

# Ben Speers

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A lot of people go through life without ever questioning things, but I’ve always identified with Socrates’ sentiment that the unexamined life isn’t worth living. In the realm of politics, I’ve always been driven by the question, “What are the proper limits on personal freedom?” When I was introduced to voluntarism (also known as voluntarism), I felt like I had finally found a philosophical home. The journey that took me there was a long one. In a way, it’s the story of my life.

## **Dad’s Legacy**

As a child, my political views were largely informed by my father’s views. Dad was an outspoken conservative. I could probably sum up his views best by describing him as a Reaganite. Dad was not quite a paleo-conservative, but he was in many ways antagonistic towards neocons. While my dad did vote Republican almost all the time, he was aware of rampant corruption within the Republican Party. My father taught me about why communism doesn’t work economically, and he also warned me about the dangers of totalitarianism. In some ways, he was a product of the cold war. It wasn’t until later in life that I fully appreciated what he meant when he said that the US was becoming more and more like the Soviet Union.

Dad talked a lot about small government and individual freedom, yet he worked for the federal government for most of his adult life, right up to his untimely death. He had been raised in a very patriotic family; his own father had fought in WWII. My father believed in the ideal of a Constitutional Republic with a limited government. So he believed in the necessity of having some government while remaining fiercely skeptical about the benefits of having too much of it.

I think Dad’s career was a reflection of that attitude. He enlisted in the Air Force during the Vietnam War in order to avoid being drafted into the infantry. He felt that that route was a reasonable compromise between draft-dodging and sacrificing his life for what he perceived to be a senseless and poorly managed war. Dad later earned a commission as an officer with Air Force Intelligence, but after a few years he could no longer tolerate the incompetent, inefficient, pig-headed bosses who impeded him from doing his job while simultaneously taking the credit for his work. In the ‘80s Dad transferred to the Air Force Reserves, a part-time job, and secured a position with US Customs Intelligence. Eventually, however, he would come to face many of the same problems that he had suffered under in

the Air Force in his Customs career. The ineptitude and clumsiness of bureaucracy nearly drove him mad at times.

My dad was always a big believer in self-defense and gun ownership rights, although he never spent much time actually handling guns. In fact, after I was born, he got rid of his guns. But I'll get back to this topic in a moment.

When I was fourteen, Dad was assigned to work at the US Embassy in London, England. I ultimately spent four years there. This was my first time travelling abroad, and it was a real eye-opener. I toured much of Europe and fell in love with the richness of the history and "high arts." I thoroughly enjoyed visiting the castles, going to the theatre, and trying new foods. I attended a private American-style high school on the US government's dime. This school was very different from the public schools that I had attended in America. I was expected to pick my own classes from an extensive list of courses, the teachers really knew their material, and almost none of the students ever engaged in violence at school. I took a Shakespeare class where we went to several world-class productions of the Bard's plays. And I took an Asian Literature class where over half the students were from Japan and China. Likewise, I took a Middle Eastern Studies class in which several of the students were Arabs and one was a Jew (they were actually good friends!). I also met people from India, Italy, Pakistan, Nigeria, Portugal, and Greece. As you can see, London was amazingly cosmopolitan.

When we lived in London, our home was situated in a large Jewish neighborhood, the largest outside of Israel, I'm told. So I was an outsider on the basis of culture, religion, and nationality. Being a minority in those regards gave me a perspective that I had never experienced before.

But not everything I observed in London was positive. I saw firsthand how England's socialized medical system created absurd shortages and insane waiting lists. It was not at all unusual for people to wait for months or even years for basic, common operations. Yet because it was "free" (or at least subsidized) very few people complained about the system as a whole. I was also saddened to see that there was a rather large class of people who had been living on government handouts for generations. As far as I could tell, most of these people led purposeless lives, watching TV all day, and generally remaining largely inactive, with the exception of those who engaged in petty crimes just for the thrill of it. My father had warned me about socialism on a theoretical level, but in London I saw the very real, personal destruction and degradation that central planning and the "welfare" state wrought upon people's lives.

## **Bookending Mexico**

After London I lived in Guatemala for two years as a volunteer for my church. I experienced

even more firsts in Guatemala. I experienced what it was like to be a racial and linguistic minority. In some cases people acted like I was the first white person they had ever seen. I actually overheard parents telling their children that I was a bogeyman. Also, I had never before seen such grinding poverty, people living in cardboard shacks with little or no modern plumbing, frequent blackouts, and limited access to even the most basic modern medicine. I actually saw farmers using ox-carts. But the simple life-style didn't bother everyone. Most people had enough to eat and were fairly content with their lot in life. However, life in Guatemala wasn't always peaceful. Between the police and the private gangs, Guatemala City was a war zone. I will never forget my first night in the slums of Guatemala City. I sat on my bed counting the gunshots that I heard. I lost track after two dozen. I'd like to say that I faced the danger with courage, but at the tender age of nineteen, quite frankly, I was scared out of my wits, especially at first. Several times I was caught in the crossfire of shootouts between the police and the local gangs. On those occasions all I could do was run like hell. I remember one specific evening when I was inside someone's home having a conversation with them when we heard a gunshot ring out very nearby. After a moment of trepidation, I poked my head outside the door to see what had happened. There was a small crowd looking down at something several yards away from me. I approached the crowd and saw that the people were looking down at a man lying in the gutter. He died in a pool of his own blood just moments later. On yet another occasion a drunk man put a gun to my head. When he withdrew the gun to chamber a round, I ran away. I was starting to get sick of being so helpless, of always having to run away.

I often wondered why life in Guatemala was so different. What was the cause of all that poverty and violence? This question really got me thinking about the effects of culture and politics on society. In Guatemala I had seen the dark side of humanity, and I wanted to fight the darkness. Yet my understanding of human nature and human rights was still in an embryonic stage. A fellow volunteer in Guatemala introduced me to a magazine called *The New American*, which had a connection to the John Birch Society. I was intrigued, and being an impressionable young man, I quickly latched on to much of TNA's ideology. I became a Constitution-loving, welfare-warfare-state-hating anti-socialist. Everything that TNA said about the dangers of big government, unaccountable politicians, the welfare-warfare state, and the police state all rang true to me. However, I often wondered if the goal of saving the Constitution and restoring a balanced republic was a realistic one. Nevertheless, I revered the Constitution and practically worshipped the Founding Fathers. "That's unconstitutional!" became my war cry and "That's not what the Founders intended!" became my motto. While TNA was very good at pointing out many of the things that were wrong with America, it came up very short in terms of providing satisfactory, realistic solutions. Furthermore, there was never a clear, consistent system of ethics to back up TNA's positions. I frequently pondered the question, "What exactly are the legitimate limits on human freedom?" but I could only come up with vague answers like, "People should be

able to live their lives without a lot of interference from government.” I was as yet unclear on how much interference was too much or what the legitimate origins and purposes of government were. Furthermore, I was infuriated at the manner in which the forces of evil were able to make corrupt deals with the government in order to line their own pockets, but I had no idea how to stop such corporatism. I should also note that I was suffering an increasingly acute cognitive dissonance on the issue of illegal immigration. Having lived with people from all over the world, deep down I had mixed emotions about the concept of barring people’s right to travel from one part of the world to another.

After Guatemala I moved to El Paso, Texas, where my parents had moved to while I was in Guatemala. My newly acquired Spanish-speaking skills came in quite handy. I was back in America, but in El Paso I was still a racial and linguistic minority. It’s amazing what people will say about you, to your face even, when they think you can’t understand what they’re saying. In spite of the heavily Mexican-influenced culture, from El Paso the difference between America and Mexico was obvious and staggering. There are some places right on the border where you can see shanty-towns on the Mexican side and ivory towers on the American side. I always thought it was funny that there was a gargantuan Mexican flag flying from Ciudad Juarez (the Mexican city adjacent to El Paso), as if they were compensating for something by waving a bigger flag. The border problems that I saw in El Paso strengthened my anti-immigration views somewhat.

While the border presented a stark contrast of America versus Mexico, no border is absolute, and the violence in Mexico did sometimes spill over into American soil. When my father became aware that one of the drug cartels had put a bounty on the heads of all American counter-drug officials (which included my father) he decided that it was time to buy a gun. I joined him in that decision. We both bought guns and learned how to use them from a former Navy SEAL who was a friend of my dad. This SEAL taught me a brief pistol course as part of my application for a concealed carry license, which I was proud to obtain. Pretty soon I was carrying my pistol everywhere that was legally allowed to do so.

Around this time I noticed my father complaining more and more about his dissatisfaction with his job with US Customs (which eventually became part of ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement). I remember him telling me that the war on drugs would never be won by trying to undercut the supply side of the equation because as long as the demand remained, there would always be new suppliers to pick up where the old ‘neutralized’ (i.e., incarcerated or dead) suppliers had left off. I thought that was quite an admission from a Customs official, but ultimately it reflected my father’s sound grounding in capitalism.

## **Into the Breach**

A few years later I was living in Utah and had joined the Utah Army National Guard. My family had a long history of military service, going at least as far back as the American War

of Independence. I felt that there was a certain degree of honor in defending one's country, and I wanted to shoulder my share of the burden of protecting America. For a young single man, the siren call of the possibility of martial action was just too strong. I had a romanticized ideal in my mind of what I thought "life as a warrior" would be like. I never could have imagined the depths of human depravity, stupidity, and sycophantry that I would witness in the Army. And there was the bureaucracy! Every time I thought I had witnessed the very zenith of inane, banal, redundant, time-wasting bureaucracy, the system would one-up itself with something even more ridiculous. I quickly realized that even the most combat-oriented units in the Army spent most of their on-duty time filling out paper work, standing around waiting for orders, and finding regulations violations with which to fault their inferiors. Most of these many, many regulations had nothing to do with being able to execute the unit's mission. I'm talking about things like making sure that your boot laces are laced up right over left, making sure that your camouflage combat uniform is neatly ironed, and shining your combat boots. Because heaven knows you can't kill people efficiently while wearing a mussed up uniform.

I was truly shocked by the utter lack of humanity, honor, and critical thinking in most of my fellow soldiers. I knew that Army recruits weren't supposed to be the cream of the crop, but I had no idea that the bottom of the barrel was so very, very low. And if these folks weren't bad enough when they signed up, the Army did its best to brainwash everyone into becoming unquestioning little killing machines. Even I was seduced by the faux glory of becoming an effective warrior. I really wanted to kill a 'bad guy.' But I never did accept the idea that the Army's authority was something to be respected without limit or regard for common sense. From my perspective, the military's rigid command structure gave too much power to incompetent, sadistic idiots whose only skills were working the system and shifting blame. Very few of my leaders felt the need to actually earn my respect.

However, I did find some exceptions to the rules in the 19th Special Forces. I was just a lowly supply guy doing logistical support work for the real commandos—Team Guys, as we called them. I quickly noticed that many of these soldiers were men of action. Many of them treated me with a degree of dignity that I was never afforded elsewhere in the military. I was fortunate enough to do some interesting training with some of the Team Guys. Inside the Special Forces there was a subculture of rule-breaking and general roguishness that I found liberating when compared to the obsessive-compulsive automatons in other units. I was especially fascinated with learning about guerrilla warfare. I learned that guerrilla warfare was all about fighting outside the system, being unpredictable, and not playing by the enemy's rules. And there was something powerful about the idea of a few guys sneaking around in the wilderness fomenting an insurgency.

But even in the Special Forces, the Army was, to a certain extent, still the Army. The military literally treats people like government property. I heard a story about a marine

who got sunburned and was subsequently punished for “damaging government property,” i.e., himself! In the old days, long before my enlistment, the military actually gave human beings serial numbers, just like a piece of equipment. Now they use your Social Security number. On several occasions I actually heard soldiers misspeak and ask someone “What’s the social [security number] on that rifle?” The idea that I was someone else’s property made me sick. I felt it was degrading, but the military tried to sell the idea to people on the grounds that “the unit has to work as a team.” It was not uncommon for drill sergeants to ask recruits, “What’s the matter? Do you think you’re an individual?” with the very clear implication being that there was no room for individuality in the military. Speaking of basic training, we spent a lot of time marching in neat little lines—called “formations”—while singing songs about killing. There was never any mention of when it was appropriate to kill. In fact, some of the songs were as simple as “1, 2, 3, 4, trained to kill! 1, 2, 3, 4, kill we will!” I thought it was funny that the Army openly refers to its training as indoctrination.

In any case, I quickly saw that nothing I did in the military had anything to do with protecting American freedoms or upholding the Constitution. Quite the opposite, in fact. I was accepting tax dollars (in the form of my salary) to do the following things: trying to comply with fussy rules and regulations, filling out reams of paperwork, and trying to kill people who were, for the most part, only trying to kill me because the US military had invaded their country. I saw my share of death, abusive behavior, and a profound disregard for basic human dignity. And as a logistics specialist I was acutely aware of the incredible amount of resources that were wasted, misused, or outright stolen. I had to ask myself what it was all for. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that the military served no practical, legitimate purpose, and that it existed to prop up a corrupt government while making a few military-industrialists very wealthy. I got sicker and sicker of the nonsense, but I didn’t know what else to do.

I even took a full-time job as a Spanish translator for a mixed civilian-military linguist “company” for a while. Initially, I was told that the unit did “all kinds” of translation work, but I soon learned that almost all the work was transcribing and translating wire taps of suspected drug dealers. Over time I found out that most of the “criminals” I was listening to were not the slick, ultra-violent cool guys depicted in Hollywood. Maybe the guys at the very top of the cartels are like that, but the guys we were going after were just simple folks, mostly illegal immigrants trying to make a living any way they could. They were ridiculously poor and laughably peaceful. I lost track of how many of them got beaten up and had their drugs stolen from them without so much as lifting a finger to defend themselves or retaliate. They weren’t hurting anybody, as far as I could tell.

I actually met quite a few libertarians in the military. They were only a small minority, but there were still far more of them than I would have expected. They were easily the most intelligent, most well-read, and most interesting people that I met in the military. Most of

them were Ron Paul supporters.

## Getting Warmer

It was during my darkest hours in the belly of the beast, so to speak, that I realized that I was a libertarian. I went from being a conservative with caveats to being someone who believed in a bare minimum of government, what I would now call a minarchist, though at the time I was unaware of the term. I was still clinging to my romantic notions about the Constitution, but only just barely. I started watching Alex Jones videos, which were a fascinating combination of very interesting facts and a fair amount of conspiracy-theory bluster. In any case, I couldn't find fault with most of Jones' conclusions: namely, that the powers that be were rich elitists who used their wealth to control governments which were in turn used to control the masses through brainwashing, mental- or cultural-conditioning, intimidation, and, when necessary, outright violence.

I continued to ask myself two driving questions. First, what are the moral limits of an individual's rights, and second, how can the power of big business be divorced from the power of the state? I looked to history and was dismayed by what seemed to be a lack of examples of free societies. Everywhere I looked I saw corruption, bigotry, and brutal violence on a massive scale. The ancient Greeks interested me, but their democracy had fallen so quickly to the temptations of tyranny and imperialism. The ancient Romans were also worthy of study, but their republic was always so disgustingly bureaucratic, and the republic's descent into imperial madness was hardly a model to be followed. It occurred to me that the civilizations that were popularly held to be 'great' had been so designated by statist historians. So I started to look into the shadows of history. Perhaps the barbarians were not so terrible, or maybe they possessed some secret that could unlock the political mysteries that defied my understanding.

I had once read that Thomas Jefferson was a devout student of the history, laws, and language of the ancient and medieval Anglo-Saxons and that he had held a very positive view of them. So I read up on the Anglo-Saxons and discovered the concept of common law. I had heard of common law before, but I had never really known very much about it. Common law intrigued me because it seemed to place formidable limits on the power of the king. There was something very egalitarian and down-to-earth about it. It didn't take me long to see why Jefferson had rejoiced in the renaissance of common law and its subsequent victories over feudalism which had taken place in his lifetime. Two things that I especially liked about common law were 1) the fact that it espoused only a minimal government, most of which was carried out on a part-time basis by the common people, which therefore inhibited the formation of a distinct political class, and 2) that it provided so many defenses for the rights of the individual.

I thought that common law might be the gem that I had been searching for, so I took the

concept and pushed it to its logical limits. As a thought experiment, I wrote a constitution for a government based entirely on common law. The resulting theoretical government had no criminal law, no standing legislature, no standing military (only militias), no full-time government employees, and no power of taxation. But in order for this government to function I was forced to give it A) the power to compel men to take up arms and B) the power to forcibly arrest people in order to bring them to trial. As far as I was concerned, without the power to regulate or tax, this government was practically immune to corporatism. But I began to question whether conscription and arresting were legitimate powers for any human being to have over another human being. I was rapidly becoming aware of the fact that the only 'legitimate' crime a person could be punished for was initiating violence against another person or another person's property. Every other 'crime' was really just someone forcing their opinion on someone else.

This idea, that people should be free to do whatever they want apart from initiating violence, crystallized in my mind. Soon I realized that there could be no moral justifications for exceptions to this rule. This immediately led me to a conclusion that shocked me to the core, for I had never considered it before. The conclusion that I came to was that there was no moral justification for any violence-based government, which is to say any government at all based on the popular definition of government. Logically, the only road left to me was anarchism.

## **Paradise Found**

Once again, I threw myself into research, this time studying anarchy. I came to see that the conflation between anarchy and chaos was a false one. In fact, I became suspicious that the term "anarchy" had been intentionally hijacked by statists looking to smear the one ideology that could really threaten statism. My initial immersion into anarchy was fraught with irony. I discovered the truth of Proudhon's statement that "Anarchy is order." And I was very pleasantly surprised, excited even, to discover that numerous ancient Chinese philosophers, including the legendary founder of Daoism, were essentially proponents of anarchy. In fact, Proudhon's famous postulate is really just an echo of what Lao Tzu is purported to have said thousands of years ago: "I do nothing, and people become good by themselves. I seek peace, and people take care of their own problems. I do not meddle in their personal lives, and the people become prosperous. I let go of all my desire to control them, and the people return to their natural ways." There is an elegant symmetry in the concept of spontaneous order, just as there is eternal irony in the fact that violence-based 'order' always ends up causing massive disorder.

Through the miracle of the Internet I was able to reach out to what I had previously considered to be the anarchic fringe of libertarianism, which I eventually discovered was really the beating heart of libertarianism. I was ecstatic to learn that there were other people who shared my views. I found that there was even a name for the view on rights



which I had previously feared to be held only by me. It was called the non-aggression principle. And people like me, who applied this principle consistently, were calling themselves voluntaryists, or voluntarists.

My journey into anarchy is far from over. There are many more subdivisions and factions of anarchism than I had imagined there would be, but I feel like I have learned something valuable from all of them, especially agorism and neo-tribalism. My desire to fully embrace libertarianism eventually led me to accept the challenge of the Free State Project to get libertarians to move to New Hampshire to create a libertarian-enriched community. I feel like I am finally home physically, socially, and philosophically. But it's the hope and wonder of that part of the journey which still lies ahead that really drives me. I have freed my mind, and I feel like a limitless world lies before me. I found that there is nothing more liberating than letting go of my own delusions of controlling others. I can love my fellow human beings more fully. I no longer wish violence upon the enemies of the state, for I am one of them. I no longer see borders, laws, and wars as duties that define me, but rather I now recognize them as barriers to be broken down. I have abandoned nationalism and patriotism. The entire human race is now my family, and I will endeavor to unite that family in universal freedom through the peaceful means of logic, reason, persuasion, and love. That is my mission in life, and that is what voluntaryism means to me.