Episode 420: Conservatives and Libertarians: The History Almost Nobody Knows

Guest: Jason Jewell

WOODS: What a course you have here for us, just fantastic. All kinds of interesting topics to discuss; we're going to whet people's appetites for it. I'm going to try to have a free sample of the course up on the show notes page, TomWoods.com/420. I think the best way to start this off is to define the word "conservatism," because I think this audience, if you don't know what libertarianism is yet, I pretty much don't know what to tell you after 400+ episodes. But we haven't talked about conservatism all that much. And it is harder to define conservatism, partly because it's not an ideology the way, as Russell Kirk said, it's not just a set of propositions. But secondly — I kind of think it is, frankly — but secondly, there are all kinds of conservatism: American conservatism is different from Continental conservatism. So how did you sort through all this?

JEWELL: That's a good question. In the introductory lecture to the course, I start off with the definition of conservatism that was in the *American Encyclopedia of Conservatism*. I think Bruce Frohnen authored that article, and he had a pretty robust definition in there about, it's the point of view of trying to develop ideas that will allow people to live full lives in local communities under God. And so there were a number of things that you could unpack within that definition, but I noted of course, that, as you said, there are a lot of problems with trying to pin down exactly what it means. And interestingly, I used an online Facebook debate between Kevin Gutzman and Brion McClanahan, our Liberty Classroom colleagues, when they got into it about a year ago, over the question of "Is Thomas Jefferson a conservative?" And McClanahan took the yes position —

WOODS: Yeah, I could absolutely guess that. Yeah, yeah, yeah, because he's a student of Clyde Wilson, who wrote the famous article on Jefferson as a conservative. Okay.

JEWELL: That's right. And of course, Gutzman was having none of this. He said, no, no, no, Jefferson is not a conservative by any reasonable standard. And so I go through the arguments that they made, and as you said, McClanahan was taking essentially the Clyde Wilson position, based on that famous article, whereas Gutzman was taking more of a European position, and saying, well, compared to what the conservatives in Europe are doing at that time, the Burkes and so on, there's no conceivable way that you could describe Jefferson as a conservative.

So really, we continue to revisit that question throughout the whole course, how the meaning of conservatism changes depending on where you are and what time period you're looking at. Of course the Clyde Wilson position for Jefferson as a conservative is based on the Federalists, the decentralized American tradition, the stress on the agrarian life as opposed to the urban life. Whereas, Gutzman's argument that Jefferson was not a conservative is based on the idea that he opposed an aristocracy; he was a critic of Christianity and so on. So we talk about those different emphases throughout the course when we talk about conservatives.

WOODS: I feel like they're both correct in a way. Certainly by European standards, Jefferson would have been a horror. I mean, you can't imagine a European conservative having anything but contempt for Jefferson, and yet in the American tradition — and I will link on today's show notes page, TomWoods.com/420 — to Clyde Wilson's article from around 1970 in *Modern Age*, making the case for the Jeffersonian conservative tradition. And he's kind of in line with Russell Kirk, who —I don't know if he was a Jefferson fan; I kind of doubt it — but Kirk, on the other hand, insisted that Alexander Hamilton could in no way be described as conservative, because his whole program was one innovation after another. And if there's one thing conservatives are supposed to oppose, it's innovation in the social and economic sense — they're not necessarily against inventions, in that sense of the word "innovation." But they're against the types of society-wide reconstruction that basically Hamilton was engaged in.

JEWELL: Yeah, so I'm in agreement with you. I think you can make that case, even for Jefferson, to a limited extent. But you've got to give Gutzman his credit as well, to say that, yeah, the European conservatives at the time viewed him as this dangerous Jacobin; that he was a kind of systems monger, that sort of thing, that they would have recoiled from. So it's a thorny problem, particularly in the American context. And when you talk about the 21st century, of course, there's a significant difference in the way people describe American conservatism, with the emphasis on small government which is a Jeffersonian inheritance, that European and British conservatives don't share that emphasis to a great extent.

WOODS: I think we could easily have an episode just on the 19th century material. You've got American, Continental, and British conservatism throughout the 19th century; you have British classical liberalism, because of course, the course is also on libertarianism. You've got all kinds of very, very interesting topics. Then in the 20th century, you've got the New Humanists and the Southern Agrarians. I read the Southern Agrarians as a college student, and I was very taken by them — not so much anymore, but I still respect them. You've got the Old Right; you've got T.S. Eliot — very, very interesting series of topics.

But I want to focus on an area maybe that might be of more interest to the audience right now, and that would be the relationship between conservatism and libertarianism, because it has been rocky, and it continues to be rocky. And yet there was a time in the mid-20th century, and then later on, in which people like Frank Meyer, who wrote for the *National Review*, were trying to propose something called

fusionism, that really conservatism and libertarian ought to be allies; they ought to be friendly. These are not opposed to one another; they are complementary; they can exist side-by-side; they can exist side-by-side in one head of one individual. And there were people who supported that and people who rejected it. I know Rothbard was not particularly taken by it, because his view was as long as you believe in non-aggression, I don't care what your beliefs are about other things; you're a libertarian. You're not a conservative; you're a libertarian, so why don't you just say that? I personally kind of like fusionism. I read Frank Meyer in college, because I was interested in the Old Right in those days. What's your take on that whole matter?

JEWELL: Yeah, Meyer is a figure that I spend some time talking about in the lecture on William F. Buckley and the *National Review*. And I spend several minutes talking about the way he found value, both in the libertarian position, and then also in the more traditionalist, Russell Kirk kind of conservatism. And his take was that both camps are right on the really important stuff and maybe a little bit wrong on some of the less important things. He said that in libertarianism, there is this tendency among a lot of the libertarian writers towards religious skepticism and an aggressive denunciation of religion, which he thought was completely unnecessary. And on the traditionalist side, that the traditionalists often inappropriately emphasized that you've got to have authority to have this ordered society.

What he wanted to stress was what he thought they had in common that was good, which was, on the libertarian side, the emphasis on the value of the individual and the threat of the state to the liberty of the individual. And on the traditionalist side, he thought that they rightly emphasized the importance of virtue, that we want liberty, not necessarily as an end in itself, but so that we can live virtuous lives. And Meyer, throughout his career, as you know, really tried to bring the libertarians and traditionalists on board with that vision — which, I'm in agreement with you; I think that's a healthy approach to the question of why we do want liberty and why the state is such a problem on a number of levels.

WOODS: You talk about a number of earlier 20th century libertarians. So you've got Albert Jay Nock, and you could argue that Mencken has certainly libertarian tendencies. Rothbard had a very, very appreciative article on Mencken being fundamentally a libertarian. You've got here some of the women — you have Isabel Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, some of these people. I'm curious, though, to fast forward ahead about the story of where Rothbard fits into all this, because it's one thing to be a libertarian in the Hayekian mold, but it's quite another, temperamentally and in terms of content, to be a Rothbardian. Where did he fit in? Or did he fit in?

JEWELL: Rothbard considered himself a member of the Old Right, this group of loosely affiliated writers who were in opposition to the New Deal. And he has this very whimsical paragraph in one of his essays that I quote in the course about how they have all these relatively minor disagreements among them: should we just stop at repealing the New Deal or should we —

WOODS: I love this paragraph.

JEWELL: (laughing) Should we go back and repeal Woodrow Wilson, or go back and repeal Abraham Lincoln, or go all the way back to the Articles of Confederation? So he said there are all these intramural disputes. But he considered himself basically a man of the right, in that period leading up to the '50s. And where he began to diverge with what was shaping up to be the mainstream Right at that time is when you had the William F. Buckleys of the world, who were saying, well, we've got to put liberty on hold here in the United States in order for us to be able to fight the Cold War effectively. So we've got to subordinate everything to our foreign policy of anticommunism, and Buckley actually used the phrase "putting up with a totalitarian bureaucracy within our own shores".

And Rothbard would have none of that. He thought that the militarism of the U.S. government was one of the primary threats to liberty. He actually, if I'm remembering correctly, supported Adlai Stevenson in the presidential elections of '52 and '56. He opposed Barry Goldwater in 1964, because he thought Goldwater was too militarist. And by the mid '60s he is openly breaking with the *National Reviews* of the world and that sort of thing. And that's when he goes in this period of allying with elements of the New Left, not because Rothbard had changed his thinking on any topic, but because he thought that the New Left was more effective and more principled at that particular moment of advancing the ideas of individual liberty, with their opposition to the draft and the Vietnam War and so on. And so for the late '60s through much of the '70s he is associating with people on the Left more often than not.

But by the later part of his career he'd gotten very frustrated with how the Left had been shaping up, and thought, by the late '80s and early '90s, that it was the conservatives who once again were talking more of the appropriate issues in terms of trying to reduce the state and emphasizing individual liberty more. So by the end of his life, he was on board and looking forward to the Republican takeover of Congress after the election of 1994, and of course he died in early 1995 and never saw what happened after that. But it wasn't that Rothbard ever changed any of his positions or his principles; he just made tactical alliances with the groups that he thought, at particular moments, were more effectively advancing the ideas of liberty.

WOODS: Say something about Russell Kirk and how he fits into all this. There's a famous book — well, famous among our people — George Nash's book, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*. And he divides conservatives and libertarians into three groups — I mean basically, one of the groups is libertarians. The other group is traditionalist conservatives. And the other group is anticommunists. Now you can see there's a problem with that division, because some people are two of those things, and maybe might even be three of those things. But they existed side by side. They oftentimes work together.

But in the traditionalist camp, Russell Kirk, the author of the smash bestseller, *The Conservative Mind*, was very much an opponent of Rothbard and libertarianism. But

yet I don't get that sense from Richard Weaver; I don't get that sense from Robert Nisbet, the other traditionalist conservatives, who are focused on in the Nash book.

Have you looked into this whole controversy? Because of course, Kirk openly criticized Rothbard and libertarianism, and yet I've got Brad Birzer, who is a biographer of Kirk — his biography is coming out later this year; we're going to get him back on to talk about it — saying, really, Kirk in his heart of hearts was a libertarian, whether he knows it or not, whether his own wife knew it or not. What do you think of all this? What would be your take on it?

JEWELL: When you think of Kirk's writing about libertarians, he says some critical things about Ludwig von Mises in *The Conservative Mind*. I think the most famous phrase that he used, or the one that got quoted the most, is that he referred to libertarians as "chirping sectaries," which was his attempt to dismiss this, what he thought of, the kind of monomania of the libertarians on individual liberty in what he thought of maybe as to the exclusion of other issues that he thought were very important, such as the value of tradition and virtue and that sort of thing. Now, I hear you on the idea that Kirk had this very strong libertarian streak in him, in that he distrusted the modern state to a great extent. His writings on economics — he wrote a book on economics that I've heard a lot of libertarians say, hey, this is pretty good stuff; he knows what he's talking about —

WOODS: Yeah, he's pretty free market, yeah, yeah.

JEWELL: So I think that Jared Casey in his class on The History of Political Thought on Liberty Classroom makes that point that when you look at these conservative traditionalists in the early and mid 20th century and some of the criticisms that they are leveling at the classical liberals and the libertarians, Casey's read on this — and I agree with him — is that it's not so much that they dislike the non-aggression principle or the idea of the free market or anything like that. It's that the style and the mode that so many of the classical liberals and the libertarians adopted in order to advance these positions was a utilitarian posture that was consequentialist in its approach.

And Kirk had no patience for that sort of thing. He criticizes utilitarianism all over the place in his writings, and so this is part of the idea that moved us away from what we ought to be focused on, and the consequentialism he thought of as unprincipled. Of course, Mises was a utilitarian; he advanced the classical liberal position on utilitarian grounds. So if you interpret this as saying, well, you've got to be a utilitarian in order to advance a classical liberal position, and you reject utilitarianism, then of course, you're not going to take a kind view of what the classical liberals have to say.

WOODS: But he also rejects the natural rights tradition, which is another basis on which you can found libertarianism. So he doesn't like utilitarianism, and he has the traditional conservative opposition to natural rights as being abstractions divorced from lived experience. So all of libertarianism is closed to him.

JEWELL: Yeah, and yet, he comes — when it comes to specific kinds of things he wants to see happen, most of the time it's in a libertarian direction.

WOODS: Yeah, I know. So I mean the hostility is really hard to account for.

JEWELL: And I quote Thomas Fleming, who of course, was a friend of Rothbard in the '90s with the paleoconservatives and libertarians at that particular moment — there was a time when Fleming said to Rothbard, we agree on 90% of where we need to go, and we'll join forces for that 90%, but when we get to that final 10%, that's when it'll be time to quarrel. And I think that Kirk just said, the time to quarrel is now, even if we do agree on 90% of this. So I think a lot of it was unnecessary on his part, unfortunately.

WOODS: And I think it may also have been — I think Brad's case on it is that it was really a case of clashing personalities with Rothbard and Kirk.

JEWELL: Well, I can certainly see that. And of course, Kirk and Frank Meyer did not see eye to eye. They wrote very bitterly about each others' works in the 1950s, and that may have poisoned the well for a lot of —

WOODS: And it's funny, you get a sense that Rothbard didn't care for Meyer either, and here's Meyer trying to bring everybody together, and everybody just spits on him.

JEWELL: Well, that's part of the unfortunate history of the relationship between conservatives and libertarians, even within libertarianism and within conservatism, that there are these very strong personalities, that if they wind up clashing for whatever reason, oftentimes there's a failure to say, okay, let's put these personal differences aside and focus on the issue which we agree on. And unfortunately, they didn't always do that.

WOODS: Yeah, and so I want people to understand that this is not some phenomenon that is unique to libertarians on the Internet; this is a phenomenon that persists throughout the history of mankind, so don't be too upset when you see people fighting with each other over ideas or even sometimes wasting their time on silly things. I mean, at least in a sense you realize that this is a universal phenomenon.

Now looking over these lecture titles — I'll link to it on the show notes page, TomWoods.com/420 — you've got 30 lessons here going from conservatism and libertarianism up to 1815, that period, all the way down to current issues among libertarians, like intellectual property, immigration, thick and thin libertarianism, foreign policy. You've got the Ron Paul presidential campaigns; you've got Reagan and Thatcher, the theocons, the Libertarian Party, the neocons, the sorts of things that you would want to know, that are talked about today when we talk about, well, this person's not a real conservative; this person's not a real libertarian. It's hard to adjudicate these disputes without knowing the history, without knowing what the ideas are, how they developed, where they came from, who believed what. And this is

a really, really nice compact way of learning and mastering this stuff, which I personally find fascinating.

I want to focus on one of the later lessons. Number 28 in the list is the paleo moment. And I want to talk about that specifically because this gets brought up as a terrible thing that some libertarians did in the early 1990s. And I want your frank appraisal of it. Tell us what it was, because a lot of my listeners, if you can believe it, are too young to remember this. They were maybe not even born yet. But what is your overall appraisal of that effort?

JEWELL: If you're referring to the existence of the John Randolph Club and the relationships among the people who were involved in that — is that sort of where you're driving with the question?

WOODS: Oh yeah, because I was the youngest member of the John Randolph Club back in 1993.

JEWELL: Okay, so the John Randolph Club was this organization that was set up as sort of a friendly debating club, a place for the paleoconservatives and traditional conservatives, as they were coming to be known as paleos in the early '90s. And the libertarians, who were associated with Rothbard and that circle of libertarians, well they would get together at an annual meeting, and strategize and talk about what they agreed on, and what they disagreed on.

And all of this took place before I was really plugged in to this movement and understanding the personalities, but I have spoken to some people who were present at one or two of those fateful meetings in the mid '90s, where there appeared to be this rupture between the conservatives and the libertarians. And my understanding is that it had a lot to do with the paleoconservative insistence that we just can't have free trade. Of course, this was a big theme of Patrick Buchanan's presidential campaigns, opposition to the lowering of trade barriers, and so on.

And the libertarians fought back very vigorously against that position at some of these John Randolph Club meetings, and according to some of the people who were there at some of those meetings, might not have done it in the most charitable way. There might have been some bad taste in how some arguments were presented and personal attacks and that sort of thing. The upshot of all this was that some of the personalities — and this happened, too, after the deaths of Murray Rothbard and Mel Bradford, who were a couple of the personalities who really helped those two groups come together and sustain that conversation —

WOODS: Yeah, while Murray was alive, it worked great, and everybody loved each other, and we had great — I mean, I was just a kid, but I went to the Randolph Club meetings, and it was a blast; I learned a lot; I hung around with some interesting people.

Basically, what Rothbard was doing — as you said, he followed Adlai Stevenson in the 1950s. Then as the years went on he would follow these obscure third party tickets that fell apart, because they favored peace. That was his key thing, that he doesn't believe that politics are going to solve all of our problems, but he favored peace, and he thought that was the key issue for libertarians. So when the Cold War ended, he was naturally looking around to see if he had any new allies now, because after all, the conservatives, you'll recall, said that this is just temporary, that we have to have this huge military establishment, but as soon as this crisis passes, we don't need it anymore.

Well it turned out that 1 out of 87,000 conservatives actually stuck to that principle, and Rothbard sought them out. And it turned out they were very smart people. I mean, Thomas Fleming can be abrasive, but he's an erudite man, and despite my own unfortunate conflicts with him, I still have the utmost respect for him. I think he's a really, really smart guy who's made very valuable contributions, who influenced my thinking in a very positive direction. I was thrilled to get to meet people like him. I was probably more on his side than the Rothbard side early on, but the point was, I loved the fact that we had all these really smart people who were willing to learn from each other, to be courteous to each other, and to come together and say, we have to put a lid on the military establishment. That's a wonderful thing. Like, whatever other deviations other people had in the recesses of their minds, I couldn't care less. That they favored this position on one of the key moral issues of our time, I think made it at least a useful thing to try.

JEWELL: Yeah, I agree. And as you said, Rothbard was always looking for people, that he didn't have to agree with them 100% on everything, but he always looked for the contributions and insights of other people toward this principle of individual liberty and peace. And so when he and Bradford got this society together, it appeared by all accounts, like you say, to be this very wonderful thing for a number of years.

But then once those personalities passed on, and their Irenic influence, if you want to put it that way, was removed, some of these other personality conflicts unfortunately came to the fore. And from the mid 1990s on, the libertarian contingent pretty much stopped attending those meetings of the John Randolph Club — although Fleming and some of the other traditionalists continued to collaborate with organizations like the Mises Institute, with some of those symposiums on The Costs of War and all that that came out in the 1990s. So it wasn't a complete and abrupt breaking of fellowship or anything like that.

WOODS: No, no, I would never — I've had Paul Gottfried as a guest on the show a couple of times; I love that guy; I would never have had a chance to meet him if it weren't for the John Randolph Club and the whole paleo thing. Clyde Wilson, for example — very, very smart guy, one of the top southern historians according to Eugene Genovese — no right-winger himself, but he could just see that Clyde was a really, really smart and capable historian. And from Clyde we get Brion McClanahan and so many other talented historians, whom he mentored in the PhD program at University of South Carolina. I really thought — I mean, yeah, there were a few people

I probably wasn't so glad to meet, and I'm probably well rid of, but by and large, it was a great — it was a thrilling thing to see people who were so capable, who were so smart, breaking with the establishment and coming together and thinking, how can we put our heads together to change the conversation on the table?

Now, it took Ron Paul to actually really change the conversation, because this was the very beginnings of the Internet; we had very little reach in the Randolph Club, but basically Ron was taking a lot of these ideas; he was taking it to conservatives and saying, you shouldn't support this huge military establishment. Well that's what we were trying to say in our limited efforts back then.

JEWELL: That's exactly right. And Ron Paul is a figure who is really interesting in his apparent capacity to bring together conservatives who are not completely entranced by the military expansionism and libertarians. In fact, in I think in the final lecture of the series I'm talking about this seemingly perennial question: is conservatism compatible with libertarianism. I talk about the impact of Ron Paul on both of these groups, and I quote Daniel Hannan, who a lot of conservatives know. He's a member of the European Parliament, a British guy, who is very popular on the right for his continuing speeches against leviathan and the centralize European Union and all that sort of thing.

And he spoke about Ron Paul and how important he was, and saying that the thing that's so important about Ron Paul is his respect for history and tradition and the American founding and all these principles of history. And I thought, well, that sounds like very traditionalist conservative language to be using to endorse this guy who is basically a libertarian candidate, who's promoting all these ideas of classical liberalism and anti-statism. To use the language of conservatism to endorse that set of views, I think is very significant, and it shows how, although the views of Ron Paul probably would have been anathema to the conservatives of 200 years ago, like you said, but that today in the 21st century, they appear to be eminently conservative in a number of ways.

WOODS: Well, of course, this is an ongoing dispute that I have with Anthony Gregory, because we argue about, are conservatives more likely to come into our camp as opposed to left liberals? And we both agree that most of them probably won't do anything. Most of them won't — most are just going to stay right where they are. But I personally have had so much success with people on the right — and an occasional person on the Left, by the way. I had a socialist come up to me and say that *Meltdown* converted him to the Austrian School, my book from 2009. Well, okay, whatever works. I wasn't aiming that at him, but I guess whatever works. I still feel like, at least with conservatives, I've got enough in common with them, that I can just say, if you follow at least some of your principles, you're going to wind up on my path.

And also, for whatever else you can — I'm going to get in trouble for this, Jason, but — for whatever else you can say about Fox News — and believe me, my listeners know, I have not — there have been no holds barred in criticizing Fox News — but at least Fox News — back when I lived physically closer to media outlets — they would have me on

TV. MSNBC has had me on, but only when Pat Buchanan was guest hosting Morning Joe — or Scarborough Country. That was when I got onto there. But conservative conferences will invite me; whereas left-liberals would never even consider inviting me, and I feel like that says something. That means that there is more of a kinship between libertarians and conservatives than there is between left-liberals and libertarians.

But as I say, I'm glad if anybody wants to talk to us. I co-authored this book on war, *We Who Dared to Say No to War*, with a guy who's clearly on the Left. So I try to be as ecumenical as I can. But I'm also a realist, and I feel like the recruits are going to tend to come from the right wing that has grown disillusioned with what's going on.

JEWELL: Well, that's been my experience, too. And like you, I sort of came out of establishment conservative when I discovered libertarianism, so it may simply be a product of my own experience that I think that way. I also think that there's something to what the paleoconservative writer, Sam Francis, had to say about the need to attach the ideas of whether it's conservatism or libertarianism to a block of people that have certain interests, that those ideas will line up with.

And however much we want to talk about the value of establishing the principles of what's right, and then allowing that to determine where we go, we know that from experience the majority of people are more likely to embrace a set of political ideas that lines up with what they already perceive to be their own interests, rightly or wrongly. And in the United States, over the last 100 years, the people that have been most likely to do that have certainly been on the Right, rather than on the Left, because the momentum for statism, by and large, has been on the Left.

WOODS: Jason, I'm going to wrap things up here, and tell people that on the show notes page, TomWoods.com/420, that I'll link also to Jason's blog, which is WesternTradition.wordpress.com. It's the Western Tradition Blog. And I'm going to link to, as a related episode to this one, Episode 93 with Anthony Gregory — How toTalk to Left and Right, where we develop some of the themes here. I want to of course urge people to check out Liberty Classroom.com. If you've been meaning to do it, well, now's the time. We've got 13 courses now, and when you sign up you get all the courses, all the ones that exist now and all the ones that'll exist in the coming year. Y

ou can ask me; you can ask Jason; you can ask Kevin Gutzman, Jeff Herbener, all these people, you can ask them all the questions you want for a year in our discussion forums. And the courses can be listened to or viewed, depending on your preference — we've got audio and video — on the go. You don't have to be there at any particular time. You can become educated; you can learn all this stuff; you can be a great debater; you can feel more steeped in this material, easily, painlessly.

And Jason, you've done Western Civilization work for us, but I'm really excited about this course on The History of Conservatism and Libertarianism. It's thorough and yet approachable, and I'm grateful to you for doing it. Thanks for being here today.

JEWELL: Thanks, and I would like to point out that, although it's 30 lectures, it really is just an introduction. The reading list that accompanies this course on the Liberty Classroom site will keep you busy for the next decade.