

**A QUARTERLY
MESSAGE
ON LIBERTY**

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Cato's Letter

How Cato Provides a Voice for Liberty

DAVID BOAZ

After many years as executive vice president of the Cato Institute, David Boaz was named a distinguished senior fellow in April. He spoke that month at a Cato city seminar in New York.

It's great to see so many of our old friends here, especially our Sponsors, and especially some longtime Sponsors whom we really appreciate. It's also good that I see a lot of new people and young people here who maybe have never been to a Cato event before, especially since we haven't had in-person events much for a couple of years.

When we get together like this, one of the things we think about is, why do we do this? Why are we here together? Because we haven't seen old friends in a long time, of course. But it's also, and more fundamentally, because we love freedom. That's why we're here.



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Freedom is a big idea that's been developed by great thinkers over many years, people who didn't always agree about exactly what it meant. We can measure freedom in reports like the *Human Freedom Index* and *Freedom in the 50 States*. And we can debate about the measurements. But freedom is also something people feel in their bones. Every one of us, whether we ever did this or not, knows what it felt like to cross through the Berlin Wall from unfreedom to freedom.

Freedom means respecting the moral autonomy of each person, seeing each person as the owner of his or her own life, where each person is free to make the important decisions about his life: to think, to speak, to write, to create, to marry, to eat and drink and smoke, to associate with others, as we choose.

“Freedom means respecting the moral autonomy of each person.”

Freedom is the foundation of our ability to construct our lives as we see fit. And over the past 300 years, we libertarians, we classical liberals, have made great strides toward a free, just, peaceful, and prosperous society. The great scholar Deirdre McCloskey, who just spent a month in residence with us at Cato, writes in her books, starting with *The Bourgeois Virtues*, about what she calls the Great Enrichment. And what she means is that these days we expect economic growth every year. But that's not the natural condition of mankind.

There's a chart called the hockey stick chart that shows standard of living or GDP per capita, or however you prefer to define it, throughout human history. It looks like a flat line for 100,000 years. And then around 1700, it suddenly starts shooting up, first in Northwestern Europe and then in America. In China, it stays flat for almost 300 more years and then the same thing happens there.

Sometimes Deirdre calls it the Great Fact, with a capital G and a capital F. The Great Fact of human history is that we went from bare subsistence, where nothing ever changed, to the incredible growth: thirtyfold, a hun-

dredfold. It's hard to measure how much richer I am than my ancestors who left Scotland around 1720. They lived in thatched huts with their animals inside the house for warmth. I do not. That's the change we're talking about.

But nothing is guaranteed. And to some extent, we have become so used to comfort and convenience and constant growth that we forget how it happened. We don't think it matters how we preserve it, because we come to see it as so natural that we think of it as automatic. And that's why these days, ideas we thought were dead are back: socialism, protectionism, industrial policy, ethnic nationalism, antisemitism, religious and cultural wars, and threats from both right and left, both internationally and domestically.

The threats from both right and left are why Cato's job is not done and will probably never be done. Cato's mission remains what it has been for 45 years: to preserve and defend individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace.

“Cato's job is not done and will probably never be done.”

How do we do that? What do we do? Well, I could obviously give you a litany of books and studies and seminars and TV appearances and congressional testimony and so on. But you know about that. We send you newsletters about it. So I want to sort of describe some of the things that aren't so obvious. For instance, we give academics a platform to reach a wider audience.

We've created a platform that automatically makes our scholars participants in the national policy debate. Sometimes journalists don't know who our scholar is, they just call Cato and say, "Do you have someone I can talk to about whatever?" We try to be careful about that. I was asked to go on a national television network this morning to talk about safe investments in an impending recession era. I told them, "Look, I know a little about what the government shouldn't do to cause recessions, but I have no expertise in what safe investments are in a recession." So we are mindful of that—to only accept such invitations when we have genuine expertise to offer.

But often, we do have an expert, and even somebody who's just joined Cato this week can then get on television, or get interviewed by an editori-

al board, because we've created that platform because of your support. In that way, we get libertarian ideas into the national media. And sometimes, you see that. You see an op-ed from a Cato scholar in the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*, or you see a Cato person appearing on television. But there are also times that you don't realize that we've gotten libertarian ideas into the national media. Like when an editorial writer talks to one of our scholars and then writes an editorial that is better than it would have been.

Even though we don't get named, that can also happen with people who



write the op-ed columns or do cable news reports and so on. Sometimes, we give an idea and a policy angle to a reporter who then goes out and investigates something that he hadn't thought about otherwise. So, in all of those ways, we know that we're getting ideas planted. And we do keep track of that. "Hey, I talked to this reporter, and look, here's the story he's written now."

We also give people the courage to do what they know

is right. Sometimes, I hope the work we do persuades somebody that industrial policy is a bad idea, that a tax cut would help the economy, that we should stay out of whatever the next war is that people are pushing. But sometimes, I believe, people already know that. And I'm talking about people in prominent positions, who already know that what Cato says is right. But when they see us talking about it, they see that if this serious Washington think tank can talk about this issue, so can they.

One example of this many years ago was when the mayor of Baltimore, Kurt Schmoke, and the governor of New Mexico, Gary Johnson, both separately a few years apart, said that the drug war wasn't working and we ought to try decriminalizing or legalizing a lot of drugs. And one thing that I think was true of both of them, is that these were smart, experienced guys. We didn't persuade them this was a good idea. They knew that, but I do believe

it's when Kurt Schmoke saw my op-ed in the *New York Times* saying let's end the drug war that he thought, I think I'll give a speech about this. And he did. And then Gary Johnson also, who was a close reader of Cato and *Reason* and things like that, also decided that he could talk about it.

We put big ideas on the table. Ideas that probably wouldn't be part of the national debate otherwise. What ideas? Well, to name just a few in addition to the war on drugs, there's the idea of enumerated and limited powers, and health savings accounts, and reining in presidential power, and Social Security reform, and ending qualified immunity. All of these and many more besides are areas where Cato has had real influence in shaping the national debate and, in some cases, actual policy outcomes. And once again, I want to thank you for your support, because it is really our Sponsors who make all this possible.

“ We have created a major, consistent voice on behalf of individual liberty. ”

And the number-one way the Cato Institute helps change the world is to create a presence for libertarian ideas in Washington and in the national debate. Not a big enough presence yet, but a presence that wouldn't otherwise be there. We have created a major, consistent voice on behalf of individual liberty and limited government in the national media.

I have people all the time in Washington calling me up saying, “I know you guys will have a different point of view on this.” Or even at an event like this in Washington, a speaker starting to propose a bad idea, and seeing me or one of my colleagues and saying, “Okay, I know the Cato Institute is not going to like this, but . . .” So at least they are reminded that there's some large number of Americans who don't like these schemes.

The Founders pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to the cause of American freedom. Fortunately, we don't have to do that, but we do have to do what we do because freedom isn't free. It must be defended in every generation. ■



CATO PROFILE

Landry Ayres

Landry Ayres is a senior producer at [Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org). Originally from Texas, he graduated from George Mason University with both a BA in media production and criticism and an MA in communications. In addition to his other work for [Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org), he cohosts the podcast *Pop & Locke*.

What attracted you to the ideas of liberty, and how did you end up at Cato?

I came to the liberty movement from a rather progressive background after the Ed Snowden revelations. Seeing the invasive, panopticon-like power of the surveillance state led me to wondering about the state's influence in more aspects of life: the rise in drone warfare, border enforcement, and institutional racism, to name a few. I never thought I would have the chance to work at Cato, but when the producer position with [Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org) came around, I had to take a chance. The audio production industry has been growing at quite a clip in the past few years, so to be able to marry a flourishing professional community with a mission based on shared principles was very attractive.

How does [Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org) work to reach new audiences for libertarian ideas and to explore the history of libertarianism?

[Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org) is really focused on education rather than detailed policy analysis, and I think that can be a more welcoming starting point for those new to our ideas. You may not know the size of the federal debt, all the legal nuances of the current Supreme Court docket, or why the Jones Act is bad, but most people already know that everyone deserves respect, dignity, and self-autonomy. Those values are

(for the most part) universal. We can bring in people who might initially be reticent to read something labeled as “libertarian” and help them understand that we are a more compassionate, open-minded, and tolerant group of people than we might be seen as. Libertarianism is a vast, diverse ideology and we want to have a welcoming open door to everyone who wants a more flourishing, cooperative, peaceful world.

On *Pop & Locke*, you explore the themes of liberty that can be found in TV and movies. How do these cultural influences affect how people think about freedom?

Storytelling is a foundational way humans make sense and meaning in the world. On *Pop & Locke*, we don't just look at stories of film and TV in isolation. They're works of art that become something new when they're observed and interpreted by others; they're not static. Historical drama, science fiction, horror, comedy—they all have a real-world baseline to compare and contrast against. That same contrast can be helpful for highlighting the values that these stories are reflecting or commenting on. Why do we root for Iron Man but against Thanos? Why was HBO's *Veep* so funny for several seasons and then suddenly no fun to watch? The real world and the stories we tell intermingle, and when we can interrogate that dynamic we can learn new things about ourselves. ■

Legacy Planning Is Vital for Liberty

As Cato has recently concluded another strong fiscal year, we hope our Sponsors are proud to have built the Institute into what George Will calls “the foremost upholder of the idea of liberty in the nation that is the foremost upholder of the idea of liberty.” Today, gift planning is a major component of our conversations with Sponsors and helps enable our origination, dissemination, and educational outreach concerning public policies based on the timeless principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace.

Cato’s Sponsors recognize that it is vital that our principles once again become central in policy debates. In addition to being even more persuasive, we must reach a larger, younger audience. While our families are the exception, all too often young people are not exposed to the libertarian vision for a free, open, and civil society.

Recently, several Sponsors have contacted Cato to redirect their gift plans after discouraging interactions with their alma maters, which had previously figured prominently in their gift plans. As student outreach and talent development has long been featured in Cato’s core activities, we are happy to discuss the Institute’s vision for reaching students—many of whom have lived through government failure during the pandemic—with our positive, persuasive vision of liberty’s promise. Cato interns are shining examples of our community’s commitment to the next generation.



“I’ve joined a dynamic network of professionals advocating for individual liberty, free markets, and peace. Because of this internship, I can make a lasting difference with my legal advocacy.”

— **MADALYN BROOKS**

Center for Constitutional Studies intern

“The Cato internship program has taught me the importance of rigorous data analysis and improved my understanding of the investment infrastructure in the United States.”

— **NIDHI NAIR**, tax and budget policy intern

“Cato’s prestige goes far beyond the U.S. border. When I returned home during the pandemic, I was at a loss of what to do next, but the work I did for Cato intrigued a senior partner at a top management consulting company in Beijing.”

— **OLIVIA ZHANG**

defense and foreign policy intern

This year, Sponsors have created gifts for Cato in their wills, trusts, and investment accounts; created charitable annuities; and made gifts of real estate. In addition to partnering with Cato to advance our shared beliefs, many of these gift plans also provide the priceless benefit of denying the IRS even more money. ■

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS CATO’S LEGACY SOCIETY OR CREATING A PLANNED GIFT FOR THE INSTITUTE, PLEASE CONTACT BRIAN MULLIS AT BMULLIS@CATO.ORG OR 202-789-5362.

Liberty's Library



The growing library of books published by Libertarianism.org—a project of the Cato Institute—covers an extensive range of economic, social, political, philosophical, legal, and historical topics through a libertarian point of view. Available in print and ebook editions, and many as audiobooks, they place the world of liberty-focused ideas at your fingertips.



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