

The Libertarian Party, Pro and Con

Samuel Edward Konkin III

November 1, 1972

(Editor's note: The Libertarian Party had no perceptible effect on the election, but its achievement is nonetheless remarkable. Starting from scratch the LP in a few months grew into one of the movement's largest organizations, galvanizing hundreds on the indifferent fringe of libertarianism into activism and attracting nationwide press coverage.

(However, the LP has its problems, not the least of which is criticism from fellow libertarians. In the interest of examining this criticism the Southern Libertarian Messenger presents the two letters below. The first is that of Mr. David Nolan, a founder of the Party and presently its National Chairman, writing in response to an editorial in the August, 1972 New Libertarian Notes. The second letter is by Mr. Samuel Edward Konkin III, editor of NLN, and a leader in the Student Libertarian Action Movement and the Libertarian Party Radical Caucus.

(The letters form the first part of an exchange of several letters. For one dollar Xerox copies of the complete correspondence may be obtained from Mr. Konkin at 635 East 11th Street, Apt. 24, New York, NY 10009.)

An Open Letter to SLAM

As one of the founders of the Libertarian Party, I found your August issue of *New Libertarian Notes* very interesting, and would like to offer some reactions to some of the comments therein.

First, I found your comments on our approach towards achieving Freedom In Our Time Surprisingly fair, considering the basic differences between your views and ours. And, while we certainly don't expect you to agree with everything we're doing, we hope that you will continue to remain "friendly" adversaries, rather than becoming openly hostile to our efforts, as the LeFevre people have done.

The differences between LP and SLAM exist, as I see it, on two levels. The more basic difference, of course, is that you are anarchists, while we are not, at least for the most part. About 15% to 25% of our members are anarchists, but the Party as an organization has taken stands that are explicitly anti-anarchist, and we have no intention of changing our position. (We, too, have our principles.)

The secondary difference is one of disagreement over tactics. You tend to favor a radical, or even revolutionary, approach, while we favor a more moderate, gradualist approach. Only time will tell which approach is better, and, indeed, it may be that both have their place. You say that our approach may turn off "revolutionaries" and "libertarians evolving from the Left." And quite possibly this is so. We counter this point, however, by stating that *your* approach will turn off *everyone else*. . . and we think more can be gained, in terms of rolling back the State, by convincing 51% of the American people to dismantle the State by 49% than by convincing 1% of the people to dismantle it by 99%. We don't ask you to buy this line of reasoning, but point it out simply to show that there is a consistent rationale behind our methodology, just as there is, no doubt, behind yours.

You say, correctly, that anyone who advocates *increasing* (or even maintaining) the current level of State Power is an enemy of freedom. I agree. And the LP certainly does not advocate any such thing. We differ from you only in how far, how fast, and by what means we advocate cutting the State down.

Our 1972 Platform calls nowhere for increasing State Power: in some areas (such as defense) it simply advocates a change in priorities, but even there, the net effect would be one of less

government action, not more. (Considering our defense plank specifically, it should be noted that we call for a strengthened defense system for the *U.S. only*, while simultaneously calling for a drastic cutback—even a virtual elimination—of our commitment to defend other nations. Thus, while it is true—as *National Review* said—that a beefed-up defense system of a “world policeman” nature would require more spending, the arrangement we advocate would not.)

In most areas, our Platform calls for outright repeal or abolition of government activities. In others, merely a substantial reduction. And on balance, it is—I think you will agree—quite a bit more explicit and “radical” than its predecessor, the Temporary Platform. Furthermore, I might point out that if it is not as “radical” as you might wish, then this is because those who are carping and bitching the most did not choose to attend the convention at which it was drafted. We even went so far as to ask the *New Banner* to publish a notice urging anarcho-capitalists to attend and make their presence felt, but they declined to do so.

You charge that we will become increasingly statist and compromise-prone as we grow larger, and that we will put “pressure” on other libertarian organizations to “serve our interests.” The former allegation is sheer speculation; all evidence to date runs counter to it, in fact. As for the latter—just how would we exert this “pressure,” even if we wanted to? We have no power over any other group.

More interesting is the fact that despite your expressed worries on this point, you do not seem to be against the idea of one libertarian group “pressuring” another *per se*, as you say that SLAM’s “first task” at the moment is “the organization of an LP Radical Caucus.” Who is trying to pressure whom?

But, in any event, we have no objection to your forming such a Caucus. We welcome all libertarians into our ranks, and I personally feel that the presence of a Radical Caucus would be healthy for the Party, if for no other reason than that it would serve as a counter-pressure to the influence of semi-libertarians who will no doubt be coming into the Party in increasing numbers, as the GOP and Democrats become increasingly repulsive. I only hope that when the Radical Caucus doesn’t always get its own way, it won’t turn around and try to wreck the Party, thus paying into the hands of the *real* enemy—the Nixons and Humphreys of the world. Fighting our friends—even marginal friends—makes no sense, when there are so many common foes.

In any case, good luck, and keep the lines of communication open.

Sincerely,

David F . Nolan

Dear Mr. Nolan:

I am pleased you find us fair, and hope we shall be found so always. I am amused of your description of the LeFevre People as “openly hostile,” since they are well-known pacifists. I do not believe we are secretly hostile, and we are certainly openly criticized. The two levels you discern are both accurate, and I am glad to have your admission (openly) that the Party is “explicitly anti-anarchist, and we have no intention of changing our position.” I have been trying to convince several people of that here in New York, and I hope they are willing to take your word for it.

Indeed, our position, as you state, will turn off everyone else, initially. We would have liked to have an all-encompassing libertarian alliance to attract everyone to us for any reason, and have him enter the faction of his taste. As my editorials point out, your presence has made that

option no longer possible, and, I have analysed, an organization was needed to attract those you must perforce leave out. Thus was SLAM resurrected. I hope neither of us will be found guilty of believing that anyone's politics are immutable, and that, in fact, our aims are to both of us to convert (i.e. *change*) the positions of the people of the world to some form of libertarianism, if only in its most fundamental form—leave me alone! I find yourself damning by your statistics, in that you wish to only roll the state back by 49%. When I was a fellow National Office (“trad”) delegate with you to the 1969 National YAF Convention, I wished to see the elimination of 99% of the State's activities (all but defense and police), and, I am shocked to see that as I have progressed to advocating the elimination of the rest, you have actually slid back. As anarchists, we wish to convince as many people as it takes to eliminate 100% of the state.

Indeed, let us proceed to your Defense plank. *National Review's* argument was NOT for a “world policeman” nature of defense system in its advocacy of a beefed-up defense spending, but for the nuclear protection of the continental United States. You might wish to argue that eliminating the imperialist role of the U.S. will unleash funds, a fraction of which you would then use for continental arms increase. I personally do not wish to get embroiled in this kind of argument, analogous to McGovern welfare economics, but simply submit that, in the given area for defense of the arbitrarily bounded geographical area called the United States of America, you would *increase* State spending over the level it now occupies. If not, your angry “semi-libertarian” members may wish to ask you just where you disagree with *NR's* defense experts, and I shall leave you to their tender mercies.

I do not think your taking some of your Temporary Platform positions and making them wishy-washy or deliberately ambiguous in the new Platform constitutes radicalizing it. As to your implied attack on my “talk, not do,” I suggest you check your records to find that I was listed as a delegate to your National Convention as a “representative” for New York. I was unable to travel because of lack of financial resources. I am not crying on anyone's shoulder about it, but I do think your “carping and bitching” at me is unwarranted. I am delighted to think that you voted dissolution of the Convention, and reconvened as SLAM, or even LA. While Colorado is inaccessible to all but rich, hardy, or Coloradan, the State conventions coming up should provide the check your hypothesis concerning our effectiveness.

You have already grown more statist by your selecting of John Hospers as your presidential candidate. According to my source at his Press Conference, Dana Rohrabacher, he claimed he was 95% in agreement with conservatives, and when asked by Dana how he could reconcile his defence and economic positions, Hospers stated that the economic ones were just theoretical and that he did not expect them to be enacted. No longer “sheer speculation,” now stark fact! As to the “pressure” question, you should, I suggest, re-read that in context of the Editorial. Clearly, I was describing the pressure exerted by your existence, and seeming “success.” The pressure on activists to defend you when something called “libertarian” is attacked in their own circles. The pressure to join one's nearest ideological neighbors, and, if they are in a Party, to participate in these pro-Party activities they will engage in. And for groups, which will be constantly identified with the Libertarian Party if they identify themselves as “libertarian,” to either defend it, or attack it.

The LP Radical Caucus's “pressuring” of the Party hierarchy and bureaucracy we seriously do not expect: the use of us as a counterweight against the Birchers, Objectivists, and conservatives in your midst, I do expect. The fundamental task of LPRC is to reach those people whom, as you earlier pointed out, will not be reached by SLAM and who can no longer be reached by the defunct

LA. In short, we are trying to turn on “everyone” who is susceptible to radical libertarianism, however reaching more. If you wish to set up a “Statist Caucus” in SLAM, feel free.

The Party will eventually be wrecked, not because we will come in there with swinging maces, or the archetypical bombs, or even because of our “explosive” rhetoric. Not, unhappily, because the State is abolished and it will self-destruct out of uselessness. No, Mr. Nolan, as I said earlier in passing, we both attend the St. Louis Convention in 1969. You remained loyal to National Office, while I, repelled by the injustice and purgings initiated by that group, went over to the Libertarian Caucus, even though it involved breaking a personal commitment to my friend, David Keene. You know what state the Young Americans for Freedom is in today. So shall be the fate of the Libertarian Party when it begins sacking state committees and challenging credentials at some convention in the near future to stop a potential majority of radical libertarians from crystallizing. And there will be young delegates, like us three years ago, who will be driven to choose, and in choosing, come to realize the necessary consequences of the opposing philosophies, the “ideas that have consequences.” Out of the debacle will arise a new vigorous anarchist movement in numbers enough to proceed on the Final Organization.

You can abort this scenario at any point by beginning the purge early. Pass a prohibition against membership by anarchists, throw those of us who are on State Committees or other “positions of influence” out before we have a chance to spread. You can find me in the Executive Committee of the Free Libertarian Party of New York, awaiting your ax, and you would do me the favour of fulfilling: the prediction I made to my skeptical colleagues. Of course, you realize what an issue you would give us. Especially when we evil, horned creatures and “carping, bitching” malcontents turn out to be rational and armed with facts and answers to the curious questions of the innocent you may have taken into the Party.

Fighting our friends never makes sense, nor even fighting neutrals. Fighting those within our midst who will deliver us unto our enemies always makes sense. I am sure you feel the same.

Good luck, David, and I certainly shall keep the lines open. As my friends know, I would sit down with the devil for a drink and a political argument. Maybe even Richard Nixon. Definitely David Nolan.

Yours in Freedom,
Samuel Edward Konkin III
Editor, *New Libertarian Notes*

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