

Lew Rockwell Remembers

Guest: Lew Rockwell

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Lew Rockwell is founder and chairman of the Ludwig von Mises Institute and editor of LewRockwell.com. He also served as chief of staff to Ron Paul, and was the executor of the will of Murray N. Rothbard.

WOODS: This is going to be a little bit like a stroll down memory lane, because you've known a lot of significant people in the movement: Leonard Read and obviously Ron Paul, even Ludwig von Mises to an extent and of course Murray Rothbard. These are all people who are of great interest to listeners.

ROCKWELL: Well, and rightly so.

WOODS: So let's start off with that. First of all, let's stroll down memory lane. How did you first enter the libertarian movement? Who were the people you got to know right at the outset?

ROCKWELL: I guess if we can think of the pre-libertarian movement, I would credit my dad. He was a strong Taft Republican, and in fact, my first political memory is from Taft's campaign against Eisenhower for the Republican nomination in 1953. I remember my dad pinning a Taft for President button on my coat. I sort of was inculcated early on. I don't know if I would call my dad a libertarian, but he definitely was a noninterventionist in foreign policy and a free-market person. And he was a surgeon. In those days it was illegal to be a chiropractor, for example, in Massachusetts. So all the chiropractors practiced right along the border in New Hampshire or Connecticut on the Massachusetts border. He was an advocate of chiropractors being able to practice, of midwives being able to deliver babies without going through a gynecologist, and so forth.

So I would credit him, and it's really he and some of his good friends who were responsible for giving me the books that I would say led me to have similar ideas. I was sort of notorious in school, but I can remember in the seventh grade, long before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, my history teacher advocating that sort of a law, and I can remember arguing with him. I didn't have logical arguments at that point, but I remember saying to him, "It just seems to me wrong; if somebody owns a business, why can't they be in charge of who comes in and who doesn't?" I couldn't see why having the police make that decision was better than having the owner. I guess from very early on. I know Ron Paul always says that he thinks at least most of us are born libertarian, those of us who are libertarians. And that it's just a matter of discovering the various ramifications of our already existing orientation.

WOODS: Well, it's interesting that so early you latched onto an issue that so many people who claim to be libertarians want to run a million miles away from, namely antidiscrimination law. But that really is the issue among libertarians, isn't it? It's the question of what the roles are of the state and society. And antidiscrimination law claims that the state has the right to play all kinds of micro-level roles at all different levels of society, from employment to private socializing. And you don't have to be a bad person to say no, I don't want violent means used to force people together who don't want to be together.

And so one thing I really liked about Ron Paul, of course, is that he could have shut a million people up by just saying, "You know, you're right. I favor antidiscrimination law. Now let's just move on." It would have saved him so much grief, and yet he just said, "No, it violates principles that go back to John Locke. And you can derive all my views of property and liberty from that, and it does not include the power of a state to do these sorts of things." I think even though he said things that were unpopular, you know what? In a paradoxical way, it contributed to his popularity.

ROCKWELL: Well it's true, and I like the point he makes: just because bad people might use freedom of speech is hardly a reason to abolish freedom of speech, and in fact, if we're interested in defending

freedom of speech, then it is the so-called bad people whose rights we need to defend.

WOODS: That's true.

ROCKWELL: The same with property rights. Maybe we don't like what somebody's doing with their property rights, but as long as they're not offending against somebody else's rights, leave them alone or maybe as a matter of fact defend them.

WOODS: And of course we extend basic customary legal protections to people who are bad or who are openly guilty. This doesn't mean we like these people. It means that these are the values of a civilized society.

All right, let's fast forward a bit. You did know Leonard Read for a time, is that right?

ROCKWELL: I did know Leonard, and I had subscribed to *The Freeman* like many people all during high school—and when I went to work for Arlington House, run by the great Neil McCaffrey, a great entrepreneur, just a great man in general. And this was the only publishing house in America at that time that would touch libertarian or conservative books, and it was the publisher of Mises, for example. I'll never forget Neil McCaffrey calling me into his office and saying, "Would you like to be Ludwig von Mises' editor?" Here I was a very young kid, and of course, I was bowled over and thrilled. So it was through that connection and when I was first living in New York that I got to meet Leonard in person. I'd known him through *The Freeman* before that.

So because of my connection with Mises, I spent a lot of time at the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), and I thought the world of Leonard Read. He was a great leader, very charming, great-looking guy, very well spoken of course, and just very funny, full of jokes, and yet very profound, so he was a great man. He held a reception when Arlington House for the three books that I'd worked on and also a new monograph—Mises's *Omnipotent Government, Theory and History*, and *Bureaucracy*, and also a monograph on the historical setting of the Austrian School which was new. And in fact, just as a slight aside, I'll never forget opening the brown envelope and taking out this new manuscript from Mises. I mean, just obviously a tremendous thing. So Leonard held this reception in honor of these three books, at the old FEE mansion in Irvington on Hudson, now sadly gone. FEE no longer has that. But they had a dining room, so I had a tray from the kitchen. I walked into the dining room, and the only people sitting there were Ludwig and Margit von Mises.

WOODS: Oh, gosh.

ROCKWELL: And so I thought, do I dare go over there? And I said, well, because I have to go over there. So that's the one time I met Mises. I talked to him on the phone, and I spent a lot of time on the phone with Margit then and subsequently in person with Margit. But that was the only time I ever met him, and it was of course one of the great experiences of my life. That was Leonard who made that possible, and then later I find out just several years ago from Ron Paul that the thing that made Ron offer me the job as his chief of staff was that Leonard had called him and recommended me.

WOODS: Yeah, I heard about that. That's a real compliment, absolutely. And I realize just now while we were talking, Lew, that sometimes we're in such an inside-baseball world, that we forget there are young people who may not know who Leonard Read is. He is considered to be one of the sort of godfathers of the movement at large.

I'd like to know, and I think other people would, too, how you met Murray Rothbard. This would be the sort of person somebody would love to know personally, and you had the chance to work with him so closely for so many years. How did it get started?

ROCKWELL: I will say that he was not only of course such a brilliant scholar and such an unbelievably productive scholar, such an important scholar in so many ways, but he was just a great guy. I mean there's nobody on earth you would rather have a beer with. He was so funny, so interesting. You just immediately loved him. And so I had first met him when Arlington House published his *Conceived in Liberty* series, now published by the Mises Institute. It's the history of colonial America, which is quite wonderful like all of his books. But I didn't really get to know him well until I started the Institute, and I approached him: would he be in charge of our academic affairs? At this point, of course, it was only a letterhead organization. But I've never forgotten. He literally clapped his hands in glee at the idea of a Mises Institute.

WOODS: Beautiful.

ROCKWELL: It just thrilled him. He was very generous with his help and his time and his advice and his example, I might say. When I started the Institute I talked to him every day, and in addition to everything else, he was like a standup comedian. You were never in Murray's presence, whether it was in person or on the phone, for very long before you're laughing out loud. He was so funny and so humble, too. Murray was not a Christian, but I always think of the example of the Christian ideal of humility, which is not to be abasing yourself or you know, some things some other people might think. But he really was open to everybody, interested in everybody no matter what their status was. If they had the slightest spark of ability, he was trying to fan the flames.

I think of Milton Friedman as being the opposite. Milton was so arrogant and so nasty to anybody, say any student that asked a question he didn't approve of. He just loved to crush people. Murray was nice to everybody and very open. He was glad to talk to anybody, and just—he didn't put himself on a pedestal by any means, even though he could have put himself on a pedestal. And of course, so smart: he knew everything so far as I could tell. I don't care whether we were talking about art or theology as well as economics and history.

WOODS: The postmillennials and the premillennials.

ROCKWELL: Yeah. And he also thought that most economists neglected the importance of religion, for example, and he absolutely did not. Because they weren't religious so they disliked religion, so they never wanted to consider its role in history. But obviously, it's a very key thing. So anyway, he was open to people who didn't agree with him, but he never was shy about stating his own position. He could change his mind if somebody had an argument he respected. He loved to have people who were harder core than he was try to refute him. But he was charming, sweet, fun, and I'll just tell one quick story that sort of sums up his abilities in a number of ways.

He rented Sidney Hook's house, of all people, at Stanford for the summer. He was working at Institute for Humane Studies when Baldy Harper was still running it in California. And so a friend is visiting him, and the friend said, "So, Murray, I'm looking forward to seeing you at Cato next week." This was the Cato Monetary Conference before they kicked Murray out. And Murray said, "That's not next week. It's a month from now," or whatever. And his friend said, "No, no. It's next week," so Murray checks with Joey who is sort of the realism principle of the household. And she said, "No, no. It is next week," so Murray excused himself, went into the other room—and this is his paper on New Deal monetary policy, typed out the paper in one fell swoop, including bibliography and footnotes. And so he had written the whole thing in his head.

WOODS: And that's a great paper. I've read it.

ROCKWELL: Of course. But that was the kind of ability that he had.

WOODS: And you know the thing about him, Lew—the reason we speak about him so fondly—is that people who got to know him, and I only knew him a little bit, but I met him four or five times and talked to him on the phone and stuff like that. But we had a real affection for him. It wasn't that we worshiped him or

any of the nonsense they say about us, and yet, what's so funny is that although people say "You guys worship Rothbard," yet I actually have seen, I'm not going to mention his name, but he's with a very well-known think tank—I've seen a picture of a guy posing with a *photograph* of Milton Friedman. Now I've never posed with a photograph of Murray Rothbard. They take the Friedman admiration to absurd lengths. Now nobody denies that Milton Friedman was very articulate and a very skilled debater and he had many merits.

ROCKWELL: Very smart.

WOODS: No one disputes that, right? But why is it, then, that people can't give the equal share of respect to Rothbard? Why is Rothbard like the un-person? I think I said this on your podcast one time. I was going to say that for every 100 times they mention Milton Friedman, Rothbard gets mentioned once, but I would say it's more like for every 100 times we hear Friedman it's zero times we hear Rothbard. And you look at his corpus of work, and none of these people at these institutes in their entire lives are going to do one one-thousandth of that. Why does he not even get a fleeting reference?

ROCKWELL: Well, I think it has to do with the old paycheck question, because for whatever reason Charles Koch—and he's the only intellectually significant member of the Koch brothers—Charles Koch for whatever reason became a Rothbardian and then became a non-Rothbardian. And once he became a non-Rothbardian, anybody associated with him in his broad empire of so many organizations and so many people on the payroll—and of course an infinitely a larger number of people want to be on the payroll—had to hate Rothbard. So I think it's as simple as that. Maybe there's envy involved. You know, you can't look into people's hearts. I'm suspicious of that, but I can't know it. Just because everything seemed to them to come so easy to him, although he worked like a dog.

I mean he worked every day all day long. When he wasn't sleeping or teaching he was working. So I mean that's part of Edison's line about more perspiration than inspiration to be a genius. Well, Murray put out the perspiration. But I think it fundamentally comes down to the fact that if you want to be on the Koch payroll, if you want to be on the payroll of one of these many organizations and publications that are within the Koch ambit, you have to hate Rothbard. I'm afraid I think that's the reason rather than any intellectual rejection of Murray.

WOODS: But that I think goes a long way toward explaining why in so-called official and respectable circles you don't see mention of Rothbard, but in the real libertarian heartland, let's say when you actually go to events around the country that are outside of D.C., everybody loves Rothbard. Everybody's wearing the Rothbard "Enemy of the State" shirt. They're reading his books. They're learning from him. Everybody loves him.

ROCKWELL: Well, it's one of the many great things about the Internet. There was a time when the fact that at the Cato Institute they hated Murray's guts would have an influence on whether people would dare to cite him or read him or whatever. There was a funny event when somebody, an anonymous guy, I think I know who he was, writing for *The Economist*, said, "Really, what's wrong with the Ron Paul movement is that they pay attention to Rothbard. If only they would substitute Friedman, why everything would be fine," which of course would be the Keynesian economist view, because Milton Friedman was, by the way, a Keynesian among his other attributes.

So I wrote a blog post noting outside of strictly academic circles, I thought Friedman was disappearing. I just didn't think that he had the influence among libertarians that he once did and that Rothbard was vaulting ahead. So somebody on David Friedman's blog was upset at my comments. And of course, it was his dad. I can't be upset at him for being upset. Somebody said, "You know, this is really unfair, because Milton Friedman's books are all very expensive, and you have to buy them in hardback. It's unfair, because the Mises Institute has put all of Rothbard's stuff for free on the Internet. So it's not fair competition." So I

thought, well okay, but of course, here's where I was correct in one sense. Murray is so compelling. He's so interesting that they can't suppress him, and not only can they not suppress him, it doesn't matter to the extent they tell students don't read this guy, why of course they immediately want to read him. So he's a vastly bigger figure than he was during his lifetime.

And there was a column the other day by Bruce Bartlett, who used to be an Austrian, writing for the *New York Times*, and he's writing about the whole idea of defaulting on the federal debt, which of course Murray advocated that you have to default on it, because the people who contracted for it and benefited from it are not the ones who are being forced to pay it. So from a matter of justice and many other reasons. But he quoted Murray in his article. So the paragraph from Murray again just jumps off the page at you. I mean, it's so vivid and so interesting, and thank goodness, Bruce, to give him credit, linked to Murray's article about defaulting on the debt.

So it's just another example: Murray never would have been quoted in an economics article on a blog at the *New York Times*. Things are changing. Murray is a huge figure all over the world. His works are read everywhere, and he really is our most powerful engine in terms of getting students and others interested. Obviously he stood on the shoulders of Mises and of course credited Mises for everything. But Murray, in terms of interesting kids, he's the guy. It's so thrilling. It's so moving to see him so broadly loved and as you say, whether it's in the libertarian heartland, whether it's among students at colleges and universities, whether it's in the Ron Paul movement. I can remember you mentioning Rothbard at the Ron Paul Minnesota rally and getting cheered for mentioning Murray's name.

WOODS: Yeah. That's a different world.

ROCKWELL: The world is different.

WOODS: Right and it's a world I only wish he could have lived to see. And of course people who are listening to this, Lew—you had an article not too long ago, and it was simply called "Read Rothbard." So if you're wondering how do I jump in, the guy's written so much, what's my natural entry point, I would just Google Lew Rockwell and "Read Rothbard," because that's a pretty good program for reading. But I don't want to keep piling on here on Friedman, because people will accuse me of having some kind of vendetta or fixation. I don't. I just don't like weird, cultish behavior, and this cutting off of Rothbard and favoring Friedman when, in all the areas where they differed, Rothbard is vastly better from the point of view of scholarship and libertarianism, is weird and wrong. He's vastly better, but what I find, Lew, is not only that Rothbard is the more influential figure when you just talk to ordinary libertarians. Yeah, some of them will mention Friedman. I read *Capitalism and Freedom*, or I read *Free to Choose*. There's some good material in those books.

ROCKWELL: Yes.

WOODS: But very few of them are going to say they read Friedman's article on methodology in 1953, or any of his technical stuff on monetarism. That's got almost no traction whatsoever among libertarians, whereas the theoretical economic work of Rothbard has gotten plenty.

Given that we're running a little low on time, I do want to give you a chance to say a little something about the Mises Institute. Some other time we'll talk about the travails of founding the Mises Institute and all the difficulty. You would think that would be an easy thing, or it would have its difficulty starting from scratch. But you'd think everybody would be friends on this, you'd have a lot of allies in this. The real story, I think, is quite interesting.

At any rate, let's suppose the Mises Institute—I don't know, all of a sudden its budget doubled overnight. What would you do? What would you like to see the Mises Institute doing that you hope someday that it can do but isn't doing today?

ROCKWELL: Well, I think the Institute represents the future of higher education. I think that the bricks and mortar universities—with what the federal subsidies to higher education have done to the cost of education. Ron Paul worked his way through college. That sounds like science fiction today. Nobody can work their way through college, and so what they've done, just exactly with medical care, they've made it impossible for students. So the students have these horrendous debts, and the colleges and universities by and large are just either teaching error, or they're teaching the official boring view of stuff. Boys are being taught that they're the scum of the earth, and they're responsible for everything evil. And it's one of the reasons fewer and fewer boys are going to college.

So there are many other reasons why Peter Klein points out that colleges and universities still have the same production model that Aristotle did. A guy at the front of the room talking to a bunch of kids sitting down. So there are different ways to do it. I think the Mises Institute is at the cutting edge of those different ways. I think young people are sick and tired of these long five- and six-year terms of college. They make it so difficult to get all the courses you need. You end up with these horrendous debts that can never be paid off. But there's another way to do it, and we see with the online courses and where companies are more and more considering certificates from these online courses to be as good as college credits. They take it very seriously. They're taking Professor Thrun's online course on robotics, which the first time they gave it had 160,000 students. That's when he quit his job, a tenured full professorship at Stanford, to go into alternative kinds of education.

The elite schools are not going out of business. Maybe the big state universities aren't going out of business. But there are a lot of colleges and universities that are feeling the ground moving under their feet. And they're worried about the future, and they should be worried. So I think what I would like to do is turn the Mises Institute into this private online and campus-based university of the future for Austrian economics, libertarianism, and history and political science, and all related areas, where we'd give certificates. Can't give degrees, because the whole government enterprise makes that impossible. But you can certainly give certificates, and as I say, businesspeople take these certificates maybe more seriously than credits from a college or university. So I'd like to keep up what the Institute is doing right now in terms of educating students, publishing books, publishing journals, bringing back the classics that have been unavailable for free, all that sort of thing, but I'd like to see us become really the Mises university for students all over the world who are interested in learning real economics, real history, and other subjects.

WOODS: Well, Lew, that is a very exciting prospect that I hope to see come to pass.