

How Did You Become a Libertarian?

By Joshua Hardman

America's 250th anniversary is, by any measure, a moment for inventory. What has held? What has been won, slowly and painfully, from the original promise? And what remains urgently unfinished?

We sat down with 10 scholars and staff at the Cato Institute—with different origin stories, areas of expertise, and concerns—to find out how they came to libertarianism, what gives them hope, and what they would fix first if they could.



Sophia Coyne-Kosnak, program director of Cato University

How did you become a libertarian? Or how did you first come to realize and express your kind of libertarianism?

CLARK NEILY: I've always hated bullies, people who think they're entitled to impose their will on others just because they're stronger. It turns out there's actually a philosophy underlying that, and it's essentially libertarianism: respecting the right of other people to be left alone. Where it really got driven home was when I clerked for a federal judge here in Washington. I got to watch the government in action in court for a year. There were times when the government really messed up, violated somebody's rights—but the one thing you would never see was the government taking responsibility for any of its misconduct. By the time I got to

the end of that year, I thought: Whatever is the most opposite of what I just saw is what I want to be. And that's libertarian.

ALEX NOWRASTEH: I always knew I was a libertarian. When I described my opinions to a family friend around sixth or seventh grade, they said, "You sound like a libertarian," and from that point on, that's the term I used. But the most formative moment came when my father brought me on a business trip to Toronto. I found a copy of *The Libertarian Reader*, edited by David Boaz, in a bookstore, and instead of running around the city having a fun time, I stayed in the hotel room and read it cover to cover. That was the first time I encountered Hayek, Mises, Rothbard, and other luminary libertarian thinkers.



SOPHIA COYNE-KOSNAK: My libertarian origin story was a process of realization that what mattered most to me was principles, not politics. Growing up, probably like most people, I was really only aware of political parties as opposed to political philosophies—you have your Democrats and your Republicans, and they each want to control certain aspects of your life. I had a lot of questions about that. It all seemed very inconsistent to me. Why do they know enough to make decisions for people? Why do we assume that the government should be involved in this? I kept asking why, why, why. One day, I think I finally annoyed one of my teachers into saying you know, you sound like a libertarian. So I came home and said to my parents, “my AP government teacher called me a libertarian, what is that?” And then my grandma got me *Libertarianism from A to Z* by Cato’s Jeff Miron. That was really my first introduction to the word libertarianism and what it could mean to

have a principled political philosophy rather than to adopt whatever a given political party happened to be saying that day.

JONATHAN FORTIER: I came to libertarianism through literature and the arts, reading figures like Henry David Thoreau and Emerson, reading Western novels that celebrated the individual spirit of independence and self-reliance, and then, in later years, went on to read Orwell and Huxley and others that painted visions of the future that were bereft of freedom. I then went on to read many other figures well known in the libertarian tradition, such as Hayek and Friedman. But it was literature and the arts that inspired me to think more clearly about the possibilities of power being abused to stifle individual creativity and self-realization.

MOLLY NIXON: I think I was born and raised at least dispositionally libertarian, but it



Top row, left to right: **Peter Goettler** is president and CEO of the Cato Institute; **Clark Neily** is senior vice president for legal studies; **Barbara Galletti**, who hails from Peru, is a senior producer at Cato and [Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org), active both behind and in front of the camera for many of Cato's short-form and long-form videos; **Alex Nowrasteh** is senior vice president for policy; and **Stephen Rowe** is expanding Cato Courses, a free online learning platform for high school students, and serves as its program director. Bottom row, left to right: **Sophia Coyne-Kosnak**, program director of Cato University, relaunched it in 2024 and has already hosted events for hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students across the country; **Jonathan Fortier** is the director of [Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org), a Cato platform for multimedia education and outreach to broad and intellectually curious audiences; **Scott Lincicome** is vice president of general economics and Cato's Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies; **Molly Nixon**, senior fellow in executive power, recently wrote about the risk of pardon-power abuse within the executive branch, congressional abdication of lawmaking and appropriations powers, and more; and **Alfredo Carrillo Obregon**, from Mexico, is a trade policy analyst who started at Cato as an intern.

was a while before I had the education or vocabulary to articulate those inclinations. The 9/11 attacks occurred during my first weeks at college and I started paying more attention to government and its capacity to intrude on civil liberties in the months and years after that.

I began to fit my heterodox mix of views into a classical liberal framework when I came down to DC for a summer program with the Fund for American Studies. I took a fantastic comparative economics class with a professor named George Viksnins, who had fled Latvia with his family in World War II, and he taught us the greats: Hayek, Schumpeter, Friedman. In particular, the light bulb came on in my head when I read about the “knowledge problem”: the most well-intentioned central planners can’t possibly gather and utilize all the knowledge that is dispersed among billions of individuals with different experiences and information and insights. But that

tremendous wealth can be tapped by free people participating in free markets.

PETER GOETTLER: I grew up in the ’70s as the welfare state mushroomed, and I just had a visceral reaction to the idea that the state could take money from one group of people and give it to another—on a moral level, I believed in limited government and limiting state power. Then, when I was in high school, I worked at a pharmacy in inner-city New Haven, Connecticut—a very poor area—and I saw the negative consequences well-intentioned government programs were having on people’s lives. I started with a moral commitment to limited government, and then I developed the practical experience of why it was important.

ALFREDO CARRILLO OBREGON: I got introduced to libertarianism through Cato, where I have worked to defend and promote free trade and learned about libertarian



Jonathan Fortier, director of [Libertarianism.org](https://libertarianism.org)

perspectives on a variety of issues. Trade remains the issue where I hold my strongest beliefs, because they also match what I studied and what I have experienced. After engaging with debates on trade and globalization in an academic setting, I realized that a lot of the opportunities that my family (in Mexico) and I have had can be traced back to globalization and closer economic relations between the United States and Mexico. And it's been encouraging to learn about and meet people on the US side whose lives have also been positively impacted by that expansion in trade and globalization. These personal connections motivate me to keep working on these issues because there's plenty of room for America to improve so that the benefits of trade and globalization reach even more people.

This is the 250th anniversary of the Founding of the United States of America. What are you most proud of this nation maintaining or improving on?

PETER GOETTLER: There's so much focus these days on the sins of the Founders, and it's important not to gloss over this. But we can't let the sins of the Founders impugn the ideals of the Founding: They unleashed the forces of liberalism that have been advancing ever since, that have led to the end of slavery, to equal rights for Blacks and other minorities, for gays, for women. The words of the Declaration have been carried before every human movement for freedom and against tyranny since. That's what Jefferson's philosophy enabled, and we shouldn't lose sight of that.

MOLLY NIXON: I'm moved by the capacity for Americans, over the course of our history, to be persuaded, sometimes reluctantly, by the logic of arguments grounded in the country's Founding ideals. It may take too long, but movements for the abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, civil rights, and freedom of speech even for very disfavored opinions ... I think all of these were the result of advocates showing the majority that they're not living up to Founding-era principles and commitments. And I am just so moved by the fact that eventually America comes around.

JONATHAN FORTIER: I am most proud of the American ability to preserve a faith in the value of liberty and a faith in civic institutions. There's a sort of folk libertarianism that exists and persists in American society, and you see that expressed in the robust way Americans support their civic institutions, their churches, sports teams, clubs, volunteer

societies, and this is something that is really to be celebrated and cherished.

CLARK NEILY: America got the principles right, which is that government exists to protect our individual right to live our lives as we see fit, provided we respect the equal right of others to do likewise. It's unusual for a country to even get that much right, and then we've been more true to those principles than I think any country that has come before.

SCOTT LINCICOME: One of the really great things about the Constitution and the Declaration is free commerce among the states. If you live in North Carolina, you can trade with somebody in South Carolina and nobody's going to get in the way, even though in a lot of places today—Canada, Europe, elsewhere—there are still huge and costly restrictions. That has ended up being a superpower for the United States, and something a lot of us take for granted because we don't know any alternative.

ALFREDO CARRILLO OBREGON: The United States stands for something. For a lot of people in a lot of countries, the US stands as a beacon of democracy, of economic success through free-market capitalism. It's still one of the most prosperous countries on earth—and setting aside the sheer economic statistics, it's a country where you can come with goals, work hard, and achieve the life you want to achieve. There are so many inspiring stories across tech, health care, manufacturing, services—businesses that do well because that's the ethos of the US. What

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has led to this moment, where America stands for that—notwithstanding all its problems—is what I think is most important to preserve as it moves forward.

BARBARA GALLETTI: I think the United States has been remarkably stable because of the principles embedded in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. I compare it especially to my experience in Peru, where every election features the left-wing candidate proposing to write a completely new constitution from scratch. But Peru's struggle with authoritarianism has always been part of our political culture, not just the left wing.

The current constitution was written in 1993 by Alberto Fujimori—a very complicated, non-ideological leader who ended up instituting some important free-market policies. But just a year before that, Fujimori had dissolved Congress and assumed legislative and judicial powers with the support of the military.

My grandfather was president of Peru's lower house of Congress at the time. My mother happened to be visiting him when he was placed under house arrest. She and my older brother escaped with the help of a CNN reporter. I grew up knowing that everything can change in a day, so I have a deep appreciation for America's relative constitutional stability and the resilience of free societies in the face of government overreach.

What are you most optimistic about for this country and/or the world?

SCOTT LINCICOME: I'm hopeful for the future of K–12 education. I have a teen daughter, and I've seen a radical change in how education is funded and how individual families can improve their children's education through their choice of school, something that wasn't available to me as a kid and wasn't available to millions of others. That's going to be a massive benefit for the United States.

SOPHIA COYNE-KOSNAK: What gives me optimism for our future is the young people I get to interact with through my work in Cato University. There is, on the one hand, a sense of deep anxiety among young people in this country—they're not happy with the political polarization they see around them, and they're not happy with what the two political parties are able to offer them. But that sense of anxiety leads them to action, and that action leads them here. Talking with them and seeing what might be possible in offering them a path toward a freer and more open society brings me a sense of great optimism.



Stephen Rowe, program director of Cato Courses



Molly Nixon, senior fellow in executive power

ALEX NOWRASTEH: I'm optimistic about the United States because I see how many people around the world still want to become Americans. You look at the state of entitlements, the invasiveness of economic regulation, the fact that drugs are still prohibited—these are enormous problems. But the fact that so many people around the world still look here and think it is a place of opportunity, of individual liberty, of free markets, and they want to come here and join us—that fills me with an optimism that frankly overwhelms all the negativity.

STEPHEN ROWE: America has another 250 years. This is not the Roman Empire—this is the United States of America, and we have one of the most brilliant Foundings in all of recorded history. I'm optimistic about the people. You can feel despair when you talk to Generation Z, but I promise you: These are kids learning ideas that can ultimately change the course of history for the better. I'm also optimistic about entrepreneurship,

about innovation. America continues to lead, and when faced with the challenge—whether it was World War II, the space race, or other moments of national challenge—America has always risen to the occasion. I have every ounce of faith that this country will continue to do so.

ALFREDO CARRILLO OBREGON:

The American people are highly entrepreneurial, highly motivated. And people from all over the world will still come here to achieve their dreams, exchange ideas, and build together. That will propel the country forward into the future. I also think there is a growing global awareness that relatively free trade and globalization have helped many people escape poverty and achieve a greater standard of living. Progress on the trade front won't be inexorable, but I'm hopeful that the pendulum will swing back and we'll see a renewed push for freer trade and support for globalization in the long run.



Scott Lincicome, vice president of general economics and Cato's Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies



Alex Nowrasteh, senior vice president for policy

If you could change just one policy, what would it be?

CLARK NEILY: I would make us go back and rediscover one of the most important, but ignored, bits of wisdom from the Founding era: The citizen jury is one of the most important attributes of a well-functioning democracy. Your vote is unlikely to be determinative in an election, but an avenue for civic participation the Founders understood very well was the ability to serve on a civil or criminal jury. If you look at the Bill of Rights, more words are spent on criminal procedure than any other subject, and most of that is about the right to a criminal jury trial. And guess what? They're practically extinct on American soil, replaced by coercive plea-driven mass adjudication. Our system was meant to put citizen participation at the very heart of the administration of criminal justice, and citizens have been almost completely excluded. That is the one thing I would change.

STEPHEN ROWE: I would change our view on education. Nelson Mandela said education is the most powerful tool with which you can change the world, and I think we can do a lot. I look toward Alpha Schools as a great example of students using AI and innovation to achieve results better and faster than ever before. School choice is also expanding across America—just exploding in Arizona and Florida—with parents and students now able to choose their school based on academics and the right fit for them, not just being locked into a system because of their zip code. If we get education right, we're going to be in a really good position to have 250 more years of America, because at the end of the day it starts with that next generation.

MOLLY NIXON: If I could change one policy right now, it would be a balanced budget requirement. Not only because I'm worried about the national debt and the annual deficits we run, but, even more importantly, I think a requirement to balance the budget

every year would give legislators muscle memory for negotiation and compromise and the capacity to balance trade-offs. The members don't exercise that institutional competency when they can consistently rely on debt and deficits, but a legislature that is forced to engage in and annually resolve difficult tax and spending decisions would better reflect and serve Americans on other policy issues.

“I got introduced to libertarianism through Cato.”

SCOTT LINCICOME: On the economic side, I'd push for true unilateral free trade. Not just the new executive tariffs, but the old Buy American laws, the Jones Act, all the things that inhibit free commerce among individuals around the world. But frankly, all that stuff pales in comparison to some individual liberty issues. If I could snap my fingers and abolish the death penalty tomorrow, that'd be the obvious choice.

BARBARA GALLETTI: As an immigrant, I believe the work that Cato is doing advocating for a simplified and open legal immigration system is very important. The US has a rich history of welcoming immigrants who look for opportunity and freedom in this great country, but efforts to erase this tradition have been even more

pervasive in the last few years. I really hope that changes soon.

PETER GOETTLER: If you gave me the power to amend the Constitution, I'd go big: The government cannot take something from one person and give it to another. The Achilles heel of democracy is that once the public realizes they can plunder the national Treasury to get things for free—or politicians realize they can buy votes with it—it's very hard to find an equilibrium where government doesn't just keep growing. I'd go for broke on that one.

SOPHIA COYNE-KOSNAK: Congress—where are you? I would love to rein in executive authority. This one-man-rule tendency is very bad for us, not only in the policy space but culturally—it is making us so polarized to have so many major policy decisions flowing from the president. Having Congress fulfill its constitutionally assigned role would be my biggest ask. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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