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Behind the New Student Libertarian Movement

Georgetown grad student Alexander McCobin is one of the key figures in bringing back libertarianism among young people.

By Pema Lew
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Former presidential candidate Ron Paul walks onstage to address the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, Friday, Feb. 19, 2010. (AP Photo / Cliff Owen)

Alexander McCobin, president and co-founder Students for Liberty (SFL) and a Ph.D. student in philosophy at Georgetown University, got booed the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C., this past February. The reason this libertarian was booed was because he made a speech in which he thanked the conference for allowing GOPride, a gay Republican group for co-sponsoring the event. Students today recognize that freedom does not come in pieces. It is a single concept that we must defend at all times," he said to the gathering of conservatives, described by then-spokesman for Young America's Foundation Jason Mattera as "[our Woodstock](#)." McCobin's statement drew both cheers and boos.

After McCobin's speech, Ryan Sorba of Young Americans for Freedom and author of a book titled "The Born Gay Hoax" condemned CPAC, GOPride, and the audience, saying "the lesbians at Smith College protest better than you do."

The repartee made a splash in the media. [Think Progress](#) noted, "[CPAC Conference Dissolves Into Right-Wing Civil War Over Gay Rights](#)." When

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McCobin emails me, a [YouTube](#) video of the event is included in the signature, "Students For Liberty Defeats Bigotry at CPAC." It was their unexpected day in the sun.

But even though he appeared at CPAC, McCobin's tendency to get pegged as a conservative is one of his pet peeves; he is adamant that libertarians, and SFL in particular, are not right-wingers. "There's definitely a feeling, there's a lot of pro-liberty individuals, especially younger individuals, who don't associate with the cultural right, with the conservative, Christian coalition," McCobin emphasizes. "That's just not what we're about."

For the first time since the early 1980s, SFL holds the position as the only major national student organization dedicated to libertarianism, or as the SFL calls it, "pro-liberty" ideas. The last time there was a visible libertarian student movement, it was strongly allied with the right, united by the common enemy of communism as well as conservative economics.

Cato's David Boaz, who was a student activist in the 1970s, cites three major catalysts for the activism of his time: Vietnam, Stagflation, and Watergate. For SFL, by contrast, "the formative political environment was the Bush years," and McCobin believes that it is thanks in part to them that young libertarians have begun to bury their historical ties with right. "[CPAC] really drew a line in the sand," he continues. "You've got this latent bigotry/big government side of conservatism where the government should tell you how to live your personal life."

McCobin swears he has always been a libertarian. In ninth grade, McCobin's father gave him a copy of Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* as a birthday present. "Once I closed the last page," he says, "I thought, this is what I've thought for so long." While at college at the University of Pennsylvania, however, McCobin found himself largely alone in his ideology. At first, he didn't meet a single other libertarian. It took a summer seminar on classical liberalism at the Institute for Human Studies, a non-profit that seeks to further libertarian ideals, to kick-start his inner activist. McCobin returned to school in the fall of 2006 and founded the Penn Libertarian Association. He spent the next summer at the Reason Foundation, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C.

The roots of SFL go back to McCobin's time at Reason; while in D.C. McCobin met Sloane Frost, now a current director of SFL and a recent graduate of Cornell University where she was involved in the College Libertarians, who ultimately became his partner in the SFL endeavor. Frost hails from a Democratic family on the South Side of Chicago, but like McCobin, the experience of reading *Atlas Shrugged* meant finding "where I belonged." McCobin and Frost attended a small roundtable of student libertarian organizers that summer. Inspired, McCobin and Frost decided to organize a second gathering and started making plans for a small conference of 25-30 students from the Northeast. Soon, three more organizers stepped in to plan the conference; as students nationwide began to show interest, the small conference grew and eventually drew in 100 attendees from around the country (and even a few other countries).

But the founding of SFL came with key support from other libertarian groups in Washington.

"I met Alexander just before the conference [in February 2008]," recalls Joey Coon, director of student programs at the libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute. Cato helped out when McCobin was looking for conference speakers. After graduation, McCobin spent a year building up [Cato on Campus](#).

"Alex is an ideas man," Coon tells me, "He left a year ago and we're still

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rolling out some of his ideas.” McCobin developed the [Ask the Expert feature](#) for Cato on Campus, in which students submit questions to policy experts and scholars about libertarianism. He also helped develop Constitution Day, when student liberty groups hand out pocketbook Constitutions and promote libertarian ideas.

With a growing network of 250 student groups, libertarians see SFL as the driving organization behind an emergent student libertarian movement. But for McCobin, SFL isn't about politics or elections; it's about communicating the true meaning of liberty. In fact, McCobin tells me he is apathetic about politics; instead, he aims to educate young people about the libertarian movement.

And though McCobin's mission is to educate young people about libertarianism, he has a hard time articulating what exactly a libertarian society might look like. He admits the current health care system is terrible and the financial collapse was disastrous, but he says he's not a policy man. "I don't have a policy prescription for this stuff," he admits, but insists small government solutions are best.

Admittedly a man of ideas, McCobin cares more about education and outreach for SFL than policy and politics. And it's helped his cause. Hundreds of student groups benefit from SFL's resources. SFL holds conferences and provides a speakers network to bring speakers to campus; there are free books, handbooks, webinars, and occasionally grants. "We generally just try to train, network, and resource these students and student groups to try to do what they are interested in however we can," McCobin explains.

In CPAC's exhibition hall this February, SFL had a place on what they nicknamed "liberty row," an aisle of tables run by young, libertarian organizations among a sea of far right-wing groups. Libertarian icon [Ron Paul won the CPAC presidential straw poll](#) the day after McCobin had declared that young libertarians were "carrying the banner of freedom." The irony is that SFL so efficiently bolsters libertarian groups by acting as a "distribution network," demonstrating the efficacy of a support-network rather than the free market. But like McCobin says, SFL is more about ideas than policy anyway. And if CPAC is any indication, their ideas are making a comeback.

Pema Levy is a staff writer for Campus Progress.

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