Episode 1,263: *Reason*'s Matt Welch on Libertarianism, Foreign Policy, Journalism, and Michael Malice

Guest: Matt Welch

WOODS: I have to ask you as the very first question — it's the question that is going kind of lurking in the background that we're awkwardly tiptoeing over, but I'm just going to ask it straight out. What's your favorite thing about Michael Malice?

WELCH: [laughing] You know what? It's his — he's such a malevolent little beast and a troll of high standing, an anarchist, and all of this. I've come up with so many adjectives; back when we used to have *The Independents* on Fox Business Network, he was a frequent guest, and I would do pre-writes at *Reason*. But no, it is that he's, actually underneath all of it, a sweet and loyal guy, which I'm sure he would hate the sweet part, but he's a very loyal person. For all of the very weird things about Michael Malice, he's got a good heart, and he's loyal.

WOODS: I'm so glad you said that, because it's funny, I would have said exactly the same thing: good-hearted and loyal. He stands by his friends. I mean, he has fun with people, and sometimes he can really rake people over the coals, but if you're his friend, he won't let anybody do that to you. He's a good, good guy. He's been very good to me.

All right, let's talk about your background. What exactly is your background? Before you got into *Reason* magazine and into the crazy dysfunctional circles of libertarianism, what were you doing?

WELCH: So I am from Long Beach, California, Lakewood Village, part of Long Beach, aerospace belt country back in the height of the Cold War. My dad was a defense aerospace engineer working on space program and satellites and that kind of stuff for a long time, as was everybody else's dad. We used to call it "engineers' disease," which is the common affliction among all of our fathers growing up there, which basically means, because they were really smart about the one thing in their purview, they thought that they could apply that intelligence to many other things, which they didn't know anything about.

So I grew up with a kind of instinctive cultural, familial, environmental strong aversion to commies and communism and a preference for capitalism. That was just kind of baked into my system, along with a certain sense of patriotism, let's say. And at the same time, my stepdad, who was also an engineer, he was a libertarian, is a libertarian. He would start to try to feed me some Ayn Rand, which I rejected immediately on the cause of writing. But he ended up getting me into Robert Heinlein. So I started being exposed to those ideas, I would say, as a teenager.

My high school English thesis paper, big paper of the year, was a — and this kind of maybe explains me, and I didn't know it at the time, but explain and predict me. It was an analysis of how *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which came out in the early '60s, was both a predictor of and a direct influence on the Summer of Love in San Francisco and a lot of the communal living arrangements there. My teacher hated it, obviously, but it was a very interesting bit of research.

And around that time, I fell into the sway of a lot of the new journalism that came out of the '60s and '70s, the kind of anti-authoritarian writing bent of the Hunter Thompson of the world. And that kind of set me on my path to journalism. Briefly went to UC Santa Barbara, where I discovered the student newspaper there, which was one of the best in the country at the time. And I knew from the age of 18, and in fact, lived since the age of 18, that I would be working in journalism, and loved it. Personal woe — we'll set that aside — self-inflicted, and then was expelled from college for not attending classes.

And I ended up in Central Europe at age 22 in 1990, where I lived for eight years, very formative years. I started the region's first independent post-communist English language newspaper, which is a phrase that does not fit nicely onto a business card in Prague, and then I also lived in Budapest and managed a paper there. So that was where I saw with my own eyes, just the comprehensive, lasting legacy-creating horrors of applied communism. I fell very much under the thrall of the writings, which I am to this day, and kind of philosophies of Vaclav Havel, who's one of our greatest individualist thinkers and anti-communists out there.

And then I came back home around the age of 30 in 1998 after attempting and failing to move to Cuba with my newlywed wife, who was also a journalist at the time, and we were going to cover the impending collapse of communism in Cuba in 1998. And when that predictively failed, washed up in LA, and, you know, bounced around, did some freelance, started writing my first piece for *Reason* in 2001, I think. Worked at the *LA Times* for a couple years, and then came back to *Reason* as editor for eight years. And now I'm at-large, which means I'm in a basement in Brooklyn somewhere.

WOODS: What keeps you busy these days, then?

WELCH: Well, I am editor-at-large, so I write as much as I humanly can. When I'm not writing, I am podcasting either for *Reason* or *The Fifth Column* podcast or I do a lot of broadcast television work. In 2013, Kennedy, a former MTV VJ, and myself, and Kmele Foster — who has a Mises quote tattooed on his left forearm, I should hasten to add — the three of us started a show on Fox Business Network called *The Independents*, which ran for about 15,16 months, which was kind of a great, weird libertarian show without being a libertarian show. It sort of had the sensibility; didn't always use the word at all. And the three of us disagreed constantly with one another. But Kennedy still has a show, which I go on constantly. I was on last night. And she does I think really heroic work, you know, always having Ron Paul on, getting the Thomas Masseys and Justin Amashes and people like me and people from all over — and then Michael Malice, obviously.

So that brought me to New York from Washington. *Reason* has a big editorial office in Washington, and I worked there for four years, even though it's headquartered in Los Angeles. But I never did take to Washington at all, nor did my wife, and so we moved here to New York in 2012, partly so I could do more broadcasts. So as editor-at -large, I'm kind of a brand ambassador, to use a terrible phrase, represent *Reason* out there in as many broadcast

places, which includes MSNBC these days, more than anywhere else, and try to develop new media products while still writing as much as I humanly can.

WOODS: Well, I asked that because I know the editor-at-large of *The American Conservative* magazine, and his role is precisely nothing with that magazine —

WELCH: [laughing]

WOODS: So I didn't know what was going on here, so I'm glad I asked. All right, so you bypassed traditional journalism school and instead just went out and did journalism?

WELCH: Yes. What's particularly great about *The Daily Nexus* of UC Santa Barbara, especially at that time, although it still has some goodness: one, it was daily, or five days a week. Two, it was not tethered even a little teeny tiny bit to any single not just journalism program, but journalism class. The whole thing, it was self-made and self-perpetuated by the students. I remember walking through there as an 18-year-old, scared out of my mind, because it was such a good paper, and these people were strange. And back then it was nicknamed *The Commie Rag*, affectionately there. It was definitely left of center, and I come in, you know, dribbling basketballs and dressing like Axl Rose, and you know, I had much more of a frat vibe than they were used to.

But, you know, I would walk in, and the training editor at the time had written this, like, 90-page book for new employees called *Nexustentialism*, obviously. But it was an incredible journalism primer, and it's just what they did. They saw their mission as: let's perpetuate this great journalistic tradition by ourselves. There is no adult in the room telling us what we can and cannot do. Let's take that responsibility seriously, even if we don't take ourselves seriously. Incredible ethic, really changed so many lives of people I know. So many great journalists and people have come through there. And it also bred a very entrepreneurial spirit, as you can well imagine, and it's no accident that myself and four of my colleagues from there started a newspaper in Prague and went on to start lots of different media companies and websites and other things based out of there. So yeah, it was very self-created. Once I discovered that, it was really hard to sit in a class, because like, all right, I know what I want to do. It's this. It's great. I need to learn and get better at it, and sitting in a chemistry class is just not helping out.

And when I came back in '98, I applied — because you know, I love newspapers. I love journalism. It's where I come from. And I applied to literally every damn newspaper in California. I moved back home with my dad in Long Beach, you know, as we were trying to figure ourselves out for six months. And you know, I applied for *The Long Beach Independent Press-Telegram*, *The San Francisco Examiner*. It wasn't the highest quality papers. And they would look at my resume; they'd look at these papers that I created, right? And then I was the managing editor another one in Budapest. And they're like: you know what? Come back to us when you get some real clips. Id' even worked for UPI, United Press International back then. But that was sort of the last gasp of the newspaper dinosaurs. They were still making 25% profit margins every year. They took their gatekeeping function seriously. So you had to go to this school, get this graduate degree, work for this paper and that paper, and if you were unusual back then, they didn't want you. So I couldn't get a job anywhere.

In fact, the only place that hired me had to un-hire me once they learned I didn't have a college degree. It was the *Investor's Business Daily*, and it's one of the greatest things that's

ever happened to me, because it set me on other directions that turned out to be more fruitful. But yeah, they hired me and said, *Oh, you know, sorry. Rules are rules, and you don't have a degree, so can't do it*. Yeah, so I came from outside the system. Thankfully, a lot of the gatekeeper power has been obliterated, so it's easier for nontraditional weirdos to get in there. But it was a little bit a little bit rough upon reentry.

WOODS: Well, a lot of people seem to deploy the effects of the internet on journalism and on journalists. And I wonder, I bet your opinion is somewhat different.

WELCH: It's very, very different and always has been, I mean, I do see — and this is something that's definitely accelerated — the kind of impact. There is, net, probably less coverage of state capitols, for example, than there used to be, and I lament that fact. That's a bad thing. I want there to be more coverage of that. I want there to be more coverage of city halls and other things. Some of the internet sorting has not been, on net, itself great for journalism. There's a great piece that Jack Shafer wrote a couple years ago, I think, for Politico, that just talked about the geographical sorting of journalists in the internet age. It turns out a lot of 23-year-olds just go to New York, and they write hot takes Vice, and that's not necessarily the most awesome thing.

However, broadly speaking, it's been wonderful. It's absolutely been wonderful. In LA, which is a great freelancer town, Southern California, everyone's sort of scattered in the wind. It's kind of hard. There's famously no center to the town. But all of us outsiders there kind of banded together, great group of just weirdos and wonderful people, including the late Cathy Seipp, who was a great columnist for *National Review* and other places. But like Amy Alkon, who does really interesting advice columns that are mixed with, you know, evolutionary biology. Nancy Rommelmann, who's a great writer, writes sometimes for *Reason* and other places. We all were poor, scrambling, and happy. And then everyone we knew who worked in *The LA Times* was rich, lazy — lazy is too strong, but didn't have the same kind of production requirements, necessarily. That's my nice way of putting it — and desperately unhappy.

So when I got hired by *The LA Times* in 2006, I was assistant editorial page editor there for a couple years, and it was crazy, because I walk in, and I'm like, happy. *Hey, let's do stuff. This is great. I'm making, you know, three times as much money as I've ever made my life. That's fun.* And everyone was just sort of like down in the mouth. I would always ask the question: hey, what are you working on? And that was a startling question for people, because the usual thing is like: oh, Rupert Murdoch's going to buy the paper, or did you hear this rumor, or, you know, this layoff, these buyouts. I get that it's been rough for that paper, for sure, and I have great friends there, and I still write columns for them once a month. These old kind of legacy media outlets, it's really, really hard for them to get out of this mentality of lost empire. I always liken it to newspapers themselves post, let's say, 1990 are kind of like the country of Hungary, where I lived for three years, after the Treaty of Trianon, right. Like Hungary from 1867 to 1918 had a pretty good run, right? Then this long history of almost always losing wars and all this kind of stuff. For a while there, the dual monarchy with Austria, they had a lot of real estate. They stretched from, you know, from sea to shining sea, and they got to thinking that that was the norm. It's not. It's the exception.

The same is true for newspapers. Newspapers after World War II — and I know this is going far afield, but it's true. After World War II all became kind of monopolies, local monopolies, and they printed money for 40 years. They created all of the norms. They learned to love stifling competition, and they thought that was normal. No, it's not. It's ahistorical. Historically,

there's always been an incredible, interesting churn in the American newspaper and media market. We're back to that now, and because they got so fat and happy for so long, they are among the worst equipped to react to that.

WOODS: Well, just one more thing along this line. One of the complaints they have is that, in the age of the internet, with so much being given away for free, and with newspapers online finding it sometimes so difficult to monetize their content, they'll say something like: look, it's very expensive to have, you know, an Egypt correspondent and an Egypt station over there, and how are we going to do this when our budget has been cut by 90% because of internet competition, and instead, we're going to get a bunch of unreliable bloggers substituting for real journalists.

WELCH: That is a legitimate, if incomplete, kind of complaint or set of analyses. I think a major mistake that newspapers made, among many, in reacting to this new world is understanding the things that they could do that other people couldn't and reacting wrongly to the market out there. I mean, a couple years ago, there was this huge trend of we're going to pivot to video. That's something that *Reason* actually did and well, more than ten years ago, thanks to Drew Carey, who sits on our board — TV funny man, Drew Carey — who had been experimenting in low cost video production, and said: hey, you guys should learn this. You could actually differentiate yourself out there and experiment, and that's consistent with what you're doing. Okay, great. Some newspapers do video well. Most don't. It's not necessarily their built-in advantage.

Their advantage is: yes, maybe sometimes it's the correspondent in Cairo. This works especially well if you're one of the very small number of newspapers in this country that has a natural audience-interest in that topic. There aren't many newspapers that do. So know that. *The Portland Oregonian* does not need a Cairo correspondent, most likely, but you do have concentrations of knowledge, of power that comes with that knowledge, and you could hive off and not do the same things that other people out there are doing. Don't try to duplicate whatever the internet fad is and make yourself a selling proposition to readers. They're kind of getting back to that now a little bit, depending on what these paper market it is.

It's damnably hard, but look, sorry, this is absolutely competition, creative destruction. It's everything, and it should — it hasn't, but it should have given the reporters themselves and the employees some humility about covering the rest of the world and people in their circumstances, too. Sometimes I feel like it's only when — even right now, the Saudi Arabia story, which is awful what they -- you know, it looks like they kidnapped and chopped up a critic of the regime inside of a conflict. It's just unconscionable. And I can't help but also note — and it's not a "but"; it's an "also" — that this has dominated the media in a way that the war in Yemen has not, which is sponsored by Saudi Arabia, which is tacitly endorsed or aided and abetted by the Trump administration. It's a terrible ongoing humanitarian disaster and a famine, and people are dying, and they're bombing children. It is a horrifying thing, but journalists understand the journalism hero story so much, and I think it's part of the alienation that so many consumers of journalism have, because they can see that and feel that, and they know that their sympathies are kind of fleeting and self-centered.

WOODS: Let's go back to what you described as your formative years in Eastern Europe. And let me point out that when you interviewed me on ReasonTV, you gave me an opportunity to answer your questions. We weren't having a debate. There was a little pushback, and

sometimes there were some tough questions, but it was really you giving me a chance to talk. And that's how I view this conversation.

So while you were in Eastern Europe, surely this influences the way you think about communism, which you already probably had some pretty strong opinions of, but until you see the consequences close up, I bet it's a little bit more abstract. But secondly, did that influence your foreign policy views? And how would you describe those?

WELCH: Absolutely, it did. And in fact, it influenced me in directions that I, for a while now, have cause to question. So the US foreign policy, the Cold War foreign policy story from the US point of view looks the rosiest from the Central European point of view. This came as a surprise to me. You know, think that I went to school in Santa Barbara at the time when Santa Barbara was the Western White House, right? Ronald Reagan would go up in the ranch up there. It wasn't a strongly pro-Reagan campus, to put it mildly. So I grew up sort of, you know, I was marinated in college with this kind of both an anti-Reagan animus and a suspicion that the Cold War was way overheated and overexaggerated and also led to — and I think this is true — a lot of really unseemly allies of strategic convenience and us meddling into other people's civil wars that we shouldn't have been, and that kind of thing.

So I show up in Central Europe, and my god, like being American, let alone a hippie with a guitar from California, it almost as if people would break out into applause when you're walking down the street. Everyone wanted to talk to you, because they'd been cut off from you. But they felt genuinely thankful, especially to Ronald Reagan, for calling the Soviet Union the evil empire, which is true, and which a lot of I think Americans mocked him for and other people abroad and in Western Europe might have mocked him for. But boy, no, not the people of Czechoslovakia. They loved him for that, because that's how they experienced it.

So, yes, they might have some, in Hungary in particular, they might have some complaints that, hey, they thought that we were sort of tacitly promising to intervene on the side of the anti-communist rebels in 1956, and we didn't quite do that. But for the most part, they saw us as being on the right side of the struggle, identifying on a personal level, even if it's not on a on an interventionist level, with solidarity in Poland, with Charter 77 and the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia, with more or less the good guys, and also in the case of Russia, bringing in a lot of Jewish refugees in the 1980s. So they saw this with a much holier glow. So this was kind of a startling thing for me to hear nice things about my country when I was already a little bit disillusioned with the country.

And so I might have mistaken that positivity for having more general applicability than it did. And I'm also very — it was very, as everyone who lived there in the 1990s was, very profoundly influenced by the Yugoslav war. So that happened — you know, our parents — so this is before the internet, you know, so our parents hear that there's a bombing, and it's like, "My God, Matt, are they shelling you?" It's like, yeah, it's 1,000 miles away, so it's okay.

But the newspaper that we had there, every single issue that we had — we ran from March of 1991 to March of '95, started off as monthly, ended up as weekly. We had a story from inside of Yugoslavia about the war in all but two issues, beginning with our third issue. We had correspondents who lived in besieged Sarajevo. These are all — you know, these are my dear friends, to this day, my dear friends, people who covered Mostar, which was just terrible, the rape camps and stuff like that. It was just a profound influence.

And this is what led me to a place that I have since retreated from, which is to say that, in the beginnings of the Yugoslav War and particularly the siege of Sarajevo, the Western countries had no idea what to do. Everyone was working at cross purposes from one another. Germany recognized Slovenia, which broke off earlier than other people. This kind of tipped this balance in this direction. Russia was coming on the side of the Serbs. It was just a mess. Yugoslavia was fracturing apart. I had traveled there to Macedonia in October of 1990, and I knew that it was breaking apart and that there would likely be war based on that. And at that time, the world was changing so fast, that basically, George H.W. Bush and other people wanted it to slow down. Just like, stay together, be cool, we're not really in charge, and that makes us nervous.

So when it did break down into some of the most brutal and awful and ugly warfare, no one knew what to do for a long time. And there was a sense that, well, America is not going to do it, because America is in the middle of its own, like, trying to figure out its role in the post-Cold War order. And so Europe did nothing. And it was only when Bill Clinton, beginning in I think late 1994, started saying, okay, all right, whatever, we're going to get in there that, Slobodan Milosevic and some of the thugs that he allied with and enabled went to anything like a bargaining table. So it was only the exertion of US military force that changed that thing. So I supported that at that time. And then I further supported, back when I came back home in 1998, '99, the bombing in Kosovo on grounds of: they're ethnically cleansing and slaughtering these people.

I don't support that anymore. And I wrote a piece in one of my earlier pieces for *Reason* in 2003, which kind of sketches out a little bit of the evolution or devolution of my thinking on this. It's called "Temporary Doves." And it just talked about all of the people who are kind of liberal internationalists, Wilsonians, as they used to be called back then. But you know, humanitarian interventionists. This is George Soros, who is very influential in foreign policy circles; Madeleine Albright was certainly in the center of that story. And Wesley Clark was the other guy who was under review, who prosecuted the war in Kosovo. They all had books that came out after the Iraq War, the second one, that were all critical of the war. And I was like, hang on a second. What justification for the Iraq War is any different from your justification for the Kosovo War?

And in fact, when you look at it with any kind of closeness, you see that — just on like a kind of, if you're looking at this sort of from in terms of international legality and other things like that — Iraq was way more justified than Kosovo. So maybe that should make you rethink Kosovo, which is what made me rethink. It didn't make any of those people rethink any of that, because no one thinks in American foreign policy. They just kind of like keep intervening over and over again. What it brought to me is that — you know, that led me to the place where I didn't identify — and this is my biggest regret in terms of thinking about policy and writing and talking about it. I never supported the Iraq War, but I didn't oppose it from the beginning, from the get-go, as like, what the hell are we even thinking about? And I totally regret that, because I should have known that. Part of the reason why I didn't know that is because I had this feeling like, well, America has to be this kind of last backstop of international order. When the really, really bad, bad guy does that really, really bad thing, we need someone there. I no longer think that way.

So the long story is to say: yes, it influenced my foreign policy, being there, into a more interventionists direction. And since then, and also following through the logic of the way that I thought about things then, it has influenced me in the opposite direction since, and

now I'm floating into this kind of unhappy ether that nonetheless defaults on the side of: we need to roll back our far-flung sole responsibility for the world's affairs, that that is the root of a whole bunch of dysfunction not only in America and not only on the people on the receiving end of our munitions, but also in the rest of the world in terms of them taking responsibility for their own affairs. And I've felt that way pretty strongly since 2003, let's say.

WOODS: At what point in your life did you determine definitively that you were a libertarian and you were going to use that word to describe yourself?

WELCH: I was, when I came back here, when people would describe my politics — like sometimes they would call me a libertarian, and I would get angry. *I'm not a libertarian. That's another word*. I am a Central Europe-style liberal, which I guess the best translation would be basically a classical liberal, but I saw my thinking in the line of Václav Havel or the Free Democrat, which is a small party since pretty much vanished in Budapest. But these are people who are heroically and wholly anti-communist, understood intrinsically in their bones how the state should not own things that it shouldn't, it shouldn't tell people what to do. They were in many ways personally liberal. They looked around and they said: hey, look we should stop treating gypsies like crap. We should be able to smoke hash on the Charles Bridge and play guitar if that's what we want to do. And it kind of was what I wanted to do. And it was this mix of, like, we need to make the state go way the hell down, understand it not just in terms of like economic arrangements, that if — and this is a key lesson, insight of Havel — a state that is so big that does all this, that owns this much of the beer factory, is a state that is going to tell you how to think, and that's terrible, and that is going to take generations to undo.

So that all made sense to me, and I kind of presumed, naively, that while I was away for eight years, that America would be going through its own kind of post-Cold War re-reckoning, even the Truth and Reconciliation Committee if that's what they needed, where like the right would say, *Okay, look, we were probably wrong to over-revere or defend apartheid South Africa*, and the left would say, *You know what? Maybe Daniel Ortega wasn't that cool after all*. Like you know, I thought I thought there'd be something like that, and maybe there would be a home for this kind of Central Europe-style liberalism. It seemed like it makes sense. And you come back here, and of course that's not a thing that really exists.

I remember when I first started working full-time for *Reason*, it was in 2004-ish, I filled in a couple of times before. And Nick Gillespie asked me well, how would you describe your politics? And I refused to describe myself as libertarian then. I'm like, *Eh, I'm more of a Central Europe-style liberal*. And at some point, you get older, and you realize: you know what? I'm being bit poncey here. I'm defining a special flower category that doesn't really exist, and the word for it in the world is libertarian. Let's go ahead and be fine with that word.

And then I should also hasten to add that the process of working for *The LA Times* and seeing how the kind of civic sausage gets made, nothing will turn you faster into a libertarian than working for a big city newspaper and hanging out with a bunch of politicians and people in the newsroom. Much more so than working for *Reason*. I mean, working for *Reason* did pull me into some more libertarian directions than I had been, for sure, on a couple of key issues, but once I was at *The LA Times* show for any length of time, like, screw it, I'm a libertarian now.

WOODS: All right, so you're a libertarian, but you don't belong to the Libertarian Party. So I'm — not that you have to. Most libertarians don't, I suppose. But I'm curious, because both of us are interested in the Libertarian Party, what's your opinion about, let's say, the state of the party and its prospects and maybe even the overall strategy of having a Libertarian Party as opposed to, say, trying to influence one of the other parties?

WELCH: I think I am a firm believer that social change and the direction that I would like to see a change, and just maybe more broadly, regardless of its anti-Matt's direction, that it happens in just a remarkable number of ways, including ways that you cannot possibly predict. And so it is good, great even, to have any number of different projects working on stuff.

I remember Rand Paul was nice enough to invite me to come and talk to a bunch of interns on Capitol Hill a couple years ago, and I kind of worked backwards from recent libertarian victories — there had been some, I swear to God [laughing]. But like, you know, the Second Amendment being recognized as an individual right is a libertarian victory, I think unabashedly so. And it came in part because of the really long, slow spade and research work of the libertarian legal movement and of also historians. Then, I think this is after Colorado had legalized marijuana, so the beginning of the kind of dismantling of the drug war, or specifically the war on marijuana, is something that happened because of the initiative process and people rerouting around politicians. And yes, there were some libertarians in that story, and there was also a lot of gray-ponytailed hippies in that story, and whatever, but there's just all these different ways that things can happen, and you can't necessarily predict it. And some of it can happen through a party and some of it outside.

So I'm fascinated in the LP. I tend to vote for them more often than not. I've always been interested in third parties. I was pretty much the only journalist who covered the Ralph Nader campaign in 2000, near full time. I did it for a site owned by a basically communist telephone company. The site was called WorkingForChange.com; it was held Working Assets. And a friend of mine was working there, and just on a lark said, "Hey, let's go cover the Nader campaign." So I did, and it definitely gave me a big taste of kind of unlikely-outsider politics and politicians. And even though I wrote on a daily basis very critical stuff for him, I ended up voting for him, which I don't quite regret, but there's bases for that vote where I've definitely changed my mind. But part of it is that I just can't stand the idea, intrinsically as part of me, of there being any kind of major group of people based on politics. I'm not going to be part of that group, for sure.

So I think the Libertarian Party, it's a great thing that it exists as a vehicle, both for the broader education project of like, hey, there will be people talking about elections, so let's make sure that in their election conversation, that we're seeing these other messages here to spread the ideas of liberty and get people interested in things that they wouldn't otherwise be exposed to. But I also like the, *Hey, let's elect this guy to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, because he wants to reform the way that cities interact with the state's fire pension fund*. I like both of those projects at once there, and I like them to exist.

And as a journalist, I'm interested in the tension between all of them, and I've written a couple of things about your involvement and like your formulation, which is fascinating to me. And I think it's kind of a foundational way of putting it. There's been a tension, from the beginning of the party, as you put it, do you go after 70 million votes, or do you try to get 1 million people to completely change the way that they think? And the imperfect answer to

that question, but I think is kind of where the party is at, is: let's kind of try both, even though it's not really possible. And I kind of get that. I see it being useful.

The 2020 presidential season for the LP is going to be fascinating, because you have your dear friend Bill Weld, who's already sort of laying down a marker of trying to run, or like a baseline. *If nothing else, you're going to get me, so who's out there going to come in that's going to be bigger than me and challenge more*? I mean, he's doing party building stuff. I mean, I was just up this weekend at the Massachusetts state LP convention, and he sponsored it. He's endorsing candidates, giving speeches, moving his politics on certain issues too, which is kind of interesting to watch. They're stressing much more the unviability of Second Amendment rights than he certainly did even two years ago, talking more explicitly about anti-interventionism than he did even two years ago, and some other things.

But I think the usefulness of this — and you and I will probably disagree about this — is that I think that there should be a vigorous competition for what is ultimately a prize. They have built a prize. Through all of this petition-gathering and going in the rain and all this kind of stuff, it has managed in the last ten years to become America's third party, on all levels. And so that's a lot of hard work.

And in the end, in a time of incredible political tumult in America, the two major parties are just having nervous breakdowns and reforming and we could be part of a realignment, it's useful to be number three. You could get a big signal boost out of that. Maybe there could be a flood of people from one party or both or neither. Or you could squander it too, and I like the puzzle of: I don't know where they're at. I think the trend lines on party membership, number of candidates, fundraising, this kind of stuff, is definitely up, and it is interesting. And actually, you're part of the story too. Your interest and the interest of some of your allies and listeners in the LP is a sign that maybe the tent is getting bigger. And I think that's an interesting development that could also boost the party's fortunes.

But what I want to see, as both someone who's recording this journalistically, but as someone who has kind of a natural rooting interest for the fortunes of the party, I want there to be some vigorous, vigorous competition for that prize, and I'm happy, even if I would not vote for him personally — I'm not saying I wouldn't. But even if it's not my pure expression of what I want that candidate to be, if you had to ask me right now is Bill Weld going to be the nominee, I would say no. I would bet no, because they've had the governor thing the last few times around. There's a thirst for having kind of a homegrown libertarian or at least a different vote. But I think the competition is good for the party: the ideological competition, the competition among big names and people who are getting in there. I think that's all to the good. So I am very cautiously, incrementally bullish on the direction of the party, and it's certainly very interesting to watch.

WOODS: Well, I definitely want to see a very lively contest, if for no other reason that it's invigorating for everyone. It's exciting for everyone, and it gets us talking and debating and involved and paying attention. So I definitely want that. Now, I'd like to keep you a few minutes longer than I said, just because I want to try to fit in at least one more major question.

WELCH: Sure.

WOODS: Of course, there's a spectrum on which libertarians fall with regard to the question: is there something fundamental about libertarianism that we all have to be committed to? And for some people, they say it's the nonaggression principle, and others — like for example, David Friedman, I think belongs in this camp — they tend to be more utilitarian. And still others are more eclectic in the grounding of their libertarianism. Where do you fall in this discussion?

WELCH: I am, as you might have kind of sussed out through now, I'm that libertarian who did not get here through philosophy. I didn't get here through Hayek. I didn't get here through Mises. I didn't get here through Rand. I got here through journalism and Central Europe, and it's just like a weird mix. So I'm about the least philosophically-centered or -inclined libertarian you're going to find. And many people, including listeners to your podcast, will also follow up, like, "Yeah, you're about the least-libertarian libertarian, fake libertarian, Matt Welch, guy out there," which I say, that's fine. I have absolutely no problem with that description of me as well.

So I don't have the natural mental path of trying to boil things down to a sentence and then building from the sentence. I love the conversation around it, and we've had a few of them. When I was editor at *Reason,* we had a debate. I forget the name of it. But Todd Seavey was there, Kerry Howley was there, and somebody else. I think it was like: should property rights be enough? Should that be sufficient? I think it's kind of an old Rothbard type of thing, like, let's boil it down to its essential thing, which is property rights or, you know, it could be your non-aggression principle or what have you. Fascinating to hear other people talk about it. It's not where I'm coming from, so I don't boil it down to a single thing.

I think that it's more — of the way that I live it and think about it, to the extent that I do in my kind of not particularly intellectual way — I think it's more of a broad tendency and suspicion that the default is freedom, not government, and that you want people to be more free to interact and exchange with one another. You have a default understanding that private markets are going to be superior to government markets on just about everything. And so if you can get some even — you know, if you're going to have some amount of government, if you can get some kind of competition, some choice within this thing while you're trying to maybe have a long-term strategy to do something else, then that will be a better delivery of that. So it's less about a sentence and more I think for me about kind of a general tendency that is identifiable in this direction, that's more about individualized choice rather than group, state, top-down control.

WOODS: Finally, what does Matt Welch do for fun?

WELCH: I've got a ten-year-old and a three-year-old. I live in Brooklyn. I love it here. I don't have a lot of spare time, Tom Woods. But you know, I play music. I've made a few records over the years and I write songs, and so whenever I have any opportunity to either hook up with my old friends who I used to play in bands with and play, as we did a couple of months ago, or just noodle around with my fancy new Spire recording thing and try to get some of these things translated from my head to something that people can listen to. That is a kind of a pure, distilled version of what I like to do.

WOODS: I'm going to link to your Twitter and also obviously to Reason.com over at TomWoods.com/1263. Is there anything else I should link to?

WELCH: I think people might be interested in the Fifth Column Podcast, which the Twitter handle is @wethefifth, with it spelled out, where Kmele Foster, the aforementioned Mises tattoo-having feller, and I and Michael Moynihan from Vice sit around and have a pretty drunken conversation, usually about once a week, that I think people enjoy that. So maybe that too.

WOODS: Well, I've heard good things about that, so I'll link to all this at TomWoods.com/1263. Well, we've broken down another wall here today, and I'm really glad about it and glad to get to know you better and know what's going on over on your side of the world. And I'm also glad that editor-at-large at *Reason* really does mean you're still really engaged in that. I was sad when I saw that title. I thought, oh, I hope that doesn't mean he's just sitting around.

WELCH: No, as a matter of fact, we made that decision, that I'd wanted to hand over the reins of editing the magazine for a while, but we made that decision in 2016, right at the kind of kickoff of the Libertarian Party campaign, because there was a sudden onrush of interest in it among our readers and among libertarians in general, and we felt like ill-equipped to cover it as well as we could and were like, why don't I cover it? So it's kind of part of the story. So yeah, I'm not just, you know, sitting at home and snoozing. I'm trying to cover stuff.

WOODS: Well, again, thanks for your time, and thanks for the good stuff you guys are doing. I've got an episode coming up in a few days with Jim Epstein about the story that he did about car washes and the $15 minimum wage and unionization, and it's just superbly done.

WELCH: Yeah, he's terrific. And thank you for that. And thank you for having me on, too. I've really enjoyed our three conversations.

WOODS: Yeah, it's been great. Starting with Michael Malice, who, it has been said in the comments section of the *Reason* video, that he ought to be awarded — he has better claim than Obama to the Nobel Peace Prize.

WELCH: [laughing] Low bar.

WOODS: [laughing] Yeah, indeed. Thanks, Matt.

WELCH: Thanks, Tom.