



## Episode 901: Police Officer Discovers Libertarianism, Quits

Guest: Nathan Dunn

**WOODS:** You were telling your story in the secret Facebook group that we have for the supporting listeners, and I thought this is just an absolute definite. I've got to talk to this guy, because this is the sort of story people like to hear. I've had other people who have come on who have been, for example, conscientious objectors and they came to that conclusion because they listened to libertarian commentary, and that's a great human-interest story. Well, yours is a tremendous human-interest story. You were a police officer for how long?

**DUNN:** Almost 13 years.

**WOODS:** Okay, and do you want to say what state? You don't have to be more specific than that.

**DUNN:** In Southern California.

**WOODS:** Oh, okay, that's somewhat more — all right, Southern California. And something made you change your mind. Well, first of all, let's talk about where you were when you entered the police force? Did you have any strong ideological commitments when you became a police officer? And what did you envision yourself as doing in becoming a police officer? Like making the world a better place, that sort of thing?

**DUNN:** Well, I don't think I had any political leanings whatsoever. I guess you could consider me maybe a mild Republican in some ways, but I mean, I just steered away from politics as much as I could. I didn't know very much about it. In terms of why I became a police officer, I ask myself that all the time. I think that I wanted something that was both physical and mental, and I originally wanted to be in the FBI, but I wanted to have a family one day, and so I thought being a police officer would be a better fit.

**WOODS:** Okay, so you did that and you went on without incident for quite a number of years. And then there were a couple of encounters you had with libertarian ideas that started to get some wheels turning. The first one was perhaps a bit more subtle, and that was Rothbard, which, if Rothbard is the subtle one, what kind of story is this?

**DUNN:** That's right. It was actually one of Rothbard's economic works, so it wasn't quite into his hardcore stuff yet, I think. But I just wanted to know more about

finances. I figured it's time to grow up and learn the difference between a stock and a bond, and everything that I was learning just didn't seem to make sense. I kept wanting to get more and more fundamental. And I finally asked the question: what is money? And I found Rothbard's book *What Has Government Done to Our Money?* And I read that and I said yes, this is absolutely true. And I started to question, well, if they're doing this to money, what other things are they doing this to? And I started looking more into things, and I went along like that, learning more and more for probably – what? Two more years – listening to lectures of Mises University in the car and what not, and things started to change for me.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I actually note here in the notes, you write, "The way I did police work changed." Can you elaborate on that? What does that mean?

**DUNN:** Sure. Well, when I first read that book, I actually was up being special detailed to our narcotics detail. I was there for the better part of a year doing a task force with the DEA. And right away, the first implication that spun out from understanding libertarianism was the absurdity of the drug war and just, it couldn't be justified in any way. And the question I always asked was always, "Is this legal?" I never really asked the libertarian question, which is, "Is this justified?" Is this force justified? Not legal, justified. And I realized that the drug war doesn't stand up at all. So I left, almost immediately, narco. I went to my supervisor and I told her that this just isn't my personality, was my words. And so I went back to patrol. And as soon as I got back to patrol, I'm driving around, and it was this incredible feeling. The way that I looked at people just changed right away, and I felt like I had solved three-quarters of the crime just by reclassifying people. I mean, if you think about the way that you look at – Imagine, say, the Berkeley protestors smashing windows, some of them, the way you kind of look at them as criminals. Well, that's the way that police officers look at drug addicts, because they classify them as criminals. So as soon as I stopped doing that, everything changed, and it went on from there.

**WOODS:** Was there anything – you don't have to be super specific – that you saw when you were on the narcotics detail, as opposed to just philosophically "I'm opposed to these sorts of laws and I don't want to be involved in enforcing them"? But were there any incidents, was there anything that you were involved in that you saw close up that in retrospect, once you came to these libertarian ideas, you said, Oh my gosh, I can't believe I was involved in that or I did that, or, What a horror show that was – that kind of thing?

**DUNN:** Yes. I've got to say, the detectives in my department were actually really good. It was when we teamed up with the DEA that I actually saw the stark difference, and the amount of money that the DEA just throws around and just how much they don't end up – they didn't end up caring about what was going on. It was just kind of a fun game to them. That was really bothersome. That and I found out that we had somebody on the team that was asset forfeiture. I learned what that was, and that just seems insane to me, that they're trying to figure out how they can best – they looked at it as recovering their money from all the work they're doing in doing the drug busts. And so that seemed a little strange to me, and now looking back, I'm not so embarrassed about particular incidents; just how willing I was to go along with everything and not questioning anything is what I think I'm most mortified about.

**WOODS:** All right, so then something happens October 2013. You're on patrol and you're listening to I presume another Mises University talk, and this one by Bob Higgs?

**DUNN:** That's right, and to better explain that I'll have to go back. After a couple years of being on the police department, I started to question just a couple things about whether this was the right fit for me. It's not exactly what's on the brochure, right? And so I went to a seminar put on by a very popular speaker in the military and police circles, and he explained to us the taxonomy of the sheep, wolves, and the sheepdog – maybe you've heard this – and how 98% of people are just peaceful sheep who just want to go about their lives. But there's this 1% of wolves that want to prey on the sheep. But luckily, you, military and police officers, you are sheepdogs, and you protect the sheep from the wolves. And the sheep might not like you very often, but they really do need you.

And so that kind of patched me up and kept me going for I guess another six years or so until I'm driving around that day in October 2013, and I hear that speech by Dr. Higgs. And Dr. Higgs in the speech, basically he told me – he entered somebody else into this picture. He told me about the shepherd and that I work for him. And he said in his words, "If it protects them at all, however, it does so only as a shepherd protects his captive flock. Not because he recognizes and respects the natural rights of the sheep, but only to keep them unmolested in his sole possession and control until he finds it expedient to shear or slaughter them."

And that hit me really hard, because it just shattered everything I had been going on for a number of years. And I remember I pulled over the car, and I just had to kind of collect myself and let everything spin out and resettle. And I remember going home that night and telling my wife that I wanted to leave.

**WOODS:** Yeah. Now, okay, now things get pretty interesting indeed. Were you at any time, if not tormented, then at least presented with the counter claim that maybe now that you know as much as you do, it might in fact be better for you to stay because it's better for the public to have you as a police officer than some schmoe who has never been exposed to any of this stuff?

**DUNN:** Well, I felt tormented the entire time, to tell you the truth. And the reason I remember the date so well is it was a month before I was to be married and this idea that I was going to go home and tell my wife that, hey, I don't have anything else lined up but I want to quit my job. So that was a little unsettling, but we ended up talking and she ended up being very supportive and told me, Hey, listen, people leave their jobs all the time. If you want to leave, you can. Let's just line something else up first. And so that's what I ended up doing.

And during that time, I thought about it. I'm like, well, maybe it would be better if I stayed. Maybe it would be better for me, better for the family, but also maybe better for the world in some really small way, the fact that this neighborhood has me and I'm not going to end up stopping people, having the attitude of, hey, let's stop ten people and maybe I'll find something good in there. And so yeah, I went back and forth, and I've got friends on the department and officers that I really respect and they're doing some great work in some specialized area, and I thought, hey, maybe I can find a place for me where I could feel good about things and get some work done.

**WOODS:** On the free market, we would have some kind of security services, which in fact, we already have. I'm pretty sure a majority of security is actually provided privately by different security companies and so on, so there's nothing wrong, per se, with security; it's the government's perversion of it. It's the victimless crimes. It's all that. But I'm just thinking out loud here whether a police officer would have enough discretion, given that there's no oversight day to day, there's nobody following him in his car, there's nobody watching what he does – could you not turn a blind eye to victimless crimes and instead just be the police officer who breaks up fights and protects the weak and does stuff like that?

**DUNN:** Well, that's what I tried to do for about two or three years, and in a way, it makes it actually more difficult in some ways, because you not only have the very real dangers of the street, but now you do have to worry about the rules and the regulations and the law and the fact that you are not covered if you don't follow their rules. For instance, the rules regarding domestic violence, the mandatory arrests involved there, or the notifications to certain agencies like Department of Child Services and what not. So it's playing a bit of a risky game. But the discretion is a really good thing. If all the laws and all the – and I'm counting the legislation in there too. If all those were actually enforced, life would be intolerable for us, as you well know, and so the idea that I have discretion is actually a good thing. However, it does put me in a tough spot when I'm out there because I find myself wanting to work by myself, handle calls by myself so that I can do them sometimes before other officers get there or in a way that I have more control. But there is a little bit of oversight. Any time there's a bigger incident, a report is made and people check off to make sure that this went down or that went down and what not, so you do have a lot of control, but not ultimately.

**WOODS:** I don't suppose you looked around at your colleagues and thought, Well, there's Harold and Fred over there. I could confide in them about the ideas going through my mind.

**DUNN:** Right, and that's the thing, is I know a lot of people listening to this, I think I want them to understand that the police officers, the way they think about things is very similar to the way that regular people think about things. If there's a problem in society, the way we solve it is we pass a law. And I guess if you were to ask me the way that I thought back then, that's what I would have thought. Maybe the way I would have put it was: breaking the law is bad. Following the law is good. Enforcing the law is like double plus good, I guess? And so what happens is any other way of looking at it just seems kind of strange. Ethics and legality seem to be tied up, and if you don't want to follow the law, if you don't want to do what the police are doing, then that makes you bad somehow. And people don't want to have those types of conversations. They just want to come to work every day, do their thing, feel good about it, and go home, so I wasn't exactly looking to confide in very many people. That and I'm also I think a little sensitive about being officious, which seems to be one of my peeves with police officers in the first place, so I basically just kept my cards close to my cards as I did my work.

**WOODS:** So how did you go in and announce that you were leaving? Just very straightforward?

**DUNN:** No, not at all. It didn't end up coming to that. I guess I stayed a little too long. I was hurt on the job making a good arrest, but I ended up tearing out my shoulder and having two surgeries, some physical therapy over the course of two years. And during that time, I had started preparing for another career. The injury actually made me have to go in another direction. So what happened is I had waited and I was medically retired at the end.

**WOODS:** Okay, all right, so there wasn't even a temptation to go in and give them a two-minute libertarian soliloquy or anything.

**DUNN:** No, I don't think I ever would have —

**WOODS:** No, it's just that some of my people I think would, so I was just wondering [laughing]. I think some of them would.

**DUNN:** That's right, and I was prepared for it the entire time, and I think the walls of my shower have heard me explain it, you know, how many times how I'm going to leave.

**WOODS:** Sure, I bet.

**DUNN:** But it ended up not coming to that, and certain things you don't end up controlling. And the way it worked out is the way it worked out, but thankfully, if it weren't for me getting hurt and going down that path, I never would have gone down the direction that I'm going down now.

**WOODS:** Yeah, let's talk about that, because there is a certain *Tom Woods Show* link here in the direction you wound up taking.

**DUNN:** That's right. So I was listening to a show. This was during the time that I was out with my injury. And I listened to an episode that had an advertisement for Code School. And I know nothing about coding. Decent with computers, but I decided to go check them out. And I absolutely loved it. It was incredible. I was so excited about how much I enjoyed this, and I just kept going down that path, kept going down that path. And now I've actually been accepted to Hack Reactor, and I start in less than a week.

**WOODS:** All right, first of all, can you just tell people what coding is? They might not know.

**DUNN:** Oh yeah, absolutely. So what I'm doing, the type of coding I'm doing is I want to do web development, so basically writing the code for websites and web applications and things of that nature. But coding I guess is a lot broader. It's basically writing the instructions to a computer.

**WOODS:** So I did — it's true, I promoted Code School for a while. I don't promote them anymore, not because they're bad or anything; I just don't do it anymore. But I got a lot of people who gave me great, great feedback. They were really glad to have heard about it. So that always made me happy. I'm glad that it really has transformed your

life. Hack Reactor is something that I've just mentioned in passing, not really as an ad, but just as something I've been interested in ever since I found out about it. And this is another – I mean, the police part of your story is of course the main part, but man, Hack Reactor is also very, very interesting. Explain exactly what that is and how intense it is.

**DUNN:** Well, I did hear you mention it, not by name, one time on your show, and I thought to myself, Oh, I'd love to do that but I don't think I could ever get that far. But I worked as hard as I could, and I ended up getting into Hack Reactor, which is a coding boot camp. And the way that you were talking about it was exactly right. It's an alternative to going to, say, college and trying to learn computer science. This is, hey, we talk to the employers and the companies and we find out what they want and then we train you for that. You can think of it as a trade school for computer coding. And it's very competitive and there's an admissions test. I want to say acceptance rates are in the single digits, and you have three chances to get in. But if you do get in and you get through it, then you can come away with a pretty good paying job.

**WOODS:** Yeah, exactly. If you go to HackReactor.com – and again, I'm just telling you about it. No affiliate relationship. I don't think they have an affiliate program. But it's a 12-week program. You're going to be working like crazy, so don't expect to go out with your friends a whole lot. But they have tremendous results in terms of placing you in really top jobs at really outstanding starting salaries. So if you can get into Hack Reactor and you can, well, so to speak, hack it, at the end, you're going to have a very, very happy outcome. So it's tremendous that you got into this thing. So I expose it was the experience you got at Code School is what made them say, All right, even though he doesn't have a background in this, he made his own background so let's let him in?

**DUNN:** Well, I wish. So I started with Code School and I moved on to the other number of companies out there that are giving lessons. I watched YouTube videos, I listened to lectures, I did prep courses. I actually did –

**WOODS:** Okay, but you didn't go to school for this, in other words, other than these private institutions here?

**DUNN:** No, I was still – I had no time to. I was in and out of physical therapy. I was being passed around at desk jobs at work. So I was doing this at nights and weekends just whenever I could. Every spare minute that I could, I would do it.

**WOODS:** Yeah, so you did it yourself.

**DUNN:** I did it myself –

**WOODS:** Yeah –

**DUNN:** – but I had the support of my wife. And we had recently had our first child, so that kind of threw a wrench in there, but at the same time, it made me work all the harder.

**WOODS:** Well, it's a great story. I mean, there are a lot of people who, when they come across new ideas that challenge where they find themselves and that challenge the way they earn an income, the easy thing is to look the other way, rationalize it away, and not give it any further thought. But to actually encounter somebody who says I can't go on living this particular way because I just don't believe in it so I'm going to have to figure out an alternative is an exceptionally rare occurrence, so I'm impressed that you did it, and that's why I thought we should have a brief word here on the show. So best of luck with Hack Reactor. I guess I won't be seeing you much in the Facebook group for a while once that starts. When does that start?

**DUNN:** That starts in about seven days. So for me that would be May 8th.

**WOODS:** Oh wow, okay. Yeah, so let's see – yeah, because we're talking right now on I think the 3rd, so wow, gee, good luck. I guess I'll see you later in the summer [laughing]. But best of luck and thanks so much for sharing your story with us.

**DUNN:** Yeah, no problem. Anybody who wants to send me a message can do so on Facebook. Classic Rando is my name inside the private Facebook group.

**WOODS:** Okay, very good. Thanks so much again, Nathan. Appreciate it.

**DUNN:** Thanks, Tom.