

Steve Patterson

“Toward Freedom” is an Everything-Voluntary.com series sharing personal stories about the journey toward freedom. Submit your story to the editor.

Four years ago, I became an anarchist, and I’ve never looked back. My political philosophy now runs through my veins. But this wasn’t always the case. I used to be a young, apathetic conservative. Then, I was introduced to libertarianism, which slowly turned me into an anarchist. This might sound crazy, but I assure you, it’s quite reasonable, and many people share my same story.

It all started in 2007. I was casually aware of politics at the time. My parents were conservative, so I was conservative. YouTube was still relatively new, and I remember one day stumbling across a video of Ron Paul. I was immediately intrigued. Here was this funny old man saying the opposite of his fellow Republicans on stage, and he called himself a “Constitutional conservative.” This sounded appealing. He would say all these fascinating things I’d never heard before, and the more videos I watched, the more excited I became. After only a few weeks, I was fully on-board with the platform of this Ron Paul guy. Little did I know this resonance with a political philosophy would change my life.

If you know anything about Ron Paul, you know he’s an exception to the rule. He was a politician, yes, but only in title. Politicians are (rightly) known as slimy, spineless, unprincipled folk whose political ambition overrules any shred of integrity they possess. Ron is the opposite. He defies the oxymoron “principled politician”. He’s been called the one exception to the gang of 535. And it shows when he talks. He doesn’t appeal to rhetorical flourishes or woo the crowd with empty platitudes. He really believes what he says and speaks out of conviction, something nonexistent among politicians.

But to me, ultimately, Ron Paul is a charming, principled nerd. He’s an extremely well-educated man in every area of political thought, especially Economics. He puts philosophic ideas above politics or elections. In fact, he used his presidential campaigns as educational platforms. Ron didn’t think he could win, but he knew more people would discover the power of free-market ideas if he ran for president.

But as he would tell you, Ron Paul’s ideas are more important than his person. Millions of people were swayed by the philosophy of freedom, not just his charming personality. The core principles of limited government resonated through all political upbringings, whether you identified as a liberal, conservative, or were apathetic.

Given my conservative ideology, I knew that lots of people gave lip service to the Constitution, but rarely did they defend it consistently. They supported military

intervention overseas, but balked at the idea of requiring Congress to formally declare war. They complained about the Department of Education, but would only support gentle budget cuts, at most. Ron said what conservatives were too afraid to say: get the government out of education altogether. We don't need a 10% budget reduction; we need to abolish the whole department! Conservatives say they support individual responsibility and don't want a nanny-state. Then how can they support the War on Drugs? If an adult decides to peacefully smoke pot in his basement, and not hurt anybody, we don't need a nanny-state micro-manage his life and throw him in jail. Conservatives supposedly want you to be free to make bad decisions, as long as you pay the consequences for them.

Probably the most controversial position Ron held was on the US military. He thought, as old-school conservatives did, that we should be extremely cautious before intervening in foreign affairs. He also thought the Pentagon wasn't infallible; they are prone to the same egregious waste and mismanagement as the Department of Education. This ruffled a lot of feathers. It shouldn't have. Ron simply applied the same principles across the whole spectrum of government.

He was consistent, and he kept coming back to the following principle: what is the proper role of government? Before we argue about cutting 10% of the Department of Education's budget, shouldn't we discuss whether or not it should exist in the first place? Is it appropriate, or even Constitutional, for the Executive Branch to send troops into foreign countries for an extended amount of time without Congressional declaration? Before we nibble around the edges of government spending, we need to talk about what government should do in the first place.

To me, he was precisely correct, but it revealed an unsavory truth: Republicans and Democrats aren't so different from each other. One party might want to raise spending 5%; the other might want to cut spending 5%, but both favor the status quo and support big government in their respective areas. Liberals and conservatives are like two sides of the same coin. Constitutional conservatism, I thought, represented a real alternative.

But my journey didn't stop there, because Ron implanted a little seed in my head. When he spoke, he often mentioned the "Austrian School of Economics". I never heard of it, but eventually, I decided to Google around. What I discovered changed my life. I came across the Mises Institute, which had a number of free books and lectures online about Austrian Economics. I was immediately enamored. The explanatory power of Economics was breathtaking. After diving into the literature, I didn't simply believe government was inefficient, I understood why. This had an enormous impact on my political philosophy, and it started my transition to radical libertarianism.

I now believe it's impossible to have a clear understanding about how the world works without Economics. The coordination of prices, profits, and losses in a market is awe-

inspiring. No exaggeration – it is almost miraculous. I will write extensively about this at a later time. But suffice to say, Economics became a pillar around which I would develop my other political beliefs.

The further I learned – the further I went down the rabbit hole of Austrian Economics – the more “radical” I became. Not only was government inefficient at delivering mail, but they were inefficient everywhere they intervened. The same economic principles apply to the Post Office as apply to the Patent Office. Of course, this wasn’t radicalism for the sake of radicalism, it was just consistency. And if you apply economic principles consistently across the board, you are left with a very grim perspective of government. However, I was no anarchist.

I firmly believed in small-government libertarianism. Markets could handle everything except few core services: the courts, military, and police. Of course, this would be considered wildly limited government compared to today’s standards.

My first interaction with an anarchist, ironically enough, was as an intern in Ron Paul’s congressional office. I was given the opportunity to be his intern in DC for a semester, and one of his staffers considered himself an anarchist. He was a nice guy, but I didn’t take his ideas too seriously.

But that changed in the summer of 2010. I was fortunate enough to attend a conference for students at the Mises Institute – the organization I held in such high regard. The conference was called “Mises University”, and it would be a week long, focusing solely on Austrian Economics. I was elated, and it turned out to be one of the most intellectually stimulating weeks of my life. I was surrounded with the smartest peers I’ve ever met.

A few lectures hinted at the possibility of complete statelessness – the idea that private entrepreneurs could better provide all the services of government, including courts, military, and police. Supposedly, for the same reasons we don’t want government to monopolize the production of shoes, we don’t want them to monopolize the court system or the production of national defense. I wasn’t convinced.

During the middle of the week, I was forced to adjust my beliefs a little bit, so I called myself a “Secessionist” for a few days. But I was no anarchist. I agreed with some core ideas – that taxation is fundamentally coercive and is therefore theft. I agreed that markets were based on voluntary, peaceful human interaction, while governments were necessarily based on violence or threats of violence; and I agreed that, in a perfect world, we wouldn’t need any coercion whatsoever – voluntary decisions would reign supreme. But, I thought, we don’t live in a perfect world, and surely in some circumstances, large groups of people wouldn’t care about the “rights” of an individual. Statelessness might sound nice in theory, but in practice, people wouldn’t respect the property rights of a lone anarchist, declaring

his independence in the middle of a city.

Until one night, when I was challenged by a fellow student named Dan. He was a pretty burly guy, former Air Force I think, and we were hanging out at one of the local bars after the lectures. (Of course, “hanging out at the bar” at Mises University really meant “talking loudly about nerdy ideas in public places.” I remember some locals dancing at the bar, but they were outnumbered 3-1 by sweaty geeks talking about monetary history.)

I told Dan about my hesitations with anarchism, and he said he understood. “But,” he said, “let me ask you this: if I want to opt out of government services, should I be able to?” It’s a simple question, but I didn’t know how to respond. I wanted to say, “Of course you should be able to opt out of government services! If you don’t want to pay, you don’t have to, but then you don’t get to use the services.” But alas, such an admission would be tantamount to anarchism. After all, government services are by definition tied to taxation, and you can’t opt out of taxation. Doing so would be opting out of government, which is precisely what these anarchists were talking about.

On the other hand, I couldn’t say with a straight face that indeed, Dan should never be able to opt out of government services. I’d have to be willing to put him in jail if he tried. Even if his decision to opt out was poor – if he’d be better off by using the services – I couldn’t justify forcing him to pay for something he didn’t want. So, I was perplexed. I didn’t have a good response, and I remember slowly responding, “I think I might be an anarchist now.”

I wrestled with that question for the next few months, as I kept trying to justify the existence of involuntary government. I read a book called Chaos Theory by Bob Murphy, which has a section on the private production of law. My list of necessary government services dwindled. Then it happened: I became a closet anarchist. After playing devil’s advocate so much with myself – being an annoying anarchist – I couldn’t find a proper counter-argument to my critiques of limited government.

I was shocked. I couldn’t believe I’d ended up so far away from where I started. I thought anarchists were bomb-throwing hooligans who smashed in windows for recreation. But this type of anarchism was about private property and peaceful, voluntary cooperation. I saw the contradictions and inconsistencies in popular conservatism, and I couldn’t stomach it any longer.

By the end of 2010, I came out of the closet. But I didn’t know what to call myself. “Anarchist” seemed too dramatic and hot-button. (Believe it or not, people dismiss you rather quickly upon identifying as an anarchist.) I toyed around with labels like “anti-statist” or other nonsense, but I’ve recently settled on the term I find most appropriate: market anarchism.

You can sum up market anarchism succinctly: all the services which are currently provided

by governments can be more efficiently and ethically provided by private entrepreneurs. Granted, there's a million different ways to phrase it, but that's how I prefer. Really not so radical, is it?

Four years later, and my conviction has become stronger. The explanatory power of market anarchism is unparalleled. Politics finally makes sense when you throw out the romance surrounding government and patriotism. But what's surprising to me is how my own justification for anarchism has changed. I still wholly subscribe to Austrian Economic theory, but now I am even more compelled by the ethical and philosophic arguments for anarchism. To an anarchist, it's clear as day: taxation is theft. Theft is immoral. Therefore, taxation is immoral, which condemns government as immoral. Simple and profound.

Upon taking the leap to anarchism, it appears preposterous and naive to try and manage the lives of a hundred million people from a central planning board. Social problems involving 300 million people aren't resolvable by one tiny group forcing everybody to act a certain way, threatening them with jail time if they don't comply. It seems clear.

On a philosophic level, proponents for government run into trouble: what exactly is a government, anyway? Upon inspection, "governments" are only grandiose, harmful abstractions; they have no tangible reality. We live in a world inhabited by humans – not "governments" or "countries". This might sound absurd – and I won't defend the claims right now – but I intend to give rigorous explanations for these ideas in the future.

The anarchist worldview is radically individualist, not because it views people as isolated decision-makers, but because individualism is the most philosophically critical way of viewing the world. It helps us avoid dramatic abstractions and opens up the world of economic thinking. And at this point, I can't imagine turning back; anarchism has gone to my core.

If anybody is intrigued by this story, I only ask they pursue the topic sincerely. Hold on to your objections as long as you can, and see if your beliefs can withstand the criticism of market anarchist arguments. I humbly suggest starting with Austrian Economics and see where it leads. I, for one, sought political truths as a young conservative, and I believe I've found them in market anarchism.

Originally published at Steve-Patterson.com.