



Episode 904: Can Liberty Be Promoted Within the Republican Party?

Guest: Austin Sekel

WOODS: All right, tell me about the Republican Liberty Caucus because I want to know exactly when it got started.

SEKEL: So the RLC was founded in 1991 in Florida, actually. I think you've had this gentleman on the show before, Tom Walls, he's one of the founders, and Phil Blumel. They're actually part of our local chapter here in South Florida now. But it was started essentially to distinguish themselves from conservatives, not that I think being a conservative is wrong or bad, but in the Republican Party, particularly their positions after the Reagan years, they found that conservatives were constantly the ones that seemed to be not living up to their campaign promises, to say the least. So they wanted to distinguish themselves – and not because libertarianism sounded cool. These were libertarians before the RLC was founded. But the goal was to get libertarians elected to office. They had seen the shortcomings of the Libertarian Party, for better or for worse, and wanted to try a different route. And so I think our level of success isn't as high as the NRCC, per se, of electing candidates, but we've certainly helped get some good guys elected at the federal level and with the state chapters and local chapters in respect to local level and state level.

WOODS: Give me an example of such a person.

SEKEL: As a 527 nonprofit, we endorse candidates. We also advocate against them. But we've endorsed Rand Paul. Ron Paul is an endorsed member. Justin Amash, Thomas Massie, Walter Jones. Some obviously predate this election cycle like Ron Paul. We have a pretty slim margin of candidates, and particularly being the endorsement committee chair, I would never advocate anyone to blindly vote for any Republican on the ballot. We stick to our principles, and those are the few people that fit the ticket. We have a questionnaire and compact that we give to all candidates to fill out, and then we vote on it. So those are some of the candidates that we've helped get elected at the federal level.

WOODS: Whether for strategic reasons or otherwise, does the Republican Liberty Caucus automatically endorse the GOP nominee for president?

SEKEL: No, no. I actually don't think since its founding the RLC has ever endorsed a Republican in the general election for president. Also to say we've never, as far as I understand, given non-endorsements, because I had pondered this with regard to Donald Trump, just coming out, not advocating against him, but specifically coming

out and saying we do not support him at all. This is a non-endorsement. So we've endorsed in the primaries before Ron Paul, this past cycle we endorsed Rand Paul. But again, since our founding in '91, I don't think we've ever endorsed a Republican in the general election for president.

WOODS: So what kind of relationship therefore, if any, do you guys have with the Republican National Committee?

SEKEL: Well, to clarify a little more about the RLC and to reiterate again, we are a nonprofit. We're not forcibly affiliated with the Republican Party. We're not an outfit of the Republican Party. But we do have the right to use the elephant and the name "Republican," but we're not officially connected with them. With regards to the RNC, though, I mean, one of our board members was a past RNC member, Saul Anuzis, but I think we definitely need to press forward in regards to influencing the RNC. And members have been delegates before to conventions, especially in 2012, but we're not particularly trying to advocate for or against the RNC, though their tactics are usually brute and incorrect, in my opinion. But it's more of our goal to support and endorse the candidates.

WOODS: Okay, so it's not a question of we'd better do this or that because this will help curry favor with the Republican National Committee. That's just not even a factor at all.

SEKEL: Yeah, no, it's not. And I mean, being active in the Republican Party is definitely encouraged, and also to note, to be an RLC member you don't have to be a registered Republican. You do if you'd like to be a board member at the state level or at the national level, but even Libertarian Party members can be members of the RLC.

WOODS: Okay, and it looks — I wouldn't quite say vice-versa, but let's just say I know somebody who's fairly prominent with the RLC was seen walking around the convention of the Libertarian Party last year and was very much supporting two former GOP governors there.

SEKEL: [laughing] Yes, I was actually at the convention as well, and I think I may have seen this same gentleman as well.

WOODS: Okay, all right. He's not a super duper big fan of mine, but that doesn't have to be other people's litmus test. All right, I'm curious about a few things here. I mean, surely somebody's going to say to you, Look, the Republicans, sometimes they talk a good game. Sometimes they don't even do that, but sometimes they talk a good game. But in practice, they just so consistently wind up to be so disappointing that it seems like you're fighting an uphill battle.

SEKEL: Yeah, we definitely are.

WOODS: Okay, so before I even get into the Libertarian Party, is there any time when you just watch Republicans and you say, My gosh, what in the world am I even doing here?

SEKEL: [laughing] Yeah, well, I would like to revisit the last question you asked prior to about the LP, but in answer to this: all the time. You know, please put in perspective registering as a Republican and being a member does not necessarily – sure, by other means people would say you're guilty by association, but I certainly have never sacrificed my principles in being part of this.

But to put it more in perspective, I live in West Palm Beach. I live less than three miles from Mar-a-Lago and I'm a precinct committeeman here in the local party here in Palm Beach County. Either you support Trump blindly, there's not even questions asked; you're silent if you don't support him; and if you still don't like Trump, you've left the party at this point. Leaving myself and a very few libertarians in the local party here, it's a very, very small minority. And I think that most people don't get to witness this kind of near idolatry, in my opinion, that some Republicans have of the Trump administration, just being where I am. I mean, some of these people, they say, Oh, he's never broken a promise yet and he's all doing everything; we're just so grateful for him. And people get up and grandstand at these party meetings for ten minutes or so just going on with these instances of how they met Trump and he's so wonderful.

And it seems like idolatry to me, and I ask myself that many times. What am I doing here? And it doesn't make me happy at times to witness these events, but I certainly think that it's my duty to kind of chronicle these events and make people aware of what it really is like at, to some degree, ground zero here near Mar-a-Lago. It can be difficult, but I think another important thing to consider is if I'm not attesting to what they're doing in the GOP, who else will? There doesn't seem to be many libertarians up to the task. So resiliency is a key.

WOODS: I'll just say for the record that I personally have no party affiliation, and I've spoken at Libertarian Party events and I've spoken at some GOP events, and my view always is if somebody invites me to speak to their audience, why would I not do it? I mean, within reason, why would I not do it? Why would I not want to go talk to these people? Which I've done, and sometimes I've been on C-SPAN when I've done it. So I've never regretted anything like that. So I'm not in any particular corner on this myself, but I've got to ask you about the Libertarian Party because –

SEKEL: Yeah, yeah, please.

WOODS: – I think it's a reasonable question to say, if you want to have a party that reflects what you believe in, go ahead and create one. Or if there is one that already exists, go ahead and join it. And then yeah, maybe it will be a long slog, but maybe you focus on local races and stuff like that instead of always fielding these national candidates and dissipating all your energy. Focus on local races that are winnable and go from there. Why – first of all, did you ever spend any time in the Libertarian Party?

SEKEL: No, not as a member. I will say that I became a part of the liberty movement in 2012 because of Ron Paul, and after the RNC forced him out, I did support Johnson at the time, more so because I thought that this was just the only other option left to kind of stick it to them. I didn't necessarily think Johnson was the most – I could see that he wasn't a Ron Paul, but he was still pretty good. I will say that this past election, Weld was definitely the worse of the two, but even Johnson slipped a little

more in regards to being principled. And you know, to his defense, he's trying to pull people from both sides of the party, or from both parties that were upset, so he kind of watered his message down to reach them, which, you know, it's politics. I kind of get it.

But in a short answer, no, I have never been an LP member. I do have friends in the LP. Again, as I stated earlier, I was at the last national convention here in Orlando. I'm not afraid to go to Libertarian Party meetings. I have friends in the party. So there's success too, even in Palm Beach County. You know, Libertarians have gotten elected at the local level. I'm not sure if this is true or not, if LP members have ever been elected with their party name on the ballot, but I do know that in non-partisan races they have had some success. So I wish it to them. I don't think being a Libertarian Party member is wrong; I just think it's most feasible to be a Republican. I'm not sacrificing my principles by doing it. I have a chance at success.

But I think the most important issue that kind of divides us is really just the open primary or closed primary for states. I think when you really get down to it, that's really the only thing keeping libertarians from voting for good candidates or not, and when that line is crossed out in an open primary, I don't really see what the issue is to begin with. I know Republicans are sworn by oath to only vote for Republicans or vote – you know, they can't vote for other party members, which I've not done and I don't at least plan on doing. I'd never vote for a Democrat and I've yet to find myself in a position where an LP member is ever on the ballot. Actually, that's not true. There was a Senate race this past election, but I did not vote for the Libertarian and I did not vote for Marco Rubio [laughing]. I fortunately had to sit out this past presidential election and the Senate election in Florida. I could not find myself voting for either candidate.

WOODS: I remember seeing Peter Schiff speaking at some Libertarian Party event. It might have been in Connecticut. And I was shocked that he got up in front of them and said, You know, all these efforts that you're putting in here are just pointless. You should all quit this and go join the Republican Party. That was his – and I thought, I think I would have told them that that was what I was going to say before I got there.

SEKEL: [laughing] Yeah, I think that's not –

WOODS: Are you sure you want to invite me? Are you sure you want to invite me after all now that you know that?

SEKEL: Yeah, I don't know Peter on a personal level, but that does seem a little rude to say the least maybe. But again, I don't really have the same qualms that some people have and, "Oh, I hate the Libertarian Party because they always lose," or whatever these reasons are. "I hate the Republican Party because of the neocons." I mean, as a liberty movement, it's okay to disperse. The fact that there are two different big factions of libertarians, I think that's actually a good thing in the long run. I don't think I'd view it as a problem, though I wish libertarians would kind of group together to one side. I think it would be beneficial to have them as Republicans. We'd be a bigger driving force than we have been. I mean, look at 2008 and 2012. If we had built on that momentum, who knows where we would be today? Kind of yet to be told, but that's why I would encourage libertarians to register Republican, or at

least if you're not willing to do that, at least consider joining the RLC. Again, we're a nonprofit organization. You're not officially part of the Republican Party, but that is our goal as the libertarian wing and the conscience of the Republican Party.

WOODS: All right, let me interrupt our discussion to ask you to tell us about the event you have coming up at the end of May 2017, because it turns out I'm also speaking at it along with my friend Michael Boldin, which was a pleasant surprise. The guy flies into Orlando, doesn't even tell me he's coming, I'm going to smack him around. So tell me about what is the point of that event, when is it, what are the details.

SEKEL: So every [inaudible] a national convention. The last one we had was in Nashua, New Hampshire. It was a great success. We had Rand Paul and Ted Cruz come out and quite a few other people. Steve Lonegan was a guest, Grover Norquist. But this time we're meeting in Orlando, so it's hosted by my state chapter here in Florida. We're having for the state chapter, we're also having our state convention that Friday, which is the 26th, but the 27th is our national convention. We'll have Congressman Ted Yoho as a breakfast speaker. Cliff Maloney from Young Americans for Liberty, the president, and Michael Boldin of the Tenth Amendment Center for lunch, and you, Tom, for dinner as our keynote speaker with I think Lawrence Spivack, who's known as being the "Free Market Warrior." We'll have a bunch of different panel discussions. But I do hope people come out. I think we may have another guest speaker. That's yet to be announced. But the key is to rendezvous with libertarian Republicans and our allies. Even at big events like CPAC or the RNC, it's kind of difficult to stay with your people and network with likeminded individuals as opposed to kind of just being in the mess of things, which isn't necessarily bad. But it's a very centered and focused convention. And it's at the Rosen Centre in Orlando.

WOODS: All right, I will post the details of that event at TomWoods.com/904. Do you guys do any advocacy for particular policies or just candidates?

SEKEL: We do. The last cycle we had a legislative agenda that I believe is available on our website. It includes about ten bills at the federal level. At the state level, at least in Florida, we've always had a legislative agenda. In February we got back from our eighth annual trip to Tallahassee where we lobbied the legislature for liberty. I think there are two policy issues, though, that we've kind of – or at least one we've refused to kind of take a stand for, though, but we'll take a side on any other issue. It's just abortion. We are not pro-life; we're a pro-choice organization. We don't advocate for either of the issue, and not to say that one is right or wrong. I'm a pro-life libertarian, but as the organization is concerned, that is the only thing we really stay out of. And we're not a religious organization as well, but we do obviously support religious liberty.

WOODS: I myself more or less withdrew from most political stuff after the second Ron Paul campaign. I thought I'm not morally opposed to people who are involved in politics. I don't think there's any reason to be morally opposed to it. If you're just trying to limit the burdens on other people, that sounds like an honorable thing to me. It's just not something I want to do because I feel like, well, you're always going to need people doing the kind of thing I do anyway, so I might as well just focus on that because I enjoy doing it more.

But even if you guys accomplish nothing else, to me, supporting people – like especially Walter Jones – people who are on that side of the aisle and yet who are willing to speak out against a lot of military intervention, that alone makes the whole thing worthwhile because it makes people's heads explode. It lets people know that such a position exists, that you don't have to be bottle-throwing radicals at Berkeley to be against war. It's like these people have forgotten there are wars going on, because they seem to have absolutely zero interest in any of them. But that is a very, very valuable thing. And in that way, you are carrying on the tradition of Ron Paul.

Now, at the same time, I would say that with my limited experience with some people at the RLC, I would say there's one person in particular I know who is very, very outspoken and who was very critical of Ron Paul and was more or less a supporter of Rudy Giuliani. And so yeah, maybe I'll tell you off the air who I'm talking about. But that, I would have no interest in an organization like that, because an organization like that is called the Republican Party. Why would I need to join the RLC to advocate for Rudy Giuliani and military intervention?

SEKEL: Yes, I mean, as far as I'm aware – and maybe at the personal level this person was making these comments, but I don't think the RLC has ever, ever advocated for Rudy Giuliani or any of the continued failed wars in the Middle East or elsewhere, as far as I'm concerned.

WOODS: Right, I'm not sure the person was endorsing Giuliani so much as saying, I favor reasonable Republicans who have some kind of liberty streak. And the list was just all terrible people. Like, "I can't support a crazy whacko like Ron Paul." And it's just, eh. That was the taste that I had of the RLC for years. I thought, okay, well, I know this type already. They're called Republicans. What makes this any different?

SEKEL: Yeah, and again, just – I'm not sure who this person is. I would like to discuss it with you off the air. But you know, the people who founded the RLC are very fervently still libertarian. I think that's kind of unchanged. Again, Tom Walls, he's now the ambassador from Liberia to the United States. Phil Blumel is the president of U.S. Term Limits. I mean, these people have not really changed their opinion, and those are the people who I've been associated with ever since I joined the RLC, were the founders. So I'm sorry you've had this taste in your mouth and kind of this questionability of the RLC, but this is news to me.

WOODS: Well, good. Look, you were able to come here and clear the air and I appreciate that. And you know, I will say this – I know this may sound a little bit self-important, but I don't mean it that way. The fact that they would invite me to speak I take as speaking well of the RLC. [laughing] And I know people who haven't listened much might think, Oh my gosh, what kind of a bigheaded jerk is this? But what I mean is what I represent.

SEKEL: Yes.

WOODS: I'm pretty uncompromising on all these sorts of liberty issues, so I'm interested in that and I'm interested in the fact that I was invited to speak there, or that they would want Michael Boldin, which I find very interesting. But yet, I haven't yet asked what the heck it is they want me to talk about, so I guess I should probably

look into that. I don't suppose you know off the top of your head what they – I don't think they would say, Eh, just come on in and say what you want to say. Probably some topic.

SEKEL: I mean, to some degree I think you're definitely open to speak about what you want. I don't think anyone expects you to come in shaming the RLC –

WOODS: No! Oh no.

SEKEL: Yeah, but I do think that you are pretty open to speak about what you'd like. I think the biggest thing that the RLC is in need of – because yeah, keep in mind we've been trudging along since '91, and being a libertarian Republican, as many know, can be disheartening. I think we need a pep talk. So you're more than welcome to inquire more with other RLC members, but speaking for myself, I think that is definitely what's most needed. And also to kind of dissolve some qualms with the Libertarian Party, because though maybe some people aren't as outspoken about the schisms between us, but I don't see it as much and I wish that more people didn't as well, because I don't hate the Libertarian Party; I just – we need to kind of dissolve the issues we have with each other, though. And not that you're coming on to be Dr. Phil [laughing], but it would be nice to hear some unity from you as well as opposed to something divisive, which we're used to.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Well, I'm good at both. Sometimes I am the crowd-pleaser, you know? Sometimes they bring me on and – but even if I do something crowd-pleasing, it's always educational. Like when I went to the GOP – I went to the Lincoln Day Dinner, I think it was –

SEKEL: Ah.

WOODS: – the Montana GOP, and everybody was there. I mean, gubernatorial candidates, the senators, everybody was there. And I gave a rip-roaring speech that the grassroots would love but that had, let's say, some of the politicians squirming a bit. I just went through all these areas that, supposedly government's indispensable and where would we be and we would be dead and our kids would be dead and they'd all be working in a coal mine and all that. And I just went through point by point by point. Everybody absolutely loved it, but it was – I was told later that the elected officials were all squirming, I think because they didn't want to be associated with what I was saying. But all I'm saying is what it is they're supposed to believe anyway, so I'm not going to reproach myself for that.

SEKEL: Yeah.

WOODS: And it made it onto C-SPAN and I got great feedback from that. So even when I do a crowd-pleasing thing, it pleases the right crowd. I'll just put it that way. It doesn't please every conceivable crowd.

SEKEL: Yeah, yeah, well, I would still appreciate your honesty when you speak. I don't think anyone there would be offended by any means.

WOODS: No, no, no.

SEKEL: But also too, I may be a – I can't speak for everyone, but I would say to some of the RLC members who took the shot at supporting Trump, I think at this point in time after his 100 days, that that support isn't there as much as it was. Not that people need to be corrected or something, but I think that people are, you know, hungry for liberty. In a sense, voters were duped to some degree. I mean, sure, some go along with his plans right now, but I know some libertarian Republicans that kind of really have been let down. And you know, we're hungry for liberty. We need it.

WOODS: All right, well, the speech is writing itself now in my own mind as we're sitting here talking.

SEKEL: [laughing]

WOODS: How can people find out more about the Republican Liberty Caucus?

SEKEL: If you go onto RLC.org and on the homepage on the left you'll see a link to the convention.

WOODS: Okay, great, so they can find out about the event there, they can find out about the whole organization there –

SEKEL: Yeah.

WOODS: I'll link to that also at TomWoods.com/904. Well, Austin, best of luck and looking forward to seeing you later this month.

SEKEL: Yes, me too, Tom. Thank you so much for having me on. I look forward to seeing you too.