

# Orlando Sentinel

## The Principled Libertarian in the Age of Donald Trump

Larry Pino

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In 1980, I was enamored by the Libertarian Party's philosophy, its ideological clarity and rather pristine point of view. With a young group of inspired Mensans, I headed to Denver to the party's national convention, which would nominate a presidential candidate.

The convention was packed with a plethora of Goldwater Republicans who had recently come out of the Libertarian closet — wonderful, youthful and principled.

That era also let loose an intellectual discovery avalanche that brought me through Rothbard, the Libertarian Manifesto, the Cato Institute, the Koch Family, and countless other influences on that side of the political spectrum.

I ended up participating, supporting Ed Clark as the Libertarian nominee for president, and his wife, Alicia Clark, as the national chair.

I also ended up chairing the Florida Libertarian Convention a year later in Orlando. I wrangled the Sentinel's bristling conservative columnist Charley Reese and radio-host-with-Libertarian-leanings Gene Burns to debate. The discourse was electrifying, poignant and melodious. (Many Central Floridians will remember the great Reese-Burns discourse.)

That said, I ultimately abandoned the Libertarian Party for a few specific reasons I haven't thought a great deal about until the rise of the Tea Party movement among Republicans and Donald Trump's seemingly endless incoherent ramblings infecting the political dialogue.

As I read Libertarian chairman [Nicholas Sarwark's commentary Friday in the Orlando Sentinel](#) — "[Anything can happen](#)" — I couldn't help but remember my experiences in 1980.

First, Libertarians were incapable of coalescing around the idea of actually electing people to office, and it seemed to me that the effort was somehow lost if we weren't about trying to get people elected.

The Achilles' heel of the Libertarian Party was an intrinsic mistrust of government — as government. As a result, there wasn't a whole lot that could be done to take over the governmental machinery of which the Libertarians were fundamentally skeptical, unless that machinery was productively engaged.

So, extended to its logical extreme, Libertarianism at that level intrinsically carried the seeds of its own self-destruction.

Second, Libertarianism was ideologically sound, but so self-righteous it was pragmatically strained.

Think about a political philosophy as unforgiving as was Ayn Rand in social philosophy. I loved (and still do) Ayn Rand. She got my heart pumping, but could I truly respect her when I woke up in the morning or was it just an over-the-top but fleeting intellectual fling?

Lunging at windmills doesn't forestall the dawn. When left to a minimal level of interpretation, Libertarian principles make an awful lot of sense, especially within the context of the history, culture and mindset of the American experience:

- Limited government
- Economic conservatism
- Social liberalism

Those principles manifest relatively easily in specific dictates – restrict national authority, maximize individual rights, bring voting on issues close to home on the state and local levels – and we unleash a tidal wave of political freedom and economic prosperity. Not unsound, and clearly rational.

At a less fundamental level, but one that is still resonant in American history and which formulates plank components:

- Create a powerful military, but restrict its use to where it belongs
- Empower state diversity
- Balance the budget
- Use debt only in times of national emergency, and then pay it off quickly
- Police internationally for self-defense with a bias toward issues closer to home than far away
- Maintain a “Mind-your-own-knitting” foreign policy
- Fear “political evangelism,” domestically or internationally

So, at all of those levels . . . combining political, economic and social tenets . . . Libertarianism makes a lot of sense.

Where it fails, of course, is that the limited government framework is not of universal appeal, even within the context of the American experience, and even moreso, when viewed within the prism of our very real sense of American Exceptionalism. Hence, there needs to be a nuanced conversation resulting in specific compromises with individuals, political movements, parties, and special interests that don't necessarily buy into the view.

In short, there needs to be governmental structure within which that dialogue can take place. The problem with the Libertarian movement — at least in 1980 — was that it simply did not countenance that.

In the first instance, it didn't want to participate in the electoral process to elect individuals who would participate in that dialogue. Second, few who were prepared to participate were ever able to get through the gauntlet of self-righteous political puritanism.

Now, back to Orlando and the Libertarian Party National Convention. Take the Libertarian movement in 1980 and add 36 years; what do you get? Welcome to 2016.

My friends, your choice is respectfully no different. To influence results, you have to get your hands dirty. And you are not going to get your hands dirty or influence the results by sidestepping the very structures where the dialogue takes place. Nor can you take extreme positions in the name of intellectual purity and expect to get away with it.

You have two divergent portraits, both of which will undermine the party this year, if you let them. On the one side, you have the Tea Party influence, with its annoying insistence on Republican puritanism. And, on the other side, you have Donald Trump, with his maddeningly inconsistent and incoherent diatribes.

So, the Tea Party poster children and Donald Trump say:

- **Disband the United Nations.** You cannot disband the United Nations without our very security being challenged.
- **Disband the Federal Reserve.** You cannot dissolve the Federal Reserve, bless its heart, without replacing it with some other non-private domestic and international monetary system.
- **Disband Social Security.** You cannot disband Social Security without destabilizing social equities and robbing us of our internal integrity on which citizens have come to rely.

That does not mean that there is no future for such influences anymore than there was no room for the influences of Libertarian thoughts. But, what it does mean is that those influences, understandably provoked by current circumstances, need to be filtered through the lens of our time, and the influences of our founders, as it contributes to solutions directed toward resolving our very real and pervasive institutional problems.

So, maybe this year really is the year. The Libertarian Party is now on all 50 state ballots. The Tea Party has destabilized the Republican Party and Donald Trump, the junkyard rabid “Cujo” that he is, has mauled its leaders violently. Maybe, just maybe, the Libertarian Party, if it gets its act together and is prepared to function within the system, as opposed to outside of it, just might be a contender, rather than a pretender.

We'll see. But, in the meantime, I'll hold on to my Republican registration, vote independently as often as possible, and be listening ever so carefully that the Libertarian Party gets it.