

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“The Second American Revolution”: Murray Rothbard and the Libertarians Imagine the U.S. Founding

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Abstract

“The Bicentennial is one of the best ways to promote libertarian ideas.” In the early 1970s, the nascent libertarian movement, spearheaded by the enigmatic ideologue Murray Rothbard, co-opted national celebrations of the United States Bicentennial to further their own political agenda. Devoted to the image of a “libertarian founding,” activists engaged in the gleeful work of undoing mainstream historical narratives on the Left and Right, ultimately claiming the spirit of 1776 for themselves. This late-twentieth-century intellectual work has had long-term effects in American politics. This article introduces historians to the as of yet unexplored reclamation work done by the libertarian movement and then moves through its more recent echoes and contemporary resonances. It contributes to literatures on libertarianism, late-twentieth-century political development, and the history of the memory of the United States.

Introduction

On July 14th, 1977, libertarian ideologue Murray Rothbard ascended the stage to present the Libertarian Party National Convention’s keynote address. Standing before a crowd of more than twelve hundred people in downtown San Francisco, CA, Rothbard proudly introduced “the American Revolutionaries, our libertarian forefathers.” They were men “not only interested in setting forth a glorious set of principles[,]” but who were “interested in *action*, in putting these principles into practice in the real world.” Contemporary libertarians, as the true inheritors of the revolutionary tradition, should follow their lead. They would need to undergo a “baptism of intellect” and a “baptism of will,” but the rewards for their tribulations would be great: a society with limited government based on personal liberty—a society that had thrown off the shackles “of the plundering and privileged minority that constitutes the rulers of the State[sic].” The address, titled “Turning Point 1777/1977,” received a standing ovation.¹

Rothbard’s speech was well-received because it reflected what many libertarians already understood to be true. For the past nine years, movement activists had been working hard to define and promote their own, unique history. They found proto-libertarians in nineteenth century advocates of individual liberty, like John Stuart Mill, and anarchism, like Lysander Spooner. Closer to their own century, they understood themselves to be the disciples of anti-authoritarian, free-market individualists like Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Ayn Rand. Identifying these established thinkers as a part of their intellectual tradition helped grant the young movement legitimacy, but no “libertarian forefather” did more symbolic work than

¹Quoted in Tom G. Palmer, “The 1977 Libertarian National Convention,” *Libertarian Review*, Oct. 1977, <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/1977-libertarian-party-national-convention> (accessed Mar. 30, 2026). Emphasis in the original.

the American founders. By loudly claiming the American Revolution as a Libertarian Revolution, the movement injected itself into the heart of the figures, moments, and ideals that comprised American national identity.² This allowed libertarians to navigate the tension that existed between their anti-statist ideology and their nationalist goals. It made the destruction of the state patriotic.

Libertarians needed to reconcile these competing impulses if they were to gain adherents and respect as a serious movement. They were having a hard enough time simply establishing themselves as an American political entity that was neither Left nor Right. Long a member of the country's conservative coalition, young libertarians had split from other young conservatives in the late 1960s. The split was not a surprise. American libertarians, who prized limited government and free markets above all else, had sat uneasily alongside, in their eyes, moralizing traditionalists and war-mongering anti-communists in opposition to the New Deal for decades.³ The younger generation, attracted to the individualism of the Leftist counterculture and dismayed by other conservative students' support of the draft, were ready to seek political solutions elsewhere.⁴ At the 1969 Young Americans for Freedom Convention, young libertarians staged a demonstration in which one activist burned his draft card. The ensuing riot left attendees unscathed but the coalition shattered. Although libertarian activists made sure to publicize their new alliances with the anarchist Left shortly after to underscore the totality of the rift, mainstream Leftists were not a refuge.⁵ The Left had taken the lead on individual liberty, but they were still statist. At best, they supported further expansion of the government. At worst, they were Marxists. If libertarians wanted a political movement that reflected their views, they would have to make one themselves.

What followed was a period of political experimentation and rapid growth. Student activists initially took the lead. Supported by mentors like Rothbard, an established conservative intellectual born in 1926 to Jewish immigrant parents who had studied under Ludwig von Mises and had been working to promote libertarianism since the 1950s, young libertarians founded organizations, slick movement periodicals, and a political party. Their growth was aided in part by the ascendance of neoliberal thinkers and ideas in mainstream politics, but the libertarian project remained distinct for its libertine culture and emphasis on developing new institutions, not simply grafting itself onto existing ones. By the early 1970s, these radicals for capitalism were attracting professionals and deep pockets, who were disillusioned by mainstream politics' failures to address domestic unrest, rising inflation, foreign military engagements, and political corruption.⁶

The most prominent of these new members were Charles and David Koch. Although they would later become famous for financing conservative campaigns in the 2000s and 2010s, in the 1970s, they were young businessmen with a libertarian streak and an oil inheritance to spend in support of it. Their money provided the backing for a wave of publications, radio shows, and

²My thinking on what constitutes American national identity is heavily indebted to Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1–21.

³George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945: 30th Anniversary Edition*, 3rd ed (1976; Wilmington, DE, 2006).

⁴Jonathan Schoenwald, "No War, No Welfare, and No Damn Taxation: The Student Libertarian Movement, 1968–1972," in *The Vietnam War on Campus: Other Voices, More Distant Drums*, ed. Marc Jason Gilbert (Westport, CT, 2001), 20–53. There were currents in non-student conservative politics at this time which were anti-draft, but the student libertarians were primarily engaged in debates with the Young Americans for Freedom, who were pro-draft. When they split, their energy became focused on building new institutions as opposed to aligning themselves with existing establishment figures, like Richard Nixon, who were anti-draft.

⁵Jerome Tuccille, "The Revolution Comes to YAF!" *Libertarian Forum*, Sept. 15, 1969, 1–4.

⁶Jennifer Burns, "O Libertarian, Where Is Thy Sting?" *Journal of Policy History* 19, no. 4 (Oct. 2007): 452–70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jph.2008.0001> (accessed June 15, 2025).

institutions, as well as a creative outpouring of libertarian writing and thought.⁷ Much of this scholarship was focused on the “recovery” of libertarianism’s history as a means to both build intra-movement identity and appeal to those on the outside.

In the early 1980s, a falling out between Rothbard and the Koch brothers over visions for libertarian strategy and culture split the nascent movement into two: a radical, Rothbardian contingent and a staid, Washington-D.C.-focused, Koch-backed wing.⁸ Both strains—and their understandings of early American history—have been influential in American politics in the years succeeding the rift. Rothbard’s exile from the mainstream movement saw him building alliances with racist paleo-conservatives and white nationalists. It is for this reason that, as historians Quinn Slobodian and Melissa Cooper have begun to explore, Rothbard has emerged as an intellectual darling of the alt-right.⁹ Meanwhile, the Koch brothers, who eventually abandoned the countercultural elements of early movement libertarianism in favor of the trappings of mainstream neoliberalism, continued to fund libertarian causes that caught their eye. The most publicly known of these funding endeavors is the late 2000s “tax revolt” Tea Party movement, which borrowed historical frames straight out of earlier libertarian playbooks to protest President Obama and sow the seeds for Trumpism.¹⁰

Despite the movement’s continued relevance, historians have been slow to study libertarians. There is a healthy literature on the economists and theorists of the early twentieth century who would later influence the movement, but professional histories of the movement itself from the late 1960s onward are rare.¹¹ This remains the case even as historians of the twentieth century have placed the 1970s—and, in particular, the decade’s glorification of neoliberalism in the form of individualism, limited government, and free-market capitalism—at the center of new ways of historicizing the recent past.¹² Although culturally distinct in its early years from other

⁷The premiere works on the Koch Brothers and their funding habits are Jane Mayer, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* (New York, 2016); and Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York, 2017). For information on their libertarian funding activities specifically, see Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern Libertarian Movement* (New York, 2007), 406–17.

⁸Daniel Bessner, “Murray Rothbard, Political Strategy, and the Making of Modern Libertarianism,” *Intellectual History Review* 24, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 441–56.

⁹Quinn Slobodian, “Anti-’68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals Helped Spawn the Alt Right,” *Cultural Politics* 15, no. 3 (2019): 372–86; Melissa Cooper, “The Alt-Right: Neoliberalism, Libertarianism and the Fascist Temptation,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (Nov. 2021): 29–50.

¹⁰“Trump’s Staunch GOP Supporters Have Roots in the Tea Party,” Pew Research Center, May 16, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/05/16/trumps-staunch-gop-supporters-have-roots-in-the-tea-party/> (accessed June 15, 2025); Ron Elving, “Trump’s MAGA is marching down a trail blazed by the Tea Party,” *NPR*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/21/1100386445/trumps-maga-is-marching-down-a-trail-blazed-by-the-tea-party> (accessed June 15, 2025).

¹¹For histories on thinkers who inspired the libertarian movement, see Jennifer Burns, *Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right* (New York, 2009); Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, ed., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge, MA, 2009); Kimberly Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan* (New York, 2009); Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets Since the Depression* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman, and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2012); and Janek Wasserman, *The Marginal Revolutionaries: How Austrian Economists Fought the War of Ideas* (New Haven, CT, 2019).

¹²Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA, 2011); Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Kim Phillips-Fein, “The History of Neoliberalism,” in *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams (Chicago, 2019): 347–62; Gary Gerstle, *The Rise and Fall of the Neoliberal Order: America and the World in the Free Market Era* (New York, 2022). For historiographical reflections on this turn, see Bruce J. Schulman, “Post-1968 U.S. History: Neo-Consensus History for the Age of Polarization,” *Reviews in American History* 47, no. 3 (Sept. 2019): 479–99; Ariane Leendertz, “State of the Field: A View from Abroad: Post-1968 U.S. History, the End of the New Deal Order, and Neoliberalism,” *Reviews in American History* 49, no. 4 (Dec. 2021): 633–48.

neoliberal projects, libertarianism is a pure expression of neoliberal ideals that must be reckoned with as such in any history of the last half-century. The few academic histories that do exist on the movement show the promise of libertarianism's deep connections to these important political currents.¹³

This article contributes to this growing literature by investigating how libertarians understood, dissected, and manipulated history and memory, especially the history and memory of the founding period. It begins with a discussion of how early movement libertarians approached history. The early movement was obsessed with history—particularly their idea of “revisionist history.” Although revising historical narratives is a standard feature of all academic historical work, the libertarian approach took on quasi-conspiratorial tones and challenged libertarians to tear down old heroes while installing new ones. It was in this bubbling intellectual atmosphere that Murray Rothbard, already a leading figure in the movement, published his five-volume libertarian retelling of the U.S. founding: *Conceived in Liberty*. I analyze these well-read tomes and trace their impact within the movement. Finally, this essay closes with a discussion of how Rothbardian historical frames lived beyond his time in the movement and beyond his death. To this day, the Rothbardian vision of the founding is the reason for their premiere think tank, the Cato Institute's, eighteenth century namesake. It is also the source of the libertarian alt-right's fondness for the eye-catchingly yellow Gadsden flag, with its “Don't Tread on Me” slogan. With the Founders on their side, libertarians have been able to advocate, sometimes violently, for the destruction of the state while still remaining, in their understanding, the true patriots.

(Revisionist) History in the Libertarian Movement

“The most radical ideas are old ideas.” So went the advertisement for *Liberty Classics*, a publisher devoted to reprinting out-of-print “landmark books in the libertarian tradition.”¹⁴ The slogan described the entire libertarian movement's early approach to history. Looking to establish legitimacy as they tried to build political momentum, libertarian writers pushed beyond the usual suspects—Ayn Rand, Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises—to tie themselves to notable thinkers and movements across centuries and continents. From early Chinese political thought to Plato to ancient Ireland to the Quakers to Daniel Webster, libertarians saw the roots of their movement everywhere.¹⁵ Such wide-ranging origins would, theoretically, allow them to rise beyond electoral divisions of race, class, and party. As a part of an intellectual tradition even longer and prouder than those on the Left or Right, the libertarians could make a serious argument for their prominent inclusion on the American political stage.

This process of historical recovery was explicit and methodical. “What is history?” prominent essayist Roy Childs asked in the pages of the movement's flagship magazine, *Reason*. Childs, born in 1949, had risen to prominence early in the movement for his iconoclastic writing and had since devoted himself to libertarianism's intellectual health, including its sense of history. “In short, [history] is a selective interpretation or recreation of the events of the past, according to a historian's premises regarding *what is important* and his judgments concerning the *nature of causality* in human action.” For libertarian historians, Childs argued, “*what is important*” was guided by ideology, defined as “a consistent world-view[,]” which “integrates the principles discovered by a rational philosophy to the context of the real world.” Whereas philosophy

¹³Whitney McIntosh, “Libertarianism: An Emergent Field,” *Reviews in American History* 52, no. 4 (2024): 359–69.

¹⁴David Franke, “Liberty Press,” *Libertarian Review*, Nov./Dec. 1976, 6. Emphasis on “Classics” in the original.

¹⁵Murray Rubinstein, “Traditional China and Anarchism,” *Libertarian Forum*, July–Aug. 1971, 7–8; Philip DeMatteis, “Was Plato a Libertarian?” *Reason*, Feb. 1979, <https://reason.com/1979/02/01/was-plato-a-libertarian/> (accessed Mar. 30, 2026); Joseph R. Peden, “Confronting Leviathan,” *Libertarian Forum*, Aug.–Sept. 1972, 1; “Liberty's Heritage: Daniel Webster on Military Conscription,” *Libertarian Review*, Apr. 1979, <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/daniel-webster-military-conscription> (accessed Mar. 30, 2026).

“is concerned . . . with *truth*; ideology is concerned . . . with *making truth relevant*.”¹⁶ The philosophy-ideology of choice was libertarianism. In keeping with libertarian precepts, the *nature of causality* was placed solely in the hands of the individual. Armed with these methodological tools, discerning libertarian writers could look backwards into the past and pluck out writings, movements, and people with a bent toward liberty, transforming them into proud forebears.

Although the stakes were high, this project had a critical edge. Libertarian writers understood themselves to be discerning “revisionist” historians devoted to unveiling newly revealed historical truths in their writings. “At the time when any set of events occurs, in any historical context, there is almost always a specific set of interpretations of events which spreads throughout a given culture, to the relative exclusion of others,” Childs explained. It is the role of the revisionist historian to “[re]interpret] some aspect of history according to the demands of either (a) new factual evidence, which was not available or suppressed when the conventional interpretations were being promulgated, or (b) new theories.”¹⁷

This approach saw libertarians pulling from their countercultural siblings on the New Left. Many libertarian historians relied on New Left historians for their secondary and primary sources. “As any libertarian who has ever talked with new leftists[sic] knows, members of the new left are notoriously concrete-bound,” Childs wrote. Although this approach was “disastrous in philosophy . . . in history it is often quite a benefit. For many new left historians are so concrete-bound that their devotion to detail in history is excruciating[,]” which means they produced good, and reliable, works of history. “Their interpretations are botched because of their erroneous theories,” but their research was sound.¹⁸ New Leftists also had the benefit of sharing the libertarian movement’s distrust of the United States government. Reeling from the Vietnam War and Watergate, the Cold War revisionism of New Left figures like William Appleman Williams and Gabriel Kolko was met with “acceptance or, in some cases, active cheering” by libertarians, who widely discussed their methodologies.¹⁹

Libertarian historians were so moved by iconoclastic revisionist approaches that they even turned against their own heroes. In a two-part historical expose, Roy Childs revealed that, despite their reputations as ur-capitalists, it was “a group of big businessmen who was the primary ideological force behind many” pro-statist “reforms” in the early twentieth century. Relying on Gabriel Kolko’s *The Triumph of Conservatism* (1963), Childs detailed the ways in which “businessmen turned to the state to regulate the economy on their behalf.”²⁰ Far from champions of the free market, “[i]n both word and deed, American big businessmen sought to replace the last remnants of laissez-faire in the United States with government regulation—for their ‘benefit.’” The ultimate lesson of the article series was that libertarians “seeking allies in their struggle for liberty” needed to “look elsewhere.”²¹

More often than not, however, libertarian historians turned against the heroes of other traditions. A short, salacious piece of gossip regarding President John F. Kennedy in the

¹⁶Roy Childs, “Big Business and the Rise of American Statism: A Revisionist History, Part One,” *Reason*, Feb. 1971, <https://reason.com/1971/02/01/big-business-and-the-rise-of-a-2/> (accessed Mar. 30, 2026).

¹⁷Childs, “Big Business.” This description of revisionism can be applied broadly to all forms of historical work. In this way, as in others, libertarian writers were somewhat within mainstream traditions even as their explicit ideological pursuits pulled them outside.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Alan Fairgate, “Non-Marxist Theories of Imperialism,” *Reason*, Feb. 1976, <https://reason.com/1976/02/01/non-marxist-theories-of-imperi/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026); Steven Springer, Michael Hardesty, Peter Kuetzing, and John McCarthy, “Introducing Revisionism,” *Reason*, Jan. 1976, <https://reason.com/1976/01/01/introducing-revisionism/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

²⁰Childs, “Big Business.”

²¹Roy Childs, “Big Business and the Rise of American Statism: A Revisionist History, Part Two,” *Reason*, Mar. 1971, <https://reason.com/1971/03/01/big-business-and-the-rise-of-a/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

movement periodical *Libertarian Forum* is a good example of this urge. The charge levelled against the dead president was that he had married an old girlfriend, Durie Malcolm, prior to his marriage to Jacqueline Bouvier: “a bombshell, as it would have made the Jack-Jackie marriage illegal according to Catholic doctrine.” Although only an “intriguing bit of Americana,” the piece is an ideal type for libertarian revisionism. It takes gleeful aim at a statist “shining prince,” tearing down a pre-1970s-disillusionment darling and calling into question established narratives that uphold the illusion of state power. As the accusation included an Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) cover-up of the secret first marriage, it also charged inappropriate use of force. Finally, its tone was somewhat playful—a common libertarian cultural voice that suffused the early movement.²²

Revisionist history was so popular in the movement that its central publication, *Reason*, devoted its February 1976 issue to a celebration of the methodology. “The critical revision of ‘official’ versions of the doings of states is an important adjunct to the overall battle for liberty,” the *Reason* editorial board opined in an advertisement for its upcoming special issue.²³ “Revisionism,” movement intellectual Murray Rothbard elaborated in a companion piece to the *Reason* issue, “is . . . made necessary by the fact that all States are governed by a ruling class that is a minority of the population.” As “its rule is exploitative and parasitic, the State[sic] must purchase the alliance of a group of ‘Court Intellectuals,’ whose task is to bamboozle the public into accepting and celebrating the rule of its particular State.” Libertarian revisionists, funded by nascent libertarian organizations or working as independent scholars, were the opposite of court intellectuals. Rothbard argued that “[t]he noble task of Revisionism[sic] is to de-bamboozle: the penetrate the fog of lies and deception of the State and its Court Intellectuals, and to present to the public the true history of the motivation, the nature, and the consequences of State activity.”²⁴ Revisionism was not just an exciting new methodology; it was indispensable to the movement’s goals.

Central to the libertarian revisionist project was a critical reevaluation of World War II. Like with the John F. Kennedy piece, some of the appeal was the sheer impiety of the act. These young libertarians enjoyed smashing the idols of their parents’ generation, calling into question the “good war.” Doing so was made easier with the language of the Vietnam War and Watergate. In a *Reason* article charging President Franklin Roosevelt with prior knowledge of the Pearl Harbor attack, essayist Bruce Bartlett, then a graduate student at Georgetown University and later an advisor for Ronald Reagan, framed his argument by explaining “Every administration has had its Watergate, and Pearl Harbor was Roosevelt’s.”²⁵ World War II skepticism further allowed libertarians to differentiate themselves from the mainstream conservatives they were trying so hard to break away from. “[L]ibertarian and pacifist revisionists of the World Wars” were “marching forward undaunted into cold war revisionism (leaving conservative anti-communists behind)” essayist Gary North, an independent scholar, proudly proclaimed.²⁶

This iconoclastic approach also gave libertarians more opportunities to attack their favorite devil, President Franklin Roosevelt. Although libertarians were self-consciously expanding their history, the movement’s immediate ideological concerns were still very much based in the early twentieth century context in which their chosen philosophers were writing. In the United States, this meant that the libertarian movement was indebted to a tradition that had coalesced in part against the New Deal. President Roosevelt was the architect of American statism, and thus

²²Murray Rothbard, “Kennedy Marriage Revisionism,” *Libertarian Forum*, Aug. 1974, 1–2.

²³Springer, “Introducing Revisionism.”

²⁴Murray Rothbard, “Revisionism and Libertarianism,” *Libertarian Forum*, Feb. 1976, 3.

²⁵Bruce Bartlett, “The Pearl Harbor Coverup,” *Reason*, Feb. 1976, <https://reason.com/1976/02/01/the-pearl-harbor-coverup/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

²⁶Gary North, “World War II Revisionism and Vietnam,” *Reason*, Feb. 1976, <https://reason.com/1976/02/01/world-war-ii-revisionism-and-v/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

American evil, as they knew it. The tool of revisionist history also allowed them to charge that he had entered the country into a costly war due to his fascistic principles. “Fascism came to America in 1933 not with a goose step and a stiff-arm salute,” Don Feder, an attorney and freelance writer, argued in *Reason*, “but with a cigarette holder and a politician’s famous smile.”²⁷

Some libertarians took their World War II revisionism so far that they waded into Holocaust denialism. Skepticism about entry into the war forced libertarian essayists to confront the great evil that made the interventionist bent of the “good war” so good (regardless of the actual reasons for U.S. involvement).²⁸ Their response was to deny that it had ever happened. Relying on the works of famous Holocaust denial conspiracy theorists like Paul Rassinier, libertarian essayists questioned “the supposed execution of 6 million Jews by Hitler.”²⁹ “I don’t believe that the evidence of a planned extermination of the entire Jewish population of Europe is holding up,” historian Dr. James J. Martin shared in *Reason*.³⁰ If there were atrocities, they were more likely committed by members of the German Communist Party, “whose members were the first occupants of these camps and who managed to establish a cadre and control all the significant jobs in the crucial aspects of these camps.”³¹ Regardless, for these libertarians, “[o]ne thing is certain . . . we did not intervene when the Soviet Union executed millions of kulaks—the private owners of small farms, prior to their expropriation and liquidation by Stalin . . . The kulaks, unfortunately for them, had no supporters writing editorials in the *New York Times*.”³² In this way, Holocaust denialism served libertarian goals in two ways: it removed a moral dimension of opposition to World War II, and it cast leftists and liberals as the real villains.³³

Many of the libertarian writers expounding these revisionist theories were laymen essayists and activists at best, or conspiracy theorists at worst, but others were professional historians. They were graduate students and professors of history employed at colleges across the United States. They knew contemporary historiographies, and they cited them. They even published book reviews of recent works of academic history in the pages of their magazines.³⁴ The result was a unique mix of overtly ideological conspiratorialism entwined with professional knowledge and skill, both of which were preoccupied with what it meant to do and have a “libertarian history.”

²⁷Donald Feder, “Benito and Franklin,” *Reason*, Aug. 1982, <https://reason.com/1982/08/01/benito-and-franklin/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

²⁸North, “World War II Revisionism.”

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Springer, “Introducing Revisionism.”

³¹*Ibid.*

³²North, “World War II Revisionism.”

³³Reader response to Holocaust denialism was mixed. *Reason* published three letters to the editor which criticized the revisionists for taking it too far. Sylvén L. Schaffer, “Martin and Extermination,” *Reason*, Apr. 1976, <https://reason.com/1976/04/01/letters-169/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026); Adam V. Reed, “The Six Million,” *Reason*, May 1976, <https://reason.com/1976/05/01/letters-168/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026); Kevin Bjornsson, “Guilt by Association,” *Reason*, June 1976, <https://reason.com/1976/06/01/letters-167/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026). In each instance, the *Reason* editorial team allowed a response by the Holocaust denialists, a not unprecedented but still unusual decision that ultimately upheld the authority of denialism. Murray Rothbard, the most prominent Jewish intellectual in the movement, never commented on this dynamic.

³⁴The academics working most prominently in the movement were Ralph Raico, a Buffalo State College professor of history, and Williamson Evers, a Stanford University political science PhD student. Both men held leadership positions and used their academic credentials to publish on behalf of libertarian issues. Ralph Raico, “On Tory Blind Spots,” *Reason*, Mar. 1977, <https://reason.com/1977/03/01/on-tory-blind-spots/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026); Bill Evers, “Economic Scapegoats: Heroes or Scoundrels?” *Libertarian Forum*, June 1976, 8. Libertarian publications featured other academics as guest writers, including figures like Noam Chomsky and Eric Foner. Noam Chomsky, “East Timor: The Press Cover-Up,” *Inquiry*, Feb. 19, 1979, 9–15; Noam Chomsky, “A Wordy Disclaimer,” *Reason*, July 1981, <https://reason.com/1981/07/01/letters-131/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026); Eric Foner, “Freedom Road,” *Inquiry*, Dec. 10, 1979, 17–9.

This was the state of history in the libertarian movement as it turned its attention to the United States founding. In their quest for libertarian forebears, the founding was an obvious prize. The United States has long had an intimate relationship with its founding figures, events, and documents. Aligning oneself with them would allow this nascent movement to leap undaunted into the slipstream of American history with original legitimacy. Even better, it was not an ideological stance to acknowledge small “I” libertarian principles in the writings of the United States founding. The founding came with ready-made libertarian heroes looking for their movement.

Interest in the United States founding was also in the air: 1976 marked the bicentennial of the start of the American Revolution, and activists felt strongly that “[t]he Bicentennial is one of the best ways to promote libertarian ideas.”³⁵ And the early 1970s were filled with bicentennials—of the Boston Tea Party, Lexington and Concord, and, of course, Independence Day itself. Libertarian groups got to work to make the most of the moment. They sponsored political “sail-ins” at the re-enactment of the Boston Tea Party in an effort to attract publicity.³⁶ They celebrated the anniversary of Lexington and Concord by hosting a protest against the “Infernal Revenue System.”³⁷ A libertarian running for Mayor of Boston in 1975 promised to use his campaign as a means of promoting the movement to bicentennial tourists.³⁸ “The Bicentennial is too significant both in terms of symbolism and publicity to pass up!” was the party line of the movement. “Let’s make it one for our side!”³⁹

This libertarian reclamation of the U.S. founding was not to be uncritical—they were still revisionist historians, after all. Founders who supported a strong state were left behind. Alexander Hamilton, for example, was often cast as no friend to liberty, and John Adams “should be remembered as a precursor of the New Deal and New Society.”⁴⁰ The Founders whom they did admire, like Thomas Jefferson, were still subject to critique. For his crimes of buying “the Louisiana Territory with eyes open to the unconstitutionality of his act” and admitting he was not ready to see a woman in public office, Jefferson was chastised as a libertarian, certainly, but “not a ‘pure’ one.”⁴¹ Some even admitted openly that “[t]he aim and purpose of the ‘founding fathers’ was not to establish laissez-faire by means of the constitution.” This was “one of the flaws” of trying to project contemporary political ideas onto the past. Doing so was often “too defensive,” and the impulse was “to claim too much of the past, in matter or spirit, as its own ancestor,” without approaching either the past or the present with a critical eye.⁴² To these libertarians, the founding period was brimming with libertarian ideas—but to adopt its frames wholesale risked falling into the blind historical fundamentalism that they felt already existed on the Left and Right.

Even with these reservations, the U.S. founding was still to be the libertarian movement’s most important reclamation project. More ink was spilled over the founding than any other time period. And much of that ink was to be found in Murray Rothbard’s five volume libertarian history of the founding, *Conceived in Liberty*.

³⁵Phil Fellows, “The Libertarian Bicentennial Center,” *Libertarian Review*, Mar./Apr. 1976, 17.

³⁶Lynn Kinskey, “Give Me Liberty...” *Reason*, Mar. 1974, <https://reason.com/1974/03/01/frontlines-12/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

³⁷Chris Grieb, “A Word to Our Readers,” *Libertarian Review*, Dec. 1974, 12.

³⁸Committee to Elect David E. Long Mayor of Boston, “Renew the Revolution,” *Reason*, Aug. 1975, 15.

³⁹Kinskey, “Give Me Liberty.”

⁴⁰Art Hoppe, “The Great Census Debate of 1787,” *Inquiry*, Mar. 3, 1980, 20–4; Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., “Dreams of the Future,” *Inquiry*, Oct. 5, 1981, 26.

⁴¹Roger Lea MacBride, “Nock, ‘Jefferson’ and Malone, Milhollen, Kaplan, ‘The Story of the Declaration of Independence,” *Libertarian Review*, Sept. 1975, <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/jefferson-story-declaration-independence> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

⁴²Roy A. Childs, “Review of Hospers’ *Libertarianism*, Part II,” *Libertarian Forum*, June–July 1972, 4.

Murray Rothbard's Vision of the U.S. Founding

Murray Rothbard was an ideologue, raconteur, and leading light of the libertarian movement. He was born in New York City in 1926 to Jewish immigrant parents and struck a different chord from his socialist surroundings since childhood: "At one family gathering [in the late thirties], when the adults in the solemn conclave were pledging devotion to Spain's "Loyalist" (i.e., Communist) government, he piped up to ask: 'What's wrong with Franco, anyway?'"⁴³ As an adult, he obtained a PhD in economics but continued to run afoul of the academic mainstream for his views. Quick on his feet, Rothbard instead made a career out of promoting libertarian ideas in conservative organizations.⁴⁴ By the time a separate movement coalesced in the late 1960s, he felt poised to lead and was lovingly accepted by the younger generation for his sharp wit, good sense of humor, and decades of experience in movement politicking.⁴⁵ Rothbard wrote prolifically and published widely, in books, columns, and newsletters, and what he wrote was taken seriously by his disciples.

Conceived in Liberty was one of these many publications. Rothbard had begun writing the five-volume series on early American history in 1962 thanks to a grant from the Lilly Endowment. "The original idea was to take the regular facts and put a libertarian assessment on everything," he shared in a 1990 interview. "But once I started to work on it, I found many facts had been left out, like tax rebellions. So it got longer and longer." It would eventually reach over 1700 pages, "covering the Colonial period to the Constitution." The publisher, Arlington House, went out of business before the final volume on the U.S. Constitution was published, but the first four volumes debuted from 1975–1979, during the hey-day of the libertarian movement.⁴⁶ Their publication was met with fanfare in the form of full-page advertisements and fawning reviews in the most popular movement magazines. For libertarian activists, *Conceived in Liberty* was hard to ignore.

The series itself begins with a short essay on Rothbard's philosophy of writing history. Self-consciously motivated by his libertarian ideals, he acknowledged that he "see[s] the liberty of the individual not only as a great moral good in itself . . . but also as the necessary condition for the flowering of all the other goods that mankind cherishes."⁴⁷ Convinced that other historians have "squeezed out the actual stuff of history, the narrative facts of the important events of the past" in their survey works, Rothbard endeavored "to put the historical narrative back into American history."⁴⁸ In effect, this meant a thoroughly detailed approach to the events of the founding period, presented with a libertarian flourish.

In addition to being refracted through a libertarian lens, the narrative of early American history was to be ordered in accordance with the historical methodology of Ludwig von Mises. Indebted to Mises' somewhat obscure work *Theory and History* (1957), Rothbard placed special emphasis on the role of ideas and the influence of individual action.⁴⁹ According to Mises, "[t]houghts and ideas are not phantoms. They are real things," which bring "about changes in

⁴³Rothbard elaborated: "It didn't seem to me that Franco's sins, however statist, were any worse, to put it mildly, than those of the [Spanish] Republicans." Quoted in Justin Raimondo, *An Enemy of the State: The Life of Murray N. Rothbard* (Amherst, NY, 2000), 24.

⁴⁴Raimondo, *Enemy of the State*, 11–22.

⁴⁵Rothbard continues to inspire a fawning obsequiousness amongst his adherents. For an example, see "Murray N. Rothbard," Ludwig von Mises Institute, <https://mises.org/profile/murray-n-rothbard> (accessed July 25, 2025).

⁴⁶"Interview with Murray Rothbard on Man, Economy, and States, Mises, and the Future of the Austrian School," Austrian Economics Newsletter, Summer 1990, <https://mises.org/austrian-economics-newsletter/interview-murray-rothbard-man-economy-and-state-mises-and-future-austrian-school> (accessed June 15, 2025).

⁴⁷Murray N. Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty* (1979; Auburn, AL, 1999), xvi.

⁴⁸Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty*, xv.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, xviii.

the realm of tangible and material things.”⁵⁰ As such, the ideology of early America was to be stressed above all else—except, perhaps, action “performed by individuals and groups of individuals.”⁵¹ In Misesian historical philosophy, this was the pure stuff of history. “There is no answer to the question why Frederick II invaded Silesia except: because he was Frederick II.”⁵² Some historical moments were inherently opaque or unknowable because they came down to the private decision-making and action of individuals, as opposed to systemic processes beyond individual control. The power to change reality was thus placed in the hands of individual actors. This approach readied Rothbard to find libertarian heroes (and anti-libertarian villains) in the past.

Although the basis of his methodology was unusual, like other historians in the movement, Rothbard largely worked within historiographical paradigms more than he worked against them. He rejected the innovations of new social history, but his approach was still methodologically aligned with older works of non-Marxist professional history. He eagerly cited a wide variety of these studies, including those by his ideological foes for “a work of history does not lose the bulk of its value because of errors in ideology or points of view.”⁵³ He also readily engaged in communication with storied historians of early America like Robert E. Brown and Forrest McDonald, who “were kind enough to read the entire manuscript and offer helpful suggestions even though it soon became clear to them and myself that our fundamental disagreements tended to outweigh our agreements.”⁵⁴ More than anything, however, he was proudly indebted to the historiographical innovations of Bernard Bailyn and his colleagues, including Caroline Robbins and Gordon S. Wood.⁵⁵ Bailyn’s turn to the ideas of the American Revolution as an explanatory force resonated with Rothbard’s Misesian approach to history. The fact that these ideas were described by Bailyn himself as “libertarian” excited Rothbard even further.⁵⁶ Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) was not itself an ideological tract, but in recovering a libertarian heritage, the work gave the contemporary libertarian movement fuel for their own fire.

Rothbard followed other historiographical currents as well. Like those he admired in the ideological turn, he rejected the materialist analysis of the Beardians and neo-Beardians. Doing so was easy as it allowed him to reject a methodology that stank of Marxism. One thing that he maintained from this older paradigm was an emphasis on conflict, however. Rothbard’s conflict was “not between classes (social or economic), or between ideologies, but between Power and Liberty, State and Society.” In other words, “[c]onflicts arise only through attempts of various groups . . . to seize control over the machinery of government and to use it to privilege themselves at the expense of the others. It is only through and by state action that ‘class’ conflicts can ever arise.”⁵⁷ In Rothbard’s retelling, the central conflict was between a libertarian populace and the unyielding British state. To emphasize any consensus in this story was “truly absurd” and a mistake of the post-war era. “Under the spell of American celebration and of the hostility to all modern revolutions . . . the consensus historians were [tasked] to absolve the American

⁵⁰Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution* (1957; Auburn, AL, 1985): 96.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 159. Von Mises refers to this approach as “praxeology.”

⁵²*Ibid.*, 183.

⁵³Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty*, 502.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, xix.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 805.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 1119–20. Bailyn uses the term “libertarian” a few times to describe the documents which inspired the American Revolution. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967; Cambridge, MA: 1992): 36, 40, 44, 58, 237, 263.

⁵⁷Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty*, xvi.

republic from the original sin of having been born *via* revolution.”⁵⁸ For Rothbard, a revolution—especially a truly “libertarian revolution”—was a thing to celebrate, not deny.⁵⁹

Rothbard’s emphasis on the balance between Liberty and Power, on the tension between individuals and states, saw him starting his narrative during the early Middle Ages. He opened on a Western Europe that was “stagnant and war-torn . . . burdened by feudalism,” which was slowly revitalized by “emerging commercial capitalism,” particularly international trade.⁶⁰ This early capitalism flourished for centuries until it “came to an abrupt halt at the beginning of the fourteenth century.” Tempted by the region’s growing wealth, “Power . . . seize[d] and divert[ed] that wealth for its own nonproductive, indeed antiproduative, purposes.” In this instance, power existed in the “emerging nation-states of Western Europe,” who threatened to “confiscate and drain off the wealth of society for the needs and demands of the emerging state.” They succeeded, propping up elaborate state apparatuses and throwing Europe into costly wars to maintain their power. Their actions “ruptured the harmonious and cosmopolitan social and economic relations of medieval Europe.”⁶¹ Liberty would fight back in the form of the international trade pressures, which led to the Europeans’ arrival in the Americas, but the stage was set in Europe: a land “beset by the incubus of feudalism and statism, of absolute monarchy, of state-controlled churches, of state restrictions on human labor and human enterprise” could never be a friend to liberty.⁶² Those in search of a better life would have to look elsewhere.

Like in many Eurocentric, celebratory narratives of early English colonization, Rothbard’s colonists hang all their hopes on the “New World.” In his telling, they are individualists inspired by the libertarian promise of a land untouched by statism struggling against efforts by the state to impose the bureaucratic restrictions that made life so untenable in Europe. And they struggled mightily. Far from being founded as a free land, the early colonies were instead havens of “communism.” The Virginia Company, to start, was “being run on ‘communist’ principles,” which led to “what we might expect: each individual . . . had little incentive to work, or to exercise initiative or ingenuity” resulting in starvation and mutiny before reforms were put in place.⁶³ The Plymouth colony had similar reasons for their early “persistent hardships.” “A major reason . . . for the ‘starving time’ in Plymouth as before in Jamestown, was the communism imposed by the company.” This communism saw half the colonists dead before “[f]inally, in order to survive, the colony . . . permitted each family to cultivate a small private plot of land for their individual use.”⁶⁴ As much as Rothbard worked within professional historiographies, and as much as his narrative broadly followed the contours of his non-libertarian peers, his analysis always imported the concerns of the contemporary libertarian movement into the past. A professional historian might pause before describing a dynamic in the seventeenth century as “communistic.” Rothbard eagerly read into the distant past the experience of the present, casting all American history not only as a battle between liberty and power but as a struggle between Marxism and libertarianism.

Rothbard’s analysis of the colonial period continued in this vein, fulfilling the Misesian promise of finding libertarian heroes by highlighting individual colonists who acted bravely on behalf of liberty. He celebrated the heretics of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, describing Reverend Roger Williams as an “individualist and fearless logician”; Samuel Gorton as “an individualist and free spirit”; and devoting a rousing chapter to Anne Hutchinson, whose “spirit of liberty . . . was to outlast the despotic theocracy of Massachusetts Bay” that she had spent her

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 1119.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 1120.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 6.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 7.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 36.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 49.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 151.

lifetime battling.⁶⁵ As the population of the colonies grew, each new settlement flourished anew with liberty as free-thinkers and individualistic entrepreneurs moved to take advantage of what Rothbard portrayed as untouched lands.⁶⁶ Changes in well-established colonies also brought heroes, although they were not always the obvious ones.

A major element of Rothbard's argument is not only that revolution is a positive good, but that it is necessarily dynamic and comes from the bottom up. This is true of the American Revolution, and it is also true of the rebellions that preceded it including Bacon's Rebellion. Ever the revisionist, Rothbard resists making Nathaniel Bacon a singular torchbearer of revolution because of his racist views against Native Americans. Instead, Rothbard asks readers to understand the rebellion as a "mighty [upheaval] by a mass of people."⁶⁷ Amongst the Bacon rebels, "[n]o common purity of doctrine or motive can be found . . . But the bulk of their grievances were certainly libertarian: a protest of the rights and liberties of the people against the tyranny of the English government and of its Virginia agency." Despite this libertarian halo, he admits that "there is no denying the some of the grievances and motives of the rebels were the reverse of libertarian: hatred of the Indians and a desire for land grabbing," which "Bacon's motives were originally limited to." The rebellion as a whole "may be judged as a step forward to liberty . . . but *despite*, rather than because of, the motives of Bacon himself."⁶⁸ This will not be the first time Rothbard distinguishes the libertarian mass from the anti-libertarian leader.

Bacon's Rebellion is the only time, however, that any attention is paid to anti-Native American sentiment. Rothbard does acknowledge early in the first volume that the "New World" was quite old to the people who already inhabited it, and he briefly addresses early colonial atrocities, but Indigenous Americans are quickly relegated to the backdrop of his narrative.⁶⁹ Native individuals or nations appear from time to time as rabble-rousers or diplomatic points of contact, but they never step forward as libertarian heroes. This approach aligns with norms within the libertarian movement of the 1970s as a whole: explicit racism is considered gauche, but there is little analysis or depth behind it.

Enslaved people are treated similarly in *Conceived in Liberty*. Chattel slavery is acknowledged by Rothbard as a great evil, but his analysis is hemmed in by a focus on the economic theory of slavery. According to Rothbard, "the essence of slavery is that human beings, with their inherent freedom of will, with individual desires and convictions and purposes, are used as *capital*, as tools for the benefit of their master." They are "therefore habitually forced into types and degrees of work he would not have freely undertaken; by necessity, therefore, the bit and the lash become the motor of the slave system."⁷⁰ This is the antithesis of free market labor and thus both the cause and result of atrocity.

Condemning slavery does not mean that Rothbard is willing to make a place for Black Americans in his narrative. Individual enslaved persons, such as a man named Tony, are highlighted as having "the distinction of staging perhaps the first demonstration of nonviolent resistance in America," and slave rebellions are mentioned, but there are no Black libertarian heroes in this tale.⁷¹ For Rothbard, it is not slavery that is America's original sin but instead its revolutionary birth.⁷² This means that slave-owning revolutionaries with libertarian scruples, like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, are presented lovers of liberty without comment.⁷³

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 173, 187, 186.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 352–497.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 95.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 63.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 110, 64.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 1120.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 1349.

Like the broader movement, *Conceived in Liberty* is nominally anti-racist but does little to center the experiences of anyone who is not white.

The only societal divisions that really matter to Rothbard's analysis are between those in the ruling class, or those who use the state to further their own interests, and those who do not. He uses this analytical framework to flatten race as well as class distinctions. In particular, Rothbard is interested in dispelling the alleged tensions between merchants-creditors and farmer-debtors, a popular distinction made by historians of early America. According to Rothbard, this is "misleading" for many reasons. First, "there is no such common interest of merchants as a class. The state is in a position to grant special privileges . . . It can only do so to *particular* merchants or groups of merchants, and therefore only at the expense of other merchants who are being discriminated against." Second, "[a]nyone can go into debt and there is no reason to assume that farmers will be debtors more than merchants." These two dynamics undermine the idea of a shared class identity, which Rothbard argues in his third point actually exists between merchants and farmers: there is a "harmony of interests of different groups on the free market." Any "homogeneity" of classes or clashes between two groups of people must arise "from the intervention of government in society" as it is "only in relation to state action that the interests of different men" come into conflict "for state action must always privilege one or more groups and discriminate against others."⁷⁴ Rothbard's unique approach to "class" analysis allows him to acknowledge the innovations of Marxist historians while maintaining an ideologically libertarian outlook. It also allows him to speak to a more contemporary moment. In a movement that is trying to weld the interests of wealth capitalists like the Koch brothers to the common man, an analysis that allows them to be allies in a common fight against a ruling "caste" serves as a powerful tool.

In this world of privileged, state-sponsored elites and unprivileged masses, Rothbard identified a third category of individual: the intellectual. As "it is impossible for the masses to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps to hammer out an ideological movement in opposition to the existing state," it falls on "intellectuals, full-time (or largely full-time) professionals in ideas" to "spread the word to the people."⁷⁵ In the revolutionary context of early America, it is these people—the political theorists and muckraking journalists of early modern England—who wrote the wellspring of liberty that crossed the Atlantic ocean in the 1700s, and it is their compatriots who spread those germs to the erstwhile colonists.⁷⁶ In the context of the 1970s, Rothbard is not-so-subtly describing himself and his fellow libertarian writers as those chosen few who would bring libertarian ideals to the masses.

The first two volumes of *Conceived in Liberty* are devoted to setting the colonial scene, and the final two published volumes bring the narrative up through the American Revolution. The books move slowly through the military and political history of the Imperial Crisis and Revolutionary War, marking a consistent throughline of tension between the true libertarian revolutionaries and their conservative opponents. It was the true libertarians who threw tea into Boston harbor that cold December morning, while the right-wing expressed their "stern Tory disapproval."⁷⁷ True libertarians expressed their discontent with England in terms of "the ultimacy of natural law and natural rights" whereas the conservatives "were most anxious to ignore natural law and its profoundly radical implications," confining American complaints "to legalistic discussions of the British constitution."⁷⁸ Following the start of the war, a right-wing emerged in the independence movement itself. Rothbard argues that these individuals were conservatives prior to the start of the war who opted "in deep resignation" to join the rebel cause

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 251.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 1117.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 72. Rothbard's analysis here is plucked in whole from Bailyn and his colleagues.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 1037.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 1060–61.

“in order to guide it in a conservative direction.”⁷⁹ This right-wing took “steps at home toward oligarchic rule” even as Congress as a whole “was moving toward liberty and independence,” and they resisted any radical libertarian experimentation with state governments during the war.⁸⁰ According to Rothbard, some revolutionaries were not so revolutionary after all—at least not by libertarian standards.

Rothbard is willing to take this argument to its logical conclusion by outright rejecting particular founders. Like other libertarian historians, he is unafraid to smash the image of national darlings, regardless of how beloved they are by the public. Case in point, the two individuals who draw the bulk of his ire are Benjamin Franklin and George Washington. In Rothbard’s retelling, Franklin was an opportunistic statist who repeatedly allied himself with the state in all its forms. Unable to make a libertarian hero out of a man so entwined with the ruling caste, he rejects Franklin totally. He even charges Franklin with spying for England during the American Revolution.⁸¹ His distaste for Washington does not quite go as far, but he still castigates the general for his “aristocratic temper” and incompetence on the battlefield.⁸² According to Rothbard, the only way to properly fight the Revolutionary War was to “run a new style of war, a radical people’s war of national liberation, a guerrilla war resting on individual responsibility, mobility, and surprise.”⁸³ Washington’s insistence on fighting the war in “European fashion” crippled the army.⁸⁴ The only reason the war was won at all is because the revolutionary spirit of the people had bubbled up regardless of their general’s vision. The final battle, Yorktown, had all the trappings of the “last phase of a revolutionary guerilla war.”⁸⁵

Conceived in Liberty creates heroes in the same breath that it destroys them. During the imperial crisis, Sam Adams emerges as a key protagonist, “the brilliant father of the revolution,” for his commitment to rabble-rousing libertarian politics.⁸⁶ Christopher Gadsden, of “Don’t Tread on Me” flag fame, is praised as “the Sam Adams of South Carolina” for his willingness to forego his mercantile fortune in the name of liberty.⁸⁷ Charles Lee is portrayed as the anti-Washington, a “pungent individualist, personally and politically dedicated to liberty and deeply influenced by libertarian thought” who, unlike his rival Washington, understood the importance of guerilla warfare “for the American scene.”⁸⁸ These figures all float in the United States’ civil religion, but they are claimed as key proponents of libertarian revolutionary impulses in Rothbard’s telling. In this way, the project to promote a libertarian founding is not just a reclamation project. It is one that is actively creative: not simply sewing a libertarian face onto the past but manipulating a narrative in new ways to come to new conclusions.

And the conclusion of the last published volume is that the American Revolution was very revolutionary and very libertarian. Borrowing from Gordon S. Wood, Rothbard asks the question: “Was the American Revolution radical?”⁸⁹ His answer was a resounding yes. A “people’s war” with “libertarian goals, the American Revolution was ineluctably radical.”⁹⁰ It was a triumph. Certainly, it “rend[ed] society in two” and resulted in “mass violence,” but this was a worthy thing on behalf of a libertarian goal.⁹¹ The contemporary movement was part of a

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 1256.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 1223, 1255–63.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 562–70, 1473–76.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 1338.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 1138.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 1395.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, 1459.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 1060.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 1054.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 1148.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 1555.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 1559–60.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 1557, 1560.

proud lineage, “a vital milestone in the advance and development of the western revolutionary tradition.”⁹² Libertarians should be proud, and they should bring their libertarian revolution out of the past and into the present.

This inspired vision of a libertarian founding was best captured by *Conceived in Liberty*, but it poured out of Rothbard into his other endeavors as well. As early as 1969, when writing for the series was underway, he was publishing articles which used the language of the Gadsden flag to assert independence from bureaucratic forces and describing modern tax revolts as “the new Boston Tea Party.”⁹³ Over the next few years, these frames became adopted by the movement beyond Rothbard. As one example of their crawl to widespread acceptance, a February 1973 advertisement in *Reason* for “Libertarian Posters” from the Same Day Poster Service company offered eight styles, including the Statue of Liberty, Murray Rothbard, and an anti-Nixon cartoon.⁹⁴ A little over two years later in July 1975, the same company ran an advertisement in the same magazine that featured a number of the same posters—as well as a proliferation of Gadsden flag-styled posters, t-shirts, buttons, and bumper stickers.⁹⁵ Tea party frames received a boost from the bicentennial, but they remained relevant long after. Into the 1980s, tax revolts were described as “tea parties” and taxes themselves were portrayed as unconstitutional aberrations on the Founders’ original intent.⁹⁶ When it came to early American language and imagery being used for libertarian political purposes, it usually started with Rothbard.

Rothbard promoted his vision beyond mere publication. In 1977, when the Koch brothers founded the Cato Institute, he used his position as founding board member to suggest the name “Cato” after *Cato’s Letters*, the eighteenth-century essays whose cries for liberty influenced the Revolutionary generation.⁹⁷ As Cato rose to prominence, the American Revolution as a libertarian revolution became part of the backbone of the movement. Koch-funded institutions and publications went on to maintain this symbolic and rhetorical connection to the founding through their marketing. The Libertarian Party, which Rothbard and the Kochs helped shape, announced its National Convention in 1978 under the banner “Liberty is coming to Boston!” The Party included a stylized Paul Revere on the advertisement in case the meaning was missed.⁹⁸ Even bolder, the movement began to claim that its connection to the Founding made it akin to a second revolution. Advertisements for the *Libertarian Review*, a magazine acquired by the Cato Institute in 1977, promoted the publication as “a major force in the new American Revolution,” and published themed issues around topics like “Toward a Second American Revolution: Libertarian Strategies for Today.”⁹⁹ Marketing for the Cato Institute’s 1980 summer seminar presented the founders of the new movement as “the Founding Fathers” themselves. It was accompanied by a mock-up of John Trumbull’s *Declaration of Independence* (1818), with the big names of libertarianism, including Murray Rothbard, replacing the traditional

⁹²*Ibid.*, 1568.

⁹³Peter Blake, “Don’t Tread On Me,” *Libertarian Forum*, June 1, 1969, 3; Murray Rothbard, “The New Boston Tea Party,” *Libertarian Forum*, Oct. 1, 1969, 2.

⁹⁴Libertarian Posters, Same Day Poster Service, “Now You Can Choose from 8 Libertarian Posters,” *Reason*, Feb. 1973, 2.

⁹⁵Libertarian Posters, Same Day Poster Service, “Libertarian Posters,” *Reason*, July 1975, 45.

⁹⁶Karl Hess, “My Taxes,” *Libertarian Forum*, May 1, 1969, 3; David Beito, “The Working Man’s Tax Revolt,” *Libertarian Review*, July 1981, 30–4; Joan Kennedy Taylor, “Preaching at the Juggernaut: The Constitution and the IRS,” *Libertarian Review*, Apr. 1981, 33; Doug Bandow, “Is the Tea Party Over?” *Inquiry*, Sept. 14, 1981, 28–9.

⁹⁷Raimundo, *Enemy of the State*, 218.

⁹⁸HUBCON ’78, “Liberty Is Coming to Boston!” *Libertarian Review*, May 1978, 32.

⁹⁹Charles Koch, “Toward a Second American Revolution: Libertarian Strategies for Today – The Business Community: Resisting Regulation,” *Libertarian Review*, November 1974, 13–8; Roy A. Childs, Jr., ed., *Libertarian Review*, August 1978; Robert D. Kephart, “Publisher’s Announcement,” *Libertarian Review*, March/April 1977, 2. Emphasis in the original.

Founders.¹⁰⁰ A group of four, including a woman, were portrayed in deep discussion beneath an image of the same four two centuries past. “It was like living in a libertarian society,” a happy seminar-goer from a previous year’s testimonial boasted at the top of the advertisement.¹⁰¹ A libertarian society just like the eighteenth century, it implied.

When Rothbard gave his “Turning Point 1777/1977” speech at the Libertarian Party National Convention in San Francisco, he was at a high point in his career. His vision of a libertarian founding had become critical to the movement’s understanding of itself. The movement had been looking for its history, and through Rothbard’s conception of the founding, it had found it. Not only that, but laying such a claim to the Revolution propelled the movement forward with self-confidence. It made its anti-statism patriotic and empowered it to work for change in the present. If the first American Revolution had been libertarian, then surely this new outpouring of libertarian thought portended a second one—which contemporary libertarians were poised to lead. When Rothbard told the assembled crowd of twelve hundred that their “libertarian forefathers . . . [set] forth a glorious set of principles,” which they “[put] into practice in the real world,” he was asking party members to pattern themselves after the Revolutionary generation and do the same.¹⁰²

The Koch Brothers and the “Lost” Fifth Volume

“On Black Friday, March 27, 1981, at 9:00 AM in San Francisco, the ‘libertarian’ power elite of the Cato Institute . . . revealed its true nature and its cloven hoof” by ousting Murray Rothbard, as retold by Rothbard.¹⁰³ For all his power and influence, he had made the mistake of running afoul of his funders. Tension had been building for years over disagreements regarding policy and strategy. Rothbard had publicly disagreed with Koch-funded publications over issues like nuclear power, and he had been vocally unhappy with the movement’s increasing focus on winning elected office.¹⁰⁴ In Rothbard’s eyes, the second American Revolution was becoming increasingly unrevolutionary. Things finally unraveled during the 1980 presidential election, during which Koch-backed candidates—including David Koch himself as vice president—ran for office under the banner of the Libertarian Party in hopes of making a real impact. Although they were just shy of their “one million votes” goal, they did well for a young third party, garnering 1.1% of the total nationwide.¹⁰⁵ This was not enough for Rothbard, however, whose disagreements with their campaign and platform had led to the publication of numerous, scathing critiques in his newsletter, the *Libertarian Forum*.¹⁰⁶ For the Kochs, who cared dearly about who was being supported by their money, this was unacceptable.¹⁰⁷ In the months following the election, Rothbard was unceremoniously let go from his position as Cato Institute board member. Livid, Rothbard refused to go gently into the night. Shortly after his dismissal, he turned the *Libertarian Forum* into his personal clearinghouse for screeds against Cato, the Koch

¹⁰⁰Cato Institute, “Suppose you were given the opportunity to meet and talk with the Founding Fathers,” *Reason*, Feb. 1980, 6.

¹⁰¹Cato Institute, “It was like living in a libertarian society; a week of it might just last me till next year,” *Reason*, Mar. 1981, 19.

¹⁰²Quoted in Palmer, “The 1977 Libertarian National Convention.”

¹⁰³Murray Rothbard, “Purged from Cato! It Usually Ends with Ed Crane,” *Libertarian Forum*, Jan.-Apr. 1981, 1.

¹⁰⁴Rothbard, “Purged from Cato!” 1–11; Murray Rothbard, “The Clark Campaign: Never Again,” *Libertarian Forum*, Sept.-Dec. 1980, 1–10; Burns, “O Libertarian,” 462; Raimundo, *An Enemy of the State*, 235–44; Bessner, “Murray Rothbard,” 441–56.

¹⁰⁵Rothbard, “The Clark Campaign,” 1; “1980 Presidential General Election Results,” U.S. Election Atlas, <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1980&off=0&f=1> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

¹⁰⁶Rothbard, “The Clark Campaign,” 1–10; David F. Nolan, “Clark President: A Campaign Critique,” *Libertarian Forum*, Sept.-Dec. 1980, 11–5.

¹⁰⁷Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 409. The *Libertarian Forum* was not funded by the Koch brothers, but as a board member for Cato, Rothbard was benefitting from their funding.

brothers, and their allies.¹⁰⁸ Gathering his own allies, Rothbard launched an intra-party attack so intense it destabilized the Libertarian Party and neutered its chances at future electoral success.¹⁰⁹ Although he had won a battle against the Koch wing of the movement, he would not have a home in mainstream libertarianism for much longer.

With the Libertarian Party in shambles, the Koch brothers turned away from libertarian electoral politics and toward policy. The Reagan presidency offered renewed hope that libertarian causes might be represented at the national level. Eager to turn the Cato Institute into a major player, the young think-tank moved from the countercultural atmosphere of San Francisco to the slick, professional offices of Washington, D.C.¹¹⁰ Their eyes on the present and future, they had little need to engage as seriously as they had with the past. There was no longer pressure to reclaim a storied history, and the countercultural impulse which underlaid an interest in revisionist history was in large part abandoned. Instances of the use of early American frames in movement literature still existed, but they stayed within conventional notions of the country's civil religion. The promise of *Conceived in Liberty*, a uniquely libertarian founding with unique heroes and villains, was abandoned.

Rothbard's influence in the Koch brothers' imaginations remained, however. Scholar Nancy MacLean has shown how, even after Rothbard's ousting, his strategies for an anti-statist revolution remained at the forefront of the Koch brothers' minds. MacLean focuses on Rothbard's argument for the necessity of a "cadre" of libertarian activists to overthrow the state, and she traces how the brothers invested in institutions which would train and influence this cadre, including the Cato Institute.¹¹¹ These ideas animated the tycoons even as they, too, abandoned the mainstream libertarian movement in search of greener pastures. Disappointed by a lack of electoral success, the brothers turned their attention to influencing politics without the formal trappings of a third party. They shifted to funding amenable Republican candidates and invested more heavily in institutions like the James Buchanan Center and George Mason University.¹¹² These candidates and programs disseminated libertarian ideas without being wedded to the eccentricities of the movement. They also used Rothbardian-style early American frames. These frames—particularly anti-tax "tea party" ones—were in use by Koch-funded programs as early as the 1990s, but they really caught fire two decades later in the form of the Tea Party movement.¹¹³

The Tea Party movement was an anti-government protest that coalesced shortly after President Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009 and dissolved in the mid-2010s. Like earlier libertarian "tea parties," it was anti-tax, broadly construed. Unlike those earlier tea parties, it became a national sensation. The Tea Party movement's early origins were steeped in populist mythos. The conventional narrative of its founding owed its namesake to Rick Santelli, a contributor to financial news network CNBC, who famously ranted on the floor of the Chicago Stock Exchange, calling for a "Chicago Tea Party" on behalf of the free market and against economic unrest.¹¹⁴ As journalist Jane Mayer has argued, in reality, this "grassroots" movement was backed and planned by Koch-funded think tanks and allied donor groups.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁸Nearly every issue of *The Libertarian Forum* from the Jan.-Apr. 1981 issue, in which he describes his ousting, to the journal's close in 1984 includes some reference to his maneuverings against Crane and the Kochs.

¹⁰⁹Raimundo, *An Enemy of the State*, 244–8, 257–9; Burns, "O Libertarian," 461–4.

¹¹⁰Raimundo, *An Enemy of the State*, 253; Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 445; Bessner, "Murray Rothbard," 451.

¹¹¹MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*, 138–42.

¹¹²MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*, 190–204.

¹¹³Mayer, *Dark Money*, 168–9.

¹¹⁴Mayer, *Dark Money*, 166.

¹¹⁵Mayer, *Dark Money*, 167–72; Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williams, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA, 2012).

The Koch brothers and their allies chose these founding frames because they knew how potent they were in the American mind. They knew because they had seen it before in the libertarian movement of the 1970s. They were powerful because they were popular—because they appealed to every-day Americans’ sense of patriotism. This new version was not Rothbardian in the sense that it did not reject George Washington, or fawn over ideology. But it was Rothbardian, in the sense that it was from Rothbard the Koch brothers learned these frames could be potent rhetorically. The Tea Party was not conceived in liberty but it would not have looked the way it did had *Conceived in Liberty* not been written.

Rothbard did not forget the power of founding frames, either, even though he did not make them a centerpiece of his work again. *Conceived in Liberty*’s publisher, Arlington House, went out of business around the same year that Rothbard was ousted from the mainstream movement. In need of a new intellectual home, Rothbard had more pressing concerns than publishing. By the time he landed on his feet in 1982, co-founding the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Auburn, Alabama, with fellow radical libertarian Lew Rockwell, Jr., his priorities had shifted. Spurned by the mainstream movement, Rothbard decided that the real future of liberty lay in revitalizing the Old Right.¹¹⁶ In an effort to do so, he focused his efforts on spearheading an alliance between those radical libertarians who had followed him away from the Cato Institute and white nationalist paleo-conservatives.¹¹⁷ Viewed as a betrayal by some of his followers, Rothbard nevertheless defended this alliance until his death in 1995. Meanwhile, the fifth volume of *Conceived in Liberty* languished. Fully written, Rothbard shared in a 1990 interview that its fate was sealed to forever remain unpublished as it “was written in longhand and no one can read my handwriting.”¹¹⁸

Glimpses into the Rothbardian vision of the founding—and in particular what lay dormant in the fifth volume—would spill out from time to time. This would first happen in 1987, in a *Reason* magazine review of a work on Patrick Henry published just in time for the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution. Dusting off his libertarian hero-making abilities, Rothbard wrote that Patrick Henry was “one of history’s great orators who bent his splendid rhetorical powers to the service not only of principle but of libertarian, individualist principle at that.” He would not be celebrated during the bicentennial because he was “one of the major fighters *against* the new constitution and in defense of liberty.” In distinguishing liberty from the Constitution, Rothbard previews his final argument: although the American Revolution was libertarian, the U.S. Constitution could not be more anti-libertarian. Reminiscent of his Turning Point 1777/1977 keynote speech, Rothbard closes his review by asking: “Where are the sons of thunder” who might oppose the Constitution “today?”¹¹⁹

A few years later, another bicentennial lured bits of the fifth volume out of hiding. In 1994, writing in the Mises Institute publication *Free Market*, Rothbard celebrated the Whiskey Rebellion. A 1794 anti-tax rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion was an obvious choice for libertarians in search of founding moments to idolize. Rothbard portrayed the rebellion as a fight for liberty against the Washington administration, resurrecting one of his favorite villains from the published volumes. Even more Rothbardian, he portrayed the nonviolent aspects of the rebellion as being “covered up” by the state and its court intellectuals. As a libertarian rebellion against the newly installed American state, the Whiskey rebellion was “a victory for liberty and

¹¹⁶Raimundo, *An Enemy of the State*, 259–66; Bessner, “Murray Rothbard,” 451–2.

¹¹⁷Slobodian, “The Anti-68ers,” 379–83; Cooper, “The Alt-Right,” 29–50.

¹¹⁸“Interview with Murray Rothbard”; Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr., “The Lost Fifth Volume of *Conceived in Liberty*,” *Mises Wire*, Mar. 25, 2019, <https://mises.org/mises-wire/lost-fifth-volume-conceived-liberty> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

¹¹⁹Murray Rothbard, “Patrick Henry, Noble Rhetorician,” *Reason*, Jan. 1987, <https://reason.com/1987/01/01/patriot-henry-noble-rhetoric/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

property” that kept the spirit of the Revolution alive. According to Rothbard, it should be remembered as such.¹²⁰

These were the only insights into the fifth volume until 2019. A few years prior, libertarian economist Patrick Newman had rediscovered Rothbard’s notes as a Mises Institute Fellow. He was shortly thereafter approached by Academic Vice President of the Mises Institute, Joseph Salerno, to translate Rothbard’s near-indecipherable notes and edit the lost fifth volume. It took Newman a week to learn to read Rothbard’s handwriting and six more weeks to translate the notes.¹²¹ In 2019, the fifth volume, the promised “most revisionist of all,” was finally published on the Mises Institute website to a splash in radical libertarian circles.¹²² His mythos had only grown following his death amongst both mainstream and radical libertarians alike, and a new publication—particularly a lost one—was a cause for celebration.

The fifth volume of *Conceived in Liberty* has a clear thesis: the U.S. Constitution was an anti-libertarian conspiracy foisted on a libertarian populace by a minority “ultra-conservative constituency.”¹²³ According to Rothbard, post-Revolutionary War struggles in diplomacy and debt were caused by an over-stepping federal government under the Articles of Confederation. Seeking control and personal enrichment, “nationalist forces” which included “reactionary ideologues and financial oligarchs,” “land speculators,” “southern slave owners,” “disgruntled ex-army officers,” and “inefficient urban artisans” tried to circumvent liberty again and again. When they failed to do so because of the Articles of Confederation’s “ironclad” protections for state’s rights, they staged a “bloodless coup d’état” to create a “strong nation-state that would use the power of coercion to grant them privileges and subsidies.”¹²⁴

Rothbard’s vision of the Constitutional Convention and following events is deeply pessimistic. The members of the convention are “Machiavellian” in their machinations, which Rothbard painfully retreads. There are no libertarian heroes in this retelling. Friends of liberty from previous volumes either “didn’t grasp the nationalist designs” afoot or they “had become so conservatized” that even people like “Sam Adams’ reaction to the [anti-government] rebels was as bigoted and uncomprehending as any conservative’s.”¹²⁵ Potential wins for liberty, like the Bill of Rights, are portrayed as a means of “mak[ing] some concessions right away and thus pull[ing] the teeth out of the drive for an overhaul of the Constitution before it really got underway.”¹²⁶ The only people who come out looking good are the Anti-Federalists, whom Rothbard portrays as the last of the libertarians.

The book closes by asking the question “Was the U.S. Constitution radical?”¹²⁷ According to Rothbard, it could not be further from radical. The American Revolution “was liberal, democratic, and quasi-anarchistic; for decentralization, free markets and individual liberty; against monarchy, mercantilism, and especially strong central government.”¹²⁸ The Constitution was a conservative elitist movement to create a “new super government” to carry out “on a national scale the mercantilist principles of taxation, regulation, and special privilege for the benefit of the favored groups (‘the few’) at the expense of the bulk of producers and consumers in the country (‘the many’).”¹²⁹ It was placed upon the people through means of “propaganda, chicanery” and

¹²⁰Murray Rothbard, “The Whiskey Rebellion: A Model for Our Time?,” *The Free Market* 12, no. 9 (Sept. 1994), <https://mises.org/free-market/whiskey-rebellion-model-our-time> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

¹²¹“Ep. 1524 The Constitution a Coup?” The Tom Woods Show, Oct. 30, 2019, <https://tomwoods.com/ep-1524-the-constitution-a-coup/> (accessed Apr. 3, 2026).

¹²²Rockwell, “The Lost Fifth Volume.”

¹²³Murray Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty, Volume 5: The New Republic, 1784-1791* (Auburn, AL, 2019), 127.

¹²⁴Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty, Volume 5*, 127–9, 306.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*, 149, 123.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 298.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*, 306.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 308.

¹²⁹Rothbard, *Conceived in Liberty*, 306–7.

“fraud.”¹³⁰ It was a “counterrevolution” to the “libertarianism and decentralization embodied in the American Revolution.”¹³¹

What was a good libertarian revolutionary to do? In one fell swoop, Rothbard brings his argument to fruition: the most patriotic thing to do, the one most aligned with the values the country was built on, is to destroy the government. This move allows radical libertarians to grab onto the power of civil religion, with its imagery and emotion, while also staying true to their anarchist or monarchist designs. It is a means of indulging in nationalism while doing the most anti-nationalist thing possible. Its nuances—who is a hero and who is not, and how they change over time—bring the past to life and ask libertarian activists to confront how the 1700s and the 1900s are not so different. In doing so, it instills radical libertarians with confidence. What they are doing has been done before, and what they are doing means they can advocate for creative destruction while not turning their back wholly on what they were raised on. *Conceived in Liberty* is not only a libertarian history of the founding; it is a blueprint and a call to action.

This call to action puts Rothbard in conflict with other conservatives. Where mainstream conservatives in the last half of the twentieth century have moved to enshrine the Constitution, and its original meaning, at the core of their political strategy, radical libertarians reject the Constitution wholly. This might feel obvious—of course libertarians and conservatives are not the same thing. But in historical analysis, they are often conflated. This is in part because many libertarians do support mainstream conservative causes. But when it comes to memory politics, there is a key difference. Conservatives are happy to work within the system, even if it means morphing it until it is unrecognizable. Radical libertarians would like to see it destroyed.

Rothbard’s explosive argument provides ammunition for all means of people on the radical right. Anarcho-capitalists and white nationalists alike can find something within *Conceived in Liberty* to support their claims. But his argument resonates most with the people who are still reading him: the radical libertarians who are ready to do away with the nation-state in total in search of smaller, racial enclaves.¹³² The fifth volume may not have been available for libertarians in the 1970s and 1980s, but it is available for the net-savvy libertarians of the 2020s. The argument remains as potent as it was when it was written in the 1960s and 1970s: here is how you can justify the destruction of a state while still being patriotic.

Conclusion

The imagery and stories of the nation’s founding have always had a place in American political movements. Deft usage of the United States’ most precious symbols can grant legitimacy and respect to an upstart campaign, and invocations of certain founders and moments can have an unknowable, emotional, and quasi-religious appeal to potential adherents. Wrapping themselves in the flag was an obvious strategic choice for the libertarians of the 1970s. Awash in bicentennials and with a good argument for the little “I” libertarian nature of the American Revolution, the libertarian movement grabbed the U.S. founding with both hands and made it their own.

They did so with a particular Rothbardian flair. Culturally committed to iconoclasm (in the name of revisionism), any libertarian history of the founding was likely to be somewhat non-traditional. With ideologue Murray Rothbard at the helm, the libertarian vision of the founding, *Conceived in Liberty*, was more than just an unconventional retelling. Rothbard used the past to

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 306.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 310–2.

¹³²Quinn Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy* (New York, 2023).

create a call-to-arms for the present and the future. Although initially successful, America's libertarian revolution had been strangled in the cradle. Anti-libertarian forces had conspired against liberty to create a state in the form of the U.S. Constitution. But not all hope was lost. A libertarian revolution—with all of the violence, chaos, and brutality that all revolutions bring—had been won before. It could be won again, if only there were radical libertarians willing to do what needed to be done.

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