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How I Became a Libertarian

PENN JILLETTE

I got out of high school—notice I don't say "graduated"—on a plea bargain. I had reasonable SATs, and I went to my principal in the beginning of my senior year and said that I wanted to pass, because it was important to my family that I actually finish high school. But I wasn't going to come to school any more, because I was sick of that, and I said that if he did not graduate me at the end of my senior year, I would give an impassioned speech to the school board that they were not dealing well with their gifted students. He said to me, "Are you threatening me?" and I said "Yes." And we made a deal.

So before I finished high school, I was out on the road in the USA. I learned to eat fire, and I learned to juggle, and I went to Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Clown College.

PENN JILLETTE, Cato's H. L. Mencken research fellow, is the louder, larger half of the magic/comedy team Penn & Teller. He spoke recently at Cato's 27th Annual Benefactor Summit in Las Vegas, Nevada.

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And I say "Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth Clown College" all the way through, because if you worked for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth and you ever said "circus," or "show," or "the Ringling Show" *without* saying "Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth," you were fined. And we weren't paid that much.

I met Teller when I was 18 and we started putting together our magic show. I guess we were kind of fast-tracked to be Hollywood liberals—I'm in show business, I have this kind of impotent ponytail back here—I probably should be a liberal. I probably should be a Bernie Sanders supporter and I should be "Feeling the Bern"—but I'm not.

The way the media tend to present libertarians is that we're conservatives, or we're people with money who want to smoke dope. And it's really not true at all for me. I do not come to libertarianism because I'm a really successful businessperson, or a CEO, or because I have to fight regulations. I really come to it from a purely hippie point of view. I have always been a peacenik, and in the 80s I met a man named Tim Jenison. I was then just kind of your standard liberal, and Tim was libertarian.

> "I really come to libertarianism from a purely hippie point of view."

I started giving all the arguments for why the government had to be more powerful, and Tim said a really simple sentence to me. He said, "Do you think it's OK to punish people who've done nothing wrong?" And I said "No"—even though I felt somewhere in my heart that it was a trick question. And then he said, "Why is it OK to reward people who've done nothing right?" He said, "Can't you see that you can't reward without punishing? They're the same thing." And that shut me up for a little while.

Then Tim started saying, "You know, you're so against force. You've never hit anybody in your life. You've been beat up. You've been in carnival situations that have gone badly and people have hit you and you've not hit them back because you didn't think it was life threatening. You are insanely peacenik in terms of the way you see war, what the country should do. Why do you think it's so OK for the government to use force to get things done that you think are good ideas?"

I started thinking that one really good definition of government is that govern-

ment is supposed to have a monopoly on force. The government is the guys with the guns, and we are the people who tell the government what they can do. So in my morality, I shouldn't be able to tell anyone to do something with a gun that I wouldn't do myself. Now I want to add here that I am incompetent and I am a coward, so this is all theoretical, what I'm about to say—but if you asked me: Would I use a gun to stop a murder? Yeah! Would I use a gun to stop a rape? Yeah! Would I use the threat of a gun to stop a robbery? Yeah, I think you kind of have to. Would I use a gun to protect our country and our way of life? Yeah! Would I use a gun to build a library? No!

Do I think libraries are really important? Wicked important! *Really* important! I came from a dead factory town in western Massachusetts, before the Internet.

> "Before Teller and I actually called ourselves 'libertarians,' we had a lot of run-ins with government art groups."

Without the Greenfield Public Library, I wouldn't have had a chance. I rode my bike there every day. I read everything. When Frank Zappa put in the back of the album *Lumpy Gravy*, "Do not listen to this until you've read Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*," I jumped on my bike and rode to the library and read it, then came back to listen to the record. I follow directions well.

So will I give my money to help someone build a library? Yeah! Will I ask other people to give their money to help build a library? Yeah! Will I beg other people to give money to build a library? Yeah! Will I lie to people to get them to give money to build a library? A little bit. Will I use a gun to get someone to build a library? No. And that is, in a nutshell, my entire view of politics: that I have to look over what people want the government to do and say "If I were given all the power, would I use a gun to accomplish what they want to accomplish?"

I am a huge fan of art, and I am a huge fan of crazy art. But Teller and I, before we met Tim Jenison, and before we actually called ourselves "libertarians," we had a lot of run-ins with government art groups. There was a theater in Philadelphia called the Walnut Street Theatre—it's still there—and upstairs at the Walnut Street Theatre was Theatre 5, which was a little tiny room that sat 100 people. And they had local grants, federal grants, just grants, grants, grants to put together little experimental theater shows in this 100-seat theater on the 5th floor of the

Walnut Street Theatre.

They had all their money paid by the government, and they had to put up one new show, I think it was every six weeks. Teller and I, at this point, were street performers. We went out to Head House Square in Philadelphia, and I would do a 12-minute juggling show, and I would then pass the hat. I was a very, very successful street performer. We had a dream of doing a full evening show indoors. We needed a place, and Teller had gone to college with one of the guys who had these grants. But we didn't *know* they had grants—we thought they were the same as us, that they made money from ticket sales. They said that they couldn't get their show together (six weeks with nothing else to do and they couldn't do a show? Shakespeare's in the public domain!) so they said, "You can have our theater to put your show on—you'd only have to pay us a little bit of money, and you can have the whole space and do the whole show." We were thrilled to pieces. Just thrilled to pieces! And we worked really hard (I mean, hard for show business.) We went out and did press releases and got reviews. And that 100-seat theater, when we were in there, was sold out for the whole six weeks.

Then the head of the Walnut Street Theatre found out that our show had been so successful—they'd never been successful in there at all—and came and talked to us. We didn't know we were blowing the G on the joint—to use carny terms. We didn't know we were giving up a secret, to use, I guess, regular-people terms. He said, "How much of the grant money did you get?" And we said "Grant money? No, we just happened to have the theater—thank you so much, sir, we really appreciate it. It's really helpful, you know, that small amount of rent we're paying." And he said, "Rent?!" I said, "This has been wonderful! We're making our living, it's going great." Well, anyway, they lost all their grants. And then there were all sorts of articles written on how Penn and Teller were destroying the arts in Philadelphia because we had lost the federal grants because we went and ratted out the people that were doing the real, important, significant work that we weren't doing because we were "commercial."

Then the 80s came around and there was all that controversy over a few artists—there was the Piss Christ art, and there was a New York artist named

David Wojnarowicz. They did art that was very, very controversial, and very, very blasphemous. They lost some of their National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grants, and I was then in a very awkward position. I was a freedom of speech nut and I thought that they absolutely should have the right to do whatever art they wanted. But I was also remembering my Theatre 5 days in Philadelphia—and I didn't think that the government should pay for them. And although I was—am—an atheist, my mom and dad were very strong Christians, and I was very close to them. And I had that image in my head of the gun. I looked at this art that I loved, that was so blasphemous to my mom and dad, and I was appalled by the idea that my mom and dad were having a gun held to their head to pay for art that I loved, but they didn't. And that to me was libertarianism in a nutshell. I wanted those artists to have their work everywhere. I wanted those artists to be very, very successful—but I did not want anyone that did not like that art to pay for it, and certainly not to be forced.

> "It is immoral for me to use the government to use force to do anything that I wouldn't do myself."

So when Wojnarowicz lost the grants from the NEA, I went over to his studio. He was a little surprised that I'd showed up there, because I'd been on TV a few days before saying that I didn't think the NEA should exist at all, and he shouldn't get any money whatsoever. I said, "I'd like to buy a lot of your work. I want to buy it because I really, really like it." As a matter of fact, with some of my friends, we bought enough art from him to actually make up for his grant. (And now I own that art and it's worth a ton of money, so I turned out OK.)

I've read such wonderful defenses of the invisible hand, and I know how important it is to let the free market work—but I can't say in good conscience that I'm absolutely sure that if you took regulations away and let the free market run wild that everyone would be doing better and everyone would be happy and everyone would be living in utopia. It makes sense that it would work, but I don't know. But I do know that if this is a government by the people, and I'm one of the people, and the government is the one with guns—I know that it is immoral for me to use the government to use force, to use guns, to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. And that's how I became a libertarian. ■

SCHOLAR PROFILE

Emily Ekins

EMILY EKINS is a research fellow at the Cato Institute. She focuses primarily on American politics, public opinion, political psychology, and social movements, with an emphasis in survey and quantitative methods. She holds a PhD in political science from the University of California, Los Angeles.

What is the state of the "libertarian moment" in politics?

Public opinion change is often slow, deep, and tectonic. The libertarian moment is not based on one candidate or political party, but a set of ideas that permeate throughout the public. Across a number of public policy issues, Americans continue to become more tolerant toward LGBT people, and take more libertarian positions on guns, marijuana, immigration, education, and so on. I think a meaningful libertarian shift is taking place among America's youth with Democratic youth placing greater emphasis on individual autonomy and Republican youth shifting toward "liberty candidates." This doesn't mean that young people are libertarian, but are more open to libertarian ideas than generations before. Take for instance that young people today have a more positive reaction to the word "libertarian" (50 percent) than any other generation (compared to 25 percent among those 65 and older). As young people age and take on positions of power and influence, libertarian ideas may become more prominent.

Why are millennials so much more likely than their elders to support socialism?

Young people don't know what socialism is. For young people, socialism doesn't mean the Soviet Union, it means Scandinavia—and Scandinavia isn't even socialist! Young people are about as favorable toward socialism as capitalism, whereas all older generations are starkly opposed to socialism and about equally supportive of capitalism. When asked to define the word socialism, only about 16 percent of young people could do so accurately. Instead, they tend to think of socialism as the government providing for people's needs, rather than running all of the nation's businesses. They don't remember the Cold War, and thus they don't associate socialism with political repression, long bread lines, starvation, forced labor camps, and so on. What's unclear is if young people are willing to pay higher taxes to fund the large social welfare programs that Scandinavians employ. We find that once millennials reach the threshold of about $40,000-$60,000 a year they begin to oppose income redistribution, including raising taxes to expand financial assistance to the poor.

You've done a lot of research into the tea party movement—what should we know about them?

The tea party movement is a coalition of different types of people who joined together in the same movement largely over a belief that activist government was unfairly rewarding the undeserving (i.e., banks, automakers, cities, and homeowners who purchased too much housing) at the expense of the truly productive members of society. In particular the two largest groups in the tea party movement include libertarian leaners and socially conservative tea partiers. Tea partiers often say the movement is about reining in big government in order to protect individual liberty. For some people this is certainly true. However, for most people in the tea party movement, the preference for limited government is driven by a "reap what you sow" conception of economic justice. It's based on the idea that everyone should be rewarded in proportion to their achievements and failings and that government should not shield people from the consequences of their decisions. ■

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