

# James Ostrowski



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I suppose I could best be described as an independent, middle-class, populist, radical libertarian. How I got that way is an interesting story (you hope). I was born into a political family in one of the most highly politicized counties in the United States. My father was a New York State judge from the time I was four years old. From the age of twelve (1970) through the time I left Buffalo for law school in 1980, I was a close observer of local politics. I saw it up close and personal. By sixteen, I became personally involved as a campaign volunteer. What I saw in those early years was critical to my conversion to libertarianism later.

My first memory of national politics was the fight over the Vietnam war. Since my parents were news junkies, I literally grew up watching American boys die in the rice paddies of Vietnam on network news. I particularly recall the weekly body count: U.S.-214, South Vietnamese-313, North Vietnamese-765. Boy, we sure were killing a lot of the enemy, I thought. Can't be long now.

My father publicly denounced the war in 1970 and that was that. I was against the war. We supported McGovern in 1972. The war was the only issue that mattered. I grew up despising Nixon. He was the guy who said he would end the war and didn't. The next big event was Watergate. In the summer of 1974, my mother and I sat rapt while the impeachment hearings detailed all the sleaze and corruption. (Yeah, I played football and basketball, too.)

That same year, I got involved in my first campaign other than my father's—Ramsey Clark's campaign for the United States Senate. I remember attending a fundraiser for him

in Greenwich Village hosted by Chevy Chase where Harry Chapin sang. Cool stuff for a seventeen-year-old in the big city.

It's precarious to reconstruct what my political philosophy was twenty-five years ago. My main inspiration was Thomas Jefferson. I would re-read the Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July. It would, however, take me several years to grasp its radical implications. It's fair to say that in those days, I was a liberal. I was voted "most liberal," Class of '75, St. Joseph's Collegiate Institute. I was anti-Vietnam war, pro-drug legalization, pro-civil liberties. I was however, unfortunately ignorant of economics and fell prey to liberal redistributionist nostrums. I also have to confess I was pro- "gun-control." In my defense, I was a juvenile and gun control is a juvenile notion.

In the later years of the 1970s, I started developing a notion of politics based on personal experience with local politics in Buffalo. What I observed was political machines blatantly using the government to enrich themselves at the expense of the general public while a once great city was decaying. In response to this, I formulated my own simple (and unoriginal) notion of politics: government should do those things which are in the general interest, not the interest of one faction at the expense of another. I did not have at that time a firm notion of what was in the general interest; I just knew what I was seeing in Buffalo politics—use of the government for the benefit of the discrete interests of those in power—was not it.

Meanwhile, I worked on Mo Udall's campaign for president. We liberals really—I'm trying to think of another word than hate—disliked Jimmy Carter. What a phony. Was I right about him. If he didn't have so much competition, he would be up for worst president ever: cancelled my beloved Summer Olympics, started draft registration, created an artificial energy crisis, lowered the speed limit to 55. What an idiot! And need I say, Iranian Hostage Crisis, stagflation and the Mujahedeen? When it came time to vote, I cast my first presidential vote ever for the Libertarian, Roger McBride. I didn't know much about him, but I knew the Libertarians were against the war on drugs, and I didn't want to vote for one of the Commies.

In college (SUNY Buffalo), where I majored in political philosophy and the classics (an unofficial major of my own invention), I read some soft-core libertarian stuff: J.S. Mill's *On Liberty* and Milton Friedman's *Capitalism and Freedom*. I liked both but was still searching. Then I saw Ayn Rand on Phil Donahue. Most of the audience despised her. That made me think, maybe it's worth checking her out. I read the *Virtue of Selfishness* and *Capitalism, the Unknown Ideal*. Since I was already an individualist and rationalist, her rationalist, individualist philosophy clicked with me immediately: (1) man is to be guided by reason; (2) the individual is the unit of value; (3) big government sucks; and (4) capitalism is cool. (That's free market, not corporate-state, capitalism.) I already knew points one to three; Rand (and Rothbard) taught me point four. I abhor, however, the authoritarian cult that

developed around Ayn Rand and the philosophical straight-jacket she forced her followers to wear.

Meanwhile, in college, we read Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. A fine book, but its main value was that it first introduced me to the century's greatest expositor of libertarianism, Murray Rothbard. I quickly devoured many of his books and essays and signed on to Rothbardianism, a general outlook on politics and economics I have held to since 1980. I had the privilege of inviting Murray to Brooklyn Law School in 1982, where he did a tripartite dissection of the statist Reagan administration. This was to the utter amazement of the liberal audience, who could not conjure how Rothbard could be to the "left" of Reagan on civil liberties and foreign policy, but to the "right" of him on economics.

I did not see Murray Rothbard often over the years, but I felt a special bond with him, and he had the ability to make a young libertarian feel that the bond was reciprocal. The only degree I have in economics is an MNR (Murray N. Rothbard). I had the privilege of attending Rothbard's ten-part seminar in the history of economic thought in 1984, in New York City. My notes from that seminar evidence lectures covering the wide sweep of Western and even Eastern economic, political and religious thought. Rothbard's grasp of the history of Western religions was startling.

In the early years, I had the privilege of meeting other great libertarian pioneers, including Henry Mark Holzer, my law professor, historian Ralph Raico, my fellow Buffalonian, and the incomparable Roy Childs (who died in 1992). Roy, also originally from Buffalo, got me interested again in drug policy, which I suppose is where I made my bones. (I learned years after we met that Roy had been taught to read by my cousins.) I say "again," in high school I had debated in favor of marijuana legalization. At the 1980 Cato Summer Seminar at Dartmouth, Roy spoke three times and gave perhaps the three most inspiring lectures. Roy and I had coffee at the bus station after the conference. I told him how impressed I was at the speeches by him and Rothbard, Thomas Sowell, Raico and others. Roy said to me, "You can do the same someday if you try."

During the 1980 presidential campaign, the libertarian movement began to split into two factions, the Rothbardians versus the Cato Institute faction led by Ed Crane and funded by the billionaire Koch family (The "Kochtopus"). As I see it, and saw it, the split is about whether libertarianism would be "hard-core" or watered down, grass roots or inside the beltway, decentralized or run by a few moneybags and their minions, principle versus principal. I was always a Rothbardian in spirit, even when I took a brief and disappointing detour into the Kochtopus in 1990 to try to start a national anti-drug war organization. For reasons never made entirely clear to me, the Kochtopus, after encouraging me to abandon my law practice to start Citizens Against Prohibition, abruptly dropped the project.

Off and on since 1980, I have been active in the Libertarian Party. I flirted with the

libertarian-Republican movement around 1992, but decided that policy tinkering is pointless. In 1994, I decided to run for governor of New York State as a Libertarian. My life-long friend and campaign manager, Marty Mutka, and I worked long and hard to gain the nomination and I was in the driver's seat until about one month before the convention. Then, an eccentric long-time libertarian who I had mistakenly counted as a friend, recruited Howard Stern to run for Governor as a libertarian.

I thought the idea was absurd and was surprised that many party activists were intrigued by the idea. (Murray wouldn't have been surprised.) Two key activists, each of whom begged me to run and promised to support me, stabbed me in the back and supported Stern. Several very decent libertarians stuck with me, however, including Mark Axinn and Becky Akers, and the late Gail Bova. I refused to quit and fought hard. As reported in *The New Yorker*, I even offered to meet a pro-Stern heckler in the parking lot after the convention. (He never showed.) The myth is that Stern rolled over us at the convention. The reality was that we came within about thirty or so votes of depriving him of a first ballot victory. The national media covered the convention but the best account was by Murray Rothbard writing in the *Rothbard-Rockwell Report*. Murray was a great journalist on top of everything else.

What struck me the most about the bitter experience of 1994 was how little respect many New York libertarians had for traditional non-political values like loyalty and friendship. If I gave my word of honor that I would support someone for office, then, in the old Irish neighborhood I come from (South Buffalo), come hell or high water, my word is my solemn oath, and may I rot in hell if I betray that oath. Lest I be accused of obsolete romanticism, I point out that, having scorned such old-fashioned values as loyalty, honor, friendship, and philosophical principle, the NYLP has enjoyed spectacular electoral failure since 1994. A = A, I guess.

Currently, I am affiliated with the Ludwig von Mises Institute as an adjunct scholar and contributor to [Mises.org](http://Mises.org) and [LewRockwell.com](http://LewRockwell.com) as a columnist. Lew Rockwell, Jeff Tucker, and the crew in and around the Mises Institute are the finest people, personally and philosophically, in the libertarian movement today. Unlike many other libertarians I have known, they believe in the ancient and eternal verities.

The Mises team is the most productive free-market policy group in existence. They do far more with fewer resources than other think tanks possess. And they do it without ever selling their souls or any part thereof. Years ago, when Jeff Tucker first approached me to write for the *Free Market*, I asked Roy Childs what he knew about the upstart think tank in Alabama. Even though Roy had broken with Rothbard and was aligned with the Cato camp at the time, he encouraged me to work with the Mises Institute. "They're okay," he said, "They're hard core." Boy are they ever! When others cowered after 9/11, they fought for their principles more boldly than ever.

It has been twenty-three years since I abandoned reform Democrat/liberal politics and joined the libertarian movement. It has been fascinating, frustrating, thrilling, maddening, and more. I have met some of the finest men and women of our time, and a few scoundrels, too. There have been many defeats and only a few victories, but we have not yet begun to fight! "Once more into the breach, dear friends . . ."