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O Libertarian, Where Is Thy Sting?

With the 2008 Democratic National Convention slated for Denver, the libertarian concerns of Western voters, denizens of the so-called purple states, are suddenly of high interest. Pundits and commentators see in the "live and let live" ethos of the West a chance for the Democracy to reshape its faltering coalition and enter the twenty-first century rejuvenated and strong. Ryan Sager, a critic from the right, notes that from the Democratic perspective, "the West looks abundant with opportunities. And the same might be said of a long-neglected, long-suffering political demographic: libertarians."[1] This optimism in part underlay the party's choice of Denver over the traditional Democratic bastion of New York. Colorado is often identified as a libertarian-leaning state, and it was where the Libertarian Party was founded. But what exactly is libertarianism? What role has it played in American politics in the twentieth century? Is libertarianism truly the wave of the future or has its moment come and gone?

In this article I investigate these questions by looking at the first libertarian moment, the ferment of intellectual and political activity in the late 1960s and early 1970s that produced the modern Libertarian Party. Richard Hofstadter famously observed that "third parties are like bees: once they have stung, they die."[2] By this standard, the Libertarian Party seems to have been born without a stinger; its impact on national politics has been negligible, certainly far short of its nineteenth-century counterparts the Know Nothings, the Anti-Masonic Party, and the Populists.[3]

But if the Libertarian Party failed to disrupt politics across several states, alter the outcome of significant elections, or midwife a major political realignment, it has not been without influence. Indeed, a better comparison may be with the Socialist Party, a group that achieved little electoral success but still flags for us the presence of a broad-based sensibility that

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shaped politics and social institutions throughout the beginning of the twentieth century.[4] Socialism was far more powerful than the Socialist Party. This distinction between party and movement is key. The Libertarian Party may have been a failure, but its very failures ensured the success of a broader libertarian movement.[5] Today, that libertarian movement must capitalize on the broader libertarian sensibility if it is to fulfill the dreams of its first political organization.

Throughout the 1970s, the decade in which the party was most active, the Libertarian Party helped members of the libertarian movement mature and grapple with the realities of social change in a democracy. By the end of the decade, key operatives within the party had traded in an emphasis on converting the population to "end state" libertarianism, focusing instead on a "general direction" strategy.[6] They had also left the Libertarian Party, but not the libertarian movement. Ensconced in Washington think tanks, business careers, or the Republican Party, libertarians went on to spread their ideas through more durable political vehicles, leaving the Libertarian Party to its fate as a small band of fiercely warring ideologues.

The Libertarian Party was founded in Denver in 1971 by a few young professionals who had previously been active in the Ayn Rand–inspired Objectivist movement, the conservative youth group Young Americans for Freedom, and Young Republicans.[7] The party grew out of the subculture that had flourished around Rand's ideas and libertarian activism within the broader conservative movement, but the immediate event that galvanized the Denver group was President Richard Nixon's August 1971 speech announcing wage and price controls. Party founder David Nolan characterized the controls as "economic fascism" and was spurred to action in outrage. Once the intention to start a party was firm, the Denver group drew on the libertarian subculture to announce its first 1972 convention. This was how Edward Crane, a subscriber to "a lot of small, mimeographed libertarian newsletters," heard about the party and made his way to the first convention.[8]

The Libertarian Party's inaugural event was tiny—about eighty-five people—and its followers were, by all accounts, a strange lot. Crane remembered "Flakes. . . . A lot of people in black capes and gold jewelry and such." Other early attendees corroborated his description of the young party as essentially a debating club and drew a distinction between "real-world people" with careers and experience, and a cohort of "losers, outsiders."[9] Still, it was a start. At the Denver convention, the libertarians organized themselves into a loose network of state parties, coordinated by an elected central committee. They adopted organizational bylaws and a

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platform calling for withdrawal from Vietnam, draft amnesty, and abolition of victimless crimes and the FCC. The party's statement of principles declared in hyperbolic language: "We, the members of the Libertarian Party, challenge the cult of the omnipotent state and defend the rights of the individual."[10]

This step into electoral politics marked a significant shift for libertarians, many of whom had eschewed voting in favor of educating themselves and others in the proper principles of government. Wedded to the belief that ideas were the driver of social change, and naturally suspicious of politicians who eagerly employed the machinery of the state, libertarians often chose not to vote. Despite their strongly held opinions about the nature of politics, many libertarians were apolitical in practice, waiting until they could cast a principled vote for candidates who fully shared their beliefs. The Libertarian Party was meant to generate such candidates. Even so, the early party was vehemently criticized by some libertarian writers for relinquishing principle in favor of worldly success, and this tension between idealism and expediency dogged the party throughout its history.[11]

The party's rate of growth in its first few years was spectacular. In June 1972, the date of the inaugural convention, the party claimed one thousand members. By election day in 1972 it had doubled to two thousand members, and by the end of 1973 it had three thousand members, with organizations in thirty-two states. Although these early numbers sound plausible, it is difficult to track growth after that. In 1975, different sources listed party membership at ten thousand and five thousand.[12] Later figures printed credulously in the press were wildly inaccurate, reflective of libertarian enthusiasm rather than success. Although the party recognized organizations in thirty-two states, these varied from paper organizations run by a few lone enthusiasts to active organizations with expanding membership (Colorado and California had particularly strong chapters). By 1980 the party claimed to be on the ballot in fifty states, but even this number was exaggerated, as many libertarian candidates ran as independents or under the banner of another party.[13]

In the early years, there was a distinctly Objectivist flavor to the party culture. Founder Nolan remembered that many early members were "fans, admirers, students of Ayn Rand . . . heavy Objectivist influence."[14] The *Colorado Libertarian Newsletter*, published by the founding chapter of the party, was studded with Randian ideas and references. Authors and advertisers took for granted that readers would know what was meant by "the Randian sense-of-life" or that they would be interested in seminars held by Nathaniel Branden, Rand's former associate.[15] A survey of

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Californian Libertarian Party members revealed that *Atlas Shrugged* was overwhelmingly the one book most members had read, with 75 percent indicating they had read the 1,086-page novel. The third most popular book was also by Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness* (the second position belonged to a publication by Roger MacBride, the party's 1975 presidential nominee).[16] The poll also revealed that Robert Heinlein's science-fiction novel *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* was a party favorite, with 52 percent claiming to have read it. Nolan was a fan of both Rand and Heinlein, and in the earliest years the party's symbol was a slanting anarchist arrow above the acronym TANSTAAFL (there ain't no such thing as a free lunch) taken from Heinlein.[17] In the early years, outgrowing the Objectivist/science-fiction subculture that deeply shaped the movement would be a key task. The party's ability to transcend the sophomoric antics and insularity of Rand's followers was vital to maturing the movement as a whole.

The party's immaturity served it well in one respect: the decision to run candidates for president and vice president in 1972, despite the inexperience of nearly everyone involved. After an unsuccessful attempt to draft the libertarian economist Murray Rothbard, the convention settled on John Hospers, a philosophy professor at the University of Southern California, and Toni Nathan, a broadcast journalist and businesswoman based in Oregon. Hospers and Nathan were on the ballot in only two states, Colorado and Washington, and had a campaign budget of under $7000. Although the party earned only 3,671 votes, it gained one electoral vote—and national media coverage—when a renegade Virginia elector, Roger MacBride, cast his vote for Hospers-Nathan.[18] The nominally Republican MacBride, a committed libertarian from a young age, cast the vote to publicize the fledgling party and "stir up some public discussion of the foreign policy and the domestic policy that the administration had taken." His rebellion made Nathan the first woman to receive an electoral-college vote, an event that drew television news trucks to the normally staid Richmond Capitol Building, where electors voted. "My fellow electors were strongly resentful because all of the newspaper reporters wanted to talk to me, not them," remembered MacBride.[19] The party's naïveté had turned out to be a savvy move, garnering it national news coverage far beyond what was warranted by the campaign. MacBride became an instant hero to party members and sympathizers, and would go on to be the party's presidential candidate in 1975.

Before the party could capitalize on this media coverage in the next national election cycle, it had to contain ideological divisions within the ranks, particularly those between minarchists (who favored a minimal

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government) and anarchists (who envisioned a future with no government at all). From the outset, the Libertarian Party framed itself as an alternative to both left and right. Early campaign literature described the party as uniquely different, blending the Left's social tolerance and commitment to personal freedom with the Right's desire for low taxes and limited government. But how limited should that government be? The ideological fervor of the late 1960s and early 1970s that birthed the party had also produced a strong movement toward anarchism within the libertarian movement, and now it created the odd spectacle of a Political Party with members who agitated for complete abolition of government. Within the broader ranks of libertarianism, the split between minarchists and anarchists had troubled various organizations since the 1950s.[20] But until the late 1960s, few had openly claimed the label anarchist. By the time of the party's founding, however, there were a significant number of vocal, self-conscious anarcho-capitalists afoot, and they loudly condemned the Libertarian Party for its acceptance of government.

The split between the two factions came to a head at the party's second national convention, held in Dallas in 1974. At the first convention, the party had weathered a heated conflict over whether to support active tax resistance, eventually concluding that it would not endorse unlawful activity but condemn taxation and offer "moral support" to resisters. Now it worked out a similar accommodation between those who advocated anarchism and those who approved minimal government. With the party platform the central issue, a compromise between the two factions was worked out at 4 a.m. Ed Clark, the New York Party chair, remembered that "all references that seemed to support one or the other or exclude one or the other were taken out of the platform. So that it established the principle that you could be for no government or for very limited government and still be a Libertarian."[21] The party's ability to broker this compromise struck some observers as a telling sign of progress. Crane saw it as "the first real indication that the party was going to be, was going to try to be a real party, not just a discussion club." Although factionalism would be a recurrent difficulty, the party's ability to manage these potentially explosive differences was testament to the growing maturity of its leaders and membership base. Over time, the composition of the party shifted away from the Randian subculture to more professional types attracted by its socially liberal, fiscally conservative positions.[22]

Ed Crane, who was elected National Chair at the 1974 convention, played a key role in this professionalization. Crane's first move after his election was to open a national office in San Francisco, where he lived. He also upgraded the party newsletter, ditched the adolescent

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"TANSTAAFL" logo, printed a first run of more than five thousand, and "sent the newsletter out gratis to anybody who made the mistake of getting on our list." Crane also began to exercise control over the state parties, often, as he admitted, in a heavy-handed manner: "So I made a lot of enemies all around the country by just going in there and trying to throw out the incompetent people and get good people in . . . on the theory that we just didn't have time to fuck around."[23] Crane exposed himself to even more criticism when, after winning reelection as National Chair on a pledge to keep the party out of Washington, D.C., he moved the headquarters there upon his victory. Although he had argued against the corrupting influence of politics as usual, Crane felt that a D.C. presence was necessary if the party was to establish itself as a serious organization. These changes had the desired effect of attracting a different segment of the population to the party. Crane and others remembered that from 1975 to 1979, the party's "golden era," a higher number of educated professionals without previous experience in the libertarian movement were attracted to the party.

The Libertarian Party needed all the help it could get. The party faced an uphill battle to become a lasting presence on the American political scene. One of its fundamental challenges was simply getting on the ballot, and ballot drives would be a key feature of life for party members and activists. In California, 670,000 ballot signatures were needed. In New York, a party's candidate needed to garner at least 50,000 votes in a statewide election to get on the ballot. Other states imposed arcane regulations that the party found impossible to surmount. West Virginia forbade the circulation of petitions outside a person's home magisterial district. To make the ballot in Michigan, a candidate needed need 3/10 of 1 percent on a primary ballot, but voters could not actually vote for the candidate; they simply wrote in a future preference.[24] Other states had extremely early filing deadlines. Until a 1980 lawsuit by third-party candidate John Anderson that successfully challenged early filing deadlines, they created a significant structural obstacle to third-party presidential candidates in the American political system.[25] Similarly problematic was the 1974 Federal Elections Campaign Act (FECA), which limited campaign donations by individuals, meaning the party could not rely on the largess of a wealthy patron (although it would find ways around this restriction in 1980).

As the party's focus moved away from Rand-inspired treatises, it began to provide a constructive outlet for the political energies of its members. In New York, Jerome Tuccille ran for governor in 1974, hoping to garner the 50,000 votes the party needed for ballot status. Tuccille's colorful campaign, which featured an election parade with a young Lady Godiva in a body stocking riding a white horse, did not win

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the requisite number of votes. It did, however, catch the eye of *Newsweek*, and a small boomlet of national media reporting on libertarians helped the party expand its base.[26] In California, the party began to resemble a more traditional electoral organization, issuing a twelve-page report on the California legislature, describing major bills and ranking state senators and representatives according to libertarian principles.

John Hospers's 1974 run for California governor may have had something to do with this enthusiasm. Building on the press he received from the 1972 election, Hospers ran on a platform of opposition to taxes, regulatory agencies, state action, welfare, busing, and victimless crime laws (chiefly marijuana use and sodomy laws).[27] Although Hospers's campaign was still that of an outsider, an explicit protest vote or outlet for those who were fed up with politics, it was at least an extant political campaign, an effort to engage with democratic processes. In other states, the party made a respectable showing. Kay Haroff ran a surprisingly successful campaign for governor of Ohio in 1974, earning 80,000 votes (3 percent). The party met with its greatest triumph in Alaska, where state legislature Dick Randolph switched his party allegiance from Republican to Libertarian and then won election as the first Libertarian state legislator in 1978.

Although professionalization proceeded apace under Crane, it remained unclear if the party's mission was educational or political. Crane himself sounded conflicted on the issue, telling a libertarian magazine, "I strongly believe that the purpose of the Libertarian Party is 100% educational. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to elect people to public office."[28] Crane and others within the party believed that national elections were the only time Americans listened to political ideas, and they could not miss the opportunity to enter this forum. Although party members rightly understood that they had the best chance of winning office in local elections, they also believed the party would never be taken seriously unless it fielded national candidates. Victory was unlikely, but the party had to put its best face forward.

Roger MacBride's 1976 presidential campaign showcased the party's struggle to develop a viable political strategy. MacBride, a party hero for his 1972 electoral vote, easily won the presidential nomination. A brief crisis over his running mate ensued when MacBride rejected the two top candidates, one for owning gold before it was legalized, and one because he was homosexual (although the party was committed to gay rights, the conservative MacBride was not). The party and MacBride settled on David Bergland, an attorney from California. MacBride was a welcome candidate because he could use his financial resources and free time to fund the

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campaign. He piloted his own converted DC-3 plane ("No Force One") through forty-eight states and spent $500,000 of his own money on the campaign. For the first time, the party boasted television advertising, unabashedly taking advantage of FCC rules for equal airtime.[29]

Crane had a clear strategy for MacBride, which was to run on a "tripod of issues . . . a non-interventionist foreign policy, a free market economic system, and a strict respect for civil liberties." But the party also engaged in a "special issues" strategy, reaching out to one-issue voters with pamphlets like "Pot, Helmets, Vitamins, and You," written by party founder David Nolan. Crane explained in a letter to party officials that the pamphlet "may not sound like your typical LP position paper and it isn't . . . [it] is purposely geared toward a less than intellectual audience. . . . Surprisingly, many vitamin freaks and motorcycle enthusiasts are gut libertarians and we should attempt to elicit their support."[30] Crane later came to regret this strategy, realizing that one-issue voters were attracted to established parties that could actually have an impact on their cause. Nonetheless, by the party's standards, the MacBride campaign was a success. MacBride earned 173,000 votes, a huge improvement over 1972, and the party was on the ballot in thirty-two states. The party's ballot presence surpassed that of Gene McCarthy, as the *New York Times* noted, indicating the libertarians had an effective ground organization.[31]

Despite the party's professed educational focus, once in politics it was hard to resist the temptation really to try to win. The party's appetite for political success was whetted in 1977, when Ed Clark's campaign for California governor garnered 5 percent of the vote. Building on those vote totals, the party could hope to become a deciding factor in state elections, a constituency that would have to be noticed, courted, and perhaps even obeyed. These hopes were further stoked by an infusion of money from David and Charles Koch, two brothers who began actively funding libertarian causes in the 1970s.[32]

The Koch funding would soon give birth to a new organization, inextricably intertwined with the Libertarian Party: The Cato Institute. In 1977, dispirited after the MacBride campaign, Crane suggested to Charles Koch that libertarians could benefit from having their own think tank that would supply ideas and education to policymakers. In many ways, the impetus to found Cato was a return to the earlier libertarian ethos of education. But Cato would become deeply involved in policy and politics, and it displayed some of the strategic thinking that Crane would soon bring to the Libertarian Party. From the start, Cato strove for respectability among the intellectual elite, publishing a magazine, *Inquiry*, that offered serious, well-researched, and quietly libertarian articles for an

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educated readership. As the years passed, Cato would develop into a true player within the Beltway think-tank world.[33]

Cato, along with the Libertarian Party, would have a transformative effect on the libertarian movement. Where the party suggested that political action was appropriate, Cato provided a model for how to be a serious, accessible, and engaged libertarian looking toward the mainstream. In the 1970s, both organizations would help libertarianism shed the qualities of a fringe subculture and move toward respectability.

As the 1980 election approached, the party's enthusiasm was high. Clark, who had gained valuable experience during his gubernatorial run, was recruited to be the presidential candidate. The campaign would be much better funded than in 1976, thanks to the presence of David Koch on the ticket. As a candidate, Koch would not be bound by federal election laws and could draw on his considerable fortune to advance the campaign. With increased funding, Crane was eager to abandon the "single-issue" focus in favor of a broader outreach to the mass of voters.

In throwing over Nolan's pet project, Crane was on dangerous ground. He veered into even more perilous territory with his strategy to link candidate Clark to John F. Kennedy. Crane and the campaign managers hit upon a palatable way to describe the often frightening libertarian agenda. On *Nightline*, Clark told his interviewer: "We want to get back immediately to the kind of government that President Kennedy had back in the early 1960s, which I think was much more benevolent . . . had much lower inflation, much higher growth rates, much lower levels of taxes." Invoking Kennedy was a clear way to get across the party's desire to restrict government without seeming unrealistic or revolutionary. In the party's television spots, a just-out-of focus portrait of Kennedy hovered behind Clark's shoulder as he explained his political agenda.[34]

Although it made perfect sense to establish a link between the unknown Clark and the iconic Kennedy, such a connection was anathema to the party faithful. Crane had always been resented for his centralizing tendencies. Now, in addition to rumblings about the "Crane Machine" and the "Kochtopus," there was a deep suspicion that Crane was selling out the party's principles. Justin Raimondo, founder of the Radical Caucus within the party, remembered that Clark's "openly opportunist platform outraged everyone" and scorned the guiding philosophy of "low-tax liberalism."[35] What good were electoral victories if voters couldn't tell the difference between a Libertarian and a Democrat?

This discontent was kept quiet by a general tone of optimism that pervaded the party during this time and Crane's undeniable success at projecting a more serious and professional image for the organization.

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A journalist surveying the party's political posters noted, "Wearing dark plastic glasses, with pupils that seem slightly askew and a small Mona Lisa smile, the candidate [Hospers in 1972] looks like someone the Secret Service would frisk at least twice before they would even let him tour the White House. But the latest poster, from Ed Clark's 1980 run, can only be described as snappy."[36] Although his campaign strategy had been scotched, and his vision of a science-fiction-themed 1980 convention would also be overruled, Nolan remembered the years leading up to the election as a "golden era" when the party was "happy and confident and growing and having at least some taste of victory under its belt." Raimondo, too, remembered that the party felt "unified, there was room for everybody. We were fighting, but still friendly."[37] The success of Proposition 13 in California and a near miss with marijuana decriminalization in San Francisco convinced Libertarians that their ideas were catching on with the broader population.

As the 1980 election approached, party officials hoped for a record-breaking total of several million votes. Crane declared openly that anything under a million would be "a failure."[38] This optimism overlooked the larger-than-usual structural problems the party faced. First off there was Ronald Reagan, a mainstream candidate who borrowed libertarian rhetoric where useful. Even more problematic was the Independent candidacy of John Anderson, whose highly visible campaign was poised to siphon off potential Libertarian Party voters. Despite these problems, Libertarian Party members believed their day in the sun had arrived. In 1980, they foresaw, the party would finally arrive as a presence on the national scene. It would command enough votes that the major parties would listen, the media would grant respectful coverage, and Americans would begin to incorporate libertarian ideas into their political worldview.

In the face of such rosy projections, Clark's performance in the 1980 election was crushing. Again, he far outstripped any previous libertarian candidate with a vote total of 921,000. But it was below the dreaded 1 million mark, foreordained as failure. The election was a clear letdown that drained the enthusiasm of many party members. In the wake of Clark's defeat, a number of disappointed volunteers drifted away, among them the most talented and effective. It was in 1981 that future Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton, previously a Libertarian Party enthusiast and organizer of Clark's campaign in Colorado, left the organization.[39] Even worse than Clark's performance were the dynamics his loss unleashed in the party. Disgruntled purists who had remained quiet while Crane's polished campaign unfolded now let their full fury vent. Nolan led the charge with "Clark for President: A Campaign Critique," a pamphlet

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attacking Crane's management of the campaign and the party. Murray Rothbard, a pugnacious libertarian economist who kept a careful eye on the party's progress, swung into action. He denounced the Clark campaign and the forces behind it in a special issue of his *Libertarian Forum* magazine, and pulled together a coalition opposed to the "Crane Machine." At the beginning, the conflict fell along ideological lines, what Raimondo called the "orthodox Murray Rothbard faction" and the "left opportunist faction," but the conflict "quickly degenerated into clique politics, personal animosity."[40]

Rothbard's experience with the Cato Institute was also deteriorating during this time. He got off to a rocky start with Cato in 1978, when he delivered several lectures praising Lenin during the Institute's Summer Seminars. Rothbard looked to Lenin as a skilled revolutionary whose tactics might help the Libertarian Party achieve political power, but fellow libertarians disagreed. Next, he opposed the institute's outreach to the antinuclear movement. Finally, Rothbard's hysterical maneuverings within the Libertarian Party against perceived enemies alienated him from former allies and friends, most significantly the Koch brothers.[41] In 1981, he lost his position at the Cato Institute. But by then, Rothbard seemed happy to trade a secure berth within the growing think tank for dominance within the fast-declining Libertarian Party. By 1982, the anti-Crane movement had elected a national chair, ousted a Crane ally from the position of national director, and moved the party headquarters to Houston, home of the new national director. In 1984, the Crane faction made one last attempt to reassert control of the party by nominating their presidential candidate. Outmaneuvered by the crafty Rothbard, their efforts ended in failure, and the convention split, with nearly half of the delegates exiting the hall, leaving the party in disarray.

Throughout the infighting, Crane was not without his defenders. Roy Childs, an early anarcho-capitalist theorist and later respected editor of the Koch-funded magazine *Libertarian Review*, praised Crane and other members like David Boaz and Andrea Rich for recognizing that "one had to take the existing situation seriously, and try to communicate with people where they were at." Without making this transition, Childs noted, the party would "sound like you're threatening everyone."[42] After the disastrous 1984 convention, movement regular Sheldon Richman sent a furious letter to Rothbard defending Crane: "Crane is the first person I met who acted as if the libertarian movement seriously could succeed in the real world. He, more than anyone, is responsible for the movement passing from the living-room, discussion-club stage into the world of social change. The party is stuck back in 1972. I already lived through that and

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don't wish to repeat it."[43] Similarly, Raimondo, an activist for the anti-Crane forces, ultimately concluded that Crane should not be blamed for the party's downturn. "The major responsibility was not the Crane machine: it lies with those who made existence of the Crane Machine the issue . . . [Bill] Evers, Rothbard, Nolan, and their coalition. They made it into an organizational issue, their plank was exclusion of one faction from leadership. They ended up getting what they deserve."[44] The purists had won a Pyrrhic victory in the long-running libertarian war over purity or pragmatism.

The fighting essentially destroyed the party as an organizational vehicle that could effectively advocate—or advocate at all—for political change. Evidence of the party's decline streamed in from all quarters. A Virginia libertarian wrote in low spirits to the national director, "The accusations and infighting among the various factions on the national LP has seriously undermined the confidence of the ordinary member toward the leadership. . . . The LP does not seem to be functioning effectively to us ordinary folks out here in the hinterlands."[45] Although most members saw clearly that the energy had dissipated in the wake of 1980, Ed Clark still spoke of "hopefully major party status in the '90s." But the party was a changed organization. It would limp forward throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with vote totals far lower than Clark had earned.[46] Candidates were ever more obscure or unsavory. The party stuck by its 1992 presidential candidate despite a cloud of scandal, including four marriages, unpaid child support, outstanding warrants, and unauthorized use of the party's credit card. Texas libertarians nominated a ninety-four-year-old woman for state office.[47] Where it had once seemed an active and growing political force, the Libertarian Party was now essentially a joke, a vehicle for stunts like radio shock-jock Howard Stern's 1994 bid for governor of New York.[48]

What lessons does the history of the Libertarian Party hold? Some are obvious. The party's failures point to the difficulties that all third parties face: ballot access, little or negative publicity, insufficient resource base, convincing voters they are not "wasting" a vote, and so forth.[49] The Libertarian Party also suffered—and suffers still—from social dynamics common to third parties. It tended to attract an atypical cross section of the population, individuals who were by definition alienated from the political process. And even worse, libertarian ideology itself encouraged this disengagement by explicitly frowning upon compromise and defining the state as inherently evil and destructive. Libertarians who strictly followed their ideology would find themselves without an adequate theory of social change. Those who moved toward the political process, like Crane, opened themselves up to charges of opportunism, expediency, and

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betrayal. This combination of ideological extremism and the structural constraints of the two-party system may have doomed the Denver dreamers from the start.

But as the party disintegrated, the libertarian movement was on the move. In fact, the failures of the Libertarian Party served a vital function by siphoning off the most extreme members, allowing a more respectable general libertarian movement to emerge. After David Nolan attacked Alaska State Representative Dick Randolph, the party's most successful (and nearly only) officeholder, disgruntled party member Duncan Scott was direct: "You and others are in the process of driving out the successful Libertarians. I guess there is an appropriateness to your actions. When you've accomplished your task, you can once again hold a national convention in your living room."[50] Scott's assessment was accurate: Ed Crane and Gale Norton, two of the party's luminaries and among the few who would go on to hold significant political clout in later years, left the organization in the early 1980s. Crane's Cato Institute would climb to the top of the think-tank world, ranking in the top-three think tanks by 1997. Norton served in a cabinet-level position under George W. Bush. But by the time they achieved these successes, neither would identify with the Libertarian Party. The party had come full circle to its obscure, marginal, eccentric beginnings.

While the Libertarian Party's history since 1980 makes it difficult to take seriously, perceptive commentators of all stripes continue to identify libertarianism as an important presence within the American political system. In 1991, E. J. Dionne argued that libertarianism, "if not quite a mass movement, had certainly become what political scientists call 'a mass belief system.'"[51] Offering some proof of this idea, a recent survey by Gallup identified 20 percent of voters as libertarian; more cautious Cato Institute estimates reduced that number to 9–13 percent.[52] Rhetorically at least, libertarianism has become a significant part of the political world. The Cato Institute, joined by other libertarian-leaning think tanks like the Reason Foundation, ensures that libertarian ideas are consistently injected into the political conversation. As Nolan asserts, "A lot of things that libertarians used to talk about—and still talk about—are no longer considered bizarre or outside the realm of legitimate policy debates."[53] The libertarian movement, consisting of writers, bloggers, activists, and educational institutions unaffiliated with the Libertarian Party, has flourished, particularly on the Internet.

Beyond the hard fate of third parties in the American system, the tale of the Libertarian Party also offers a cautionary tale to the libertarian movement. Libertarians still struggle with a basic truth: "We committed

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libertarians are a very small group with very unpopular views," as Cato analyst Brink Lindsey put it.[54] The one policy idea with the clearest libertarian fingerprints—Social Security privatization—went down to a stunning political defeat after its debut on the national stage. Even the successful libertarian think tanks may be less influential than they appear. The arrival of Cato and Reason coincided with an increase in ideologically oriented think tanks more generally, and some academic research suggests that these new think thanks may be less influential and seen as less credible than their nonpartisan forebears.[55]

So why the persistence of libertarianism, the continued impression that it is an ideology of force and consequence? One way to understand this paradox is through the idea of a libertarian sensibility. A libertarian sensibility is different from the libertarian movement, which like the Libertarian Party tends to orthodoxy, rigidity, and therefore irrelevance. But libertarian sensibility is flexible. It is a deep suspicion of government action, but not a defining one. The libertarian sensibility can be married to other impulses, ideologies, and priorities.[56] Ed Crane could be considered both an actual libertarian and one with libertarian sensibilities. On the other end of the spectrum would be a successful politician like Montana's Democratic governor Brian Schweitzer, who sounds almost like a teen Rand fan when he asserts, "When it comes to government telling you what to do, [in Montana] we're just as likely to tell them to go straight to hell."[57] Despite the libertarian rhetoric, Schweitzer's policy positions are more traditionally Democratic, including an emphasis on universal health care, public education, and antimonopoly regulation.

This libertarian sensibility is what has made libertarianism such a wonderful coalition partner, and in the final analysis accounts for its prestige on the political scene. For most of the century, libertarian ideas have found a home in the conservative movement. Here, the libertarian emphasis on clarity, rigorous argumentation, and education served it well. Libertarians were often able to provide the ideological ammunition needed by conservatives to clarify what it was they wanted to conserve. In 1970 Gary Wills argued that free-market economists provided the substance of conservatism: "Only the economists maintained a respectable academic base and an intellectual tradition of any rigor." His words were echoed by Ronald Reagan, who declared, "I believe the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism."[58] Those who became coalition partners were not the libertarians of the Libertarian Party, but their compromising brethren. In intellectual terms, they were the followers of Hayek and Friedman, not Rand and Rothbard.[59] This compromising was in fact essential to the coalition. Libertarianism alone was too fierce, too

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scary, too extreme. Linked to more traditionalist conservatism—especially religion—it lost little of its intellectual heft, but many of its rough edges. And in turn, it gave conservatism an intellectual heritage beyond reflexive patriotism and religiosity.

Now the coalition appears to be fraying. The rise of "big government conservatism," the war in Iraq, and George W. Bush's presidency in general seem to have pushed many libertarians over the edge. A flurry of books by disgruntled libertarians has poured forth, all sounding a common theme: libertarians have been betrayed by the Republican Party and ought to consider new coalition partners—even Democrats and liberals.[60] Much of this discussion simply revisits themes from the early days of the Libertarian Party, when party leaders openly described their new organization as a blend of left and right. Since their early characterization as "Republicans who smoke grass," libertarians have never fit cleanly on the ideological spectrum. Today, they may be as far from Republicans as from Democrats, and could join hands with either.

In rethinking their traditional alliance with the conservative movement and the Republican Party, libertarians must confront a series of fundamental questions. Some of these questions have been with the Libertarian Party all along. Is it possible to attract broad support without compromising key principles? Others are new, created by a shifting political situation, changing demographics, and the new opportunities that may lie within reach. How can libertarians reach the supposed 20 percent of voters exhibiting a libertarian sensibility without repeating their own sorry electoral past? And most important, if libertarians are in search of a new coalition partner—will anyone want them? The willingness of individual libertarians and movement activists to make changes varies greatly.[61] But the final lesson of the Libertarian Party is clear. Without significant redefinition, libertarians don't stand a chance.

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Notes

1. Ryan Sager, *The Elephant in the Room: Evangelicals, Libertarians, and the Battle to Control the Republican Party* (New York, 2006), 167.

2. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York, 1955), 97.

3. Scholars generally note a shift from the nineteenth century, when third parties "functioned as complete political organizations," to the twentieth century, when third parties are often "more accurately labeled independent campaigns than political parties." Steven J. Rosenstone, Roy L. Behr, and Edward H. Lazarus, *Third Parties in America*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, 1984;1986), 48, 81. Third parties, also called minor parties, are the

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subject of a robust political science literature. Analysts disagree as to whether third parties indicate systemic decay or are a sign of democratic health, but there is a general consensus as to their origins, roles, and the structural constraints they face. Third parties are seen to perform an array of vital functions beyond the winning of elections, including formulating issues and reforms, generating ideas for major parties, serving as an avenue of protest or a safety valve for discontent, and indicating potential electoral realignments. For summaries of the major interpretations, see David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia, S.C., 1993), esp. chap. 1, and Rosenstone et al., *Third Parties in America*, in Joseph Hazlett, *The Libertarian Party and Other Minor Political Parties* (Jefferson, N.C., 1992), analyzes the Libertarian Party with reference to this literature, arguing that its primary function has been as an issue innovator and issue educator. The Libertarian Party can be labeled a "continuing doctrinal party" according to V. O. Key's classic dichotomy, and it fits Clinton Rossiter's definition of a "minor Political Party," one of six third-party types he identifies (others are one-issue obsessionists, one-state party, personality parties, major party factions, and left-wing splinter groups). V. O. Key Jr., *Politics, Parties, and Pressure Groups* (New York, 1964), 281; Clinton Rossiter, *Parties and Politics in America* (Ithaca, 1960), 5.

4. It is worth noting, however, that libertarianism and anarchism have deeper indigenous roots than socialism, which was often imported by European immigrants. On the forerunners of modern libertarianism, see Mildred J. Loomis, *Alternative Americas* (New York, 1982); James J. Martin, *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827–1908* (Colorado Springs, 1970; 1953); and David DeLeon, *The American as Anarchist: Reflections on Indigenous Radicalism* (Baltimore, 1978).

5. Although the libertarian movement predates the Libertarian Party by decades, the two largely overlapped throughout the 1970s. The libertarian movement has been covered by historians as part of twentieth-century conservatism, but only recently has it received exclusive attention, in Brian Doherty's *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York, 2007), a comprehensive and lively insider history written from a sympathetic perspective.

6. This distinction is from Roy Childs, interviewed by Tom Palmer, 28 June 1984. In "Interviews with Libertarian Party members, 1984," Box 11, Libertarian Party Papers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville. Further citations from this collection will be cited as "LPP."

7. Secondary literature on the Libertarian Party is scarce. It is discussed most often in connection with other third parties: See Hazlett, *The Libertarian Party*, and Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery*, Immanuel Ness and James Ciment, *Encyclopedia of Third Parties in America* (Armonk, N.Y., 2000), 339–43. The party is also treated in Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism* and Justin Raimondo, *An Enemy of the State: The Life of Murray Rothbard* (Amherst, N.Y.: 2000), although neither treatment is extensive.

8. Jonathon Schoenwald connects the Libertarian Party to the student libertarian movement of the late 1960s, but curiously suggests the party represented the "death blow" to the movement. My own research suggests that the Libertarian Party grew out of a thriving subculture in which students and recent graduates played a key role; the party ought to be considered the peak of that subculture, rather than its end. See Jonathan Schoenwald, "No War, No Welfare, and No Damn Taxation: The Student Libertarian Movement, 1968–1972," in Mark Jason Gilbert, ed., *The Vietnam War on Campus: Other Voices, More Distant Drums* (Westport, Conn., 2001), 20–53.

9. Interview with Childs, LPP, and Edward Crane III, interview conducted by Tom G. Palmer on 28 June 1984, in "Interviews with Libertarian Party members, 1984," LPP.

10. "There is no Middle Ground," LP pamphlet, in "Campaign Literature 1972–1981," Box 1, LPP.

11. See Murray Rothbard, "The Party," *Libertarian Forum*, March 1972, 1, and Scott E. Royce, "America's Third Largest Party: Failure!" *Reason*, August 1977, 14, 19–23.

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12. For early figures, see "Libertarian Party: Background Information," in "Libertarian Party Literature," Box 2, LPP. "Watching Libertarians in Convention," *Review of the News*, 10 September 1975, 33, put 1975 membership at 10,000, while the *Christian Science Monitor* listed 5,000. George Moneyhun, "Third Parties Gear Up for Election," *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 August 1975, NP.

13. A Kansas newspaper quoted a libertarian giving an unlikely membership total of 400,000, and noted the party had not been on the ballot until 1982. Julie Heaberlin, "Libertarians View First Election as Victory in Disguise," Lawrence *University Daily Kansan*, 10 November 1982, NP.

14. Interview with David Nolan by Palmer, 1 July 1984, LPP. A poll of activists found 36 percent identified as Objectivists, while 75 percent were former Republicans. Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 391.

15. *Colorado Libertarian*, February 1977, 2.

16. "You Are What You Read: Survey of CA Libertarian Party Members," *Colorado Liberty*, 23 May 1979.

17. On the Libertarian Party sign, see Freeman Fox to John Hospers, 17 October 1973, in "1972 Campaign Literature: JH for President," Box 2, LPP.

18. Campaign figures are from Crane, oral history, and vote total from "Editorial Research Report: Libertarian's Alaskan Warm-up," *Congressional Quarterly*, 17 August 1982.

19. MacBride interview by Norma Lee Browing, "Correspondence of Roger Lea MacBride," Box 1, LPP.

20. Although the term "anarchist" wasn't used until the 1960s, Doherty finds evidence of a similar divide in the 1950s. Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 178–81.

21. Ed Clark interviewed by Palmer, 2 August 1984, LPP

22. Crane, interview with Palmer, LPP.

23. Ibid.

24. "Libertarian Party's Radical Capitalist," *Santa Barbara News and Review*, 18 October 1974. Ballot restrictions are further detailed in Hazlett, *The Libertarian Party*, 38–40, 125–26.

25. Anderson's lawsuit, settled by the Supreme Court in *Anderson v. Celebrezze* (1983), overturned prohibitively early ballot deadlines for presidential candidates but left untouched regulations affecting state offices.

26. Kenneth L. Woodward, "Every Man for Himself," *Newsweek*, 11 November 1974, 91, Stan Lehr and Louis Rossetto, "The New Right Credo: Libertarianism," *New York Times Magazine*, 10 January 1971, 24. Also adding to the discourse was the success of Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York, 1974), winner of the 1975 National Book Award. Nozick was a member of the LP in the 1970s and attended several conventions.

27. *California Libertarian Report*, March 1973–May 1974, and Hospers for Governor Press Release, 28 September 1974, both in "Campaign Literature: John Hospers for Governor of California," Box 2, LPP.

28. "An interview with Edward H. Crane III, National Chairman, LP," in *The Sandy-Cohen Political Nitty-Gritty Libertarian Newsletter*, ND, NP, "Libertarian Party Literature," Box 2, LPP. The Libertarian Party's educational function and its members' historic discomfort with voting raise the issue of whether it should be considered a true Political Party. In *Party Government* (New York, 1942), E. E. Schattschneider contends that minor parties based on principle are not truly seeking power through the electoral system, but rather use politics as a point of departure for other agitation. Therefore, they should not be considered real political parties (35, 61, 63). Similarly, William Goodman argues that many minor political parties should be more accurately considered agitational associations, debating societies, or educational organizations. See Goodman, *The Two-Party System in the United States* (New York, 1956), 49. Although at times the Libertarian Party has resembled the quasi-party organizations that Goodman and Schattschneider describe, in the years 1975–80, the party's strong

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emphasis on fielding viable candidates and building a national organization made it function as a Political Party.

29. Details on MacBride's VP decision are given in Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 397. MacBride was wealthy from real estate investments and his ownership of rights to The *Little House on the Prairie* books and television series, bequeathed to him by his libertarian godmother, Rose Wilder Lane, the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

30. Crane Interview. Crane, Memo to Execom, State Chairs, VIPs and LP Activists, in "Circular Letters, Libertarian Party Headquarters, 1975," Box 11, LPP Papers.

31. Richard Halloran, "Libertarian Leading 3d Party Candidates," *New York Times*, 26 October 1976, 23.

32. Charles and David were sons of Fred Koch, an early financial supporter of the John Birch Society. The family made its fortune through Koch Industries, an oil-refining business based in Wichita, Kansas. Charles was also a major donor to the libertarian educational organization, Institute for Humane Studies. Details on the publicity-shy Koch family can be found in Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 406–9.

33. Details on Cato's founding are from Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 411–13. An alternative account crediting Murray Rothbard is given in Raimondo's celebratory biography of Rothbard, *An Enemy of the State*, chap. 5. Cato's strategy of direct policy intervention and advocacy represented a new direction for think tanks that was increasingly popular in the 1970s. Andrew Rich describes this transformation as one from expertise to advocacy in *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Expertise* (New York, 2004). According to Rich's data, Cato was considered the fifth most influential think tank in 1993, and the third most influential in 1997 (81).

34. Quoted in Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 415. For the Kennedy image, see Nolan, "Clark for President: A Campaign Critique," Box 11, LPP.

35. Justin Raimondo, interview by Tom Palmer, LPP.

36. Anne Neville, "Libertarian Accepts Defeat with Grace and Humor," *Gazette* (Chillicothe, Ohio), 5 November 1987, NP.

37. Raimondo interview, Nolan interview.

38. Crane interview, LPP.

39. In 1981 Norton dropped out of the race for national director. Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 419. Norton's career as a libertarian is briefly covered in Laura Flanders, *Bushwomen: Tales of a Cynical Species* (New York, 2004).

40. Nolan, "Clark for President." Murray Rothbard, "The Clark Campaign: Never Again," *Libertarian Forum*, September–December 1980. Interview with Raimondo,.

41. Interview with Raimondo, LPP.

42. Childs interview, LPP.

43. Richman to Rothbard, 22 September 1983, "Correpondence of the LP, 1981–1984," Box 1, LPP.

44. Raimondo interview.

45. Crane interview. Ron Courtney to Eric O'Keefe, National Director, 22 February 1982.

46. In 1984, David Bergland won 228,705 votes, a sharp comedown from Clark. In 1998, the presence of Congressman Ron Paul on the ticket brought in 431,750 votes. The party's totals in years since have been within this range. Electoral figures can be found in *Encyclopedia of Third Parties*, 341.

47. Claudia Feldman, "A Plunge into Politics at Age 94," *Houston Chronicle*, 23 January 1983, NP.

48. Details on Stern's campaign are in Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 516–17.

49. Indeed, major works on third parties take failure as a given. In *Third Parties in America*, Rosenstone et al. begin their discussion with an explication of constraints on third parties, which "are so formidable that only the most serious breakdowns of the two major parties produce significant levels of third party support" (11). Daniel Mazmanian reaches similar conclusions in his *Third Parties in Presidential Elections* (Washington, D.C., 1974), while

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Hazlett lists fifteen factors leading to third-party failure (20). Constraints cited by the literature include factors outlined in this article and others, such as political socialization, the single-member-district system, amount and type of media exposure, low resource base, lack of committed workers, extensive membership criteria, regional or sectional base, and fusion/co-optation by a major party.

50. Duncan Scott to David Nolan, 10 May 1984, "Correspondence of Roger Lea MacBride," Box 1, LPP.

51. E. J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York, 1991), 282.

52. David Boaz and David Kirby, "The Libertarian Vote," *Policy Analysis*, no. 580, 18 October 2006 (Washington, D.C., 2006). The report declared: "The libertarian vote is in play" (1).

53. Nolan interview. Essentially, Nolan claims the party has been an "issue formulator" for the other two parties. The issue formulator function of third parties is controversial; see Mazmanian, *Third Parties in Presidential Elections*, 81–82. But at least one analyst, Joseph Hazlett, agrees with Nolan (Hazlett, *The Libertarian Party*, 91).

54. Brink Lindsey, "Libertarians in an Unlibertarian World," 8 March 2007, Cato Unbound, http://www.cato-unbound.org/issues/libertarianism-past-and-prospects/ (accessed 26 March 2007).

55. See Rich, *Think Tanks, Public Policy, and the Politics of Experts*.

56. For example, Andrew Kirk finds libertarian ideas connected to consumption through the Patagonia catalog and the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence, Kans., forthcoming 2007), esp. chap. 6.

57. Quoted in Sager, *The Elephant in the Room*, 182.

58. Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston, 1970), 556. "Inside Ronald Reagan: A Reason Interview," *Reason*, May 1978, 47.

59. I borrow this distinction from Virginia Postel, "An 18th Century Brain in a 21st Century Head," Cato Unbound, 18 March 2007.

60. Beyond Sager's book, see Brink Lindsey, "Liberaltarians," *The New Republic*, 4 December 2006, Bruce Bartlett, *Impostor: How George W. Bush Bankrupted America and Betrayed the Reagan Legacy* (New York, 2006); Stephen Slivinski, *Buck Wild: How Republicans Broke the Bank and Became the Party of Big Government* (Nashville, 2006).

61. A recent spectrum of debate can be seen in the March 2007 "Libertarianism: Past and Prospects" issue of the online magazine Cato Unbound, available at: http://www.cato-unbound.org/issues/libertarianism-past-and-prospects/ (accessed 26 March 2007).

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