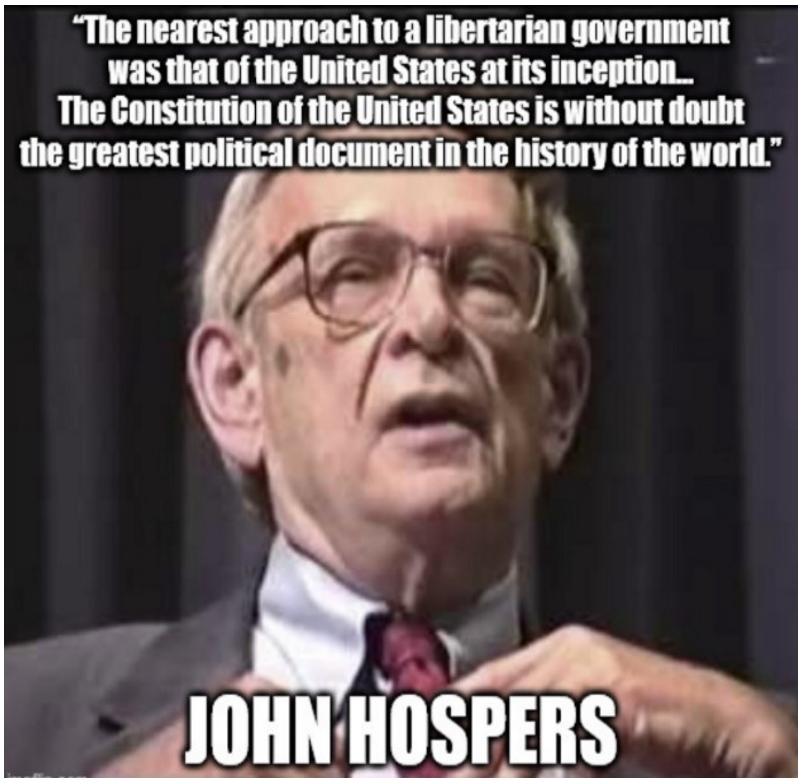
THE WISDOM OF JOHN HOSPERS – A PERSONAL MEMORY: PART THREE



[This is the concluding Part Three of my Festscrifft to the memory of Professor John Hospers (1918-2011)*, my mentor under whom I gained my doctorate in philosophy, and the first presidential candidate of the Libertarian Party in 1972. Part One was in TTP two Mondays ago (7/27), while Part Two was last Monday (8/10). It will appear entire as a chapter in the forthcoming book, "Libertarianism and the Libertarian Party at 50 and Beyond," edited by Stan Oliver and C. Ron Kimberling.]*

PART THREE

Once again, I was gone all that summer – swimming the Hellespont for the second time, then overland through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. When I got back that Fall of '73, John had a question for me: "Have you ever heard of a fellow named Mike Oliver?"

"It rings some kind of bell," I answered, playing for time. Finally the bell rang. "Oh, yeah – wasn't he the guy with that Minerva Reef thing – tried to create a new country in the South Pacific on some unclaimed reef underwater at high tide called the Republic of Minerva until that huge fat king of Tonga put a stop to it?"

It was one of those rare times when I made John laugh out loud. “Well, you might describe it that way. In any regard, I’ve gotten to know him. He’s starting his New Country Project again, and wants to meet you.”

“Me? How come?”

“He’s looking for someone who really knows how to explore remote places in the world. Who else am I going to suggest better than you?”

“Where does he live?”

“Carson City, Nevada. You’d fly to Reno. He’ll pay for your ticket.” I said okay.

So the next weekend found me in a car at the Reno airport with a slender fellow, black hair, crew cut, full of intense energy yet an easy smile. He said, “Let’s take a drive – how about Tahoe?” Sure, can’t do better than Lake Tahoe. “Where’s your accent from?” I asked. “Lithuania. The Soviets seized my country, then I spent four years in a Nazi concentration camp as a kid. So I hate Commies and Nazis equally.”

I couldn’t agree more. Then I learned that his two heroes were Ayn Rand and Ludwig von Mises, so I really paid attention.

Mike explained, “I love America, but I’m afraid the liberals will kill our freedom. So I want to locate some viable piece of real estate in the world that could be transformed into an actual sovereign nation founded on libertarian principles of minimal government. Such a country is to have total free trade with no customs or tariffs on any imported goods; no corporate, income, or sales taxes; and a government restricted to a police force, a small professional military, and courts.”

“No Rothbard anarchism?” My question elicited a stern look. “Fantasy kid stuff,” was his curt reply. “John had me read your article in *The Personalist*, by the way.”

“How do you pay for the government?” He brightened. “Ayn Rand’s concept of a contract tax. For the courts to recognize any sort of contractual relationship, the parties would pay a fee for the contract to be legally binding.”

“Sounds like my kind of place, Mike. Do you have any spot on the globe in mind?” Big smile. “Plenty. I learned what not to do with Minerva. We’re starting with an island in the Bahamas called *Abaco*.”

This was the Abaco Independence Movement, launched a couple of months earlier (August ’73) by local Bahamians (more precisely Abaconians) who wanted to be free of the monumental

corruption of the government led by Linus Pindling, just given sovereignty by the British.

Thus, the following February (1974), John, Mike, and I went to Abaco. John was the big draw, of course, speaking to a large crowd and a number of reporters on the extensive benefits of combining political and economic freedom. I stayed quiet, listened as I drank a lot of beer with a lot of Abaconians, and got to go scuba diving.

John and Mike asked my assessment. "Abaconians are solid honest people who just want to be free. It depends, though, on how corrupt Pindling is. You know there's only one thing worse than a corrupt dictatorship – an *uncorrupt* dictatorship. At least you can buy your way out of the former. Pindling's a crook of course, but will he sell you actual sovereignty for real?"

Turned out, surprise, that was the one thing he wouldn't sell.

As the Spring semester ended, I finally became ABD (All But Dissertation), and contracted with Mike to search the world for a New Libertarian Country. John gave me the Fall '74 semester off from the courses I was teaching. I was gone six months.

Mike made millions in Carson City real estate development, but other backers of his New Country Project were far wealthier. One of them was famous libertarian investment advisor, Harry Schultz. I spent a lot of time plotting with Harry at his mansion in Monaco.

Another was a character right out of a movie, Mitch WerBell. We'd shuck oysters, drink iced vodka neat from his silver tumblers, shoot an amazing variety of weaponry at his outdoor firing range in Powder Springs, Georgia, as he'd explain how best to overthrow governments. Both gave me several leads.

Mitch said I should check out Cameroon in Africa. The Brits and French stole it from Germany after WWI, he explained, and divided it up. The French-speaking part has all the power, relegating the British-speaking part into an oppressed backwater.

"There's now a growing independence movement among the anglophones now, since the francophones took away all their rights two years ago (1972) – you should check it out," he advised. "Capital is Bamenda, beautiful prosperous place, great climate, great people."

But when I did, although Mitch's description was accurate, we all – John, Mike, his donors – decided after reading my report it was way too foolhardy to risk involvement in a likely shooting civil war in deep Central Africa. Any other place in Africa – which is more enormous than most anyone understands, far larger than Russia and Canada, the world's two biggest countries, combined – I checked out turned out the same.

Harry had me visit a client family of his in their fabulous chateau in the Loire Valley of France. They owned an island of several square miles named Kitava in the Trobriand Islands off the east coast of New Guinea.

"You would not believe how *jolie* our island is, a true tropical paradise," they told me. "And especially because of the people. There are only several hundred, but sweeter nicer people you will never meet – and we've had doctors tell us they are the healthiest people on the planet, no heart disease, no cancer, no strokes. Plus the women are beautiful and go bare-breasted – another reason tourists would flock to Kitava!"

The next year, 1975, Australia was granting full independence to its Territory of Papua New Guinea (the entire eastern half of the island) which would encompass the Trobriands. "The Aussies are ridiculously foolish to this," the French family told me. "Papua is an ungovernable mess and the Trobrianders want no part of it. We love Harry's and Mike Oliver's concept of a truly free country. We will sell Kitava to you for just that."

Kitava did turn out to be the untouched paradise exactly as described, including the native ladies. John and Mike were "stoked," to use the Malibu surfer term for really excited. Just as the deal was about to go through, word got out that Kitavans were about to declare full sovereignty from Papua New Guinea and encouraging all Trobrianders in the other islands, such as Kiriwina and

Kaileuna, to join them.

Soon after, Mike's office in Carson City received a message from the Australian Embassy in Washington – that with any actual attempt to declare sovereignty in the Trobriands, the Australian Navy would land their Marines to physically prevent it.

John and Mike next sent me to Fiji. "Both Harry and Mitch have told us there's a chief there you should meet," I was told. That would be the paramount *Ratu* (Chief) of the western half of Fiji's main island, Viti Levu, named Ratu Osea Gavidi (pronounced *nya-vindi*). I soon realized Osea was one the finest men I'd ever met – we were to become fast friends for many years.

Osea wanted freedom for his part of Viti Levu, which included Fiji's best beaches and resorts. He was inspired by Ayn Rand, read works by Von Mises, and understood the connection between economic freedom and prosperity. "I love Miss Rand's saying that as there should be a separation of church and state, so should there be a separation of economy and state," he told me over our very first beer.

Yet he knew that sovereignty for his realm was a long way off and we were in a hurry. "Have you ever been to the New Hebrides?" he asked. I shook my head. "It's a *condominium* jointly governed by both the British and the French. A lot of unrest there clamoring for independence on the main island of Efate – but there's a chief on the largest island of Espiritu Santo who I know. He's a smart guy who wants no part of the socialist hotheads in Efate, and wants real freedom for his people. You should see him. His name is Jimmy Stevens."

It wasn't long before I reached the village where "Moses" lived, as everyone called him. He told me to call him Jimmy instead. Flamboyant and charismatic, he preached the gospel of people in control of their own lives, not a government. And his people replied, Amen. I was sure I had found the Libertarian Promised Land.

I raced back to LA, where Mike and I sat down with John in his office. "I think this is the guy. Osea is educating him, the people are all in for him, the French are ready to help because the Brits will give the New Hebrides to their people on Efate. Espiritu Santo is a big island (1500 square miles) with great resources and gorgeous beaches."

After my briefing, John said, "Harry agrees – that's what his contacts in the French foreign ministry tell him." Mike asked, "Jack, we need to move fast – when can you go back?"

"That's a problem – my six months are up, I have to start teaching again, right, John? And I've got a doctoral dissertation to write. But I've found someone who can go in my stead. He's a solid libertarian who was with me in *Youth for Reagan*, and just got back from reporting on the Montagnard tribespeople – whom I know – in South Viet Nam. His name is Dana Rohrabacher.

He said he's met you, John."

"Yes, I spoke at a meeting of libertarians he and Ron Kimberling arranged. He's ready to go?" I nodded. So off Dana went, Mike bankrolled Jimmy's Nagriamel movement, and we all thought we might have a fully free new country after all.[1]

By the Fall of 1975, thanks to invaluable advice and prodding by John and the philosophy department's brilliant expert on the Ancient Greeks, Professor Kevin Robb, I finally got my dissertation done: *Ethical Egoism in Hellenic Thought* (the period from Homer to Aristotle, ca. 720-322 BC). I promptly called Tibor to say, "You may now call me Dr. Wheeler."

It was a wild ride, as at the same time I wrote my first book, *The Adventurer's Guide*. John knew I wanted to be a professional adventurer instead of a professor, but he couldn't stop kidding me as he wished me luck: "How you could write on Aristotle on one day and how to live with headhunters the next is mysterious."[2]

I was gone almost constantly for the next few years, and got out of touch with John. But John stayed in touch with Dana, who became a Special Assistant and Speechwriter to President Ronald Reagan. Dana had told John about a Cabinet meeting just after Reagan's Inauguration (January 20, 1981), in which the President announced he would abandon the "Containment" policy of the US towards the Soviets, that his policy instead would be "We win, they lose."

John's response: "Yes, very well – but how is that policy to be *implemented*?"

The key insightful question, as always from John. It took a while, but Dana and I came up with the answer. In 1983, I was gone for much of the year talking my way into a number of little known Anti-Soviet Anti-Communist guerilla insurgencies that were emerging in Soviet colonies throughout the Third World.

When I got back to the White House in late November, Dana had me brief the President's National Security Council and other West Wingers. I showed a series of slides of these various freedom fighters, explaining there was an emerging worldwide revolt against Soviet Imperialism, nascent but real, that if supported with money and weapons (no US soldiers, these people wanted to fight for their own freedom) would be a structural assault on the Soviet Empire that could cause its collapse.

The briefing went over so well that many in attendance later attributed it to the "birth of the Reagan Doctrine."[3] But at the time, after the meeting and back in Dana's office, Dana said, "Let's call John." When he answered the phone, Dana exclaimed excitedly, "Professor Hospers, I think Jack Wheeler and I know how to implement the President's 'We win – they lose' policy."

As I told John where I'd been and what I explained at the White House, he got as excited as Dana. "You really think the entire Soviet Colonial Empire can be collapsed?" he asked

incredulously. "It's now clearly possible," I answered. "If we get one victory one place, say in Angola or Afghanistan, the momentum will move into Eastern Europe spearheaded by Solidarity in Poland. And once Eastern Europe is liberated, it will move into the Soviet Union itself – because the USSR is no union, it is a colonial empire within its own borders."

John had to process that in silence for a moment. "That would be the most promising, the most astounding world event of modern times…" he mused, lost in thought. "I couldn't encourage you more – please keep me informed."

And we did. He told me he devoured my series of cover stories in *Reason* Magazine: UNITA in Angola-April 84, Contras in Nicaragua-June/July 84, The Mujaheddin in Afghanistan-September 84, Turning Back the Terror in Cambodia-February 85. I spent the rest of the 80s going inside with these insurgencies and democracy movements in Eastern Europe , then reporting back to the White House and friends in Congress like Charlie Wilson[4]. I made sure to keep John informed.

We talked to celebrate after the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989. John was ecstatic – and even more so when the Soviet Union ceased to exist by December 1991.

Tibor Machan and I talked with John on his 80th birthday in 1998, and his 85th in 2003. We reminisced about old times and were optimistic that the Libertarian Party was shaking off its anti-American albatross of Rothbardian anarchism. "No more Blame America First Libertarianism!" Tibor exclaimed and we all laughed.

We together felt that the Libertarian Party should be profoundly pro-American, a party of true genuine American patriots that championed a recommitment to America's founding principles of the Declaration of Independence with the goal of keeping the federal government within the bounds of the Constitution.

Now John is gone, at age 93 in 2011, along with Nathan at age 84 in 2014 and Tibor at age 77 in 2016.

It was such a privilege, such a profound experience of my life to know and work with John Hospers. He was the embodiment of wisdom, of the temperament of reason. Aristotle's highest compliment was to say someone was a person of *kalon*. There is no equivalent English word, combining the aesthetic with the moral. The *kalon* was thus for Aristotle the *morally beautiful*.

John Hospers was *kalon*, a morally beautiful human being. Thanks for your friendship and guidance, John. Thanks for your existence.

---

[1] . In 1980, Jiimmy's Nagriamel declared the independence of Espiritu Santo as the *Republic of*

Vemerana that received formal diplomatic recognition of its sovereignty by France. Briefly, a New Libertarian Country existed. But the Efate government, now calling the New Hebrides *Vanuatu*, got a contingent of Papua New Guinea soldiers to squash Vemerana and put Jimmy Stevens in jail for ten years.

[2] . I'll always appreciate the laudatory praise Nathan gave my book in his keynote speech at Reason Magazine's 10th anniversary banquet in 1978.

[3] . Cf, "Jack Wheeler's Adventures with the Freedom Fighters," Washington Post, April 16, 1986.

[4] . Charlie became famous when Tom Hanks made a movie about him, *Charlie Wilson's War* in 2007. Charlie was my best man at my marriage in May 1986.

Jack Wheeler received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Southern California in 1976 under Professor Hospers. Among his philosophical writings is "Rand and Aristotle: A Comparison of Objectivist and Aristotelian Ethics" in The Philosophic Thought of Ayn Rand, Den Uyl & Rasmussen, eds. Author of The Adventurer's Guide and The Jade Steps. Publisher/Editor of the geopolitical website, To The Point. Founder of Wheeler Expeditions, conducting expeditions worldwide since 1976.