

Why We Left the Left: Personal Stories by Leftists/Liberals Who Evolved to Embrace Libertarianism

Why I Left the Left*
by
Tom Garrison

“Point of racism.”

Along with the ever popular “point of sexism,” these additions to Roberts Rules of Order often echoed at statewide meetings of the California Peace and Freedom Party (PFP). You have to understand that one would be hard pressed to find a group less imbued with racist or sexist thoughts or behaviors than the leadership of the California Peace and Freedom Party—the only avowedly socialist party with ballot status in California. Yet, during debate members of some factions would often challenge any speaker who even mildly criticized or challenged the ideas of a person of color or woman by shouting “point of racism” and/or “point of sexism.” Leftist democracy in action—try and intimidate your opponents by labeling them as racists and/or sexists. It is important to know that these folks are hypersensitive about race and sex and calling them racist or sexist is a powerful tool. It sounds ridiculous now and was silly then.

As a member of the PFP State Central Committee, I experienced these activities many times from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s. These were only a minor, and somewhat amusing, sidelight to the major themes of why I left the Left.

Basically there are four characteristics of the Left that made it impossible to continue with my leftist affiliations. I’ll mix personal observations with a wider analysis and empirical evidence. The four characteristics are: (1) a lack of respect for and understanding of the concept of personal responsibility for one’s own actions; (2) unnecessary lying that undermined the democratic process; (3) a slavish adherence to “affirmative action” preferences, quotas, identity politics, and multicultural “diversity”; (4) and a strong intolerance for real diversity of ideas.

As time went on, I found myself more and more at the non-leftist part of the political continuum. While not the only issues that split me from the Left, there are representative of how the Left (and contemporary liberals in general) just don’t get it.

Personal Responsibility

Our local Socialist Party/PFP chapter had a meeting soon after the April 1992 riots in Los Angeles that followed the original Simi Valley trial and acquittal of the Los Angeles police officers who were charged with attacking Rodney King. As you recall, during those riots, a white truck driver, Reginald Denny, was savagely attacked by several black men for no reason other than that Denny was a white man in the wrong place at the wrong time. Damian Williams, of the “71 Hustlers” a prime attacker of Denny, used a piece of concrete to fracture Denny’s skull in 91 places. Williams also did the “revolutionary” act of pulling down the pants of another unconscious white victim and spray-painting his genitals black while a mob watched and laughed¹ Even though Williams’ actions were captured on videotape, he was later acquitted of the most serious charges.²

At our meeting one member proclaimed that we need to understand the black thugs (not their words) who attacked Denny and to see that their actions were not their fault but rather a function of societal oppression. Incredible! These thugs attack a totally innocent white man and we're supposed to tolerate it because the attackers are black. In our present culture feelings trump behavior.

Look at the facts. Damian Williams had a long history of gang-related violence. He could clearly make a choice between attacking a white man with whom he had no grudge and not attacking—the choice was his. But at least one member (and most likely several other sympathizers) of our local socialist group accepted and advanced the idea that poor Damian Williams was not to blame for his purposeful and vicious attack on a truly innocent victim who happened to be white. Society made him do it. Amazing.

Another very popular and obvious example of dismissing personal responsibility is the fairly recent idea of classifying alcoholism as a disease. Come on. If you believe that, then it is the only disease to have ever been eradicated by willpower. Quitting may be a difficult process, but an alcoholic can end his “disease” by simply *choosing* not to drink. That is, taking responsibility for his actions and not drinking.

If this were not the case, how else could we explain the millions of former alcoholics who simply choose not to drink and don't? Does their “disease” simply go away? In a sense yes, it does, once they decide to display some willpower and character.

It may be true that some folks have a genetic predisposition toward alcoholism. But that just means that once they know this, they should not drink. Abstaining may not be easy and requires willpower, but that certainly does not mean alcoholism is a disease.

However, the Left and liberals do seem to strongly latch on to any excuse for why an individual's crappy behavior is not his fault. Usually the mantra is that society is to blame. In this case, it is the mythical “disease” of alcoholism. Why is so difficult for leftists/liberals to simply say that someone does not have much character and/or willpower and this leads them to abuse alcohol. The answer is obvious—once the way is open to honestly discuss personal failing as a reason for destructive behavior, then other personal failings may also be attributed to an individual's own actions and not the fault of society. The whole underpinning of the Left and liberalism would be badly shaken. Leftism/liberalism relies on the proposition that, for the most part, people do not control their own lives and they need the government (for liberals) or the new socialist society (for leftists) to protect and watch out for them—the nanny state.

It is true society plays a role in molding people and that a black person in a racist society may face problems not of his own making. But contemporary America is not oppressively racist and there are plenty of chances for any hard working person who makes thoughtful choices to carve out a decent life. However, leftists/liberals are thoroughly immersed in the narcissism of minor differences. Noted civil rights activist Dr. James Meredith points out that:

... somewhere along the line, someone in power decided that the proud black race, a people who build cultures in Africa and built many of the physical structures of this nation, could not survive without a host of federal programs and giveaways.... A “dependency mentality” was created and fostered by black and white liberals looking to buy power. . . . I have come to realize that while white racism exists, our main roadblocks in the '90s are ones that have been created by our own so-called leadership.³

The situation today—approximately 40 percent of Americans receive federal government handouts of cash and valuable benefits (more than 45 million receive food stamps), financed by the 50 percent of citizens who actually pay taxes—further undermines personal responsibility. Assuming some percentage those receiving handouts are in a bad situation through no fault of their own, our nanny state system—fully supported by liberals and leftists—still enables tens of millions of Americans (and who knows exactly how many illegal aliens) to abrogate personal responsibility. The sad reality is that decades into the welfare/nanny state, virtually nothing has changed. According to political scientist and authority on public administration James Wilson:

...there are three simple behavioral rules for avoiding poverty: finish high school, produce no children before marrying, and no child before age 20. Only 8 percent of families who conform to all three rules are poor; 79 percent of those who do not conform are poor.⁴

All three rules are dependent upon personal responsibility. Act responsibly and your chances of living in poverty plummet. Individual responsibility, not society, is the key. Ask your favorite leftist/liberal if they agree and you will get a litany of “reasons” why people are victims of society, corporations, the rich, or some other boogeyman—anything but personal responsibility. After all, a villain is needed to justify the security blanket of the nanny state.

Unnecessary Leftist/Liberal Lying

During the 1980s my wife, Deb, and I were very active in the local Santa Barbara Tenants Union (SBTU). Other than our local socialist group, the Tenants Union was the most active “progressive” organization in Santa Barbara at that time.

At least some of the SBTU’s permanent leadership (they always held office in the SBTU) were affiliated with the League of Revolutionary Struggle (LRS), a nationwide communist organization formed in 1978. The LRS considered itself anti-revisionist and took inspiration from the Communist Party of China and its leader Mao Zedong. It was heavily invested in racial and ethnic identity politics.

How could we tell they were commies? The LRS published a newspaper called *Unity*. Even for a lefty paper it was pretty bad—full of slogans and stories of struggle against capitalism by just about anybody as long as they were non-white. By this time I was fairly well connected with the local reds, some LRS people and a few Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) types. The only people who sold *Unity* were members of the SBTU’s permanent leadership. When Deb and I asked if they were LRS members the reply was always, “I am a supporter of the *Unity* newspaper.” Come on. Nobody except a dues-paying LRS member would try to sell that rag.

Deb and I had no problem with commies. Well, maybe a little problem with the fact that they were Marxists-Leninists and believed in the dictatorship of the proletariat. I had some concern that, if they were honest, they would most likely initiate violence (as opposed to self-defense) to achieve their ends. Ohhhh, and we had maybe a tinsy problem with the most likely outcome if their kind gained power—that people like Deb and I would be some of the first to be lined up against a wall and shot. Other than those small caveats, we were fine with the local commies.

But this transparent lying about their political affiliation means that when the “revolution” comes it will be led in Santa Barbara by political activists who are, if not skilled at lying, at least comfortable with it. A great start for a new humanistic order.

Lying about one's principal political affiliation has a long history on the Left. There may have been justification for underground political work (including lying about leftist political affiliations) in Czarist Russia or 1980s El Salvador. But in 1980s America?

I twice ran for Santa Barbara City Council (1985 and 1987) openly as a socialist. In several years (early 1980s to mid-1990s) of very intense political activity—all of it done openly as a member of the California Peace and Freedom Party and the Socialist Party, USA—I never had a major hassle with the public due to being a socialist and promoting socialism. Neither did any of the score or so core members of our local socialist group.

Keep in mind that this was the apogee of the Reagan-Bush years and I was doing openly socialist political work in Ronald Reagan's adopted home town. As a matter of fact, I think my campaigns and other political work by myself and others in our local socialist group greatly benefited from our honesty and being a novelty. I was treated fairly and with respect by moderates and conservatives and the local media. I had dozens of intense yet civil discussions with capitalists and other running dogs.

The only real problems came from liberals who wanted me to lie and say I was simply another “progressive” Democrat—a stupid idea for several reasons. “Progressive”/liberal Democrats are a dime a dozen in Santa Barbara. At least one runs for every office in the county. I was not a Democrat and was not about to lie concerning my basic political affiliations, even though I surly would have received more votes if I did. But it would have been a betrayal of the public trust and my own values. It still seems odd that Democratic Party activists encouraged me to lie.

During both campaigns my campaign literature noted my membership in the Socialist Party and the Peace and Freedom Party—I ran openly as a socialist. What is the use of being a socialist and not openly pushing it? A socialist running as a “progressive” or liberal Democrat is simply one more liberal Democrat and does not advance the democratic socialist “revolution” in any meaningful manner. If nothing else, my running openly as a socialist showed people who met me during the campaign that a “red” could also be a thoughtful believer in democracy (and they could see that I did not have horns).

“Affirmative Action” Preferences, Identity Politics, and Multicultural “Diversity”

My campaigns were run by committees of decent hard working leftists. I still have nothing but admiration for almost all who were at the center of the campaigns. Among many interesting discussions during my two campaigns for Santa Barbara City Council was one that emerged in both campaigns and demonstrates illogical pandering to the god of multicultural “diversity” and identity politics.

To become a US citizen, one must demonstrate competence in the English language. My campaign committees had serious discussions about whether or not to print some of our campaign literature in Spanish. Many felt that doing so would help us gain the Latino vote. (More than one-third of the population in Santa Barbara is of Hispanic ancestry.)

My wife and I consistently argued that since only citizens could register to vote, and since naturalized Hispanic citizens must have competence in the English language (or they could not become citizens), there was no need for Spanish language campaign material. Those not competent in English could not become citizens and, thus, could not vote. Further, since virtually all Hispanic-

ancestry citizens born in the US would speak English by the time they could register to vote, there was absolutely no need for Spanish language campaign material.

Our logic won the day, but it interesting that the folks working in my campaigns would even broach this subject in a serious manner. Their arguments demonstrated the power of multiculturalism and the need of the Left to pander to identity politics.

Like most communist groups, the LRS was active in the Democrat Party (although not always openly as LRS members). Nationally they played an important role in the Rainbow Coalition and the 1984 and 1988 campaigns to elect Jesse Jackson as president.

The LRS folks and their supporters also exhibited an incredible ability to politically support almost anyone—excepting, of course, the most blatant conservative—as long as that person had black or brown skin and was a Democrat.

They demonstrated this behavior when Democrat Tom Bradley, a black moderate (at best), ran for governor of California in 1986. Other than being black, Bradley had almost no progressive/leftist credentials. The Tenants Union had a radical constitution and, as noted above, some members of the leadership were LRS members. My wife and I, being serious and open leftists, argued strenuously that the Tenants Union should endorse the PFP candidate (a Hispanic woman, Maria Elizabeth Munoz) instead of the milquetoast Bradley for governor. While we managed to convince several Tenants Union members who were not LRS “supporters” to endorse the true leftist candidate, the majority voted to endorse Bradley (the vote was 13 to seven for Bradley).

Understand the underlying political context. An endorsement by the Santa Barbara Tenants Union for any candidate for statewide office would only influence at most a couple of hundred voters in Santa Barbara—almost certainly not enough to make a difference for any candidate. But, by openly backing a socialist (the PFP candidate) the organization would help build a base outside the Democrat Party for progressives and leftists. On the other hand, backing a tired old moderate Democrat would mean almost nothing and build little except allegiance to what almost everyone in the leadership agreed was a corrupt Democrat Party. Moreover, it would show that the Tenants Union supported a black male candidate over a Hispanic woman. It didn’t matter that Bradley would offer at best lukewarm support for the goals of the Tenants Union, while the PFP candidate would whole heartedly support those goals. Bradley was a black Democrat—that was enough. A clear example of identity politics wining over issue-based ideological politics.

One of the most impressive examples of identity politics and race pandering was the hoopla surrounding the June 29, 1995 US Supreme Court decision (a five to four vote) ordering the state of Georgia to redraw its 11th Congressional District in a manner that omits race as the “predominant” factor. Subsequent redistricting of five “racially gerrymandered” black-majority Congressional districts into white-majority districts in Florida, Georgia, and Texas spurred leftists, liberals, and so-called black leaders to predict (read their words) Armageddon for black folks in America.

The ruling was “the first step in the resegregation of American electoral democracy,” according to Wade Henderson, legal director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He added “If race can’t be a factor, it’s going to be almost impossible to preserve these black districts”⁵. Cynthia McKinney, the black female Democrat incumbent in Georgia’s 11th district, lamented the ruling as “...a setback for democracy” and said that she

believed that “The issue of fairness has been squarely left behind”⁶. That paragon of virtue President Clinton called the decision a “setback in the struggle to ensure that all Americas participate fully in the electoral process”⁷. And Rev. Jesse Jackson said this limit on racial gerrymandering would produce an “ethnic cleansing of Congress.”⁸

Guess what? The sky did not fall and black folks are not once again in slavery. All five black incumbents in the former black-majority and now white-majority Southern districts won their races in the November 1996 Congressional elections. Maybe Americans, even white Southerners, are not as racist as identity politics leaders would have us believe.

By early 1996 I had become fed up with affirmative action preferences and quotas in government, college admissions, etc. I took a small, entirely unscientific, survey to gather empirical evidence as to the extent of discrimination against women in college and the workplace. Over a couple of months, I asked co-workers and friends if they had ever been discriminated against in school or the workplace because of their sex. I polled nine women, from their early 20s to their late 40s, if they felt they had suffered sexual discrimination at any point during the last ten years. (I used ten years because I figured that even the most retrograde men had at least heard of sexual discrimination by the mid-1980s and knew that it was unacceptable and could be illegal.) None, that’s correct *none*, of the respondents reported *any* discrimination based on their sex.

Of course, the sample was small and my method unscientific. But if sexual discrimination was as rampant as leftists and feminists would have us believe, I figured at least half the women I talked to would report some sexual discrimination in the past decade. And if we are to believe feminists and the advocates of preferences and quotas, it is damn near impossible that not one of the nine women had been a victim of sexual discrimination.

I know sexual discrimination exists. But from my own observations, questioning, and much reading, I cannot believe that it is anywhere as pervasive as feminists and quota advocates would have us believe. Perhaps they need to keep “victimhood” alive to maintain their own jobs in Women’s Studies programs and the cottage industry of sexual discrimination.

In a March 23, 1998 *Newsweek* essay Meg Greenfield clearly stated the major problem with identity politics (and by extension support of affirmative action preferences, quotas, and multiculturalism):

To let yourself be transformed into the emblem of some cause, any cause, or demographic category, and to draw your identity and take your marching orders from it is to kick away your freedom, your independence and your individuality. It is to suspend all these and basically to lose your influence over events that matter to you. You will find you have forgotten how to speak out with views that do not conform to those of the group or that you will have been led not to trust such views. You will see life through a very narrow lens and be very much in the control of those who do the defining of the group interest.⁹

Intolerance for True Diversity of Ideas

Several years ago my wife and I got into a political discussion with another couple while on a trip to Las Vegas. While cruising sin city in our rental car, I remember relating how I have two good friends who are conservative—two undergraduate teachers with whom I still maintain contact after graduating decades ago. The guy, let’s call him Mr. N, replied that he had never met a conservative who he believed was not a fascist in disguise. No matter what I said, Mr. N would not accept the idea that a conservative could be principled and decent person—that there exists

such an animal as a Burkian conservative who is not racist, not sexist, not anti-democratic, but simply has an ideology that challenges many tenants of modern liberalism.

I encountered the same or similar attitude dozens of times with leftists and liberals, albeit usually in not such an unvarnished manner. The truly unfortunate thing is that I doubt if Mr. N ever had a serious discussion with a principled conservative. It might lead to some doubt and the notion that a conservative could be seen as a real person and not simply a stereotype.

It was a bit of a shock to realize that Mr. N—while not a leftist but a strong liberal—could not accept as valid the idea that there exist people of good will who were not of his political persuasion. He was clearly being intolerant of other political views. I realized that the much touted diversity of the last 35 years or so does not seem to include the most meaningful type of diversity—a diversity of ideas.

Years ago I came across an interesting article in *The Wall Street Journal* that reported on a study at the University of Colorado and academic tolerance, or lack thereof. It is the premier public university in a state in which registered Republicans (at that time) outnumber Democrats by more than 100,000—a state in which the Republican Party controlled both houses of the state legislature from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. The article noted that in 13 social science and humanities departments at the University's main campus in Boulder, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by a ratio of 31 to one. Of the 190 professors affiliated with a political party 184 were Democrats. Not a single Republican turned up in major departments such as English (29 Democrats) and psychology (20 Democrats). There was a single Republican in anthropology (10 Democrats), education (21 Democrats), sociology (12 Democrats), and two Republicans in political science (14 Democrats).¹⁰ Students could easily go through four years of “liberal” education without taking a social science or humanities class from a single Republican professor. Students find themselves in an environment in which liberal professors don't merely dominate the faculty, they essentially are the faculty.

A more recent study in 2005 and reported in the *Washington Post* by Howard Kurtz finds similar results from a survey of 1,643 fulltime college faculty across the country. By their own description, 72% of those teaching at American colleges and universities are liberal and 15% are conservative. At elite schools, the disparity is more pronounced—87% of the faculty is liberal and 13% conservative¹¹. These are only two of several studies that reach the same conclusion.

This ideological hegemony is the obvious result of diversity that only takes race/ethnicity and gender into consideration. What happened to the idea that an undergraduate education was intended to provide diverse ideological stimuli and produce graduates who are able to think critically about a range of subjects? Unfortunately, as other studies show, the University of Colorado at Boulder is not an anomaly in its slavish adherence to a very narrow notion of diversity. How is this ideological bias different in method and result from McCarthyism of the 1950s?

I personally experienced ideological intimidation during the Proposition 187 campaign (1994) and its aftermath. The proposition was designed to deny state welfare benefits to illegal immigrants. (On November 8, 1994 it passed 59% to 41 %.) I wrote a couple of letters to the editor and an opinion essay that were published in local newspapers.¹² Of course, some local liberals replied and in print I was referred to as mean-spirited and probably racist. In addition, a couple of friends refused to take my arguments seriously, and publicly derided me for questioning the Left/liberal belief that America is an open house with complete benefits for anyone who can sneak

over the border. All this over some published letters and essays that were replete with logic and facts.

This questioning of the condition of my spirit and my supposed racism would seem very odd for anyone who knows my history—like the fact that in the preceding 15 years I had voted for, given money to, and publicly worked in electoral campaigns wherein 70 to 80% of the candidates were brown or black and most often women. Yes, I certainly have a history of racism.

But then facts are not the point, the point is to threaten people with vile labels if they overstep the bounds of politically correct thought. Yet another clear example of intolerance for true diversity.

Conclusion

Around this time, the mid- to late 1990s, I began to reconsider my commitment to socialism. I, and most of Santa Barbara socialist group, advocated New Left decentralized power. Marx's idea of the withering away of the state and voluntary cooperation among empowered citizens was our goal and guideline for action. For me, accepting free markets was simply applying my end state to current actions. And since I was always a Libertarian on social issues—such things as supporting gay rights, pro-choice, gun ownership via the 2nd Amendment, legalizing personal drug use—the evolution into a classical liberal/libertarian was not as drastic as one may think. As I began to read libertarian thinkers and magazines (*Reason* and *Liberty*) I came to see that the decentralized aspects of New Left ideology fit well with free markets and free minds. By the late 1990s I considered myself a libertarian and joined the Libertarian Party.

I have not found the four characteristics discussed in this essay that typify leftism/liberalism in libertarianism. Libertarianism is founded on personal responsibility and limited government; while they probably exist, I have yet to encounter libertarians who practice political lying; affirmative action and identity politics are not, for libertarians, worshiped at the altar of political correctness; and Libertarians are a diverse group who are tolerant of ideological diversity.

The Left betrayed me. As a young man I eagerly read about the Left, Marxism, socialism, and leftist heroes. My understanding was that the Left was striving to create a society wherein people could fully use their talents and together create a true democratic society. It seemed obvious that taking responsibility for one's actions was a necessary part of the equation, as was being a stand-up citizen/activist by not engaging in political lying. Equally obvious was the need to end racism and sexism, but not by creating new systems where some folks are given extra consideration because of their skin tone or sex—a long-term recipe for polarization and divisiveness. I also expected the new society to display a real tolerance for a diversity of ideas. A crucial aspect in avoiding “thought police” that I then assumed was necessary, and still strongly believe is a keystone for a better society.

“To hold the same views at 40 as we held at 20 is to have been stupefied for a score of years.”¹³

*This is a revised and updated version of an essay originally published in the January 2000 issue of *Liberty* magazine.

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