

Impassioned, Funny, Learned, Brilliant, Unfoolable, Relentless

by **Brian Doherty**



Foreword to [Strictly Confidential: The Private Volker Fund Memos of Murray N. Rothbard](#), edited by David Gordon. An audio version of this article, read by Steven Ng, is available as a [free MP3 download](#).



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I never met Murray Rothbard.

Because I am the author of *[Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement](#)*, that was highly unfortunate. More than any other person, Murray Rothbard was the modern American libertarian movement.

Intellectually, he was the most prolific and active advocate and scholar for the ideas and concerns that most vividly mark libertarianism as a distinct tendency and movement; he brought together Austrian economics, natural-rights ethics, anarchist politics, and a burning interest in history – in the actual facts of the intellectual heritage of antistate thinking, and of how and why in specific incidents governments oppress and rob the bulk of the populace.

Institutionally, he helped form or worked closely with every significant libertarian group or organization from





[Strictly Confidential](#)

Murray N. Rothbard...

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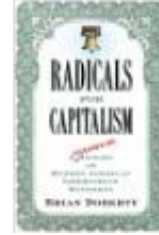
the 1940s to the 1990s, from the Foundation for Economic Education to the Volker Fund to the Institute for Humane Studies to the Libertarian Party to the Center for Libertarian Studies to the Cato Institute to the Ludwig von Mises Institute.

Every other significant libertarian thinker was personally influenced by him or felt obligated to grapple with him where they disagreed, from Leonard Read to Robert Nozick.

When it comes to modern American libertarianism, Rothbard was the Man. That I was not able to meet him and get his fresh words into my book is my greatest regret associated with it.

This does not mean that my book was not shaped by Rothbard's words or interpretations. He was also the most prolific and thoughtful theorist of institutional and movement libertarianism. From the 1950s to the 1990s, he wrote on where the movement had been, where it was going, and what he thought it needed to do. He left hundreds of thousands of words of great insights on these matters, words that are sometimes general and theoretical and often – especially in the pages of his great 1968–84 journal, *Libertarian Forum* – precise and personal.

As a researcher into libertarianism, I was greatly fortunate to have not only his many, many published essays, columns, and interviews to rely on for Rothbard's thoughts and actions; the Mises Institute, the repository of Rothbard's library and papers, granted me wide-ranging access to his heretofore unpublished memos, essays, and letters. These documents are a treasure well beyond my comparatively parochial needs in researching my book. They are a joyful alternative career of Rothbard's writings and research, and as such inherently one of the most valuable (and most fun) intellectual resources of the past century.



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David Gordon – probably the only man around who knows as much about as much as Rothbard did when it comes to the historical and philosophical and economic background of libertarianism – has compiled this new book of letters and memos and reviews from Rothbard on the value and often on the libertarian bona fides of dozens of thinkers and books that came to the attention of the Volker Fund and Volker-associated groups such as the National Book Foundation, which helped promote and publish libertarian-friendly scholars and scholarship in an age when it was welcome almost nowhere.

The reader of this book – and of editor Gordon's introduction – will find out for themselves in the best way possible the scope of what Rothbard accomplishes here. There are useful and rich nuggets covering every aspect of Rothbard's intellectual project, starting with his bold call for the necessity of a pure and unsullied *libertarian* set of institutions and activists.

I was most delighted to notice subtle little throughlines that help remind the reader of Rothbard's perspicacity (his consistent recognition of the not-to-be-forgotten distinctions between the modern libertarian and the modern conservative or right-winger) and of the disciplined humane concern that could almost be said to constitute the heart of Rothbard: his recognition, from the War of 1812 to the Cold War and every war in between (no matter how beloved by historians nowadays), that the monstrous crime of state-launched murder and rapine and destruction so blithely called "war" has been the greatest enemy not only of life but of American liberty.

Rothbard wrote a wonderful four-volume history of colonial America, published as *Conceived in Liberty*. His fans have long wished he had managed a full-on history of America. He never had the time to do so.



[Conceived in Liberty](#)

Murray N. Rothbard...

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[This Is Burning Man](#)

Brian Doherty

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But in this volume's bravura centerpiece, disguised as a simple [book-review memo](#) of George B. DeHuszar and Thomas Hulbert Stevenson's *A History of the American Republic*, we have in essence at least the outline or study guide to one. It's a marvelously detailed step-by-step discussion of the primary points, personalities, and controversies in American history that should most interest the historian who loves liberty. How I wish someone could add more meat to this already



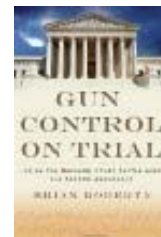
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strong and imposing skeleton of an American history.

Alas, the man who had the knowledge and stamina and proper perspective to do so left us in 1995.

I never met Murray Rothbard. Likely you didn't either. But most especially in this book – because of its immense range, its private purpose, and its easy and wide erudition – you are meeting the man at his finest: impassioned, funny, learned, brilliant, unfoolable, relentless. I advise you to read this with pen and notebook in hand. Rothbard is going to teach you so many things, in so many unforgettable formulations, that you are going to want to take note of them; just as Rothbard, in his decades of staggering reading and thinking, took notes for us, and passed on his insights tirelessly.



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That benefit accrues now not just to his friends and colleagues who sought his advice on matters libertarian in years gone by, advice solidified in these memos; thanks to Gordon and the Mises Institute, that benefit is for the ages.

Writing from the 2010 perspective of the "Ron Paul Revolution," the first mass-political movement to make a splash in America in our times – a movement clearly animated by Rothbardian style and ideas about currency, war, and the evils of the state – I believe the ages will more and more note Rothbard and his message. And the world will be a better place for it.

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Brian Doherty [[send him mail](#)] is senior editor of [Reason](#) magazine. He is also the author of [This is Burning Man](#) (BenBella), [Radicals for Capitalism](#) (PublicAffairs), and [Gun Control on Trial](#) (Cato Institute).



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