



I Went to a Convention for Libertarian Revolutionaries Trying to Take Over New Hampshire

By Livia Gershon

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It's an early spring weekend in Manchester, and Emily Smith is sitting in the Radisson Hotel with her baby, selling goods from her northern New Hampshire farm. There are jugs of maple syrup in various sizes laid out on the table, and also guns, .308 caliber rifles, lovingly hand-assembled for improved accuracy. The combination would raise eyebrows in most company, but not here, at the annual gathering of the Free State Project, a libertarian movement to create a limited government utopia in the Granite State.

Hundreds of Free Staters were assembled for the three-day Liberty Forum, which brings together the movement's pioneers, prospective members, and sympathizers. The Free State Project aims to relocate 20,000 committed citizens to New Hampshire, change local laws, reduce taxes and regulations, and ultimately establish a literal Galt's Gulch where—to quote a popular libertarian saying—married gay couples can use guns to defend their marijuana plants. According to organizers, more than 1,700 people have moved so far, and another 16,000 or so have pledged to promising to do the same once the full 20,000 have signed on.

The annual conference is a way to bring on new recruits, showcasing the full spectrum of the Free State fringe. There are sessions on anti-war activism, school choice, and polyamory. A heavy-hitter in Koch brothers-backed political groups is giving a talk on "Freedom and Well-being." In one time slot, there were dueling panels on "the Tao of Anarchism" and a critique of anarchy based on the work of Ayn Rand. A woman in business casual tries to sell people on ziftrCOIN, a New Hampshire company that helps retailers accept cryptocurrencies.

Smith and her husband joined the migration in 2007, relocating to New Hampshire with another couple and opening up Bardo Farm. She told me the move was about freedom, but also about finding a great piece of land that came with oxen, goats and solar power. "We wanted to be off the grid," she explained, nursing her baby as we spoke. The Free State Project provides a built-in network of customers, she said, and the farm often gives like-minded libertarians a place to stay when they're in the area.

Like most Free Staters, Smith and the other farm owners are engaged in local politics. Ian Underwood, one of Smith's business partners, said selling the rifles is partly an effort to build a self-sufficient community in their area. "People who have guns can defend themselves," he said. "Who knows where the cops are, but your neighbors are right there." Plus, he noted darkly, cops might not be on your side at all. "One of the things that you may have to defend yourself against is your government," he said.

Not far from Bardo Farm, in rural northern New Hampshire, the small town of Grafton has become a haven for Free Staters, to the consternation of local residents frustrated by the libertarian zeal to overhaul local laws. At the Liberty Forum, Grafton resident James Reiher tried to sell potential movers on the town, promoting it as a great place for libertarians to create their alternatives to the mainstream. "They should be creating coops and doing what the government does on their own," he told me. "If you like fair wages, open a fair-wage store. You don't have to wait."

Another member of the Free Grafton contingent, Rich Angell, tells me he grows most of his own food and lives as autonomously as possible as a "voluntary servant." He wouldn't tell me who he serves—"let's just say a landowner in Grafton"—but said he pays rent by making himself useful, tending the boiler and wood stove and shoveling snow. "I pay my way with my labor," he said. "I am about as free as I can be in this country."

Angell tells me he's a former "card-carrying Republican," a "college graduate, clean-cut former Marine, good-old American." He talks a lot about things like "unraveling the left-right paradigm." His politics, based on the principles of freedom and nonaggression, are hard to pin down, except to say that they're about as far outside the mainstream as you could imagine. He credits his political awakening to the issue of circumcision. "When I saw what we do to our children it opened me up to what else is going on in this country that nobody is paying attention to."

These days, Angell is cynical about politics. "If Hillary Clinton is the best the Democrats can do, and Jeb Bush and that crowd are the best that the Republicans can come up with, it's time we seriously start thinking about voting for Vermin Supreme," he said, referring to the perennial presidential candidate whose New Hampshire primary campaigns are equal parts anarchist activism and satirical performance art.

Davi Barker, a California designer and writer giving a Liberty Forum talk on "The Undead Democracy Apocalypse," told me his activism is focused on influencing cultural, rather than politics. He's the author of a survivalist children's book, "Survivor Max," about an 11-year-old boy trying to navigate a zombie apocalypse. He sees zombies as a metaphor for libertarians—in zombie stories, he explained, heroes band together in small autonomous groups, to fight a multiplying army of stumbling automatons. "They're a democratic monster," he said.

Wandering around the conference floor, I barely registered a table for the Atlas Society, until the guy staffing it, George Johnson, asked me urgently if I was familiar with the work of Ayn Rand. Johnson was handing out ballots for the Society's Crony Awards. According to an explanation on the ballot, the current economic system is not "true capitalism" but a bastardized version where companies depend on government favors, not the free market; I'm supposed to vote for the "clearest and most egregious cases" of cronyism. Candidates include the AFL-CIO, George Soros and Elizabeth Warren, but also Dick Cheney, Chris Christie and Walmart. Perhaps sniffing me out as a lefty, "They say free markets are an illusion, and they're right," Johnson tells me.

Many of the Free Staters were big supporters of former Congressman Ron Paul, giving his 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns a boost in New Hampshire's first-in-nation primary. But Paul's son, Kentucky Senator Rand Paul, doesn't seem to have inspired the same enthusiasm, and activists seemed generally disinterested in national politics. "I don't think the enthusiasm is strong for Rand Paul," said Free State Project Chairman Aaron Day, an active organizer who holds a half dozen titles with local libertarian and Republican groups.

Matt Philips, who works with Day on a couple of projects, said he cares about the presidential election only to the extent that it affects down-ballot races. Philips is a sort of libertarian cliché, a Princeton graduate who interned at the Cato Institute and later worked for a digital advertising company that sold to Yahoo! for \$680 million. With no need to work after the sale, Philips eventually gravitated to the Free State Project. "It gives back more to the world than internet advertising," he said, "although that's laudable in an Ayn Randian sort of way." He's currently focused on New Hampshire issues, including cutting state taxes and fighting federal incursions on healthcare and education.

At the one conference session devoted to running political campaigns, the 2016 race didn't come up until the question-and-answer session. "I haven't heard anybody talk about what's going to happen in this cycle," said activist Paul Breed. "It's the elephant in the room." But the roomful of activists seemed more interested in local candidates than the national horserace.

For most of the Free State hardliners, the focus for 2016 is mostly on forcing candidates to address libertarian concerns. "We party-crash," said Lisa Gravel, a native New Hampshire libertarian and former candidate for local office. "We show up at the events and talk about the issues they don't want to talk about. We make them nervous. It's great."

When I approach her later, Gravel demands to know if I'm part of the mainstream media. I'm not sure how to answer, but it doesn't seem to make a difference. She keeps talking, telling me that she likes Rand Paul, but has a lot of reservations. "I'm very disillusioned," she says. "Really, I am."