

Trentaquinquennial

The Founding of the Party

by John Hospers

A founding
father of the
Libertarian
Party reveals
what it was
like at the
start.

A few months ago, at a libertarian-related meeting in Los Angeles, a man whom I remembered by face but not by name sought me out: "Don't you remember me? I was with you at the first Libertarian Party convention."

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It was not the first time I had been greeted in this way — although it doesn't happen often anymore. Memories are fading with the passage of years. Yet I have been told that someone should write a record of those exciting three days in which the national Libertarian Party was formed. I had no plans to try to write such a record, and held off for years waiting for an observer, rather than a participant, to write it, in the interest of greater objectivity. Finally I was pressed by the editor of *Liberty* to take on the job. In doing so I will write only my impressions and recollections of the convention, with no claim to getting it all quite right.

Political activist David Nolan founded the Libertarian Party of Colorado in 1971, in a meeting in his living room in Colorado Springs with his associate Pip Boyles. Later he sent letters to a few hundred people who had shown interest in a nationwide get-together of libertarians and the possibility of organizing a national party. He invited all members of this undefined group to meet on a June weekend in 1972 in the Radisson Hotel in Denver — an ordinary middle-class hotel, with a big ballroom in which meetings could be held. Nolan had no idea how many people would show up. Fewer than a hundred people did.

I had attended some meetings of the recently formed California Libertarian Party in Los Angeles — just a few dozen of us who met to discuss issues. We were encouraged that a national meeting was being organized, and some Californians were among those assembled in Denver the following June. Bill Susel, who had got me into the California Libertarian Party, insisted that I make the trip to Denver too. On arrival, I found that the interests of the group varied considerably, but we shared a contagious enthusiasm for the task. Anyone visiting the Radisson Hotel today

could have no conception of the atmosphere of excitement and anticipation that pervaded the ballroom during the convention.

One thing was soon evident: there were not many anarchists in attendance. After all, it was a *political* party that was being founded. The most famous anarchist, Murray Rothbard, wanted no part of a national party and was not present at the convention. He joined a year later, and for many he became Mr. Libertarian, a title he well deserved in view of his numerous writings on libertarian themes.

The meetings, which went on for three days, were chaired by Nolan and his wife; she took over when his voice gave out. Both were very adept at parliamentary procedures, and properly took a no-nonsense approach to those who wanted to hog the discussion.

The main problem on which time was spent was the party platform. A platform committee was organized by Pip Boyles, who did an excellent job, and issue after issue was discussed in open session. Foreign policy was not emphasized; the nature and scope of the United States government received most of the attention.

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what activities the government should stay out of, and why, and to what extent? Then, what constitutes a right, and how far do such rights extend? What should replace the growing welfare state? Should there be taxation, and if so, for what things? What should libertarians have to say about roads, railroads, and transport in general, in relation to government regulation? And the same in regard to public utilities, rental properties, prescription drugs? Should dangerous drugs be regulated? Which matters should be left to the states (age of consent? traffic rules?), and which to each person's individual judgment? These issues, and more, came to be discussed at length, pro and con, in the pages of Liberty.

Issues that didn't come up on the convention floor were discussed in small groups, meeting informally after dinner. These were the most enjoyable times of all for me. We would sit on the patio in the summer evening, clad usually in sandals and shorts, and chart the course of the world we wanted to bring about.

The theme that most concerned me was the hope of achieving a truly limited government. Suppose a government begins by being limited by its constitution. How can it

remain limited? Neither education nor religion is mentioned in the original U.S. Constitution, but government easily intrudes into such areas. Most of us were well aware that when the government intrudes in one area, the scope of its involvement always expands: one interference follows another, in a seemingly endless sequence: "We need a law for this"; "That has to be regulated." Finally the government controls most of the activities we once thought were voluntary.

Some of the delegates had read books by Ludwig von Mises, the great libertarian economist; but the vast majority of them had read Ayn Rand's novels, particularly "Atlas Shrugged," in which she laid out in fictional form a full-fledged political philosophy. Her work was cited again and again during the convention. I myself had been greatly influenced by discussions with her, over a period of several years, in her apartment in New York. Without Ayn Rand I would not have been at this convention.

During the late '60s I had been writing a book, "Libertarianism." It had been published in September 1971, while I was spending two weeks in the Soviet Union. Many of my experiences there inspired my strongly anti-Soviet stance. (I later

wrote about this trip for Reason, which was only three years old at the time.) Some of those at the convention had read all 450 pages of my book, and had copies with them, which they quoted on the floor of the convention to establish or refute a point. I think they had no idea I had written other books.

The convention agreed that the people present should try their hand at composing a Statement of Principles, briefly presenting libertarian ideas. Many obliged, and read their proposed statements aloud to the assembled group. Some of these authors did so at great length. One person's statement was more than a dozen pages long, and at least half of it was devoted to a lengthy condemnation of altruism (Ayn Rand's *bête noire*). There were several other lengthy ones, all of them influenced by Rand.

I had been influenced by her too, but I limited my proposed statement to a few brief sentences, in which I hoped to match, in some way, the style of the Declaration of Independence. This was the statement that won the convention's majority vote, and except for a sentence on property rights, added (with my approval) by journalist Tonie Nathan of Oregon, and a few verbal changes instituted during the next LP convention (Dallas,

1974), it remains the party's Statement of Principles.

By the afternoon of the third day, most of us felt satisfied that something had been achieved. But one task remained, a task on which not everyone was agreed — the nomination of a candidate for president of the United States.

None of us thought very highly of Nixon, nor did we care much about big-government McGovern. Wouldn't it be nice if we could vote for a libertarian for president?

I was neutral on the matter of whether to run a candidate or not; I could see the arguments on both sides. Some of the members felt that such an action would be insanely premature. We didn't want the party to descend into political wrangling like the others, and most important, we had just started out, and nobody knew that we even existed. Still, what did we have to lose? Others might hear about us in time. And if that happened, there would have to be a name at the head of the ticket.

There were several names put into nomination for president, including mine. As a result of the voting, I was selected as the presidential candidate, and (as I was delighted to see) Tonie Nathan was

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selected as the vice-presidential candidate.

That I was nominated had little to do with my qualifications or lack of them. The convention wanted a "respectable" candidate, who wouldn't strike the public as a pompous fool or an ignoramus. They didn't really know me; they had no idea whether I could generate votes for the new party, and neither did I. But they did know that I was chairman of the philosophy department at the University of Southern California, and perhaps this was qualification enough.

I had given countless lectures and participated in countless discussions, but they were in a classroom setting, as teacher to students. I had never really ventured into the Great Wide World outside. As the delegates cheered their new presidential candidate, my positive emotions (joy? gratitude?) were combined with a considerable measure of dread: could I possibly live up to these expectations? But I was willing to give it a try.

When I arrived at the Los Angeles airport at midnight after the last day of the convention (my 3-year-old nephew had been taken from his bed to the airport so that in later years he could recall the event with his Uncle

John), the dread had not been dispelled from my mind, though it was gratifying to be cheered on by so many people I had not known before. I sensed at once that this was a Big Departure in my life. Previously, teaching and writing; but from now till the presidential election five months away, a different life, dominated, as it turned out, by media interviews and live speeches, and trips to about a dozen states of the Union.

Gradually, I became adjusted to "speaking to the multitudes" and to fielding hostile questions from the media. What was most difficult for me was to keep my responses uncomplicated, and not to question mistaken presuppositions in the questioner — a degree of acquiescence in ignorance and stupidity that would never have passed muster in a classroom. Some questions demanded far longer answers than the questioner thought were needed, but I had to learn to shorten my replies.

I learned not only to inform but also to *move* an audience to feel as I did about an issue — especially about the extreme importance, to all of us and to the world in general, of the mortal danger of allowing government to make our decisions for us. I would often cite the historical record; and although

some audiences were appallingly ignorant of the historical examples I used to illustrate the points I raised, time after time they remembered the examples even after they forgot the principles they were designed to illustrate.

About a month before the national election I received a phone call from Dave Nolan, about a call he had just received from Roger MacBride. I had never met MacBride, but I knew his name as a friend and inheritor of the libertarian writer Rose Wilder Lane. Roger disclosed that he had been nominated by the Republican Party as a member of the Electoral College for the coming election, and that he would switch his vote from Republican to Libertarian — i.e., that he would give his electoral vote to Tonie and me. But it was a big secret, to be told to no one, for if the Virginia electors heard of it they would surely drop him as an elector. So absolutely no one except Tonie and me would know of this.

It was quite a surprise, of course, and we kept the secret. On the appointed day in December, Spiro Agnew as vice-president fulfilled his constitutional duty by announcing the results of the election — the votes for Nixon, then the votes for McGovern, and then, apparently to his own surprise, he read,

"and one electoral vote for John Hospers as president and Theodora Nathan as vice-president" (of course, he didn't know her nickname, Tonie). Millions of radio and television watchers heard these words, and the news came to everyone as a complete surprise. Members of the recent convention were surprised as well, and I started to receive phone calls and letters of congratulation. Obviously, I was delighted, and it seemed to me that my various audiences began to take the libertarian message with greater seriousness.

"Beware," runs a libertarian motto; "the government is armed and dangerous." I believe some libertarians get this wrong: the government *has* to be armed, in order to be able to defend our rights. But it has to be dangerous only to those who would attack and destroy — and a thin line may separate those who would defend us from those who would destroy us. In a trice the first can turn into the second. We may not even know at the time that this fatal transition has taken place. It does not require a sudden coup d'État, only a sustained public indifference, a fatal habit of thinking: "let the government take care of it." What government can do for us, it can do against us. Eternal vigilance is, as always, the

price of liberty.

But there is joy in that vigilance. Let me return for a final moment to my encounter with the participant in that first convention. "Do you want to know something?" he asked. If nothing else of consequence had been accomplished at the event, his words alone would have made the convention memorable for me. "Those were the most exciting three days of my life."

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