

MURRAY ROTHBARD

Courtesy: The Ludwig von Mises Institute



Joey and Murray Rothbard

Murray N. Rothbard (1926-1995)

Murray Rothbard was the primary animating force in the powerful libertarian revolution now unfolding throughout the world. It was Rothbard's gift for clear expression that rendered comprehensible the often impenetrable thought of his Austrian School predecessors to the benefit of the eager generation today leading the assault on socialism's weakening domination of academic and public policy. The staggering volume of his writing on every facet of theoretical and applied economics, his application of Austrian school principles to the American condition and his passionate, exuberant and witty style made tremendous number of converts to the free market.

But to think of Murray Rothbard as a mere economist would be like thinking of Leonardo as a mere painter. Rothbard's unbounded passion for knowledge drove him to explore every remote corner in the fields of economics, history, sociology, political theory and philosophy. His works number 25 books in several languages and thousands of popular and scholarly articles and reviews. Has any other body of scholarly work ever radiated such exuberance, such compelling rationality, such passion? To read Rothbard is to be entertained and informed and to experience as a reader, the same *joie de vivre* that animated the writer.

Unlike most scholars, content as they usually are with theoretical exposition, Rothbard was a dedicated activist, indeed a "revolutionary of the deed," who worked tirelessly to unite theory and action in the quest for liberty. And it was this facet of the man that was at once responsible for the public prominence gained during the last 25 years of his life, as it was for his shameless consignment by the Marxist/socialist/liberal axis dominating academia to the same kind of limbo that Ludwig von Mises had known before him. He suffered these unforgivable affronts with consistent good humor and a certain resignation, knowing well the tide was beginning to turn.

Born into a family environment that was strongly Marxist, Murray from the beginning of his political consciousness was a free-market man. He was drawn to the libertarian works of Nock, Paterson, and Lane, and became a disciple of Mises in economics. He involved himself actively in the anti-war movement of the Vietnam era, was close to Rand and her circle for a while, then took up with the Libertarian Party, but his aim was always to spread the libertarian idea and to realize it as much as politically possible. The modern libertarian movement, for which he was the guiding intellectual influence, was to a great extent

the product of his works. His break from the movement to embrace what he called "paleo-libertarianism," a coalition with populist, non-interventionist and religious elements of the American right wing, was particularly bitter and left many of his admirers hurt and bewildered.

As one long ago converted by Murray to natural rights-based anarcho-capitalism from precisely the position he had now adopted, this new chapter greatly troubled me. At several junctions I attempted to dissuade him from so decisively burning his bridges to the movement he had founded. But he had become deeply offended by the cultural nihilism that he believed to pervade the modern libertarian movement, and for him, there was no gray area, and no turning back.

Only with the sustenance of my memories of our friendship and wonderful times together, can I contemplate a world without this great and lovable man, at once an intellectual giant who seemed to have read, understood and remembered *everything*, and a hilariously funny raconteur and mimic. Nobody who ever heard his uproarious cackle could forget his capacity for pleasure, nobody who ever offered some flawed argument in his presence will ever forget the rhetorical torrent of fact following fact that left it in shreds.

We spent a congenial evening together a few weeks before his January 7 death. He was, as always, upbeat and infectiously optimistic about the future, slashing in his denunciation of enemies real and imagined. He spoke tenderly that evening about Joey, his wife of 40 years, his constant companion, editor, confidant and conscience—a marriage rich in mutual love and respect.

In the grand sweep of history, Murray Rothbard will be judged only by the vast *oeuvre* he bequeaths the world. The peccadilloes, the personal feuds, the strategic misjudgments he may have made, will pass forgotten. If justice prevails, so long as the spark of liberty burns in the minds and souls of men, he will be remembered as its resolute champion, and if, as he believed, we are now witnessing the dawn of the withering of the state, Rothbard's legacy will tower over those of Locke, Voltaire, Smith, Mises, Hayek, Friedman, and the rest, for only he among them understood that no vestige of the state could remain if men are to be free.

Adieu, old friend, adieu.

—Robert D. Kephart

Robert Kephart founded *Libertarian Review*, *Books for Libertarians*, and other publications.