

Sell Out and Die

by Murray N. Rothbard

In the spring of 1979, a fateful – and fatal – shift took place in the direction and strategic vision of our leading libertarian institutions: foundations, youth movements, journals, etc. The shift was a classic leap into opportunist betrayal of our fundamental principles.

The early, pre-1976 days of the modern libertarian movement suffered from having no strategic vision at all. For that reason, it scarcely deserved the name of movement; the guiding concept was what I call "educationism": that libertarians write, lecture, teach, and spread the word, and that somehow the victory of liberty would one day magically be achieved. From 1976 on, in contrast, the movement began to flourish under a movement-building, or cadre-building, perspective; the idea was to concentrate on building a movement of knowledgeable libertarians, of men and women who would be deeply committed to hard-core libertarian principle.

This "cadre" would get involved in single-issue coalitions where the particular issues advanced the libertarian cause (anti-draft, drug law repeal, tax-slashing, or whatever). In that way, the effectiveness of the cadre would be multiplied, and the consciousness of many of our allies would be widened to see the consistency and merit of the broader libertarian perspective.

This strategic perspective is of course a long-range one, but it is the only one that can possibly succeed. At all times, the cadre holds high the banner of pure principle, and then applies that principle to the crucial issues of the day. But this course requires a lifelong commitment to what Mao aptly called a "protracted struggle"; it is no movement for those who rush in and burn out in a few months.

COUP D'ÉTAT

In any ideological movement, the temptation to take quick shortcuts, the lure of betraying principle for supposed short-run gain, can become almost irresistible. But usually sellouts have occurred after the

movement has taken power, or else when it is teetering on the brink of power. But it is surely rare for an ideological movement to sell out when it merely sniffs the faintest whiff of possible power some day in the future. Surely this is gutlessness and venality of an unusually high order. Yet this began to happen to the growing libertarian movement in early 1979, and is happening right now before our eyes.

This new opportunist strategy we might call, with considerable and much-merited sarcasm, the "quick-victory" model. The reasoning goes something like this: All this principle stuff is just a drag on the machinery. We can gain a rapid and enormous leap forward in votes, money, membership, and media influence. But to gain these great goals we must quietly but effectively bury these annoying principles, which only put off voters, money, influence, etc.

It is too slow to get votes and support by holding high the banner of libertarian principle and slowly converting people to it; far quicker to abandon our own principles and adopt the program dear to the hearts of those who might bring us votes, money, and influence.

The problem, of course, is that even if money, votes, and influence are achieved by this route, what are they being achieved for? A major purpose, for example, of the Libertarian Party is to educate the public, but to educate them to what? Presumably, to libertarian principles. But if we present to the public watered-down pap hardly distinguishable from liberals, conservatives, or centrists on various issues, there will be no true education. The public will receive education, not in liberty, but in pap, and whatever votes are achieved will not be for liberty but for watered-down treacle. In the process, our glorious principles are betrayed and forgotten, and so the cause of liberty is worse off, even with several million votes, than it was before the sellout strategy took hold. So everyone loses, and no one benefits – except perhaps the opportunists themselves, who may personally gain in power and income from the whole shabby process.

How, then, were the opportunist connivers going to handle all the stiff-necked and principled purists in the Libertarian Party? The answer was simple, and typical of the process of betrayal occurring in ideological parties: Let the purists have their platform, which indeed has gotten harder core and more radical with each national convention. And then, simply control the Presidential candidate, and he ignores the platform. And then the party can quietly go to hell, except of course when needed as foot soldiers for ballot drives. Besides, they believed they could get away with this strategy with only a minimum of hassle from us purist malcontents. So far, in fact, the tactic has worked, and will continue to work unless and until genuine libertarians throughout the country rouse themselves and begin to do something effective about it. And the first step is to raise all of our voices loud and clear against this repellent takeover of our party.

MEDIA HYPE

What specific form has this opportunist sellout taken? Specifically, the

opportunists have targeted as their constituency young, middle-class liberals, the sort of articulate people who tend to mould voter opinion, the sort of people who read the *New York Times* and watch CBS News. Better yet, they are the sort of people who write the *New York Times* and make CBS News. In short, young, middle-class, liberal media people. Who needs cadre, who needs intellectual content, who needs principle, who needs grass-roots organizing, or single-issue coalitions or all the other patient boring work that might eventually gain victory for libertarian principle? Who needs all of that when, with a considerable infusion of money and a big dilution of principle, we can "win" quickly with razzle-dazzle, direct mail, and media hype?

It is this living for the media and media influence above all that accounts not only for the betrayal of principle, but also for the kinds of ideological deviations that the opportunists have indulged in. It is time to recognize that patient argument on each of these issues is beside the point; the opportunists are simply not interested in which stand on any given issue might be consistent with libertarianism and which is not. All they care about is finding some plausible libertarian-sounding rationale for a position which will suck in the votes and support of the media and the media-oriented constituency.

For example: how are white, middle-class liberal youth to be sucked in to supporting [the ticket]? Easy. What has been the biggest, in fact virtually the only, issue animating this group for the last several years? Hysterical and ill-informed opposition to nuclear power. So: we promise them, No Nukes.

How about the sort of white, middle-class liberal women who read the *New York Times*, etc? Clearly, their big issue for years has been the ERA, so [the] opportunist institutions come out vigorously for this amendment.

What are the other basic views of the media constituency? Mainly they are soft liberals: that is, they favor the welfare state, but worry about its high costs, and wish for some sort of mild reduction in Big Government. So: [the ticket] has now promised that welfare will not be cut in a libertarian regime: in one version, until private institutions take up the welfare burden (fat chance!) or, in another, until "full employment" is achieved (no chance at all). So, middle-class liberals are assured: No Welfare Cuts. No "Goldwater extremism" here.

In accordance with the opportunist strategy, [the ticket] has given up talking about basic principle (too radical) and wants to talk only about what he will do in his first year in office (Huh?). What he will do, of course, is to be "responsible," and therefore not do much of anything that middle-class liberals or the media might consider threatening. So he talks only about a "large" tax and budget cut, but nothing really radical or principled like repealing the income tax.

What about drugs? Here [the ticket and its] handlers know that middle-class liberals mainly smoke marijuana anyway, so favor its legalization, but anything like heroin – much more a working class or

ghetto drug – scares the hell out of them. So [the ticket] bravely comes out for legalization of "soft" drugs like marijuana, and refuses to talk about heroin, which means of course, an implicit acceptance of the idea of keeping heroin and other hard drugs illegal. The implication is clear, and cannot be wriggled out of by the sophisticated and evasive reply that [the ticket] has nowhere said explicitly that heroin should be outlawed.

Neither are our middle-class liberals very fond of illegal working-class Mexican immigrants, and so [the ticket] has maintained that illegal Mexican immigration should continue to be restricted until welfare disappears. But then, of course, that has to stay until full employment, etc. So: No Mexicans.

But this is what happens when opportunists begin to sanction the idea of structured destatization, of saying that we can't repeal Statist Law A until B is repealed, and we can't repeal B until we get rid of C, etc. To the media, this of course seems very "responsible" and respectable. Sure, it's respectable; and for the very same reason, it means that we, as libertarians, are advocating the indefinite and hence the permanent freezing in place of the statist structure. The quick victory model turns out, on analysis, to be a quick victory only for the power and income of the opportunists themselves; for the cause of liberty, it means a permanent burial.

It all amounts to a monstrous betrayal; those who hanker after votes, media influence, and respectability should have stayed where they belonged and where they can get these goodies more rapidly: in the Democratic and Republican parties.

Why, then, has the [ticket] remained fairly sound on a foreign policy of non-intervention? Not, surely, because of some lingering devotion to principle. But because their beloved constituency – youthful white middle-class liberals – is fairly dovish, and so they believe that hay can be made with these people by sticking to non-intervention. But, even here, [the ticket] has already compromised by incorporating Canada and Mexico into the U.S. defense perimeter. (In short: fight the Russians in Mexico, but don't let the Mexicans in?) Also, [it] now talks of a gradual withdrawal from NATO.

Lately, [the ticket] has taken to summing up his position as that of a "low-tax liberal." What we have to recognize is that this is not simply a catchy phrase to get the attention of the media. This is precisely what libertarianism has sunk to after a year of being remolded by the campaign's power elite. The marvelous structure of libertarian principle has been reduced simply to "low-tax liberalism."

So watered down are our principles that we can already point to several key areas where Ronald Reagan is significantly more libertarian than [the ticket]. [The ticket] is against Nukes; Reagan is not. [The ticket] is for ERA; Reagan is for equal rights without the infusion of government. [The ticket] is for restricting Mexican immigration; Reagan is for a Common Market with Mexico, which

presumably means free immigration. [The ticket] links welfare cuts to "full employment"; Reagan makes no such unnecessary link. And we are yet to be convinced that the proposed tax cut will be significantly bigger than the Reagan Kemp-Roth tax cut.

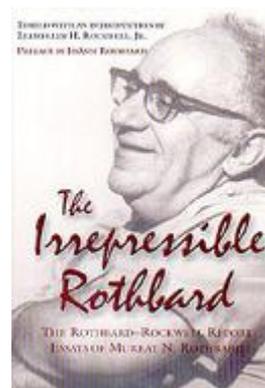
"LOW-TAX LIBERALISM"

Let's put it this way: if you were an ardent tax-cutter, would you vote for a man who might well be elected, or for a man with no chance who promises a slightly bigger cut? If libertarianism is to be buried, there seems to be no point in voting for a Libertarian Party. If only Reagan's election did not likely mean the incineration of the human race in nuclear war, libertarians might well find his candidacy very tempting at this point in the campaign.

So, if the LP candidate is to hawk "low-tax liberalism" instead of libertarianism, why vote for [the ticket] at all? Why not for someone with a better chance to win, or, to put it another way, why not vote for an authentic low-tax liberal; why not Jerry Brown, for example, that master of liberalism of lower budgets and lower expectations? Or at least that is Brown's image, and image is all that [the ticket]'s handlers care about.

More to the point: what about John Anderson? For though Anderson gives no sign of being for lower taxes, his firmly entrenched media image is that of someone, to use the old cliché, "liberal on social issues and conservative on fiscal issues." As he has rushed to return the embrace of his newfound constituency of white middle-class liberals, Anderson's foreign policy has become increasingly dovish. And as for the media, well everyone knows that the "Anderson difference" has literally been created by the media. He is the media's darling, and [the ticket] is bound to remain a humble suitor left standing in the wings.

This, then, accounts for the panic and near-hysteria on the part of the [ticket's] managers over the Anderson candidacy. Anderson, they wail, has taken away "our" constituency. Tough. It couldn't have happened to a more deserving group of guys. It is indeed poetic justice for a group of people to sell their souls for a mess of pottage and then not even get the pottage. Then, maybe, after November, these people will leave us alone and return to the major parties. And maybe then we will have a party whose candidates run on the platform and not over it, who stand up for pure and consistent principle, who are more interested in grass-roots cadre building than in media hype.



Maybe then we will again have a "party of principle." What eventually killed the New Left was that they forgot about grass-roots organizing in their thirst for media attention.

Let us hope that we don't follow the same route. So perhaps the best thing that could happen to save our souls and our principles is for the meretricious "quick-victory" model to lead to a quick defeat, even on the opportunists' own terms: in media flash and numbers of vote.