

# John Hasnas



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How did I become a libertarian? It happened in the fifth grade at Public School #6 in Woodmere, New York at approximately 9:10 in the morning. In my elementary school, we began every day with the Pledge of Allegiance. Each morning, I and 29 of my ten-year-old colleagues would tramp to school around 8:45, hang up our coats, take off our boots or rubbers when the weather was bad, put our books in the old-fashioned lift-top desks with attached chairs, and fool around while waiting for the bell to ring at 9:00 a.m. When it did, we would all quiet down, stand in line to the right of our desks, place our right hand over our hearts, and look at the upper right-hand corner of the classroom. Hanging there was an American flag next to a loudspeaker attached to the school’s public address system. Immediately after the bell, the school principal’s voice would emanate from the loudspeaker and lead us in the Pledge. Every school day for each of the last five years, we had mumbled the same meaningless words in unison, continually reaffirming our allegiance to the republic for Richard Stanz. But this day, something was different.

Immediately following the Pledge, our teacher instructed us to take out our “social studies” books. This was the day we were reading about the Soviet Union and why it was such a bad place. Our book explained (in language appropriate for fifth graders) that the Soviet Union was bad because its government enforced conformity on its citizens. To drive this point home, the book contained a picture of an elementary school class in the USSR showing the boys and girls lined up beside their desks (all wearing uniforms and hats with little red stars on them) reciting something in unison. Looking at the picture, something clicked in my ten-year-old brain and I thought, “Hey, didn’t we just do that? If government-enforced conformity is bad in Russia, why isn’t it bad here?” I remember looking around the room expecting a similar reaction from my prepubescent colleagues. I detected none. But I nevertheless began to regard the pronouncements of the adult authority figures in my state-run school with a little skepticism. And as we all know, the willingness to question authority puts one on the slippery slope to libertarianism.

This story, which is as true as an adult reconstruction of a childhood event can be, is, of course, not a full account of what led me to libertarianism. But it is the story I tell because it reflects my belief that libertarianism is a position one arrives at through a process of open inquiry. The number of libertarians who became so through indoctrination or who

learn it at their mother's knee must be vanishingly small.

I usually flatter myself that I adopted a libertarian political philosophy as a matter of conscious reflection. The truth is that I was probably predisposed to become a libertarian by cultural and familial factors. In the first place, I am a second-generation descendant of what is probably a stereotypical Eastern European Jewish immigrant family. My grandfather came to this country from Romania to escape the official oppression and utter lack of opportunity he faced as a Jew. Arriving with nothing, he worked unbelievably hard to earn the price of passage for the wife and children he had been forced to leave behind. Those children and my father, who was born in America, faced an employment market where opportunities were severely limited by anti-Semitism. By forming a family business, they worked their way out of poverty sufficiently to provide my generation with the opportunity to go to college. I was raised in an almost entirely Jewish enclave in the suburbs of New York City.

This is a family background designed to engender a skepticism of power that borders on paranoia. The experientially-based world-view of my extended family was that all gentiles would like to exploit and kill the Jews, and if they ever got the power to do so, they would. As a child, I attended Hebrew school where we were taught Jewish history. Jewish history is the story of millennia of oppression by church and state culminating with the Nazis. Although the lesson usually drawn is that the world is beset by irredeemable anti-Semitism, it requires only limited powers of abstraction to move to the more general conclusion that the evil resides not in who is oppressed, but in the existence of the power to oppress itself.

Another factor predisposing me toward libertarianism was that my parents (inadvertently, according to them) inculcated in me a belief that knowledge came from investigating and thinking for oneself. Like most Jews, my parents placed an extraordinarily high value on learning, but they had neither the education nor time to answer most of my questions. The best they could do was to encourage me to figure things out for myself. The response I almost invariably received to my requests for information was, "Look it up." Thus, I grew up thinking that one was supposed to engage in independent thought rather than just receive wisdom from others; that one should believe something because it made sense rather than merely because an authority figure said it was true.

This cultural and familial background imbued me with a strong, if inchoate, skepticism of power and a desire to discover truth for myself. These two factors, when combined, would inevitably make one susceptible to the appeal of libertarianism. Thus, I was probably at least as predisposed to become a libertarian as the child of alcoholic parents is to become an alcoholic.

Of course, being predisposed toward a particular trait does not ensure that the trait will be expressed. Not all children of alcoholics become alcoholics. Something must trigger the

predisposition. In my case, the trigger was a combination of my experience in the New York public schools system, my childhood love of science fiction, and a mistake.

In my day, the government-run elementary schools spent several years indoctrinating their students with belief in the value of liberty. We were taught that the American Revolution was fought to achieve freedom from an oppressive government that taxed its citizens unfairly. We learned that the Declaration of Independence recognized individual rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness and restricted government to protecting these rights. We were told that Americans possessed rights to freedom of speech and religion before we even knew what the Constitution was. We were taught that the Civil War was fought to free the slaves. In short, our early education was basically libertarian propaganda.

In middle school (what we used to call “junior high school”), this early indoctrination was followed immediately by the glorification of government power. We were taught how the federal government saved old people from being cast into the street, ended the vicious exploitation of poor women and children, repelled the depredations of the robber barons, provided education for all, empowered the working man, helped the needy, ended the Depression, and generally righted the wrongs inherent in the capitalist system.

Although the seamless passage from government is bad unless it is restricted to preserving liberty to government is good and should pursue all good ends was accepted without question by my public school compatriots, it was troubling to me. Was government good or bad? How could it be true both that people should be able to live their lives as they choose and that government should be allowed to tell them what to do? How could liberty be both good and bad at the same time? Something didn’t make sense in what we were being taught in school.

Meanwhile, from my elementary school days on, I loved reading comics (Marvel only please) and science fiction. Like most boys of my generation, I thought nothing was cooler than the astronauts. One day when I was rummaging through my father’s books, I found one called *1984*. Assuming this was science fiction, I started reading it. Without realizing I was reading a political book, I found it fascinating, especially the parts about the concepts of newspeak and doublethink. The idea that certain thoughts could be eliminated through the manipulation of language and that people could be taught to believe both halves of a contradiction seemed to provide a good explanation for what I was experiencing in public school. This, and other books I encountered such as *Brave New World*, began to form my budding skepticism about authority into something resembling a political position.

Then came the mistake that crystallized my inchoate musings into a definite political philosophy. I was at a bookstore looking for a science fiction book whose title I could not remember clearly. Although actually looking for Isaac Asimov’s *Foundation*, I accidentally

bought Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*. I found the individualistic philosophy it contained quite inspiring, rapidly read the rest of her fiction and nonfiction, and found myself convinced that a morally proper government should be limited to the protection of individual rights. Even though the word was not in use at the time, I had become a libertarian.

Having arrived at this intellectual position, I quickly learned that it was a prescription for loneliness. It is difficult for students today to appreciate what it meant to be a libertarian before the term "libertarianism" was even coined. Today, being a libertarian means having to defend a minority position. In the 1960s and 70s, it meant total and utter isolation. Today's students often complain to the one or two libertarian professors on their campus of feeling besieged. In my day, a libertarian had no one to complain to. There were no libertarian professors. Worse, virtually no libertarian sources were included in either high school or college curricula. A perhaps apocryphal story about William F. Buckley has it that when he addressed university audiences, he would write four names on the blackboard at the beginning of his talk. On one side of the board would be John Maynard Keynes and John Kenneth Galbraith; on the other side would be Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. He would ask his student audience how many of them had heard of Keynes and Galbraith. All would raise their hands. He would then ask how many had heard of Mises and Hayek. No hands would go up.

It was not merely that all of your teachers and contemporaries disagreed with you, it was that they treated you as though you were crazy. One reason early libertarians became good arguers is that they were constantly trying to make their position sound reasonable to absolutely incredulous listeners. There is a scene in the 1987 movie *Broadcast News* that aptly captures what it felt like to be a libertarian in the 60s. Holly Hunter's character continually disagrees with her boss over something, giving good reasons why his judgment is wrong. Exasperated, he says something like, "It must be wonderful to be so much smarter than everyone else and to always be right when everyone else is wrong." To this, Hunter's character responds, "No, it's horrible." At least part of the reason I became a philosophy major in college was that it was the only discipline in which one's work was evaluated on the basis of the quality of one's reasoning rather than the acceptability of one's conclusion.

In my case, the situation quickly went from bad to worse. Beginning from a classical natural rights-based, police/courts/national-defense, minimal-statist position, I found myself drifting toward anarcho-capitalism. The problem was that all of the arguments I used against the monopolistic state provision of services beyond the minimal protective services I supported seemed effective against those as well. Logic was leading me to support a free market in all respects. I was being seduced into thinking that competitive forces alone could solve all the problems of human interaction. And if people thought you were crazy for being a

libertarian, imagine what it was like being an anarchist.

Fortunately, later in life, I discovered Hayek and became acquainted with the history of the common law. This freed me from the economists' conception of a free market as the realm of unregulated voluntary transactions. Instead, I came to regard the free market as the realm of human interaction free of *political* interference, that is, as the realm of human interaction regulated by custom, ethics, and common law. The position that I now hold, which I perhaps inaccurately refer to as common law libertarianism or common law liberalism, is consistent with the arguments against the monopolistic state provision of services without implying an absence of all morally legitimate coercive regulation of human activity.

The concept of common law libertarianism has great explanatory power and I am firmly convinced that it is correct. Nevertheless, I expect and hope that as I learn more and gather more information, it will continue to evolve and change. This reflects my belief that libertarians usually are driven to their position by the logic of ideas. After all, no one sets out to adopt a position that almost everyone else regards as absurd and that subjects one to, at best, ridicule, and more typically, to scorn and characterization as a selfish bastard lacking in compassion. No one likes advocating a position everyone else disagrees with and having to constantly defend one's beliefs as a minority of one. (Alright, if you really do come from an Eastern European Jewish background, maybe you do.)

This is what makes the process of engaging in open inquiry so dangerous. The fact is that it is extremely difficult to make convincing arguments for false conclusions. And because so much of the justification for our current political system rests on utter falsehoods, the willingness to subject its supporting arguments to close scrutiny is almost certain to lead one to radicalism. A moment's reflection about whether majority rule is really *self*-government, whether politically-motivated elected representatives really express the "will of the people" or act for the common good, or whether government courts truly apply definite rules of law in a neutral and impersonal manner is likely to set one's feet on the path to the social ignominy of being outside of the mainstream.

Many years ago, I taught the critical thinking course in the philosophy department at the University of Texas at Arlington. This course involved acquainting students with the informal rules of logical argument and teaching them how to both distinguish good arguments from bad and construct good arguments themselves. I used to begin this course by warning the students: "If you master the techniques covered in this course, no one will like you." Not a semester went by in which some number of students didn't tell me that their ability to recognize logical fallacies and construct valid arguments for their opinions was causing them domestic strife and that their spouses or parents didn't want to talk to them anymore. Applying these techniques to political matters is a prescription for alienation, not merely from the members of your immediate family, but from all of polite

society.

So, how did I become a libertarian? How does anyone? Libertarianism is what happens to you if you are willing to question assumptions and undertake a truly open-minded quest for the truth. But one should embark on such a quest aware of the potential consequences. It is immensely satisfying to discover a political philosophy that both integrates one's experience into an intellectually consistent conceptual whole and provides an accurate account of how the world actually works. But such knowledge does not come without cost. With it comes the scorn and derision of those who chose not to undertake the quest; those who do not wish to see that the emperor has no clothes. So tread the path with care, for the price of knowledge can be loneliness.