
Murray Rothbard

ENEMY OF THE STATE

The State's greatest living enemy." That's how Dr. Murray N. Rothbard is described on the jacket of his latest book, *The Mystery of Banking*, and the description is an accurate one. Since the late 1940s Rothbard has been an uncompromising enemy of the very institution of government itself. More than a dozen books and countless articles and speeches have made him this century's most prominent Libertarian thinker and activist.

Rothbard virtually gave birth to the modern Libertarian movement in the mid-1950s, when he fused three related but then-separate themes—individualist anarchism, free-market economics and a non-interventionist foreign policy—into a single political philosophy: “anarcho-capitalism,” or libertarianism. He set forth his political vision in the 1973 book *For a New Liberty*:

The Libertarian Manifesto, which is widely regarded as the single best introduction to libertarianism. In that work Rothbard condemned government as “a criminal gang” and argued that all services provided by government—even police, courts and military defense—could be provided more effectively and fairly by the free market and other voluntary means. Rothbard feels government is unnecessary and the greatest violator of human rights to life, liberty and property.

Rothbard's ideas are unquestionably radical. They are backed up, however, by a lifetime of serious scholarship in a wide variety of fields. Rothbard is internationally renowned as an innovative economist, historian, political theorist and social critic. Among his major books are *Man, Economy and State* (1962), a two-volume treatise on economics that was hailed by a critic as “one of the great books of this century

Interview by James W. Harris

PHOTO BY KENNETH RAND



in economics;” *Power and Market* (1970), the first-ever economic condemnation of all government action; *Conceived in Liberty* (1975), a four-volume history of Colonial America and the American Revolution; and *The Ethics of Liberty* (1982), a philosophical argument for human freedom described in a review as “one of the most important works of this—or any other—century.”

“The State is an inherently illegitimate institution of organized and regularized crime against the persons and properties of its subjects,” Rothbard has written. Now 59, he continues to pit his vast command of economics and history against that institution. His articles, written with a characteristic clarity, vigor and wit, appear frequently.

A longtime Libertarian Party activist, Rothbard serves on its National Committee and advises numerous Libertarian organizations and publications. In addition, he is professor of economics at the Polytechnic Institute of New York. His writings and speeches continue to inspire a growing international Libertarian movement.

James W. Harris, whose *Guest Editorial* “The Decline and Fall of American State-manship” appeared in the March ’85 *HUSTLER*, conducted the interview.

CHIC: Dr. Rothbard, just what exactly is libertarianism?

ROTHBARD: Libertarianism is simply the belief that it’s immoral and impermis-

sible for any person to aggress against the person or property of anyone else. That’s the simplest definition.

Now most people would agree with this if you stated it like that. Most people are as against murder, robbing and mugging as we Libertarians are. The difference between Libertarians and other people is that we apply this moral principle consistently, across the board. And we specifically apply it to the government.

CHIC: You hold the government responsible for its acts of violence?

ROTHBARD: Right. Most people exempt the government from this moral rule. They think that, somehow, if the government commits an act of aggression, it’s okay, it’s legitimate. The government commits tremendous, organized systematic theft—it’s called taxation, and it’s considered legitimate. The government can enslave people—it’s called the draft. The government can commit mass murder—it’s called war and considered heroic.

So that’s the difference between Libertarians and other people. We take this moral code, and we apply it to the main exemption, the guys who are considered exempt: the government.

CHIC: You go beyond even many Libertarians, however, and consider government itself to be illegitimate, a criminal institution. Why?

ROTHBARD: There are two things essential to government that are criminal. One is that government lives off taxes. Government is the only organization in society—outside of known criminals—that gets its money by coercion, by armed robbery—i.e., taxation. Every other organization or person in society lives either by selling a good or service to somebody else, or by getting membership dues or voluntary contributions from other people for one reason or another. Only the government—aside from people who are recognized to be criminals—lives off coercion, off this vast organized crime racket: taxes.

The other inherently criminal thing government does is to outlaw all competition with itself: better courts, better police, whatever.

So government is a compulsory monopoly, and it lives off a vast engine of coercion—taxes. Other than that, it’s a great institution. [Laughs.]

CHIC: Many people consider the government to be “just ourselves,” the way we as a nation express our collective will.

ROTHBARD: There is no collective will. There are roughly 225 million people in the United States, and each one has a will. Sometimes they agree, and sometimes they disagree.

Government, rather than expressing our collective will, actually benefits one group of people at the expense of another group. There are some people who pay taxes, and other people who live off taxes—the basic class struggle in society. Government bureaucrats, for example, don’t pay taxes—that’s only an accounting fiction. If a bureaucrat gets \$50,000 a year and he pays \$10,000 in taxes, that’s not really payment of taxes—he’s simply getting \$40,000 a year off the taxpayers.

In addition to all this—the taxes and the monopolies—there are other criminal things that government does, such as forcing one group’s religious or moral precepts on other people. The Ayatollah Khomeini is an obvious example of a rigorous government forcing certain moral principles on the public. It just depends upon which group of fanatics or doctrinaires gets control of the government to impose moral or aesthetic views on everybody else.

There’s no collective will expressed by government. Government is a great instrument for coercion of one group by another.

CHIC: Our society currently depends on government for a wide variety of services. What’s the alternative?

ROTHBARD: Government functions can be divided into two categories. There are some things that government does that are illegitimate—criminal—such as murder, theft, torturing people in prison

camp, initiating force, etc. These are things that nobody—including government—should be allowed to do.

Then there are some functions of government that are legitimate—except that *government* shouldn't be doing them. The government monopolizes many legitimate activities: carrying the mail, for example.

CHIC: Why shouldn't the government perform nonviolent activities like that?

ROTHBARD: Well, first of all, it funds these activities by taxes—by armed robbery. Second, since the government gets its money from the taxpayers, it doesn't have to be efficient. It's not concerned with the consumer. With private firms the quality of the product is always going up. Competition forces them to be efficient to meet their competitors, etc. But government doesn't care; so it gets more and more inefficient, and the quality of service goes down.

When I was a kid, private residential homes got mail twice a day. Of course, that's now unheard of—you're lucky to get it once a day. [*Laughs.*] That's just one example—a little breakdown of the system.

Carrying the mail is an example of a service that can be performed not only just as easily, but better by private enterprise and free competition than by a coercive monopoly like government. Even

today, even though government has the advantage of having its capital and production costs picked up by the taxpayers, it's out-competed by United Parcel Service, Federal Express and other outfits. As soon as private enterprise enters any area, they out-compete government.

Mail delivery is just one example. This would apply to any service or any good that the government now monopolizes.

CHIC: We see how private enterprise could provide some services, such as delivering the mail, fire protection, building roads and so on probably better than government. But what about the more basic functions of government, such as protecting us against violence? Don't we need government for those type of things?

ROTHBARD: There are two answers to that. One is, since the government monopolizes protection, it doesn't do any real protecting. It's well-known in New York, where I'm from, that the cops don't protect us. There's no real police protection. There's no incentive for the cops to be around, because they're getting paid by the taxpayers.

And so the public has to "take the law into their own hands"—defend themselves as best they can—because the cops ain't around. That's why the case of Bernhard Goetz, the so-called "Subway Vigilante," has fired the imagination of

every New Yorker. And the reason why Goetz or anybody else has to use a gun to defend himself is that the cops aren't there to do it.

Number 2: Who's protecting us from government? Who's protecting us from its depredations, its graft, its taxation, its rules and regulations, and all these other things that are oppressing us? Nobody. Since the government monopolizes protection, there's nobody left to protect us from it—from government.

Those are the two big defects in the argument that government is necessary to protect us from crime.

CHIC: What's the alternative to government protective service? How could we have police, courts and so on without government?

ROTHBARD: The way I envision it, this would be another form of insurance. You would probably pay a premium to some private police company or court company for insurance. There's nothing outlandish about this. We already have a lot of private-defense agencies now—such as Brinks—which do better than government. Why do people hire private detectives or private guards? Because government is not doing a good enough job.

And we have private arbitrators who do a much better job than government judges and courts. They're much more efficient; they do, on the whole, a much better job. All these things would be done a lot better and more morally by private competition, without government, since there would be no coercion involved, no initiation of force. Having competition would give a check and balance. If people didn't like some judge or some arbitrator or some police agency, they could take their business somewhere else. Competition is something that always keeps people on their toes.

CHIC: What about people who might not be able to afford such services?

ROTHBARD: The police protection in a Libertarian society would be pretty cheap. Anyone who can afford food or clothing or insurance right now could certainly afford police protection.

You have to separate that question from the question of poverty in general. The government is always adding to poverty by taxes, controls, licensing, regulations, cartels and all sorts of other devices that prevent free-market capitalism from rising up and really wiping out poverty. If you give capitalism its head, it wipes out poverty.

CHIC: But wouldn't the kind of pure, laissez-faire capitalism that Libertarians advocate give rise to monopolies and other dangerous concentrations of economic power, as happened in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?

(continued on page 88)

ENEMY

(continued from page 44)

ROTHBARD: The usual view of what happened during that period is the exact opposite of what *really* happened. Historians are beginning to realize this, although it hasn't seeped into the high-school textbooks where most people learn history.

Businessmen tried to form monopolies. They tried to form cartels to restrict production and raise prices. And in the 1890s they tried to have mergers into one big monopoly, to share the loot by restricting production and raising prices. But these cartels and monopolies constantly kept falling apart. They all failed on the free market.

Then these same outfits, these same Big Business men like the Morgans and the Rockefellers who were trying unsuccessfully to get monopolies on the free market, turned to the federal and state governments to *impose monopolies for them* in the name of "regulating and curbing Big Business." That was the magnificent con job they pulled on the American public.

These big businesses would lobby for, say, an Interstate Commerce Commission or a Federal Trade Commission or a Federal Power Commission, arguing that "we need an impartial government agen-

cy to curb evil Big Business." And then they would get their guys made the heads of these agencies. They would write the laws, and these agencies would *impose cartels on the public* in the name of "free competition."

For example, the Interstate Commerce Commission—the first federal regulatory agency—was set up by the railroads themselves in the 1880s. The first thing it did was to impose higher freight rates—the same higher freight rates that the Morgans and these other guys had wanted to achieve by cartels and couldn't do on the market!

And this has gone on throughout the whole history of regulation. These regulatory commissions were put in by businessmen; they were lobbied for by them. The laws were written in corporate Wall Street offices and pushed on the American public in the name of "curbing monopolies." It was a great racket, a great con job.

CHIC: So the monopolies did not arise from free competition?

ROTHBARD: They were imposed by the government. As a matter of fact, I'll go flat out and say that in the history of the world there's no case of a successful monopoly or cartel without the government setting it up, forcing it and squeezing out competitors.

CHIC: This not only hurts honest busi-

nessmen, but it also hurts consumers, right?

ROTHBARD: Right. Like the medical monopoly today: the American Medical Association. It's accomplished these fantastic increases in payments to doctors and hospitals. And it's all brought about by this cartel—government-organized, state and federal—to restrict the medical profession by keeping the supply down and raising prices to keep out competing therapies.

CHIC: What about the most basic and important function of government: protecting its citizens from foreign invasion? How would a society without government handle that?

ROTHBARD: Well, a lot depends on how big this Libertarian country is. If only Kennebunkport, Maine, becomes Libertarian and secedes from the Union or whatever, it obviously won't be able to defend itself against the United States or even the state of Maine.

On the other hand, if the whole world goes Libertarian someday, then obviously there's no problem with national defense. So the problem with foreign defense is a transitional problem, a strategic problem, based on the size of the free area compared to the statist area. The larger the size of the free area, the better off we're going to be, whatever scheme you have for a national defense.

One defensive advantage that a stateless society has is that there's no government structure for invaders to take over. For example, when the British conquered West Africa in the late 19th century, one of the areas they took over was what later became Biafra, where the Ibo tribesmen lived. Now, the Ibos didn't have any chief; they didn't have any state structure. Most of them were merchants and peaceful traders.

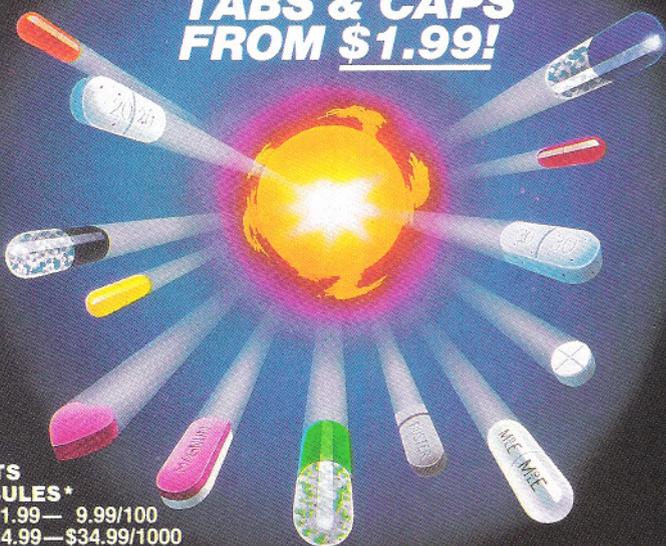
And the British had tremendous difficulties in ruling them. When the British took over other tribes, they gave the chief orders, and the chief transmitted the orders to the rest of the people. But the Ibos had no chief, no infrastructure to transmit orders. It's very difficult to govern a people—even a defenseless and more-or-less disarmed people like the Ibos—when there's no state infrastructure.

On the other hand, it was easy for the British to conquer India, even though India was much more populous than Britain. How could a handful of British soldiers occupy India? Simple: They just took over the existing government. They had more guns than the rajahs did; they gave orders to the rajahs, and the rajahs used the existing government to transmit the orders to the people.

If there's no collaborating government, it's almost impossible to dominate a country. The invaders just lose out, and

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guerrilla warfare takes care of the rest.

CHIC: Would a Libertarian society defend itself with nuclear weapons?

ROTHBARD: There's no justification for mass murder. The problem with modern nuclear weapons and missiles, probably even with strategic bombers and many non-nuclear weapons, is that you can't pinpoint them. You can't use these weapons without murdering innocent people.

Most international war thus becomes illegitimate from a Libertarian perspective, because of this weapons problem. All these nuclear weapons are threatening mass murder, even if no one uses them. Therefore, they're illegitimate. That's the only way you can look at it.

CHIC: Illegitimate or not, many nations now have them. We're obviously a long way from a Libertarian society in America today. How then should the United States deal with its current foreign-policy situation?

ROTHBARD: Well, since states do exist, unfortunately, they should at least be limited to their territorial jurisdiction. Governments should not invade other governments, killing other citizens and their own. At least each state should carry out what used to be called an isolationist foreign policy—limiting defense strictly to the ground area of each government. In other words, the United States's jurisdiction should be limited strictly to the American people on U.S. soil. This, of course, wipes out about nine-tenths of our military budget, I would say. [Laughs.]

CHIC: That's the foreign policy Thomas Jefferson urged, isn't it? "Peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none," and so forth?

ROTHBARD: Right. We don't need these nuclear missiles, much less the ground troops and the Marines and all that sort of stuff. Nobody's swimming across the Atlantic or the Pacific and invading the United States. So even if you think we need some sort of deterrent, a strictly isolationist foreign policy would eliminate most of the military budget.

That's point 1. Point 2 would be to work out a nuclear-disarmament agreement with the Russians. And the Russians are very willing to have it. There's no problem with inspection. You could have satellites do it—there are plenty of satellites spying on everybody now already. And the Russians are willing to have unlimited on-site inspections.

CHIC: The Russians have said that?

ROTHBARD: Yeah. This is a key point—something that's overlooked, to say the least, by Establishment historians. In the late '40s and mid-'50s the United States was urging the Russians to agree to "gen-

eral and complete disarmament"—the code words for disarmament down to police levels. In other words, that no government should have weapons beyond, say, machine guns, maybe tanks. No mass-murder weapons.

Finally, on May 19, 1955—a day that should live in infamy—Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev said, "Okay. You've convinced us. We hereby agree to general and complete disarmament across the board. With inspections." The press has been corrupt on this whole history. They claim the Russians didn't want inspection. Actually, the Russians said you can inspect anything—anybody can come over here and look at anything.

As soon as the Russians agreed to the American disarmament plan, the Americans said, "Uh-oh, conditions have changed. We're going to have to rethink this." We withdrew the proposal, which we had been urging for a couple of years. We suspended all the disarmament negotiations. We removed our *own disarmament plan* after the Russians had agreed to it! It was really monstrous.

Later we came back with Eisenhower's famous "Open Skies" plan. Open Skies sounds great—it's a great PR term. But what does Open Skies mean? It means unlimited inspection and no disarmament! This was really the American position.

The position of the American press—the "kept press," as we used to call it in the old days—is that the United States wants disarmament with inspection, and Russia wants disarmament, allegedly, but no inspection. Actually, it's just the opposite: The Russians will agree to any and all disarmament with total inspection, and the United States wants total inspection and no disarmament.

CHIC: But that was in the '50s. Do you think it still holds true today?

ROTHBARD: Yeah, it holds true today. The United States has always been the obstructor to disarmament throughout—since the 1950s.

The United States is also the main imperialist power in the world today. All the superpowers are imperialist in one way or another, but the United States is the major one. The United States is pushing people around all over the world. I mean, geez, *everywhere*—setting up military bases, giving orders, changing governments, either formally or covertly. Or *supposedly* covertly—actually, it's the most open "covert" I've ever seen. And we act as if we have this moral right, this divine right, to run every country in the world. The United States is acting like a fantastic international bully.

CHIC: Why is this? Who benefits from U.S. imperialism?

ROTHBARD: A lot of it is misguided ide-

ology: the idea that somehow the United States is morally obligated to impose the so-called democratic system everywhere in the world.

But one of the key roots is *economics*. Various economic interests benefit from imperialism. The foreign-aid program, for example, is just one big export subsidy. A lot of taxpayers' dollars are shipped to some foreign dictator—with, of course, the American government getting a "handling fee." The foreign dictator then cements his rule, gets *his* "handling fee," and the rest of the dollars are sent back in order to pay for American exports. The whole thing is an elaborate mechanism by which American exports are heavily subsidized.

That's just one example. A lot of American bankers also benefit. They underwrite some foreign bond, and then the United States steps in and bails out the bank. The Polish bond is a beautiful example. Poland was defaulting on its loans to Chase Manhattan and other banks. So the U.S. government steps in, gives the Polish government the money, and then they return it to Chase and other banks. So the American suckers—the American taxpayers and consumers—end up subsidizing American exporters and American bankers.

CHIC: The claim is that we have to be involved in the internal affairs of other nations in order to protect them and ourselves from Communist aggression?

ROTHBARD: [Laughs.] Yeah, right.

CHIC: You don't buy that?

ROTHBARD: It's the old shell game. It's just like saying that we have to have a municipalized police force and high taxes to protect us against crime. It's the same old thing, the same old excuse: "for their own good." We have to march into every country "for their own good."

Somehow these other countries don't see the great Soviet threat. They don't think that the Russians are about ready to march in and conquer them. And, by God, they're right, as far as I can see.

CHIC: You don't think the Soviets are an expansionist power?

ROTHBARD: No. Look, I'm not saying the Russians are some great Libertarians. But Russian foreign policy, ever since Lenin, has always been: Defend the homeland. The Russians have never been in favor of sending their armies across the borders of another country, and they never *have*. They haven't expanded beyond their borders. They haven't done any military interventions, which is presumably the so-called threat to the U.S.

CHIC: What about Eastern Europe—Hungary, Romania, Poland and so on?

ROTHBARD: How did the Russians get hold of Eastern Europe? No revisionist historian has ever denied the elemental

fact that on June 22, 1941, Germany attacked Russia. Then Hitler was joined in the war against Russia by all these Eastern European countries. Russia rolled back these armies and then occupied East Germany and all these other nations. The occupation came about because of the attack on Russia. It was strictly defensive.

And then, at the end of World War II, all of a sudden the American liberals and conservatives woke up and said, "Hey! Russia's *expanded!* How'd they get to Warsaw? How'd they get to Budapest?" They got there because they were *rolling back an attack*, okay?

The Russians have actually pulled their troops out of a whole bunch of areas since World War II: Austria, Finland, northwestern Iran. The only place that Russia has sent troops since World War II is Afghanistan.

CHIC: Isn't the Afghanistan invasion an example of Soviet expansionism?

ROTHBARD: No. Afghanistan has always been in the Russian orbit. I don't mean the *Commie* orbit; I mean the *Russian* orbit. Since about 1850.

The Russians have one interest alone in foreign policy, almost their sole interest: preventing their borders from getting into hostile hands. And Russia's been attacked through Eastern Europe three times in the 20th century: in World War I, by Poland just after World War I and by Germany in World War II. So Russia is interested in keeping Eastern Europe in non-anti-Soviet hands.

In early 1979 there was a *Commie* revolution in Afghanistan. The *Commies* took over. Unfortunately for the Russians, they were *left-wing* *Commies*—Maoists, Trotskyites, total fanatics. And this crazy left-wing *Commie* party starts nationalizing everything, blowing up mosques, looting the peasants and killing Muslims. And this stimulates the guerrilla war.

CHIC: This was *before* the Russian invasion?

ROTHBARD: Yes. *The guerrilla war did not start after the Russians invaded.* It started with this internal-*Commie* revolution.

The Russians were very upset about this. Here were these crazies on their border, ruining everything and stimulating the guerrillas. And the guerrillas were actually beginning to win out.

The Russians sent emissaries down to these Maoist *Commies*, saying, "For Christ's sake stop this." The Maoists answered, "No, no, nuts to you."

Finally, the Russians, driven by despair, sent in their troops to kick out the Maoist *Commies* and put in their own puppet Russian *Commies*. *That's* what happened. And now the Russians are screwed totally. Nobody supports the Russian puppet regime. The Soviet

Union keeps sending in more men, and they keep losing more men. It's Russia's Vietnam. They're really stuck.

I'm not justifying their invasion, but it's *not* an example of Russian expansionism.

CHIC: What about the Star Wars program? That's touted by Reagan as a defensive system that would eliminate the need for nuclear weapons.

ROTHBARD: The scientists say it won't work. You can't prevent all the missiles from coming in. It will cost an enormous amount of the taxpayers' money—trillions of dollars—and it's not going to work. Except for that, it looks great.

Besides that, the Reagan program is to keep current missiles in place and *also* have Star Wars, the so-called absolute defense. The Russians are scared, because the U.S. can figure it's safe to annihilate them. The Russians are terrified of these American war hawks. I don't blame them—I'm scared of them also.

Notice what Reagan does. He says his objective is to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons throughout the world. How is he going to do it? By maximizing nuclear forces!

Similarly, he says he's in favor of eliminating deficits—he wants a balanced budget. How does he get it? By creating the biggest deficit in American history! Two hundred-billion-dollar-a-year deficits! Maximizing deficits will somehow give us a balanced budget.

CHIC: Many people believe that Reagan is a foe of big government and high taxes. Is he?

ROTHBARD: He hasn't cut taxes; he's *increased* them. Taxes have gone up. The tax cuts were phony. They were more than offset by bracket creep, by inflation raising us into a higher tax bracket, and by Social Security tax increases. And he keeps increasing the size of government by 10% a year.

Most of the so-called cuts he's been talking about are cuts in the *rate of increase*, cuts in the *projected* budget. It's totally meaningless. Semantic trickery.

A cut means *lowering the budget*, and he hasn't done that.

CHIC: He also says he's freeing up the marketplace, deregulating the economy. What do you think?

ROTHBARD: It's just rhetoric. He hasn't done a thing, as far as I can see. All the effective deregulation done early in the Reagan Administration was actually done by Jimmy Carter. Carter was the one who put in deregulation of the airlines, trucking, the FCC and oil prices. I think regulation has *increased* under Reagan.

And now protectionism has increased tremendously—tariffs, quotas, farm-price supports and so forth.

CHIC: What do you think of Reagan's call for a "second American Revolution,"

during his most recent State of the Union address?

ROTHBARD: That's absurd. I don't know what his "revolution" is. If it's supposed to be smaller government, he hasn't done it. He's fastened government more on our backs. He's increased taxes. He's increased government expenditures. He's increased the military-industrial complex. He's brought back theocracy, invasions of personal liberty, the Moral Majority stuff. He's a counter-revolutionary talking about a revolution.

Reagan has conned the public. And he's bringing back the pro-war spirit, which is disastrous. Because of Vietnam, we were starting to have a strong antiwar sentiment in the United States. This is totally lost now, with all the flag-waving, stomping Grenada and so on.

Worst of all, he's eliminating the great hatred of the Presidency we've had since Watergate. Reagan's getting the public to love the President again.

CHIC: It's hard to build an antistate movement when the whole country seems to be in love with the President?

ROTHBARD: Exactly. Richard Nixon and Watergate did more for libertarianism than any other person or event during the 20th century. Finally, people began to distrust their damn President and to distrust politicians in general. But now there seems to be almost nobody who hates Reagan. Everybody loves the guy. Even people who say they don't like his politics say they love him. I don't understand it. It's a remarkable phenomenon. Where are the Reagan haters?

It'll happen again, though, this distrust and hatred of the Presidency. I don't think anybody will be able to repeat this Reagan phenomenon.

CHIC: As a longtime observer and critic of the American political scene, are you optimistic or pessimistic about the prospects for liberty in America?

ROTHBARD: I'm optimistic in the long run. I've been saying so for a long time. One, because I think we're right, and eventually people will see it. And two, even more than that, statism doesn't really work. There's a built-in failure in government actions, and a more immediate failure than there used to be. We've gotten to the point now where it's more and more difficult for the government to get away with anything. Take the marijuana laws, for example. They're unenforceable. Take inflation. As soon as the government starts inflating, the market realizes that more inflation is coming, and interest rates are raised to compensate. There's instant negative feedback whenever government does anything now.

Libertarian ideas are definitely spreading. There's a long-range trend toward liberty, and that's why I'm optimistic. □