

A Legacy of Liberty: Robert Levy Leaves His Mark on Libertarianism

By Audrey Grayson

From tobacco settlements to Second Amendment rights, Robert Levy has helped advance libertarian principles and defend the Constitution on pivotal issues.

There are few people in the 45-year history of Cato who have done more for—or meant more to—the Institute and the cause for liberty than longtime Cato Sponsor and chairman emeritus of Cato’s board of directors Robert (Bob) Levy.

Levy began his career with Cato as a senior fellow and eventually served for 26 years, including 15 on the board of directors and 14 as its chairman. During his tenure as Cato’s chairman, Levy steered the Institute with vision and decisiveness through formidable challenges. Most important, his leadership ensured that Cato remained independent and true to its mission.

Levy’s principled approach to stewarding the organization helped define Cato’s culture. No matter how heated the fights for liberty became, Levy maintained his characteristic sense of calm, good humor, and adherence to the values for which Cato stands.

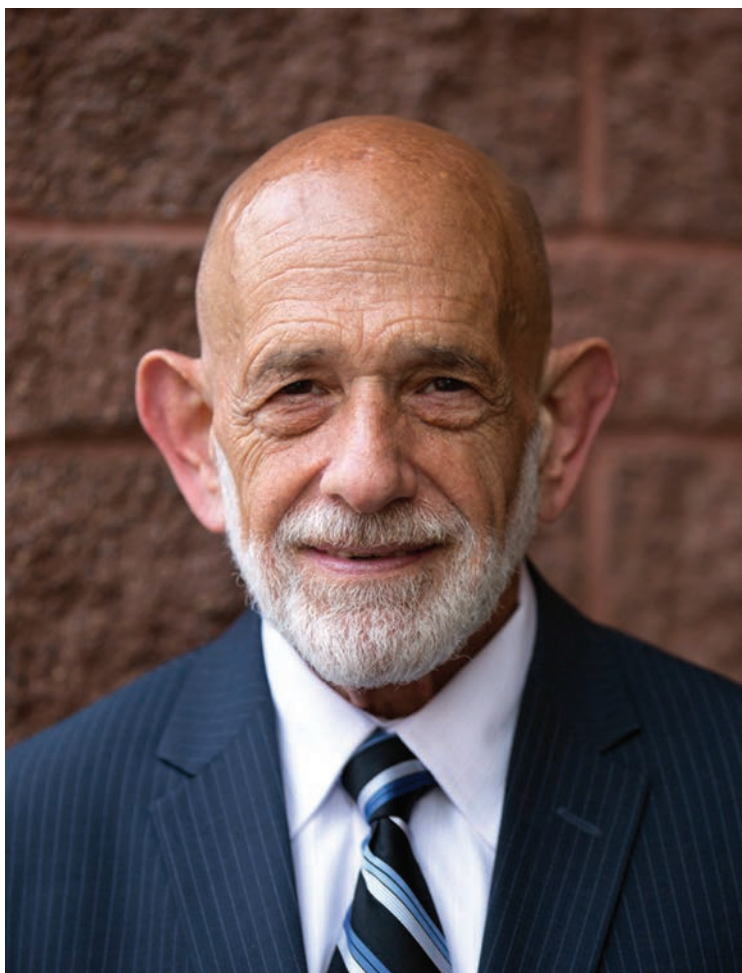
“It’s nearly impossible to overstate the profound impact Bob has had on the Cato Institute,” said Peter Goettler, Cato president and CEO. “His service has been key to Cato reaching higher and higher levels of performance, while his generosity has been extraordinary. And his friendship has meant so much to many of us.”

In 1996, Levy applied to work at Cato’s Center for Constitutional Studies. He had sold his successful financial services business, earned a law degree while in his 50s from George Mason University—graduating as class valedictorian—and clerked for two years on the US District Court for the District of Columbia and the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

He was offered a position as a legal expert at Cato, and from that day forward, Cato and Bob Levy were synonymous.

By the time Levy began working at Cato, he was already a longtime Cato Sponsor, but he believed he could make the biggest impact on the future of liberty by working alongside Cato’s legal scholars.

“Cato always operated outside the political process, addressing issues rather





Bob Levy outside the Supreme Court in 2008 after the landmark case *District of Columbia v. Heller*, which affirmed that the Second Amendment protects an individual's right to keep and bear arms.

than candidates or campaigns. And it was always consistent—never compromising on its advocacy of limited government, individual liberty, and the rule of law. Those characteristics are what make Cato successful, and I knew that's where I wanted to learn and apply my law degree," Levy said.

In his first few years at Cato, Levy became a prominent figure in a widely publicized legal battle: the global tobacco settlement of 1998 in which tobacco companies paid out \$365 billion. The payment was supposedly to reimburse for smoking-related illnesses and deaths, but it was partly in exchange for a shield from antitrust litigation. Through widely disseminated studies, testimony,

media appearances, and op-eds, Levy educated the public and policymakers on how the settlement benefited tobacco companies by protecting them against competing startups while ultimately shifting the cost to smokers—the very people it was intended to help—by allowing the major tobacco companies to raise the price of cigarettes without fear of competition.

Despite negative feedback from some in the tobacco industry and threats to withdraw support from Cato if Levy persisted in criticizing the settlement, Cato's CEO at the time, Ed Crane, declared that Cato would provide public commentary on the litigation regardless of the effect on donations to the Institute.

"That's just one example of Cato's consistency and independence," Levy said. "So many think tanks find themselves compromised by financial repercussions, but Cato has never succumbed to that problem." In 2002, Levy embarked on a historic battle to defend the constitutional right to bear arms.

Joining with Cato's now senior vice president for legal studies Clark Neily and local attorney Alan Gura, Levy began planning a lawsuit to strike down the handgun ban in Washington, DC. Levy called the law "an outright prohibition that transparently violates constitutional guarantees." His self-financed Second Amendment lawsuit faced considerable opposition, but ultimately Levy's insight and commitment led to the landmark 2008 case *District of Columbia v. Heller* in which the US Supreme Court established that the

Constitution protects an individual's right to keep and bear arms.

"Every step of the way, Bob's influence and support was there. The case never would have happened and never would have been successful without his participation," Neily said.

Levy's influence is felt throughout the libertarian world through his leadership on several boards, his significant philanthropy, and his collegiality—a trait that draws people to him and unites communities of liberty-lovers. Within the ecosystem of liberty organizations, the entry point for many is through a relationship with Bob Levy.

Aptly, the legal center where Levy initially applied for a job in 1996 now bears his name—the Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies—following a generous anonymous contribution made in his honor in 2017.

Beyond devoting much of his life and career to Cato's mission, Levy recently created a transformational planned gift that ensures his—and Cato's—legacy will live on for many years to come.

"It's an honor to work with such an accomplished community of Sponsors dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets, and peace," Levy said. "Our future is bright. Cato's impact is increasing every day, and our mission to promote human freedom is crucial." ✦

For more information on Cato's Legacy Society, please contact Brian Mullis at bmullis@cato.org or visit [Cato.org/plannedgiving](https://cato.org/plannedgiving).