



Episode 928: Jeff Deist on the Key Libertarian Mistake, and What We Should Do Instead

Guest: Jeff Deist

WOODS: All right, let's dive into what we want to talk about today and, in particular, we're inspired, or I'm inspired, by your recent article that generated a bit of heat, but to my mind generated far more light and it's very important. We're really talking about, much as I dislike this word, a kind of rebranding of libertarianism, or we might say a rethinking of what we're really here for, what the whole thing is really all about. And I'd like to hear you explain what it is you're bringing to the table with this particular article.

DEIST: Well, and I like the term rebranding, because there's not a new libertarianism. Liberty in the political sense of the word is just anti-state. It's letting people live free or freer of state coercion. So that's all it is, and I'm always cautious about attempts to rebrand libertarianism in the sense that there's a third way, that these old arguments between socialism and collectivism and liberty are kind of outdated and, gee whiz, technology is going to change everything. Because sometimes I see libertarianism going down this false path of futurism or third-way thinking, and so I don't mean to imply that. What I mean to say, in terms of rebranding libertarianism, I'm talking about marketing; I'm not talking about the product, so to speak. So I'd like to just say that first and foremost.

But I think there is a misconception amongst liberty-minded folks that we need to create a 51% philosophy in any country or community, and I think that's wrong. Doug Casey has talked about, is this inclination to be liberty-minded, is it genetic, is it something we're born with, or is it environmental? Well, that's an age-old question and we'll probably never know the answer, at least not in our lifetimes. But it does raise a question of why do some people seem to get libertarianism from an early age, and why do some people think it's absolutely a nonstarter and unworkable philosophy and they're collectivist in all of their political and even social thinking?

Well, I'm not sure I have the answer, but I do know that trying to create this 51% majority is a fool's errand. We've seen time and time again in the 20th century that there are lots and lots of people, Tom, who disagree with us about the nature and role of government. It's just that simple. But the happy news, I think, is that it really only takes about a 5 or 10% vanguard in any country or civilization to change things radically, because most people by their very nature, by human nature, are fence-sitters. They're going to go wherever the wind blows, and they're going to sort of keep quiet and go along to get along.

So Rothbard talked about this. I don't think we need to win 51% of the population to our ideas; I think we need to move about 5 or 10% of the population in our direction. Depending on who you want to believe, maybe 20% of Americans are somewhat libertarianish in their thinking. I think there was a Cato poll a few years ago that shows this. I think that the number of people who would actually agree with us on a more hardcore basis is probably far lower than that, but I think one of the fundamental errors of our thinking is that we have to create a 51% movement, and we don't. So that's sort of the starting point for a lot of our tactical mistakes.

WOODS: All right, let me try and see if I understand what you're saying, because I can understand, for example – well, let's think about the movement for gay marriage, for instance. When that got started, that was nowhere near a 51% movement. That was just a very, very small number of people, and it grew and it grew, and then it reached critical mass and it just went like crazy. Everybody was supporting it.

Now, you may say, at the very least they didn't have to start off as a 51% movement to ultimately be successful, but I think the difference between them and us is what we're asking for is fundamentally different. We're asking for the state to leave us alone, and if we have only 5 or 10% of people, the state's going to keep following us around and the other 90 to 95% are still going to want to exploit us and take advantage of us. So help me understand better how this works.

DEIST: Well, when I say 5 or 10%, I mean a far more elite 5 or 10%. Most libertarians are people without much wealth or power. Let's just be frank about it. And people who are at the top as elites in the West today, whether that's political, social, cultural, economic, tend to be statist, and there's a good reason for that. If you're doing very well in society, if you're an elite, almost by definition you're probably not behind a radical change in the status quo, because in the status quo, you're at the top. So we can understand this. A Jeff Bezos or a Bill Gates doesn't necessarily want a libertarian shakeup tomorrow.

So what we have to do first and foremost is have more powerful and wealthy and influential libertarians. I mean, the 5 or 10% matters. If it's just a bunch of young kids sitting at home talking to each other on Facebook, that's different. Progressives, who control everything including boardrooms – let's not kid ourselves that the business world is somehow conservative and libertarian. It's not. It's deeply progressive. Progressives have money and juice. They have the George Soros and the Barbra Streisands and hedge fund managers and billionaires and tech disruptors and all kinds of people with money and juice and power. So this is what libertarians lack.

But when we think about rebranding, I think we have to think very hard about our language, Tom, because we tend to miss the big picture. We tend to talk to progressives and even conservatives in the same language that they use to frame the debate, and I think when we do that we lose. We have to step back and say, well, we're not left or right; what are we? We're libertarian. We're anti-state. And so for us, we have to identify that the issues of our day are not what we see on the front page of *The New York Times*. The issues of our day are war and peace, central banking, and state power. Those are really the three libertarian issues of our day or any day. And by state power, I mean the whole panoply of civil liberties and spying and drug war and NSA and things like that.

But the problem is that a lot of libertarians don't talk as if those are the issues of our day. In other words, they accept the narrative and the framework mostly of progressives. They say, Well, gee whiz, you're right: the big issues of our day are climate change and inequality and gay rights and transgenderism and these kinds of things. And so if the average person hears that, their conclusion is not, "Gee, then let's get rid of the government." The average person hears that and says, "Wow, those are terrible problems. The government needs to come and pass a law to make these things better."

So when we accept this phony narrative of what the problems are, we tend to fall into the same debates that have already been framed for us, debates that we lose, debates where we're explaining, where we're on our heels, when in fact, the other guys ought to be explaining. We should be demanding of both conservatives and progressives, how can you justify this warfare state? My God, it produces nothing but debt and chaos and bloodshed. How can we still be in Afghanistan? That's insane. But those aren't the things we're sitting here talking about —

WOODS: Yeah, but you know what? I think what they say in that situation is, "I agree with you those are terrible things. Our government needs to be more like the government of Sweden, Norway, Switzerland, to some extent France, Spain, Portugal, Italy." I mean, in other words, the vast majority of countries in the world do not have warfare states that are threatening civilization, so you're throwing the baby out with the bath water.

DEIST: Yeah, I think that's true, but the question is why. Why don't they have warfare states and why do we? And why do left and right accept it? In other words, why isn't that the biggest libertarian issue? Was that Gary Johnson's biggest issue? Was that the Libertarian Party's biggest issue? Was that the Cato Institute's biggest issue: war and peace? It seems to me like it ought to be, because all kinds of terrible things the state does does flow from the power it generates from war and peace.

So I think that we tend to allow other people to decide what's important to us, and if we're talking about, let's say, inequality, we have to have the courage to say that's not a problem; that's a good thing. We're talking about racism. We have to have the courage to say that's not a problem in the West. That's nothing. And to the extent it even is a problem, it's created or exacerbated by the state itself. Feminism? That's not a problem in the West. These are not the libertarian problems that face us, and unless and until I think we get honest about that and say, No, the problems are the central bank, and look at all the things that flow from that; the problems are state power — I mean, look at the depredations of our federal government — the problem is war; what are we doing in Afghanistan 12 or 13 or 15 years after we started? So we fall into debates that are not those of our making.

WOODS: All right, let me push you into more controversial territory. Without mentioning names — although there'd be no problem in mentioning names. But suppose I had a project whereby I was going to go to, let's say Lebanon or maybe, I don't know, United Arab Emirates or whatever, and I was going to pass out U.S. Constitutions. Do you think that would be a good use of resources?

DEIST: [laughing] As long as that's your money and your time, I'd say knock yourself out. But no, I think it wouldn't be, and I think this is the universalism trap, which is also a form of the utopian trap. A lot of libertarians have fallen into a way of thinking that says universalism is the goal. The whole world, if they can just be properly instructed, would some day come around on the benefits of libertarianism and a very limited or nonexistent state and property rights and self-ownership.

And I think that's a very tough sell around the world. People come from vastly different cultures. There are slight libertarian traditions in Eastern philosophy, but they've mostly been buried. There's not much libertarian tradition left in Europe after two World Wars, a century of progressivism. In emerging countries, there's not much to speak of because globalists and NGOs have gotten so ensconced in those countries. So this idea that we need to sell libertarian universalism is I think wrong.

I think what we need to focus on is self-determination in the most radical sense of the word. Now, this is imperfect. Mises talks about this in *Liberalism*, but I think it's the best we can do given the choices in front of us. And self-determination means political decentralization; it means secession; it means nullification; it means localism; it means the subsidiary principle, which is operational in Switzerland to great effect; and it means turning away from this fetish for beating the world over the head and trying to get everyone to accept our way of thinking. I mean, it's a fool's game.

It's not working, and if we're serious about trying to create liberty in our lifetimes, just as I assume progressives are serious about trying to have a progressive world in their lifetime, why can't we use this as a sales pitch? Why can't we say, "Let's unyoke, progressives." We've seen with Brexit and with Trump's election, there are still a lot more deplorables than they thought, and their grand progressive project keeps getting stalled. It keeps getting hung up on the fact that there's these terrible people in states like Alabama that don't do or think what they want them to do or think.

But what a decentralized approach to liberty offers progressives right here, right now, is the ability to unyoke. Let's unyoke ourselves. Let's stop universalizing and trying to do everything through global government or national government, and let's try to move things down to a local or to a level closer to individuals. Let's stop trying to say Alabama has to have the same social policies as Northern California.

But for some reason, this seems to terrify libertarians too. They hate secession. They still have concrete poured between their ears when it comes to the Civil War, and we get all tied up in these arguments about slavery when the real issue is political secession is a form of freedom. But what would be so bad if – and I'll use this example again. What would be so bad if Alabama and California had radically different social rules? I'm even willing to accept things like single-payer health care. If the 17 or 18 counties of Northern California want to come together and create a voluntary form of single-payer health care to contravene the devil Trump and these conservatives, I think they should do so. I think it'll fail for a lot of reasons, but is it really my concern if they want to try this?

I wouldn't even object to those counties coming together and saying, Look, we're going to use some Irish democracy here and we're going to ignore the Second Amendment and we're going to have our own gun laws. Now, a lot of libertarians will say, Oh, no,

no, that's not acceptable, because there are some libertarians and there are some conservatives in those 17 or 18 counties and they would be harmed. Well, you know, that's true. I think it's easier to move out of those counties to another part of the U.S. than to, let's say, move overseas.

But this idea that we have to have libertarian universalism – just like progressives want universal progressive ideas, conservatives want universal conservative ideas – this is a way that we can really separate ourselves as a movement. We can say we're the only people who want to be left alone, and we actually want to leave you alone to craft the kind of society you want to craft. As long as you don't have the legal ability to yoke us together, we're offering you, progressives, a way out.

Look, San Francisco, you no longer have to worry about what some redneck senator from Alabama is going to do or how he's going to vote on a particular bill, because let's say absent some minimalist federal government that ties us all together – a national defense state, maybe social security for another 30 years, whatever it might be – other than that, that Alabama senator is not going to vote on anything that affects your life. Why wouldn't progressives take that?

Do you agree, or do you think in their hearts they're just going to say, No, we're not really about living our progressive values here and now; we'd rather have a pyrrhic victory 100 years from now where all those rednecks in Alabama have to live under our rules. It's a good question, but I still think as a sales pitch, decentralization trumps universalism.

WOODS: All right, yeah, we're definitely going to want to pick this up after we thank our outstanding new sponsor.

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All right, I'm thinking about this, Jeff, and I'm trying to think about the extent to which this would be a reasonable sell to progressives. You make a decent case that, look, neither side is going to get everything it wants and maybe one side might be victorious in 200 years, but if you actually want to have tangible victories in the here and now in the area where you live, this is the only way forward. And we all know it, and yet nobody wants to pursue it. I can see that. I am concerned that the universalism of the left and frankly the desire to dominate will be so powerful that it will outweigh even this rational appeal, in which case there's not much you can do.

And secondly, if I were a progressive, I might be inclined to say, Well, look at the 20th century. We got pretty much everything we asked for in the 20th century. Everything we asked for we got within 15 years. So I'm willing to wait 15 years and maybe I'll get single-payer health care without having to secede or have a decentralized system. So I think decentralization is a strategy advanced by losers who know they're losing, and the very fact that you're advancing it means I'm going to press all the harder to get the whole enchilada. What do you think? That was probably culturally insensitive to say "enchilada," but you know my point.

DEIST: Well, I think they're right. Progressives are winning a lot, but I think Trump and Brexit changes the calculus a little bit, and I think you get into a sense of urgency amongst progressives. In other words, if you look at how unhinged they've become since Trump won, there's almost this — it's a calamity for them. We cannot believe that people still think this way in this day and age — I think that that's what progressives are saying about Trump. So maybe this creates, especially in younger progressives, a sense of urgency. Well, gee whiz, not only can we not wait another 100 years for the inevitable march of progressivism to continue apace, but maybe it's not even continuing apace. Maybe there are signs that a monkey wrench is being thrown into the works.

So to the extent progressives would reject this and say, Hey, we're winning, well, I think that's still good in the sense that it exposes them as the domineering force that they want to be as opposed to people who are willing to live and let live, but I also think it helps us align with people who don't agree.

And if we've seen anything since Trump won, we've seen this: it's that progressivism is not a buffet. You don't get to pick and choose. There might be lots and lots of middle-of-the-road people in the United States who say:

Gee whiz, I kind of like the idea of single-payer health care. I look at the U.K. and Canada and it would be nice if people never had to worry about a doctor bill if they get hit by a car or something, and I'd kind of like to have that in the United States. I'm for that. But I'm not for dragging professors out of their classes because they use the wrong pronoun. I think this transgender stuff has gone too far, and when I hear Jordan Peterson on a YouTube video, I agree with him, and this is ridiculous. And some of what's going on on campus, I don't agree with.

Okay, maybe that's a reasonable position, but the problem is progressives don't permit this. They're cannibals and they eat their own. Progressivism is not a pick-and-choose ideology. So to the extent we're going to opt out of any of it, we'd better get busy.

And I think Angelo Codevilla, who is a Claremont Institute scholar — and know he's a right-winger, but he's a serious right-winger. He's not a Sean Hannity guy who's prone to hyperbole; he is a very thoughtful and well-rounded and brilliant, intellectual guy. For people who aren't familiar with him, he was a longtime professor. He's actually an immigrant from Italy, written a lot of books. He actually wrote the foreword to my copy of *The Prince* by Machiavelli. I've had the opportunity to meet him a few times, and he writes — now he's retired, but he writes primarily in *The Claremont Review of Books*, which, in terms of "Conservatism, Inc.," is a step way above *National Review* and *Breitbart* and some of these other outlets in terms of its thoughtfulness.

And he wrote this radical article just a couple months ago called "The Cold Civil War." And like I said, this is not a guy who's prone to hyperbole. When he calls something a cold civil war, he's serious about it. And I think he identifies exactly what you're saying, which is progressives are winning, conservatives are losing — there's nothing left to conserve. They've lost the cultural wars. They've lost the Constitution. They certainly can't say they're for limited government. So what does it really mean to be a conservative? Well, for most of them, it means opposing Democrats and progressives,

but that's about it. They don't have much of a coherent identity or ideology left. But to the extent they do, Codevilla would like to preserve that.

And so this is a guy, an older guy, who is calling for radical decentralization of politics in America, and he's calling for — he praises sanctuary cities. Conceptually, he may not like the left's version where they foster illegal immigrants or something like that, but he's calling for sanctuary cities on right-wing topics like abortion or speech. So it's very interesting to me to see an older conservative later in life saying, Hey, I'd be willing to accept all kinds of things happening in other parts of the country if I'm able to exercise more control over the part where I live.

This is radical stuff, and the article he wrote is actually available on the *Claremont Review of Books* website if you read it online. Again, it's called "The Cold Civil War." And Codevilla is not a libertarian by any stretch. As a matter of fact, the Claremont Institute has spent the last 30 years beating up anybody who dared to say anything bad about Lincoln or to say anything good about secession.

WOODS: Oh yeah, they strongly dislike Tom DiLorenzo.

DEIST: Yes, absolutely. So this is serious when someone like Codevilla says this, and I think we should seize this. I think we should appeal to progressives as best we can, appeal to conservatives as best we can, and say, Hey, let's ratchet this whole thing down. Let's not have a hot civil war. Let's not shoot and kill each other. Let's look at the alternative. And I'm reminded a couple years ago when you gave a talk for us in Texas. You said secession's the obvious solution staring everyone in the face. I mean, we're in this abusive marriage where we're starting to hate each other's guts in some ways that ought to concern us, and it especially ought to concern those of us who have children. Is this really what we want?

So I say that the most fertile ground for libertarians is to reject universalism, to stop trying to tell people in Washington, D.C., "Hey, we have the same goals as you; we just have some different approaches to how to get there, and we agree climate change is terrible." It's not terrible. It's a farce. You know, "We agree inequality's terrible." Inequality's not terrible. It's what brings civilizations specialization and differences in trade and what brings civilizations up out of caves. So we have to offer a different narrative.

And here's the thing that gets me, Tom, sometimes, is that both the left and the right tend to use a lot of clichéd and tired language. But that doesn't mean that it's not true. The left talks about an undeserving rich, and the problem is, in a world of crony capitalism and central banking, that's true. There are undeserving rich people. And people on the right wing talk about, oh, America-hating liberals and PC's out of control. Well, those are clichés and that's sloganeering, but there's some truth to it. There are lots of America-hating liberals who hate the West conceptually and they hate its history, and PC is out of control.

So as libertarians, we want to roll our eyes and evade these truths, but if something's true, then it's true and we ought to accept that and embrace it, because, look, we're all consequentialists. No matter what anyone tells you, we're all consequentialists. There's nothing wrong with being a libertarian consequentialist. The reason we're

libertarians is because we think a freer world would be more prosperous and healthier for all of us, a world with less government. In fact, the only non-consequentialist I know is Walter Block. He'll take libertarian theory wherever it leads him. But I mean, people on the left and the right and libertarians alike, for the main part, we are consequentialists. That's why we're in this game, is to create an actually better world, not just a better theory or a better argument.

So there's nothing wrong with consequentialism. But if you accept all the premises of progressives – climate change and inequality and racism and sexism and transgenderism and blah, blah, blah – if you accept those premises and you say, Oh, I agree with you those are terrible problems and I want to eradicate those, well, on consequentialist grounds, you're probably going to have more luck just being a progressive. I mean, I'm not exactly sure why you need to hitch your wagon to libertarianism if you're agreeing with progressives on what all the problems are. Those in my view aren't serious problems. They're diversions from the real problems.

And so we should be able and willing to argue from consequentialist grounds. Getting rid of the Fed or minimizing the power of the Fed would create better consequences. Getting out of wars would create better consequences. Ratcheting down state power, especially federal power, would allow us to live more as we would like to live here and now. So it's interesting that the consequentialist argument seems to be made more in the Beltway and the Mises Institute is accused of being sort of in this theoretical bubble and we're the purists, but in fact, I would say it's the other way around. By talking about self-determination, we're offering an actual choice here and now. When talking about libertarian universalism, that I would argue is pie-in-the-sky.

If Gary Johnson had done nothing other than say, "I'm going to reduce government across the board by 10%, I'm going to do everything I can at the administrative level through executive action to reduce the administrative branch by 10%, I'm going to veto any budget or any appropriations bill that comes across my desk as president that's not at least nominally 10% lower than the year before, I'm going to reduce our overseas entanglements by at least 10%, and I'm going to in general have a 10% approach to reducing everything federal about U.S. politics," that would have been palatable I think to even the most hardcore libertarian. It wouldn't be perfect; it wouldn't be great, but we could all shake our heads and say, Yes, great, 10%, we'll take it. I mean, that's incrementalism. That's pragmatic thinking. But instead, he went down this path of sort of picking and choosing what's important and what's not important, and the whole thing went nowhere.

So I think the idea that radicalists can't embrace pragmatic steps is not true. I think radicalists can embrace pragmatic steps as long as they're in the right direction, and the right direction is smaller and it's decentralized and it's not universal.

WOODS: I like in your article in particular this simple point that, even if people have been skeptical of what you've said up to now, I don't see how you can deny this simple point. You write, "The fundamental problem with universalism is that so few things really are widely agreed upon." And you don't even have to continue; it's a great paragraph, but just right there: "so few things really are widely agreed upon."

So you can – and of course we still would – even under a decentralized system, we'd still try to persuade people that we're right. But in the meantime, we might have an existence that we find more fulfilling, and they'll have one that they find more fulfilling, and as you say, we can ratchet it down in the meantime. But that really is what it boils down. The idea that the way we see the world is simply obvious and it must just be through some kind of mind control that other people aren't seeing it, there's more to it than that. And it's hard a lot of times to persuade people. And so if our goal is constantly, 24 hours a day to be in education mode so that billions and billions of people will share our worldview, that's never going to happen.

You can try your hardest and you can get a lot of people to support you, but wouldn't it be better to say to those people, Look, you've got your thing and how about we just agree to disagree? You can continue to try to persuade us; we'll try to persuade you, but in the meantime, I think we'd both be better off if, instead of waging a war against each other, we each lived according to the principles we say we believe in, and then, you know, may the best man win, so to speak.

DEIST: Absolutely, and in the digital age, it does not necessarily mean that people have to physically move. In other words, decentralization and secession at least on some levels can be accomplished now digitally. What would be so awful about having your neighbor – your neighbor's on social security and you opt out, and so your neighborhood's mixed, just like some people in one neighborhood have one cable provider and some people have Dish and some people have Internet streaming? I mean, I think the idea that we all have to up and move to New Hampshire for the Free State Project or whatever is increasingly becoming untrue because of the digital age. There's so many ways we can connect and form communities, decentralized communities that doesn't require us to be physically next door to one another. So there's a lot of possibilities for the future for smaller states that are not necessarily geographic locales. Now, that might be 50 years off in the future, but it's certainly not unthinkable.

But I think that what we've done as libertarians for the last 30 years needs to be rethought. That's the number one piece, is that we want to engage in politics as it currently is, which is not working, and we want to engage in the philosophical or theoretical debate on universalist grounds, generally accepting the progressive premises that have come to dominate the last 100 years, and that's not working. So giving people a radical option to walk away ought to hold appeal, I would think, across ideologies. Maybe not universal appeal, but definitely appeal.

WOODS: Well, Jeff, people of course should read your piece on self-determination and universalism. I was pretty convinced of it when you wrote it, and now I'm more convinced of it even after throwing some devil's advocate objections at you. So I'm going to link to this at TomWoods.com/928. And I'm looking forward to seeing you in a little over a month for the unbelievably great, just favorite week of the year, Mises University program. I just saw Judge Napolitano in New York City, and he said the same thing. He said, I hope, Tom – I assume I'm going to see you at the most glorious, wonderful week of the year, and of course he meant the Mises University Summer Program.

DEIST: All right, great, Tom; we'll look forward to it.