

RON PAUL THE FIRST TIME AROUND

*Notes from the 1987 Libertarian Party convention in Seattle;
RP wins nomination over Russell Means*

by Brian Wright

Introduction

A reader of Liberty Magazine archives sent an email to me the other day, asking if I were the writer of the article I'm posting excerpts of below: "Don Quixote in the Emerald City." I said, Yup. He was complimentary. It's been 22 years since I put that piece together[1], and frankly much of it seems sophomoric. But I'm fessing up to it, and it does present a slice of important American history.

This was Ron Paul's "Libertarian Year," and the convention was a watershed for those who felt we should continue promoting our "right-wing accountant" image vs. those of us who wanted to shake things up a bit... by nominating Russell Means, an American Indian, who had actually physically confronted the federales on the world stage. Most of the Michigan delegation was in the latter camp, feeling a image-makeover was imperative following the 1984 decline. — bw

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Don Quixote in the Emerald City

I did this once before, in 1979. Eight years later and I'm still tilting at windmills, still seeing the state advancing like my forehead.

Eight years ago I was 30 and married, bogging down at a job in the "cannon" (war) business, discontent in the real world while optimistically pursuing an ideal one. Pollyanna in a K-Mart corduroy suit, I actually believed that liberty was around the corner. There was such incredible energy, such boyish enthusiasm, such intellectual drive. Eight libertarian years is a long time for Don Quixote in a statist world.

A veteran now, I can claim some little victories. There are some scars. I abandoned super-volunteerism: this year as a mercenary for the Libertarian Party of Michigan I almost duplicated the 6,000 unremunerated signatures personally gathered during the 1983-84 ballot drive. We're going to be on the ballot again. High hopes strike once again.

I use my signature gathering income to pay my way to the LP Convention. And so I spend my Labor Day weekend in Seattle, "The Emerald City," as the Chamber of Commerce calls it.

My sinuses are acting up as we descend to Seattle; the inside of my head stays at about 10,000 feet. Nevertheless, I march bravely along with my compatriots to the baggage claim area where we figure our chances of retrieving what we checked are close to 50/50. We wait patiently, then not so patiently, memorizing the colors and shapes of about 10 separate items permanently affixed to the conveyor belt. Thank you for flying Northwest.

I say, "Hey, Emily, isn't that white golf bag a new one?" She replies, "No, Brian, it's been around maybe 50 times now. I think all this stuff belongs to one of the illicit substance kingpins in Seattle. It's probably all full of drugs and the cops have it staked out, waiting for some bald-headed guy driving a Porsche and wearing a Hawaiian shirt." Mark was

wearing a Hawaiian shirt. I hail over, "Hey, Mark, let's forget that ad hoc golf outing, OK?"

Turns out there is a stake-out of sorts going on. A couple of Seattle's finest — one big fat cop and a guy about my size only bigger on account of his badge and gun — are wandering around behind the conveyor curtains with a dope-sniffing Rin-Tin-Tin. Before I figure out what's going on, these brave young men and dog sequester a couple of bags. After some poking around, they pull out a baggie containing what appears to be a leafy item currently on the government's list of unacceptable material.

Clearly the guns, badges, and sniffer dog have no effect on the marijuana. It just sort of sits there in the officer's hand making no false moves, declining to attack anyone in the vicinity. But one mustn't forget, the Eggplant that ate Chicago was once just a harmless little veggie in somebody's backyard; these guys weren't about to take any chances with the Evil Weed, especially here in their own home town. They promptly locate its traveling companion, a fairly normal looking guy in his early 30s, and give him the third degree.

"So, how'd this societal menace come to be in your suitcase, pal?"

"You know how it is, sir. The Weed has a mind of its own. Jumped in there when I wasn't looking, back in the Murder City. I've been doing my best to fight it off. But it's been a long day. Tonight, I think it planned to wrap itself in a few Zig Zags, thrust its mad vapors into my lungs and take shameless advantage of me. Glad you guys got here when you did."

"Don't worry, son. You're looking at two of the toughest hombres in the city, and we ain't afraid of no dead leaves. Why, my partner here gunned down a dozen tea bags just yesterday. Sure, they were decaffeinated, but they drew first."

"Geez. But have you all heard about Project HEMP back in Michigan? Well, back there the federales are sending our state boys out into the woods with axes, mind you, just axes. Seems these 13-foot-tall marijuana plants are sneaking into Detroit's neighborhoods and stalking winos, preachers, high school dropouts, and other pillars of the community. Someone has to go out there in the boonies and cut down these giant weeds so others can live and raise their families."

"Couldn't ya get Rambo?"

"Afraid not. In Nicaragua."

"Wheeww doggies! Then I guess them troopers of yours hasta be some kinda brave dudes and dudettes. No Rambo, no national guard, and no cruise missiles. No wonder we're losin' the battle 'gainst drugs!"

Actually, I couldn't overhear the conversation, but the foregoing probably makes about as much sense as any. The incident disturbed me. I wanted to intervene on behalf of the harassee, to scream obscenities at the fascist idiots in blue who were so intent on busting him, to demand they get the hell out of there and go do their FRIGGIN' JOBS for Chrissake. After all, as it turned out, a serial killer was on the loose in Seattle-Tacoma. Why weren't they on stake outs for him?!

As my anger rises, so too does my anxiety over consequences of any impulsive move. I walk closer to the scene. I'm just within earshot when I chicken out.

I'd like to think I made the rational choice, but it won't square with my feelings. On the do-something side:

1. I was dressed in a suit and tie.
2. There was a sense that other passengers might have supported me.
3. The PR value of an LP delegate coming to town and resisting immoral police acts could have been substantial.
4. I would probably have been in no physical danger even if I had lost my cool (which was likely).
5. It might have given moral support to the guy being hassled.

On the do-nothing side:

1. My head felt as thick as stale pudding and, despite the suit and tie, I looked like I'd "been rid hard and put away wet."
2. The victim might not have considered my intervention helpful.
3. Those guys were wearing real guns and badges.
4. The ensuing confrontation might have affected others in my entourage, particularly Tim, who had grown strangely quiet and preoccupied upon seeing Rin-Tin-Tin and colleagues checking things out.

Afterwards, we figured out a lot of ways we might have handled it. For example, the three or four of us could have approached the cops together and let Emily do all the talking. At just over five feet tall and hardly 100 lbs, she would certainly have presented a non-threat to the cops' macho cretinism. Then snap a picture. That kind of thing. There were plenty of witnesses, and chances are the cops would not have acted out any Neanderthal fantasies.

Well, we all walked away from that one.

As I proceed to the convention floor to hear the keynote speaker and take up credentials and bylaws, I find I can't shake the image of those two cops at the airport rousting that guy for marijuana possession. Achieving liberty isn't only a matter of deftly convincing people of the ideas, it's also resisting those who would just as soon step on your idealistic faces.

Thought and action. I wish I had a dime for every libertarian whose thinking is pretty damned good but whose actions aren't worth a bucket of warm spit. I don't mean standing up to a couple of armed fascists in a strange airport (as much as I reproach myself, that might have been a bad move). I mean all the talkers who can't or won't petition, who can't or won't write letters to the editor, who can't or won't hand out literature, join tax protests, make phone calls, or even lick stamps....

Have we figured out how to install a set of spark plugs in our converts, or do we just rely on the statistical probability that a huge influx of new libertarians will provide some activists, not to mention a leader or two?!

The bitterness of an ex-super-volunteer?

A super-volunteer, especially in libertarian organizations where higher order goals prevail, will necessarily feel deserted by the majority of his ostensible compatriots. There's no reason to expect a higher percentage of such psychologically independent people among libertarians than what exists in society at large. A super-volunteer, by continually kicking the weak ones in the ass, only exacerbates the problem: a) the others never learn to do things on their own, b) resentment is compounded on both sides, and c) the super-volunteer tends to redouble his efforts to the point of exhaustion. At this point the organization tailspins only to be reinvented by the next SV.

Nor is the SV totally bereft of psychological problems: usually a peculiar mixture of altruism, egomania, and a need to dominate. Ironically, with all the Randism in the Party, it has been my observation that altruism is usually the largest component of this killer trio. Mea culpa.

So what's a mother to do? First, get the cart and horse in their proper relative positions by recognizing that thought necessarily precedes action, that culturally we are squarely in the educational phase of libertarianization. Party politics definitely resides in a later phase (i.e., popularization) where action tells and we snap pictures and take names.

In a sense, the LP is ahead of its time; those who are active in it have to realize it's going to take time (education) for most people to catch up. I like the LP. It's something to do. It adds credibility and motion to our ideas. As for how far to get involved in action vs. education, that's a tough, individual call.

Okay, no need to be a super-volunteer. But when a Paul Jacob goes to jail for defying draft registration or when a Jim Lewis goes to some kangaroo Connecticut court to fight the evil income tax or a bunch of libertarians from Michigan menace a couple of Seattle vice cops, some of us would shout: "If this be out of phase, make the most of it!"

I'm getting away from the business at hand. Let's face it, though, credentials and bylaws don't rank very high on the list of Fun Things to do on my Summer Vacation.

Before we start cranking, Don Ernsberger delivers a fine keynote address: "...1988 will be a crucial year for the Libertarian Party. The powers of the state are arrayed against us. We will have to petition. We will have to gain media attention. We will have to raise money. But, dammit, we will be heard!"

Credentials is fairly straightforward. California has a couple of problems and is denied expansion of their delegation. OK, now everything's legal. Total delegate count: approximately 385.

Rather than proceed to consideration of bylaws changes, the floor hosts an eagerly awaited candidates' forum. No need to suspend the rules, because as far as anyone can tell, no orders of the day have been established.

In strut the hopefuls, four of 'em: Ron Paul and Russell Means, of course, then Jim Lewis (who ran with Bergland as VP candidate in '84) and Harry Glenn of Indiana. Russell is wearing his customary braids and full regalia. Ron, perhaps to tone down his establishment image, is decked out like the Prez returning from Rancho Santa Barbara: large plaid shirt, boots, Levi slacks. And ol' Harry, with cowboy hat and bolo tie, looks like a high plains drifter whose Greyhound missed the turn to New Mexico.

For a minute we expect to be treated to an unscheduled Wild West Show, but Lewis dispels that prospect by walking to the microphone sporting a simple gray suit and announcing, "Hi. I'm Jim Lewis, and I'm the only presidential candidate who decided not

to dress up today." He lambastes the IRS and stresses the need for the LP to quit meekly going to the back of the bus, especially with respect to IRS thugs and the Federal Elections Commission. Civil disobedience? You betcha. Read your Constitution and stand up for it, people.

Ron Paul is next. He emphasizes his libertarian record in Congress and his ability to run a successful, well-financed, well-organized campaign. He excoriates the IRS, its incarceration of Representative George Hansen of Idaho, the income tax, the Federal Reserve funny money system, military intervention abroad and government's interference in our private lives. He claims the time is right for his candidacy and we can have significant effect in '88.

Russell Means begins with his vintage Lakota greeting, as always. He points out that freedom is for everyone. Forget the Demopublicans. Attract the major victims of the onrushing tyranny, get them to the voting booth, blitzkrieg the media between now and the major party primaries, and we can be running 15% in the opinion polls by February.

It's a little premature for comic relief, so let's just call Harry Glenn's harangues something you'd want to relieve yourself about in general. Like the militarist rube who insisted on cluttering up our presidential field in '83 (I forget the man's name; most just knew him as the Wacko from Waco), Harry decided we were his kind of people and set out to save us. He's also loud and he lacks the courtesy to dispense with voice amplification. He's a charmer all right:

- "I'M THE COUNTRY BOY FOR THIS COUNTRY!"
- "WE'RE GONNA HUNT DOWN THE IRS AGENTS AND GIT RID OF 'EM!"
- "NO MORE OF THIS 'MEET, EAT, AND RETREAT!'"

Throw in a couple of barnyard similes and some guitar pickin' and what we have here is a perfect media salient. The news folks positively drool over this guy: concrete-bound, Red-White-and-Blue, cracker-barrel eccentric with some clever lines, catchy tunes and no discernible input circuitry. Great PR. Footage at eleven.

Hey, I know this is the LP and we're a tolerant bunch. And I ain't sayin' bozos shouldn't be allowed to run. But I sure as hell don't have to like it. After today's exposure, I walk off the floor every time he gets close to the mike. I don't find him cute, and my eardrums are still sensitive from the sinus problem.

In the question period each serious candidate presents himself well. Lewis is asked what effect he feels his upcoming court case will have on his campaign ("could be positive, especially with media"). Paul is queried on his disagreement with the platform's position allowing abortion ("Yes, I disagree, but would not make it a campaign issue or a federal law"). Means is asked which area of the government spending he would cut first as President ("Cut all, but adopt specific sequence from LP staff experts"). Even if one doesn't like all the answers, each man comes across as sincere, thoughtful and competent. No Demopublicans here.

Several questions are put to all candidates, e.g. what will you do if you lose the nomination, would you consider the VP slot (which former Alaska LP legislator, Andre Marrou, has a lock on anyhow), how much money does your campaign have now, what Presidential candidates have you voted for since 1972, will you contribute your mailing list to the cause, and how many Luftmenschen[2] can dance on the head of a pin?

A warm round of applause, the candidates leave and we all get back to the next order of business...

[At this point, the Liberty editors excise about three-quarters of my full article, and conclude: "As the "Rodney Dangerfield" of politics, the LP takes what it can get."]

The 1987 LP convention was a watershed moment for the party and for me personally. Dr. Paul won the nomination, and his vote totals were less than half of what Ed Clark received in 1980 (when running against Ronald Reagan). Huge discouragement, disillusionment for many. I'm going to be 40 years old in a year; in the immortal words of Frank O'Connor, "I feel as if I'm casting pearls to swine and not even getting a pork chop." Maybe this Libertarian Party horse I've been riding so hard is not leading me to the promised land of liberty.

Please convey your thoughts to me via email, or through a subscribing and posting to the Coffee Coaster Blog.

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[1] The full article may be read at the Liberty Magazine archives (<http://libertyunbound.com/article.php?id=173>). I recall being unhappy with how the editors back then cut it down so much. But I don't know where the original is; if anyone does have it—probably someone associated with the Michigan LP—I would love to get a copy. Thanks.

[2] Luftmenschen is a German word meaning "air people," which Murray Rothbard had recently resurrected to apply as a pejorative term to many of the individuals who hang with the Libertarian Party (having no visible means of support).

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