

Rothbard's Conceived in Liberty: The New Republic

I've been waiting to read the fifth volume of Murray Rothbard's *Conceived in Liberty* for over 30 years. Now my former student Patrick Newman, professor at Florida Southern College, has miraculously undeleted this "lost work." Patrick's quasi-archaeological efforts are nothing short of amazing, but how does the actual book hold up?

In the first four volumes of *Conceived in Liberty*, Rothbard tells the story of the American colonies' rise, rebellion, and victory over the British. In this final volume, he tells the story of America's brief time under the Articles of the Confederation – abruptly (and illegally!) ended by the revolution/coup/counterrevolution that we now know as the United States Constitution. Rothbard, a vociferous detractor of the Constitution, could easily have subtitled this last book in his series "The Revolution Betrayed."

Under the Articles of the Confederation, government was much more decentralized – and therefore much better:

Overall, it should be evident that the Constitution was a counterrevolutionary reaction to the libertarianism and decentralization embodied in the American Revolution. The Antifederalists, supporting states' rights and critical of a strong national government, were decisively beaten by the Federalists, who wanted such a polity under the guise of democracy in order to enhance their own interests and institute a British-style mercantilism over the country.

Rothbard's main focus, however, is not in persuading the reader that the Articles were superior, but simply chronicling the details of their demise. As a result, the book is disappointing. I expected to watch Rothbard debunk the standard civics case for the Constitution – to insist that the Articles fostered rapid economic growth, high individual liberty, and peace both between the U.S. states and between the U.S. and the world. I expected him to enthusiastically defend the repudiation of war debt. And I expected him to at least consider reconsidering his earlier support for the American Revolution and its many slave-holding philosophers of freedom. Instead, Rothbard glosses over the Big Questions in favor of detailed multi-stage Constitutional vote analysis.

Admittedly, quantitatively comparing growth, freedom, and peace under the two colonial regimes would be difficult due to data limitations. But there's no excuse for ignoring the

implications for revolutionary change. In his engaging introduction, Newman depicts Rothbard as a dedicated supporter of the American Revolution:

Although the Revolution was enormously costly and resulted in the near destruction of the economy (through hyperinflation, military confiscation of goods, British pillaging of infrastructure and supplies, and the flight of British loyalists), the war was worth it since it led to the achievement of highly libertarian goals of inestimable value. Rothbard explains that the American Revolution was radical and led to the restriction of slavery in many areas, the end of feudalism, the emergence of religious freedom, democratic constitutions with increased suffrage, and revolutions in European nations.

Here's the rub: How can the war (including the "near destruction of the economy"!) be "worth it" if the libertarian revolution gets cancelled a few short years later? This is an astronomical price to pay for such a transient gain. Sure, you could reply, "Well, the war *would* have been worth it if the Articles had endured." But that immediately raises a deeper question: Was the American Revolution even a prudent gamble? The probability of victory aside, what is the probability of winning the war but losing the peace? If your answer isn't, "Very high," I question your knowledge of the history of violent revolution.

Perhaps Rothbard would insist, "The Constitution was only a partial counterrevolution. Many of the libertarian gains of the American Revolution endured." Then he could point to all the items in the preceding list: "the restriction of slavery in many areas, the end of feudalism, the emergence of religious freedom, democratic constitutions with increased suffrage, and revolutions in European nations." Given the hellish history of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era, I'd say the latter "achievement" outweighs all the others. In any case, Rothbard barely grapples with the counterfactuals. How do we know slavery wouldn't have been restricted anyway? What's the probability that the British would have restricted slavery earlier and more peacefully? Inquiring minds want to know.

Rothbard also fails to grapple with the complex interaction between decentralization and mobility. As I've explained before:

[D]oes decentralization alone really promote liberty or prosperity? The mechanism is elusive at best. Imagine a world with a thousand sovereign countries of equal size. This is far more decentralized than

the status quo, right? Suppose further, however, that there is zero mobility between these countries. Labor can't move; capital can't move. In this scenario, each country seems perfectly able to pursue its policies free of competitive pressure. Why should we expect such policies to promote liberty, prosperity, or anything else?

The story would change, of course, if you combine decentralization with resource mobility. In that case, each country's government has to compete to retain labor and capital at home. If you don't make the customer happy, somebody else proverbially will. But without this "universalist" mobility rule, decentralization leaves everyone under the rule of a preordained local monopolist.

Standard civics classes claim that under the Articles of the Confederation, interstate tariffs were a serious problem; they offered decentralized politics without free trade. Rothbard only response is to downplay the severity of the regulation:

While Connecticut taxed imports from Massachusetts, and New York in 1787 moved to tax foreign goods imported from neighboring states, the specter of disunity and disrupting interstate tariffs was more of a bogey to sell the idea of a powerful national government than a real factor in the economy of the day.

Perhaps Rothbard's right, but remember: interstate tariffs only had a few years to get online. What would have happened to interstate tariffs in the long run if the Articles endured? And doesn't the question illustrate the critical insight that decentralization without resource mobility is no recipe for liberty?

To be clear, I enjoyed reading the final volume of *Conceived in Liberty*. And to be fair, Rothbard probably would have greatly improved it before publication. As it stands, though, Rothbard's lost book dodges the fundamental questions that Mr. Libertarian famously relished. If you want to read one of his posthumous works, you'd be better off with *The Progressive Era* – also beautifully edited and annotated by Patrick Newman.