



BY DAVID BOAZ

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The  
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EDITORIAL

# Creating a Voice for Libertarian Ideas

**B**ack in 1999, I met a young law student at the Cato University summer session in California. Since then he’s gone on to a successful career, working at two different pro-freedom organizations. Recently he talked to Cato president Peter Goettler about the prospects for liberty and stressed the importance of Cato: “If it were not for Cato struggling to move the climate of ideas and debate, all of the victories we win for liberty in legislatures and the courts will be short-lived when the political winds inevitably shift. On behalf of the entire movement, please never surrender this mission!” As Peter told him, we won’t.

That was our goal when Cato was founded in 1977: to revive the principles of liberty and limited government that were deeply rooted in the American spirit and to help build a movement devoted to those ideas. Our work since then has built on that foundation.

I’ve always considered myself part of the reasonable, radical libertarian movement—radical by the standards of contemporary politics (though not by the standards of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness) and reasonable in presenting policy ideas in a mainstream way. This can also include rescuing sound libertarian ideas from unsavory associations or counterproductive framings.

We have tried to present the principles of liberty in a variety of accessible ways to broaden public understanding and support. The Cato University Home Study Course offers 30 hours of audio on the history of libertarian ideas. Cato University seminars give people a chance to study liberty with great teachers and engaged students for several intense days. Our website [Libertarianism.org](http://Libertarianism.org) presents both classic and original articles on liberty. Books such as *The Libertarian Mind*; *The Encyclopedia of Libertarianism* (now online at [Libertarianism.org](http://Libertarianism.org)); *Realizing Freedom: Libertarian Theory, History, and Practice*; *Economics and Free Markets*; and *Peace, War, and Liberty: Understanding U.S. Foreign Policy* can be found in libraries and college classrooms.

We have been ahead of the curve in focusing attention on policy problems that politicians and pundits were ignoring:

- We began warning about Social Security’s financial imbalances in 1980 and proposing a transition to a system based on ownership, inheritability, and choice. Sadly, the political

system has not acted on these warnings, and Social Security’s financing remains rickety.

- We challenged the war on drugs, pointing out that drug prohibition violated individual rights and led to crime and corruption. Changing minds on drug prohibition has been a slow process, but now 33 states and the District of Columbia have enacted varying degrees of marijuana legalization.
- In the 1980s, discussion of the role of the judiciary centered on “judicial activism” versus “judicial restraint.” Scholars associated with the Cato Institute began challenging that dichotomy with an emphasis on the duty of the courts to protect individual rights. Richard Epstein, Randy Barnett, and now, this perspective is well represented on the Supreme Court and has influenced rulings on such issues as interstate commerce and gun control.

Of course, we could not carry out our mission without the generous support of our 15,000 Cato Sponsors. We’re especially grateful when Sponsors partner with us to identify special opportunities to celebrate and advance our shared commitment to liberty. A grant from the late B. Kenneth Simon helped to sustain our Center for Constitutional Studies, and Roger Pilon became the B. Kenneth Simon Chair as well as director of the center. A more recent grant grew out of a longtime Sponsor’s desire to help Americans learn and understand the basic principles of economics as they apply to policy choices, and his bequest in 2016 allowed us to hire Ryan Bourne as the R. Evan Scharf Chair for the Public Understanding of Economics.

In 2012, the *New York Times* called Cato “a venerable libertarian research center unafraid to cross party lines” and reported, “Over the years, Cato has successfully injected libertarian views into Washington policy and political debates, and given them mainstream respectability.” That’s an indication of our accomplishment over the past 43 years in creating a voice for libertarian ideas in Washington and in the national policy debate.