

## Libertarians Took Control of This Small Town. It Didn't End Well.

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From his book's very title, it's clear that Matthew Hongoltz-Hetling sees his story as one great big joke. As he describes it, *A Libertarian Walks Into a Bear* tells the "strange-but-true story of Grafton, NH, a small town that became the nexus of a collision between bears, libertarians, guns, doughnuts, parasites, firecrackers, taxes and one angry llama." The book—his first—is based on a lively article, published in 2018 in *The Atavist Magazine*, about an attempted political takeover of the small New Hampshire town by a motley crew of libertarians and survivalists from all across America. Their stated goal was to establish "the boldest social experiment in modern American history: the Free Town Project."

Their effort was inspired by the Free State Project, a libertarian-adjacent organization founded in 2003 with the goal of taking over New Hampshire and transforming it into a tiny-government paradise. After more than a decade of persistence, the project persuaded 20,000 like-minded revolutionaries to sign its pledge to move to New Hampshire and finally force the state to live up to its "Live Free or Die" motto. (Despite their pledged support, only about 1,300 signers actually made the move. Another 3,000 were New Hampshire residents to begin with.) The project's political successes peaked in 2018, when 17 of the 400 members of the New Hampshire House of Representatives identified as Free Staters—although all but two were registered Republicans.

The affiliated Free Town Project set its sights on Grafton in 2004 because of both its small size—about 1,200 residents—and its long history as a haven for tax protesters, eccentrics, and generalized curmudgeons. The Free Town Project leaders figured that they could engineer a libertarian tipping point by bringing in a few dozen new true believers and collaborating with the resident soreheads. Over the next decade or so, Free Towners managed to join forces with some of the town's most tightfisted taxpayers to pass a 30 percent cut in the town's \$1 million budget over three years, slashing unnecessary spending on such municipal frills as streetlights, firefighting, road repairs, and bridge reconstruction. But eventually, the Free Town leadership splintered and the haphazard movement fizzled out. The municipal budget has since bounced back, to \$1.55 million.

But even though the Free Towners' full-scale libertarian takeover of Grafton never fully materialized, they fanned the flames of a community culture that prioritized individual freedom above all else—whether the individual sought the freedom to smoke marijuana or feed daily boxes of donuts to the increasingly aggressive local bears. The libertarian battle cry of "Nobody tells me what to do!" drowned out all other political debate, at least temporarily, and the results of their blindly anti-government, anti-authority mind-set were both troubling and predictable.

Hongoltz-Hetling presents the Grafton experience as a rollicking tale of colorful rural characters and oddly clever ursines. The Free Towners' wacky political views, like their eccentric clothes, their rusting pickup trucks, and their elaborate facial hair, present him with seemingly limitless opportunities to display his own cleverness.

Certainly, the author is not alone in finding cause for amusement in Grafton's funny little basket of deplorables. For years now, reporters and pundits have chosen to focus on the style, rather than the policy substance, of the growing libertarian right. Again and again, we read stories of rural rubes clad head to toe in MAGA swag, hunched over chipped cutlery in dingy diners, wielding biscuits to wipe the last of the sausage gravy from their oversized plates while vociferously proclaiming that taxation is theft and inveighing against the nanny state. In choosing to shoot these red, white, and blue fish in a barrel, Hongoltz-Hetling is in very good company.

But had the author not chosen snark over substance, his book could have served as a peculiarly timely cautionary tale, because the conflicting philosophical principles that drive this story are central to understanding American politics today. The differences between the libertarian stumblebums who moved to Grafton and the staff of the Koch-funded Cato Institute are mostly sartorial. And the sad outcomes of Grafton's wacky social experiment are now being repeated in American communities every single day.

If it seems unkind to slam a writer for indulging in a bit of a laugh as he slogs his way through a story that basically boils down to fundamentally divergent views of tax policy, consider the chapter in which Hongoltz-Hetling drags his reader into an ultimately unsatisfactory discursion into the political dynamics of French-occupied Tunisia. In the chapter, he references the work of the Oxford University professor Daniel Butt, a noted scholar of colonialism. In his discussion of Butt's academic work, Hongoltz-Hetling brutally torques his sentences to produce the phrases "Butt heads," "Butt wipe," "Butt cracks," and "Butt (w)hole." Oh, how devilishly cheeky.

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Look. I get it. Snark is to reporters what salmon is to bears—they thrive on it, and many can't survive without a lot of it. But back in my crime-reporting days, our city editor routinely tossed back any sophomoric attempts to inject witticisms into odd little crime stories by asking, "Would this be funny if it happened to you?"

Hongoltz-Hetling's chronic prioritization of style over substance brings his reportorial judgment and diligence into question at multiple points throughout the book. He lightly glosses over one character's conviction on 129 counts of child pornography, and later compares Grafton's troubling influx of sex offenders—from eight to 22 in four years—with an equally disconcerting drop in the tiny town's local recycling rates. Later, he chuckles about a man found "in questionable circumstances with a preteen" who was "[asked to] leave in an impolite manner involving a very visibly wielded baseball bat." I raise this issue not solely because I am a midwestern mom who is absolutely unamused by child sex abuse, but also because Hongoltz-Hetling does not mention that pedophilia and child pornography are profoundly schismatic issues

for the American libertarian community. Mary J. Ruwart, a leading candidate for the Libertarian Party presidential nomination in 2008, wrote,

In 2008, the party refused to vote on a resolution asking states to strongly enforce existing child pornography laws.

The author takes a similarly lighthearted approach to his account of the Unification Church's establishment of a summer retreat in Grafton in the early 1990s—a lengthy episode that buttresses his portrayal of Grafton as a weirdo magnet of national proportions. In fact, there are numerous villages across this country where religious leaders have walked into town and proclaimed, “This is the place,” regardless of whether that place was already occupied by nonbelievers. The resulting conflicts between townspeople and the invading faithful can be deadly serious. When the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh founded a commune of 2,000 followers in Oregon's rural Wasco County in the 1980s, for example, the group's resistance to land-use laws fueled a campaign of terror against local residents. Group members poisoned hundreds of people in the county by spraying salmonella bacteria on salad bars, and the commune's leaders targeted state and county officials for assassination, sending one county commissioner to the hospital with a potentially deadly case of salmonella poisoning.

Again—would it be funny if it happened to you?

These shortcomings, and many others like it throughout the book, would diminish Hongoltz-Hetling's narrative even in normal times. But today more than ever, there is nothing remotely amusing about a group of wrongheaded extremists plotting to take over a government and impose its own dangerously eccentric views on an unwitting and unprepared majority. And it is this reality that makes *A Libertarian Walks Into a Bear* such a painful missed opportunity. With the story of Grafton, Hongoltz-Hetling was handed the American character in an ant farm. This New England hamlet twines together the most significant strands in our history: tax aversion, religious fervor, veneration of individual liberty, and a deep vein of cantankerousness, all counterbalanced by our equally powerful belief that we are on a God-given mission to establish on this continent a shining City on the Hill. In Grafton, we find a microcosm of the constant American tension between “Don't Tread on Me” and “E Pluribus Unum.”

Certainly, one cannot fault a writer for failing to anticipate the specific details of the present disaster. This time last year, none of us could have foreseen that a new, fast-moving virus would spark a global pandemic, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives, nor that wearing a mask to prevent infection would be viewed as a political statement. But the test of a great writer, or a great editor, is the ability to look deeply into a specific set of circumstances and to extrapolate from them, to assess the present and then take a leap of faith into a prophetic vision of the future. In the Grafton experience, we see clearly the chaos that can be created when a significant chunk of the community rejects the strictures of government, science, and the notion of community itself.

As I write this, more than 159,000 American lives have been sacrificed to failures of government at almost every level, and to the refusal of millions of Americans to curtail their sense of personal liberty and submit to relatively brief inconvenience to protect their neighbors and their communities. It is heartbreaking to think of how many more lives will be lost to COVID-19 by the time this magazine goes to print.

This is what happens when massively funded propaganda campaigns lead large numbers of Americans to lose faith in our system of government. This is what happens when that loss of faith leads to blind opposition to taxation. This is what happens when public services and public infrastructure are systematically starved of resources in the name of “fiscal responsibility.” And this is what happens, shamefully, when those who are best able to recognize the threat and sound the alarm choose instead to treat local politics like some sort of low-stakes sporting event for out-of-shape people.

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Today, we are all living in Grafton. Armies of rabid bears are wandering through our streets, clawing at our window screens, and gnashing their teeth at our children while the phone rings unanswered at the state department of fish and game. The old village church is erupting in flames, but someone has slashed the tires on our town’s lone fire truck, and the fire hydrants—unmaintained for a decade—have all run dry. Terrified, we beg our neighbors for help, only to be told that the Lord will protect us, or that the cataclysm in the streets is just punishment for our moral failures or our political misdeeds.

And all of this is happening because a large, disgruntled minority of Americans dutifully memorized the Declaration’s listing of our inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness without perceiving that these rights can exist only within the context of the social contract—an Enlightenment concept so deeply familiar to the Founding Fathers that, tragically, they didn’t consider it necessary to mention.

Right now, I am sitting in self-imposed quarantine with my husband, in a small Michigan town far from our home. Our beloved daughters—both adults—are thousands of miles away, in California. We haven’t seen them now for almost seven months, and in my darkest moments, I wonder whether we will ever be all together again in this lifetime. We are separated today, and likely will be for long weeks and months to come, because millions of my fellow Americans have been unwilling to sacrifice even a shred of their perceived personal liberty to the higher consideration of what we owe to each other.

And it’s not funny. None of it is funny. It isn’t funny at all.