

# “Nobody Is Coming to Save You”: Jane Coaston Explains How Skepticism Informs Her Worldview

By Alex Nowrasteh

Journalist and commentator Jane Coaston joins Cato’s Alex Nowrasteh to discuss the futility of culture wars, where libertarianism fits in today’s political landscape, and the evolving role of the Libertarian Party. Coaston, the host of Crooked Media’s *What a Day* podcast, a contributing writer to the *New York Times*, and the former host of the *Times’ The Argument* podcast, is known for her incisive coverage of the conservative movement, American politics, and the complexities of identity. Coaston’s trademark blend of skepticism and optimism cuts through ideological dogma as she reflects on the future of liberty in an increasingly polarized world.



**ALEX NOWRASTEH:** You've said of yourself that you are "especially distrustful of efforts by the state to get people to do things." What caused your distrust?

**JANE COASTON:** A couple of things. One, I hate being told what to do. And I actually think that that's a very general American sense. It's a funny thing I've noticed, because you see along the national conservative right, this belief in kind of hammering people toward the "common good," and I just keep thinking, "You've met people, right?" They don't want to be hammered into the common good. If you hammer them into the common good, they will hammer back. So, I think just kind of a general sentiment of not wanting to be told what to do.

I also think that I tend to be very concerned about uses of the state to get people to do things, especially because it's not just the state—it's people within the state. The state is constructed of people who can make mistakes, people who can have bad motivations, people who can just be having a weird day. I think that's something that's made me very distrustful, and that also goes for institutions more broadly. It's been interesting to see people who are very opposed to state intervention but are also like, "Please, billionaire, help me, save me." And I'm like, "Nobody is coming to save you." There are just people with varying degrees of power, trying to figure it out the best they can and sometimes not the best they can. And I think that general skepticism has informed my view.

**ALEX:** Do you think that's innate to you, your personality, or is this something born of experiences? I know you've written and talked about your experiences growing

up in a mixed-race household and being a minority in that way as well as a sexual minority—do you think that's informed it? Or is it more just your personality, just innate to you?

**JANE:** A little bit of both. I think that growing up as a minority in any way informs how you respond to the majority. Even when you become the majority, even if you move to a different place and more people are like you, you're still informed by your experiences of not having that. I think that's something we don't talk about enough is that so many people who move to left-leaning cities or regions are coming from places that were very conservative. You're responding to an experience of being the minority without really remembering that you are now the majority.

But I would also say it's just kind of natural to my personality. I am always asking questions in a really irritating way. I used to joke that I got into journalism because I'm an intensely nosy person. If you are having an interesting conversation at a restaurant near me, I am listening. I can't help it. It's just who I am. So all of those pieces have come together.

As you get older, you see changes in how people talk. I think about this a lot—I went to Catholic school, and I also spent a lot of time in my youth attempting to be an evangelical Christian, very ineffectively. For people who remember the 1990s and early 2000s, purity culture was a big deal—abstinence-only education, a real emphasis on the idea that sex is bad, having sex is terrible, teen pregnancy is the worst thing that could possibly happen to you. And now we're starting to see the pro-natalist right arguing, "Actually, teen pregnancy is

pretty OK." People are getting very upset when you see reports that teens are having sex less, when in 1997, it would have been greeted with a parade. So I think that there's a sense, to me, of an inherent skepticism now, seeing how people who were so willing to demonize people who had sex before marriage, or people who got pregnant as teens, and now those same exact people are performing outrage that teens aren't having enough sex.

**ALEX:** It seems like the social conservatives won, and they're just not happy with it.

**JANE:** I've been thinking about this a lot, this idea of a final victory in politics—it doesn't exist. There is no such thing. I remember joking about this a couple of years ago when Donald Trump first won in 2016, and it seemed to me that he believed that winning the presidency was like winning a gold medal in the Olympics, like you wouldn't have to go do anything else. You'd win, and everyone would celebrate. And actually, being president is a terrible job. I don't think he really liked being president. I keep seeing people assuming that there will be a final victory in politics, where every knee shall bend and every tongue will confess that they were right the whole time. But there is no final victory.

And also, culture wars can't permit a win. I think you see this with the Dobbs decision, which I've said was the greatest "dog that caught the car" decision in American politics, because you had 50 years of people saying, "We want to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. That's our main goal, and once we do that, everything is going to be awesome, and everyone will be happy, and we don't have to think about anything." It was always

presented as something you were fighting for, but you kind of assumed you'd never get it. I think that's how politicians used the issue as a carrot to wave over people who oppose abortion, to get them to vote, and then they got it, and it turns out people weren't happy with it. And it turns out that even the people who thought everyone would be happy with it now kind of have to dissemble and lie about it.

I think a lot about how those two factors—there is no final victory in politics and culture wars won't permit victory—I think that really informs how I see a lot of these issues, especially when people flip-flop so dramatically on them.

**ALEX:** We had this so-called libertarian moment before Donald Trump came on the scene.

**JANE:** Haven't we had, like, 10 libertarian moments?

**ALEX:** I mean, I have one daily, but politically, yeah, you're right. I admit, at the time I was fairly enthusiastic about it, but then it got just immediately replaced by Donald Trump, populism, national conservatism. Was it real? Or was it just like an illusion where we're just fooling ourselves?

**JANE:** It was an illusion. I think that whenever government is unpopular, people who are libertarian—"small-l" libertarian-minded—they see that as a moment to talk about how the government's too big, and it does the wrong things, and it has too much power over our lives.

I remember thinking that talking about the stories of white Americans or Native Americans and Indigenous folks who'd been

killed by police wrongly would get people on board with criminal justice reform. And you still see this with people who were like, “Well, the January 6 protesters who are still stuck in detention in DC—they complain about the conditions.” And you hear prison reform people being like, “Yeah, the conditions are really bad. You know where they’re also really bad? Rikers.” It *should* mean that people would get on board with policies that would curtail the power of the state, or curtail the power of government, or do something about prison conditions. But it doesn’t. It just doesn’t, because what we see over and over again, especially with regard to the libertarian moment, is that people don’t like the government, but they really want the government to do these other things.

**ALEX:** There was a time when the Libertarian Party waved a kooky but principled flag. They weren’t very serious, but at least they held some deep principles and commitments. Then, over the last several years, they have increasingly taken up a lot of fairly extreme, right-wing policy positions. You can’t follow the Libertarian Party of New Hampshire Twitter account and not be deeply disturbed by the lack of libertarianism, its obsession with trolling—they’re basically just promoting Trump. What caused the LP, which used to be this kooky, principled standard bearer, to just drift so far into these nether reaches of the internet?

**JANE:** I think the LP faces the same challenge that any movement does, which is a tendency toward a purity spiral. A purity spiral shows up in any movement, but the challenge of it is that the purity

spiral—you can’t get out of it, because it can’t be disproven. There is no reason for anyone who is within a purity spiral to get out, because doing so would be less pure. I think about this a lot with people who are on the very far left, people who are advocating democratic socialism, and they get very upset at candidates who are advocating their values, but doing so in a way that they don’t think is pure enough, because the most pure thing to do would be to never win elections. And you see this now with the Republican Party, where it is physically impossible for them to say, “No, this is wrong.” They may say it’s ineffective, but that’s not the same thing as wrong. They can’t turn down their furthest right flank.

You see this with religion; you see this with pretty much anything. The LP, I think, succumbed to a purity spiral. The Mises Caucus took over a couple of years ago, and I think that there was a real sense to them that winning votes wasn’t the point. Gary Johnson technically had the best performance of any Libertarian Party candidate for president ever, and people were furious because he thought that driver’s licenses were OK.

The Libertarian Party has nominated and elected candidates in down-ballot races, and many people vote for Libertarian candidates in presidential runs. But I think that once the party itself became about a purity spiral, then you invite the worst possible elements.

**ALEX:** So where does this leave libertarians? Is there a viable space in American politics for small-l libertarianism?

**JANE:** I think small-l libertarianism is always at its most effective when it is

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trying to influence the actions of the two major parties. We’ve seen that actually quite effectively with Democrats and the YIMBY movement [“yes in my back yard”] and talking about making housing more available and reducing regulations. You actually had people talking at the DNC about reducing housing regulations. I think Barack Obama talked about cutting regulations. But that wasn’t because of purity spiraling. That was because people were talking about these issues and doing so based on policy and being convincing and making the point that places that could build housing were doing better, and places that couldn’t weren’t

doing as well. So, I think when you can push the two parties toward a more libertarian direction—though with both of them, it’s kind of kicking and screaming—I think that is where libertarians find their place.

**ALEX:** I think a libertarian cynic would hear what you’re saying and think, “Well, Jane’s endorsing fusionism,” this alliance between conservatives and libertarians. And a lot of libertarians seem pretty upset about that, because they see what’s happened to the conservative movement. But are you talking about fusionism, or are you talking about just an alliance of convenience?

**JANE:** Alliances of convenience. The point of fusionism was not that people agreed. It said they had a common enemy, and if we don’t have that common enemy, well, things are more difficult. It’s politics—if you want something to happen, occasionally you’re going to have to work with people you don’t really like all that much. So, I think being willing to say, “I disagree with this person on all of these issues, but on this one really important issue to me, I’m going to support them” [is important]. If you think that it is good when there’s more housing or fewer regulations for small businesses, or if you support licensing reform so that people who want to braid hair don’t need to get an expensive license to do so, you will likely be working with people who you disagree with on a host of other issues, and you can continue to disagree with them.

I think the challenge with fusionism was not that people were making an alliance on specific issues. It was like a moral rubric of saying, “We are together. We stand together athwart this giant challenge.” Which could have been a more concise challenge—it

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could have been saying, “We oppose the Soviet Union,” but then it became, “Oh, we oppose big government, or we oppose these ideas.” And then when you get down to it, you’re like, are you all agreed on what you’re actually doing here?

I think you must be willing to say, on this issue I’m going to support this person, on this issue I’m going to support this person. Having a more diverse politic—I think that’s the requirement of any person with libertarian views. Nobody’s going to make you happy, everybody’s annoying, but some people are going to be correct on certain issues, and you can support them.

**ALEX:** You’ve spoken before about tribalism and about the decrease in tolerance in the United States—tolerance for ideas, different people, different ways of living, just disagreement in general. And the world certainly does seem more intolerant in multiple different ways. What’s the cause of this? Is it that we lack a common enemy? Is it the internet? Was it always there?

**JANE:** I think tribalism is eternal. We’ve always been this way. I think that it might

become more visible. I think this is also one of those moments in which I urge people to go outside. I live in West Hollywood, which is a fascinating place, because it is, like, half hipster gay folks and ultra-Orthodox Jews. Everybody’s just kind of bopping along, and it’s fine—folks are going to shul; some folks are going to the bar. We just kind of intersect and we’re OK. So, I think the disagreement and the rancor, a lot of that is because it pays. It’s because media negativity, cultural negativity, cultural rancor gets clicks and people to pay for it, and they like it.

There’s a way in which now, because we have the use of social media, which provides a fun-house mirror into how the world works, I think that we are simultaneously just as bad at responding to new ideas and new concepts we disagree with as we always were, but now we’re all really aware of it. But I do think we can’t look backward without being in that time, without being in that context, remembering that for much of the 20th century, the people permitted to have ideas in public was very limited. And now it’s way less limited, which is good, but we’re hearing more ideas that we hate and trying to respond to all of those, and we’re being observed in kind of a panopticon while we do so.

**ALEX:** So, we’ve talked a lot about things that are not going super well in American society and in the libertarian movement. What do you think is going well in American political culture and society, and what’s going well among libertarians in the libertarian movement?

**JANE:** I’m glad you asked me that, because I am actually a deeply avowed optimist. I hate negativity. I hate doomerism. Doomerism

is a political ideology that leads nowhere. There are many people who seem to be convinced that if they just complain about how bad things are, things will get better because of the complaining. But that’s not how this works. So, I would say lots of things are going really, really well in American culture and American society. For example, I think the massive improvements that we’ve seen across the board with regard to access to technology—great. I mentioned teen pregnancy earlier—teen pregnancy has dropped 79 percent since the 1990s; that is an achievement the likes of which people would have been having parades for. There are lots of different places where people can live across the board. I think all the time about how in very conservative areas, there will be pockets of really liberal places. That’s great, the diversifying of American states like Ohio, Michigan, Minnesota. There are more different kinds of people living among each other peacefully than ever before in the history of human civilization.

Whenever people ask, “What time would you want to be born in?,” I’m like, literally right now. There’s never in history been a better time to be alive. It’s just true. You go back 30, 40 years, and you start edging into, how much access do I have to the Albuterol inhaler that I need sometimes? How much access do I have to medications, to contact lenses, to just basic things?

**ALEX:** If there’s one thing that you’ve learned about American libertarianism in the last 5 or 10 years that you wish a younger version of yourself knew, what is it?

**JANE:** Nobody has any idea what the hell they’re doing. Actually, that would be a

secondary thing. I think the main thing is to know that small-I libertarianism and big-I libertarianism are always going to be different, because I think small-I libertarianism is something that everybody kind of has. I talk about the idea of personal libertarianism, and it can be extraordinarily selfish, which I know people who are libertarians get accused of being selfish all the time. And I will say that there’s a form of personal libertarianism which is, like, “I should be able to do what I want, and you should have to do what I want.” You see this a little bit with driving regulations, or with some of those ticky-tack laws that have gotten people killed before, in which people violate them all the time, and then they call the cops on somebody they see violating them. So, I think that the challenge has always been translating little-I personal libertarianism, widening it to be like a libertarianism for everybody, the belief that if I see someone breaking a ticky-tack law, I’m not going to call the cops, because I wouldn’t want them to do the same to me.

The difficulty of translating personal libertarianism to libertarianism writ large—I think that’s the biggest challenge. I thought when I was younger, perhaps, that libertarianism spoke for itself, and it doesn’t. It just doesn’t.

**ALEX:** I love what you said there. Nobody knows what they’re doing—probably the shortest and most succinct criticism of central planning I’ve ever heard. ♦

*Editor’s note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*