



Episode 596: Libertarian Strategy: What Should We Do?

Guest: Jeff Deist

WOODS: I watch your talks when they're at Mises events where I'm not in attendance. I always make sure, I want to know what was Deist talking about at the event, and I always love what I hear, because you take a lot of thoughts and you put them out — I mean, it's not like the way I do a talk. Your approach is different from mine. I don't want to go into differences in style, but I like that. I don't like just listening to somebody who's exactly like me. You have thoughts that I've never articulated but that I have in my head, and I just nod my head through your whole talk. What I liked — you did a fantastic, interesting talk on the socialist left and the alt right that I loved.

I want to talk today about a theme you raise in an earlier talk on what should we do, because we get hit hard a lot by people who say, okay, you wise guys, you've diagnosed the problem perfectly well, but you haven't told us what to do. And I get that. I understand that frustration. On the other hand, people have specializations, and mine is I am able to explain problems to people, and that is important, because only if people see there's a problem will they even bother looking for a solution. But I get people's frustration.

We've pinpointed a number of possible approaches before we started talking here, and I want to run down them with you and get a sense of which one or which ones you think have the most promise. So let's start with the most obvious approach that we might take, and that would be a political approach. Let's change the people in political office and see where we can go from there. What are the pluses and minuses of that?

DEIST: Well, I think at the national or federal level that's mostly a minus. If we look at the 20th century, politically it was a purely progressive century, so really when, let's say, progressives or left libertarians complain about this threat from the Right, they're really being nonsensical, at least in the political range. Really from World War I, we might say the Wilson era, the era of the Fed and the income tax, it's been a thoroughly progressive political landscape in America, so at a federal or national level, I don't think there's a lot that libertarians can do to push back or work within the system. They can certainly try. They can spend time and money and energy to do so.

But let me give you one example, more from the Right rather than the libertarian perspective, which is abortion. I would venture if you took every dollar and every hour

of human energy that has been expended on the GOP and GOP candidates in supposedly fighting the scourge of abortion since the Roe v. Wade decision in the '70s, if you took all that time and energy and money and just put it into dormitories that tried to help girls in trouble, you would have had ten times more effect on the abortion situation in this country than you've had politically.

So I'm not optimistic about the political approach at the federal level. I think there's a lot of interesting things you can do at the state and local level, and that's something I'm going to talk about at an upcoming Libertarian Party convention in Texas, because I really think that the Libertarian Party has missed its calling as a local party and as an issue party instead of a movement party. But yeah, politics, you know, we could talk all day about that, but it's not what I would recommend.

WOODS: Let me jump in on this a bit. I remember reading Rothbard's response to Sam Konkin, whose approach of agorism is really the opposite of politics, really. It's a withdrawal from politics completely, and it self-consciously opposes the market to politics, because of course the market is voluntary and political system involves coercion necessarily. And Rothbard, who was not by any means urging everybody to spend all this time on politics, nevertheless pointed out that it's not so easy as that. It's not so simple as to say, well, we should just try to shun it the best we can, he said, because there are major advances we've seen that came about through politics.

So for instance, the repeal of the Corn Laws in England, for instance. That didn't come about because of agorism and people just weren't paying the taxes; that came about because they were repealed by Parliament. Or slavery was not abolished because the slaves rose up in an agorist-style rebellion. It was abolished because government got rid of it. Or the Second Bank of the United States didn't fail because people just voluntarily agreed not to use the currency it produced; it was because Andrew Jackson didn't renew its charter. So in other words, these are big, big things, and we can't lose sight of that. So I guess even though I also see the futility of politics, at the same time if we're not involved at all, how could things not get worse?

DEIST: Well, but all the things you mentioned that occurred politically, the politics followed. People's hearts and minds change first, and then the politics follow. And so what changed those hearts and minds was not necessarily political; it was social, cultural, economic. So I would repeat the often-used phrase that politics is a lagging indicator and that culture drives things first and foremost.

But there's also been some structural changes I think in the 20th century that go against Murray's argument. The Supreme Court has become something it was never intended to become. The two political parties that dominate America have buttoned things down precinct by precinct in a way that makes it much, much harder for independent or third party candidates to prevail. Other changes have occurred in fed gov itself, in the federal agencies, where administrative agencies are acting so far outside of any congressional mandate or congressional intent that really the only solution to that is a nebulous one, which is sue those agencies in federal court. Well, if you have ten years and a million dollars like Mark Cuban, maybe you can do that.

So I think we're operating in a very different environment, and even that when Murray might have been speaking in the '70s or '80s or even the '90s, I think things have changed radically and fundamentally, and I also think that the threat of imprisonment, the threat of fines, the ways in which the federal government can come along and ruin your life are broader and more far ranging and deeper than they've ever been. So I'm not sure that any sort of real political process could come along today and say abolish the income tax or do away with even something like FATCA. The ways to attack these thing politically have been restricted, from my perspective.

WOODS: We have a mutual friend, Connor Boyack, who has produced a wonderful book series for children, *The Tuttle Twins* series, and he's just got his hand in a whole lot of things. And one of the things he does is he heads up a state-level think-tank, the Libertas Institute in Utah, and he's had a lot of success at the state level, even though he is by no means the big, free market Utah think-tank. I don't even know what that is. But he has a small budget, but he's extremely effective with it, and he can point to a lot of bills that have incrementally made some good changes in Utah. So I still believe there is scope for that, and so then for people who just feel drawn to politics, I would say there are some practical steps you can take at the state and local level that might do some good if this is where you feel like your calling is.

But you shouldn't feel bad about yourself or guilty if your calling is somewhere else, and the somewhere else that may people's calling seems to be who listen to my show is in the second of the strategies that maybe we might talk about today, which would be education. Now, for some people this just seems hopelessly slow, that I've got to somehow spread the word about Austrian business cycle theory to the entire world sounds hopeless. So why is it not hopeless?

DEIST: (laughing) Well, part of the strategy on education, what we might call winning hearts and minds, is also to be laying down markers, historical markers for people in the future. You know, I get a little tired of this idea that we've got to have X, Y, and Z, and if we don't we stamp our feet. Well, there's never been a time in human history where people got to have exactly the society they wanted, and there's never been a time in human history when things were easy. And any decent society in the history of mankind has been built by people who have low time preferences, which means that they're willing to sacrifice and give some things up in their own lifetime to build a better future for their progeny. When you look at medieval churches that were built over hundreds of years when the average lifespan was 30 years, I mean, imagine the commitment and the devotion to the future that the people who built those magnificent cathedrals had.

Well, I say we have to take the same approach. We're certainly in some ways freer than people were 100 years ago, and in many other nefarious ways we're less free. But either way, I don't think it's hopeless, because events unfold in ways we can never imagine. In 1980 no one could have reasonably sort of named 1989 as the year that the Berlin Wall would collapse. You could have said in the abstract, well, gee, I don't think communism is sustainable, but you could never pinpoint it. So when the Berlin Wall did fall, at least there was a body of free market literature and thought out there to

sort of help to explain things and also to give Russia and East Germany a blueprint or a model to follow to do better. Now, they didn't do it necessarily. It's sort of cronyism, especially in Russia.

But nonetheless I think we sometimes downplay how important it is to be laying down historical markers and be laying down the truth. I mean, Ludwig von Mises did not really live to see all of his ideas vindicated or even to see his works vindicated in academia, but today fast forward and Mises is seen even by his most grudging critics in the mainstream or on the Left, is seen as a serious scholar and someone who has to be reckoned with. So it's a bit childish I think to demand or to insist that you're going to see everything you want to see in your lifetime. That doesn't mean that we should be willing to accept impediments that we could otherwise be blasting through, but we also have to take a long-term picture. We're not children. We have to consider the fates of our children and our grandchildren at least as important as we consider our own fates.

WOODS: All right, I'm going to make this a little more controversial here and bring up Donald Trump. Here we've engaged in as much educational activity as we can possibly do. We've exerted ourselves like crazy, and yet the guy who has the most success — now, it's not to say Trump doesn't have certain merits. I think he has said some important things on foreign policy that his more crazed opponents for some reason won't concede. They should concede that. I don't care who says it. I don't care if the devil himself says it. He said some very important things about foreign policy, and he said them to cheering crowds. That's very important.

But he is, to my eye anyway, far and away the least intellectual person that I can think of in public life in a long time who is seeking the presidential office. Now, that's not to say that we've had a lot of geniuses. I mean, these are mostly very, very unimpressive people. But it's almost like he revels in it. He's got his instincts, he's got his slogans, he's got his simple solutions, and everybody rallies to that. So maybe education is just a waste of time, because nobody cares.

DEIST: Well, maybe it is, but you have to think about it this way. I mean, America is a uniquely results-oriented society. People want results, and that's why they like Trump, because he at least sounds like he could deliver certain results that are in fact very, very difficult to deliver. What we do know is that the current fed gov cannot produce the results it says. It can't win wars, and it can't pay entitlements, and it can't control monetary policy — at least not for much longer. So we know for a fact — without being able to time it precisely, we know for a fact that the fed gov is not going to be able to produce the results it says.

So when people talk about, you know, libertarianism is too intellectual, it's too ideological, it's not direct, it doesn't speak to the world today and what's going on, unfortunately it's going to speak to the world today in short order. We're going to find that America has some very nasty structural problems that could have been avoided if we'd had a more libertarian society, a less entitlement society and a less meddlesome society in terms of foreign policy. So we are going to have results. They're not going to

be happy results, but we're going to have results, and the question becomes, are we then standing there with an alternative or are we just sort of letting libertarianism get swept away into current events, as opposed to taking credit for explaining those events. So I think there's a difference.

WOODS: All right, I want to talk about the idea of just withdrawing from everything, but before we do that let's thank our sponsor.

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All right, what about the third option that we've got here? The third option would be withdrawing. Now, when you say withdrawing are you thinking in terms of the Sam Konkin kind of model?

DEIST: Well, I'm thinking more in terms of strategic withdrawal. The Catholics talk about the Benedict option.

WOODS: Yeah, the Ben — and by the way, Rod Dreher is Greek Orthodox now. He's an ex-Catholic, but he's the one who — and there are evangelicals who are talking about it as well — who's been pushing this idea in *The American Conservative* magazine, and I'm kind of drawn to it almost to the point that I've had him on the show, and I'm not quite sure what's been stopping me. But o ahead and talk about that.

DEIST: Well, *The American Conservative* occasionally has something decent, and Rod Dreher rarely does — how's that? But nonetheless, it's an interesting idea, that Catholics find themselves now living in a Western world that's so alien and hostile to everything they hold dear that the smart thing to do, rather than trying to face this tidal wave head on, is to use the sort of methods that they use in certain martial arts, where you sort of sidestep a superior force instead of hitting it.

And the idea would be that, hey, we have to sort of wait this out. We have to create our own enclaves, our own communities, try to be together, and it doesn't necessarily require that people come together geographically. Of course that's being tried in places like Liberland, the Free State Project in New Hampshire, but more that they come together — you know, now in the digital age there's lots of ways for people to come together in communities online — and sort of drop out, for lack of a better term. You can see how it holds a lot of appeal to people to say, you know, instead of beating our heads against the wall with this society that seems hell-bent on having this central government control everything, why don't we just sort of withdraw and worry about our kids and worry about our personal finances and worry about the things that are more directly within our control and leave the larger culture as hopeless and wait until there's a better time or a more receptive audience for our views.

So I understand it; I understand the appeal. I think it's probably something we've all thought about libertarians, saying, you know, I've got to quit beating my head against the wall trying to convince everyone and go my own way. So Catholics are talking about it, and certainly libertarians have talked about it too.

WOODS: There's another way we can think about withdrawal. It doesn't have to be quite as total as that. You can selectively withdraw in just some aspects of your life and continue to fight the fight in other aspects. So for instance, homeschooling is just an obvious example. Who wants to fight the school board forever? I mean, you want to devote your life to that? Really? How about just teaching your children the way you want to teach them if they're not going to get that in whatever school it is that you've been sending them to.

And now it's ridiculous how many resources there are. Of course I'm a bit in the tank for the Ron Paul Curriculum, because I made courses for it, and I personally think that's the most important thing that I've done, because it's a body of knowledge that is more or less kept from kids. You're not going to learn who Frédéric Bastiat is. You're not going to learn who Mises is. Even when you're in graduate school you're not going to learn that. And it's not just history and economics. It's a full-fledged thing. And it's the best thing I've done. People should check it out; it's at RonPaulHomeschool.com. You can do that sort of thing, where instead of, as you say, trying to fight — I mean, what a ridiculous prospect of trying to persuade everybody in the educational establishment that they should be teaching the exact opposite of everything they learned when they were in college. That's just not going to happen. So you create your own parallel institutions.

Or, for instance, when we think of the Mises Academy or my Liberty Classroom, these are parallel institutions. We're not trying to take on the faculty of Harvard. I don't even know how we could. But we create our own thing, because technology makes it possible for me to reach potentially practically everybody in the world. So there are ways that you can sidestep, as you say, that aren't just twiddling your thumbs and playing with your kids. And by the way, there's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly honorable. That is what your primary responsibility is. But you can also be doing things, thanks to technology, that can really have a major impact on the world if you know what you're doing.

DEIST: Absolutely. You can withdraw from media. There are so many media sources now that you can tailor your own streams to give you what you view as valid or truthful and ignore your daily paper or the CNNs or the NBCs. There's a million subtle ways for libertarians to withdraw. Withdraw from cable TV. As you said, withdraw from public schools. You can withdraw from pop culture in many ways, which wouldn't hurt anyone. You can withdraw from the inanity of social media and this brief sound bite culture and read — no one is stopping you, yet anyway, from reading the entire Western literary canon word for word. You can out there and read 1,000 pages of *Beowulf*. You don't have to read *People* magazine; you don't have to watch *E!* or Beyoncé at the Super Bowl. These are still options. These are still choices, and we tend to think that they're forced upon us, when in fact they are not.

WOODS: Let's talk about resistance. Now, what do you mean by "resistance"? I can think of a number of different ones in ascending order of plausibility and wisdom.

DEIST: Well, by "resistance," I basically mean what the Left has claimed for itself as noble, which is civil disobedience. The Left tends to really hate right-wingers who engage in civil disobedience, like blocking Planned Parenthood centers and that sort of thing. Civil disobedience is only noble when it's done by some guy in front of a university administrator or something like that.

WOODS: Right.

DEIST: But no, civil disobedience, I would say probably the most infamous form from the libertarian perspective is tax protests. These have been around almost since America has been around, and there are lots of people who have done things that got themselves into very hot water through tax resistance, like unfortunately Irwin Schiff, Peter Schiff's father, who was — that's a long story. He was actually jailed in violation of the First Amendment, certainly in my perspective.

But you know, this is a path. This is a path that has historical precedent. You could refuse to pay taxes. You could refuse to have a gun permit or license. You could buy firearms on the black market. You could refuse to follow drug laws and purchase and consume the drugs you want, either locally or online. You could refuse to have a driver's license. You could refuse to put a license plate on your car. I mean, there's a million sort of small examples, and a lot of these have been tried from one extent to another by people. So it's something that holds appeal emotionally I think to some people, because they say, you know, it's such an evil and sick federal government that I withdraw my consent. And I think that resonates with people. But is it really the way to go if it lands you in jail with far less freedom than you've got now? I think most of us would say no.

But I understand it, and it's certainly something that in many ways has been tried successfully. Like for instance, take Uber. When Uber first started, in most municipalities there were actually laws that more or less expressly forbid it, or it was at best a gray zone. And Uber just sort of came in and started operating anyway, and some investors put some money into it, which was a huge leap of faith. And then it became obvious so quickly how much better Uber was than taxis, and those municipalities are going to be forced to wrestle with, are they really going to enforce laws that run so contrary to popular opinion. So Uber just kind of went in and did something, not necessarily illegal, but certainly a gray area, and they just did it and it worked, and now they've won the battle for opinion. So that might be a little bit happier example of resistance than perhaps Irwin Schiff.

WOODS: I was telling you before that on tomorrow's episode of the show I have a guy named Dale Brown coming on. He created something called the Detroit Threat Management Center when he saw that the traditional police were just doing a terrible job, and not even just from the point of view of police brutality; they're just totally ineffective. They were not able to — the situation was so bad it's hard to believe. So he said, I'm going to create a voluntarily funded alternative, and it's going to be one that aims to defuse situations without violence. And he has had tremendous success. In all the areas of Detroit where he's present, crime is very low, and the police more

or less look the other way. I mean, he's not doing anything illegal, but the police are happier enough, because they get credit when the crime figures go down. They get the credit, even though of course he's the guy doing it.

And I bring this up, because that's an example of when people say, what should I do — okay, I see your strategies, but where do I fit into this whole thing — well, here's an example of a guy who — I don't even know if he's a libertarian, but he asked himself, where do I fit into the whole world, what's the point of my life, and he thought about where his strength was, and then he thought, how can I put this to the service of my fellow man. And boom, you have this amazing example of how the poor are taken care of and are much safer — *much* safer. It's not even a contest — than they are under the traditional Detroit police department. He did that. He just did that, and it's a great example. And so it does come down to, if you're asking yourself, as I think about strategy I have to ask what should I as an individual do, well really that's where the soul searching comes in. No one can do that for you.

But there are such wonderful examples of people. Think of Lew Rockwell and the Mises Institute. What you do doesn't have to be as big as that. But Michael Boldin with the Tenth Amendment Center has got nullification being talked about all over the country, and he operates that out of his apartment in Los Angeles. So don't feel like, well, there's nothing I can, and it's hopeless and forget it. You've got to think smart, and maybe you'll come up with something.

DEIST: Absolutely, and again, America cares about results. So even if you don't want to appeal to people ideologically or morally, for that matter, we know one thing for sure: libertarianism, which is to say private property and markets, always produces the best results. Maybe not perfect, but the best possible results. So you don't have to go at things from the perspective of someone who's read Ayn Rand or read Mises or Rothbard. You can simply go at things from people's own self interest in terms of changing hearts and minds or in terms of entrepreneurship or whatever it might be, because libertarianism produces the best results. This is absolutely unquestionable. We see it time and time again. The government can't calculate. It can't know what things should cost. It can't know how to allocate resources. So in any scenario, any human ill, we know that removing the state from the equation and letting private actors come in and do what they want to do is always going to make it better. So you don't have to convince people necessarily to win; you just have to show them something better.

WOODS: All right, and with that, we will finish up today. Of course if people don't yet know about the Mises Institute, then I don't know how long they've been listening to the show, but I welcome them as new listeners, and I hope you will check out the Mises Institute at Mises.org. If you do, just be warned there's a chance you may never leave your house again, because you'll spend all your time downloading material and consuming it. It's an amazing thing. You'll go through a three-day binge without sleep and emerge understanding the world better. Jeff, we have to talk more often. I really appreciate this. Thanks so much.

DEIST: Thank you, Tom. Great to talk to you.