose thrones had all been established by being heads of gangs of "armed banditti."

The king, he wrote, was "nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang; whose savage manners or preeminence in subtlety obtained him the title of chief among plunderers; and who by increasing in power and extending his depredations, overawed the quiet and defenseless..."

Paine concluded his great work with these stirring words:

"O! Ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted around the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her as a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."

I would like to underscore the importance of the line, "Ye that dare oppose not only tyranny but the tyrant..." For here Paine was referring to that two-step, double "baptism" process of which I spoke earlier. That it is splendid, but not enough, to come to the point of opposing tyranny in the abstract, as a general principle; but that it is of equally vital importance to press on to the second stage, to the concrete activism of engaging in struggle against the *actual tyrant* of whatever time and place we happen to live in.

This brings me to the second, interconnecting radicalism of the first libertarian revolution. It used to be thought that all Americans had read John Locke and were simply engaged in applying his concept of natural rights, of rights to liberty and property, and right of revolution against tyranny. But now we know that the process was not that simple. Even in those enlightened days not everyone was interested in or equipped to read abstract philosophy.

What most Americans *did* read were intellectuals and libertarians, like Tom Paine, who took Locke's abstract philosophy and radicalized it to apply to the conditions of their time. By far the most influential such writings throughout the eighteenth century were "Cato's Letters," written by two libertarian English journalists, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon. Trenchard and Gordon not only put Locke's ideas into stirring and hard-hitting phrases; they took Locke's "if ... then" proposition: that is, *if* the government transgresses against rights of person and property, *then* it is proper to rebel against it, and added in effect this insight: "The *if* is always here." In other words, they pointed out that it is the essence of power, of government, to expand beyond its laissez-faire limits, that it is always conspiring and attempting to do so, and therefore that it is the task of the people to guard eternally against this process. That they must always regard their government with hostility and deep suspicion: in short, with what is now disparagingly called, "a conspiracy theory of history."

And so, when the British government, after the war with France was over in 1763, began their grand design to reduce the virtually independent American colonies to imperial subjection, the American colonists, without access to the memoranda and archives of the British government of the day, suspected the worst, and immediately roused themselves to determined resistance. Now, two hundred years later, we know that the colonists' suspicions were correct; *they* could not know this, but they were armed with a "conspiracy theory" which *always* suspects governments of designs upon liberty. They had absorbed the lesson of Trenchard and Gordon in *Cato's Letters*:

"We know, by infinite examples and experience, that men possessed of Power, rather than part with it, will do anything, even the worst and the blackest, to keep it [*pace* Richard Nixon]; and scarce ever any man upon earth went out of it as long as he could carry everything his own way in it... This seems certain, that the good of the world, or of their people, was not one of their motives either for continuing in Power, or for quitting it.

It is the nature of Power to be ever encroaching, and converting every extraordinary Power, granted at particular times ... into an ordinary power, to be used at all times....

Alas! Power encroaches daily upon Liberty, with a success too evident... Tyranny has engrossed almost the whole earth, and striking at mankind root and branch, makes the world a slaughterhouse...."

There is another critical point to make about the importance of such men, such best-sellers as Trenchard and Gordon or Tom Paine. At the last LP national convention in Washington, a friendly journalist, and many others, remarked that it seemed more like a scholars' conference than a political party gathering. And one participant reported that everyone there seemed to be very smart, but if that's the case, how in the world will we ever win the masses of the non-smart?

Well, the first answer is that yes, we *are* very different from other political party conventions. I don't think that the crucial difference is that we're smart and the others are dumb; after all, if we may let this secret out to the world, we're not all *that* smart! We are a glorious movement to be sure, but we have hardly achieved perfection. The difference between us and the Democrats and Republicans is not that we are so much smarter than they are, but that we are deeply concerned with ideas, with principles, whereas they are simply concerned with getting their places at the public trough. *We* are interested in principles, *they* in power; and, gloriously enough, *our* principle is that *their* power be dismantled.

But how can the masses understand ideas? Well, a quick answer is that they have done so before: notably in the American Revolution and for a hundred or so years afterwards: in America and in Europe. So if they didn't read Locke, they read Paine or Cato or their popularizers, or read their followers in the press or heard them in speeches and sermons.

The American revolutionary movement was a diverse and structured one, with different persons and institutions specializing in various aspects of the struggle. The same is and will be true of our movement. Just as not everyone had to read Locke to become a full-fledged American revolutionary, not everyone now has to read all of our flowering theoretical works in order to grasp the essence of libertarianism and to act upon it.

The American revolutionaries never felt that every American had to grasp fully the fifth lemma of the third syllogism of the second chapter of Locke before they could take their place in the developing struggle; and the same should be true of our libertarians and our own theoretical works. Naturally, the more that everyone reads and understands the better; and it is hardly my point to deprecate the great importance of theory or of reading. My point is that not everyone has to know and agree to every nuance before we start moving, ingathering, and acting to transform the real world.

There is a third important aspect of the radicalism of the American revolutionaries, and this again underscores the importance of the mass line. In contrast to their polar enemies, the conservatives, who strove to maintain traditional aristocratic and monarchical rule over the masses, the libertarian revolutionary leaders realized that the masses, as well as themselves, were the victims of the state, and hence they only needed to be educated and aroused to join the radical libertarian cause.

The conservatives knew full well that they were subsisting on privileges coerced from a deluded and oppressed public through their control of state power; hence they apprehended that the masses were their mortal enemy. The laissez-faire radicals, for their part, understood that same fact, and so from the revolution down through most of the nineteenth century, here, in Great Britain, and on the continent of Europe, these libertarians led the mass of the public against traditional conservative statism. Where the conservatives rested their case on traditional privileges sanctified by mystical divine command, the laissez-faire radicals held aloft the banner of reason and individual rights for all

people.

Here again is a profound lesson for us today. Too many libertarians have absorbed the negative and elitist conservative worldview to the effect that our enemy today is the poor, who are robbing the rich; the blacks, who are robbing the whites; or the masses, who are robbing heroes and businessmen. In fact, it is the *state* that is robbing all classes, rich and poor, black and white, worker and businessman alike; it is the state that is ripping us all off; it is the state that is the common enemy of mankind. And who is the state? It is any group who manages to seize control of the state's coercive machinery of theft and privilege. Of course these ruling groups have differed in composition through history, from kings and nobles to privileged merchants to Communist parties to the Trilateral Commission. But whoever they are, they can only be a small minority of the population, ruling and robbing the rest of us for their power and wealth. And since they are a small minority, the state rulers can only be kept in power by deluding us about the wisdom or necessity of their rule.

Hence, it is our major task to oppose and desanctify their entrenched rule, in the same spirit that the first libertarian revolutionaries opposed and desanctified *their* rulers two hundred years ago. We must strip the mystical veil of sanctity from *our* rulers just as Tom Paine stripped the sanctity from King George III. And in this task we libertarians are not the spokesmen for any ethnic or economic class; we are the spokesmen for all classes, for all of the public; we strive to see all of these groups united, hand-in-hand, in opposition to the plundering and privileged minority that constitutes the rulers of the state.

It is this task, this march toward liberty, that the libertarian movement has undertaken. That movement was born only a little while ago, and in a few short years it has grown and expanded enormously, in numbers, in the depth of understanding of its members, and in the influence it has been exerting on the outside world. It has grown amazingly far beyond the dreams of its tiny handful of original members. The libertarian movement extends beyond the Libertarian Party, and consists of a broad number of people and organizations, ranging from scholarly centers and magazines to lobbying groups to supper clubs to tax rebels. But while the Libertarian Party is not the whole movement, it is a vital part of that movement.

We are the institution that garners the publicity, that brings to enormous numbers of people their first knowledge of libertarianism and of the libertarian movement, that educates and ingathers the broad public and attracts and nurtures present and future libertarian activists and cadres. And, on top of all this, we are the only libertarian organization that can use the established institutions of the ballot box and the political party structure to roll back the Leviathan state, to pressure from below for repeal of statist measures, decrees, and institutions.

Our national convention is a time for stocktaking, for judging how well we have been succeeding at our task. Well, let's take a look: since our last convention, we have mounted our first nationwide presidential campaign. We were on the ballot — despite enormous legal handicaps — in almost two-thirds of the states, and we have vaulted into becoming the nation's third largest political party. Now how's *that* for a party that only began a half dozen years ago? I say that's terrific, and shows that we are truly the wave of the future.

And so we have splendidly achieved Phase I of the hoped for growth and expansion of the Libertarian Party. Phase I was the establishment of our party as the leading nationwide third party, a feat accomplished by the 1976 presidential campaign. Phase II, our task for the near future, our turning point, is to use the 1976 results as a springboard for widening and deepening the grass roots strength of the Party throughout the states: over this year and next to develop local and state-wide chapters and candidates.

Then, if we perform that task well, we will be ready for a great leap forward in the 1980 presidential

campaign to make this party into a true mass party at the head of a mighty movement, a movement to complete the original American revolution and to bring liberty to our land.

We hereby put everyone on notice: We are libertarians of the will as well as the intellect, of activity as well as theory, of real-world struggle as well as idealistic vision. We are a serious movement. Our goal is nothing less than the victory of liberty over the Leviathan state, and we shall not be deflected, we shall not be diverted, we shall not be suborned, from achieving that goal. The odds against us are no greater than the odds that faced our forefathers at Concord, at Saratoga, or at Valley Forge. Secure in the knowledge that we are in the right, inspired by the vision, determination and courage of our forbears, we dedicate ourselves to the noblest cause of all, the old American cause, of individual liberty. With such dedication and with such a goal, how can we help but win?