



Written by [Steven J. DuBord](#) on September 3, 2008

## The Libertarian Alternative

A former Georgia congressman plans to shake up this year's presidential contest, and raise even more eyebrows than he did a decade ago when he was one of the leaders of the campaign to impeach Bill Clinton.

Bob Barr's credentials as a Republican were impeccable. He was first elected to Congress in 1994 and served four terms representing Georgia's 7th District as a Republican. While in Congress, he earned a cumulative score of 74 percent in *The New American's* "Conservative Index" (since renamed the "Freedom Index").



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Bob Barr was an official with the CIA in the 1970s. He served as the U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Georgia from 1986 until 1990, having been appointed originally by Ronald Reagan. He is now a board member of Privacy International, an international watchdog group based in London. He is also a member of the Constitution Project's Initiative on Liberty and Security, and from 2003 to 2005, he served on a project at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University addressing matters of privacy and security. Bob was labeled "Mr. Privacy" by *New York Times* columnist William Safire for his leadership in protecting our rights to privacy.

In 2006, he resigned from the Republican Party and joined the Libertarians. In May of this year, he won the Libertarian Party nomination for president. In this interview, conducted exclusively for *The New American*, Bob explains why he left the Republican Party — and how freedom will be the real winner if he is able to go "mano-a-mano" with Senators Obama and McCain in the national debates.

**The New American:** *Bob, in 2006 you resigned from the Republican Party and joined the Libertarian Party. Now you are their candidate for president of the United States. Why did you leave the Republicans? Why are you now a Libertarian?*

**Bob Barr:** My answer, Chip, is basically the one that Ronald Reagan gave many years ago, when asked why he had quit the Democrat Party. He said he had not; that the Democrat Party had left him.

The Republican Party has abandoned me and many other libertarian-leaning Republicans. It has veered sharply away from its historic roots of smaller government, fiscal responsibility, and individual liberty. The Republican Party we've seen for the past several years is very clearly a party that believes in big government, big budgets, and big deficits, not individual liberty. I decided two years ago that I could no longer support a party that bears no relationship to the one I served for many years.

**TNA:** *Bob, tell me what the word "Libertarian" means to you and what you think it means to Americans.*

**Barr:** Libertarian or Libertarianism means freedom. Many people have the misimpression, certainly fostered by the two major parties, that the Libertarian Party is somehow not a mainstream movement and does not represent a traditional, mainstream American political philosophy. Nothing could be further from the truth.



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I believe that in the breast of every American beats the heart of a Libertarian. It's part of our nature. It's part of our heritage. We're hard-wired to be Libertarian. By that I mean to believe in ourselves, to accept personal responsibility, to believe in personal accountability.

I believe that everybody in America is libertarian about something, whether it's educating their children, running a small business, spending their own money, where they travel, and what they do in the privacy of their own home. Everybody has some area of their lives — and maybe *many* areas — where they wish to be free of government intrusion and government controls. That's the essence of Libertarianism. It is a philosophy that our Founding Fathers would have identified with very, very well.

**TNA:** *The vast majority of Americans seem to be wedded to the notion that there are — and should only be — two meaningful political parties in this country. Do you agree with that assertion?*

**Barr:** You're absolutely right: America, unfortunately, is very wedded to a two-party system. And those two parties, the Republicans and Democrats, are basically nothing more than two sides of the same coin. They are the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of politics.

Oh, there may be some minor differences between them. There are some differences between Senator Obama and Senator McCain on energy, taxation, healthcare, and so on. Each has some favorite areas where he wants government to grow bigger, faster, and others where he'd expand government more slowly. But neither one is truly committed to reducing the size, power, reach, and cost of the federal government.

That's why, when push comes to shove at the end of the day, nothing really changes in Washington. Both major parties know that since they have a virtual monopoly on power, and that each one is going to get back in power someday, neither one is really interested in reducing the power of government. They just go through the motions of talking about it. But by and large, they make sure nothing significant really happens to diminish the size or cost of government.

**TNA:** *Having found a party you can support, and with whose principles you agree, why did you decide to run for president on the Libertarian Party ticket?*

**Barr:** You have to realize that neither of the two major parties, the Republicans or the Democrats, have a candidate who will campaign on a platform to shrink the power or the cost of the federal government. Neither of the two major candidates will promote policies that will significantly move in the direction of individual liberty.

These issues are so important to me, and we are moving away from our historic principles so quickly, that unless someone puts forth a candidate and a platform that would begin to shrink government, we may not be able to do so in the future. In other words, if we don't start now, we may not get another opportunity to do so. These issues are that important.

The only way those issues would be presented to the American people and have any chance of getting a hearing was through the Libertarian Party. So I agreed to have my name put forward as a candidate for the nomination.

**TNA:** *Bob, you and I have heard a lot of alarmist cries over the past 30 or 40 years. But you just said it's now or never. Do you really mean that? Are you really saying that if freedom doesn't strike a goodly blow in 2008, we may not have an opportunity to do so again?*

**Barr:** I do not believe government will ever become powerful enough or omnipotent enough to extinguish the flame of freedom. Rulers can try, as the Soviets did and the Chinese Communists did. But



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even they could not do it. So I don't think it's a question of never again being able to reestablish freedom.

The problem is that the federal government has become so powerful, and the people of our country have become so accustomed to turning to it to solve virtually any problem we're faced with, that government has become all-pervasive in our society. Whether it's a natural disaster, an economic problem, a law-enforcement problem, whatever it is, people expect the federal government to solve it.

I truly believe that if we do not begin right now, this election cycle, to begin the process of rolling back the power of the federal government, it will become virtually impossible to do so in the years ahead.

**TNA:** *Let's talk about some specifics then. What do you think are the two or three biggest issues that will attract voters to you this year?*

**Barr:** This year, voters are primarily concerned about economic issues. For me personally, I believe strongly that some of the most important issues are those that relate to our loss of personal liberty. Restoring respect for habeas corpus, restoring adherence to the rule of law, such as no longer allowing warrantless surveillance of American citizens, are among the most important issues any president could deal with.

But this year, by and large, the voters are going to make their decision based on economic issues. So we must show the American people how much money the federal government takes from them and how wastefully it spends it. We must expose the oppressive, unfair, burdensome federal tax system.

We want to empower people to once again take control of their own fiscal affairs. To take control of education locally, by reducing the federal role and eventually, hopefully, abolishing the Department of Education. To open up our energy reserves, so that we can again begin taking control of our own energy needs. To restore the value of the U.S. dollar. These, I think, are going to be among the issues that are most relevant in the current campaign.

**TNA:** *Let me ask you a question that galvanized attention when Pastor Rick Warren asked it of Senators McCain and Obama: At what point does a baby get human rights?*

**Barr:** At conception.

**TNA:** *Therefore, as president, what would your policy be regarding abortion?*

**Barr:** It's not the job of the federal government to determine that; it's the job of the states. I believe it's the responsibility of the people of each state to decide.

**TNA:** *My next question concerns global warming. Do you agree with Al Gore that it is a major international threat that has been caused by human activities? And that therefore it will be necessary to regulate and control our activities to solve it?*

**Barr:** While I do believe there is such a thing as global warming — it is a demonstrated fact — I have never endorsed Al Gore's proposed solutions. What we don't know is exactly what causes it. Is it simply an historic and geographic phenomenon? Is it caused by automotive emissions? We just don't know.

That's why I have not endorsed any program to solve it. The first thing we need to do is to learn more about what is causing it. We can develop solutions — if any are called for — from that.

**TNA:** *In the meantime, what is your position on Kyoto and other international treaties that the United States has been urged to support?*



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**Barr:** I am opposed to them and have always been opposed to them.

**TNA:** *You serve on the board of the National Rifle Association, don't you? Does the Libertarian Party have something to offer gun owners that the other two parties don't?*

**Barr:** Absolutely, in this election in particular. For example, I have a consistent A-plus rating with the NRA during my years in the Congress. I've served as a board member on the National Rifle Association since 1997. Neither of the other two candidates comes close to matching that. Senator McCain, I think, was a C or C-plus at best. I don't believe Senator Obama ever got a passing grade from the NRA.

**TNA:** *Bob, some of your opponents say you've changed dramatically since you were in Congress. Two examples they use are your vote for the Patriot Act and your opposition to it today, and your turning from locking up drug users to arguing for legalization of drugs. Are those charges true, and if so, how do you explain them?*

**Barr:** They absolutely are true. And I just wish that more people in public office and those seeking public office were willing to go back and reevaluate some of their previous actions, as I have done. They need to reevaluate the power that we've given to the federal government. We need to look for areas where we can start taking some of that power back.

There's nothing wrong with admitting that something didn't work. In fact from the standpoint of a conservative (which is how I described myself before becoming a libertarian), it's a very conservative way of looking at government. I wish more people would say, look, we expanded federal power by passing the Patriot Act. At the time it may have seemed necessary. But in the years since passage, we've seen that government has abused the powers it was given. Plus, many of those powers are not necessary for our security. Therefore, let's go back and reevaluate things. Let's start taking back the powers that we gave it in the Patriot Act. So that's a perfect example of an area where we certainly should go back and not be afraid to say, "Look, we made a mistake."

With regard to federal drug policy, it's very clear to me that after several decades of expending billions upon billions of dollars trying to change people's behavior and trying to rid American streets of drugs, it's very clear that the policy is not working. Besides, this should not be a federal matter. Remember the old line, "Don't make a federal case out of it"? That should be the policy regarding all of the things that Big Nanny Government wants to control. I'd definitely put alcohol, drugs, and tobacco in that category. These decisions should be made by state governments, by the people of the states, not the federal government.

**TNA:** *Prior to your successful career as a lawyer and prosecutor, you served on the staff of the Central Intelligence Agency for eight years. I've heard it said that once you have been at the beck and call of the CIA, you're always at the beck and call of the CIA. Is there any truth to that?*

**Barr:** [Laughs] No. Certainly not in my case. I was very happy to have worked both as an analyst and as an attorney working on legislative matters for the CIA for a number of years, and that has given me a very firm understanding of the need for good intelligence. And also of the need to maintain very strict controls over our foreign intelligence apparatus. I'm very distressed at some of the recent actions by the current administration to get our foreign intelligence agencies involved in domestic matters. I think that is a very dangerous, very slippery slope to go down.

**TNA:** *Let's look quickly at two or three other big issues that will be part of the national debate, such as our policy in Iraq. Are you for winning, withdrawing, something between, or what?*



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**Barr:** One of the problems in the debate over Iraq is that people are asking the wrong questions. For example, the question is not if the troop surge is working. Of course it's working. If sending tens of thousands more U.S. troops into an area does not bring a higher degree of stability and reduce the level of violence, if conditions didn't improve, we'd be in real trouble.

The question is not if the surge is working, the question is whether the occupation of Iraq, regardless of the surge, is an appropriate use of U.S. manpower and U.S. money. The answer is, "No, it is not." Therefore, as president, I would begin an immediate and substantial drawdown, not only of the U.S. military presence in Iraq, but of the economic security blanket that is propping up the Iraqi government as well.

**TNA:** *I read somewhere that the United States has troops based in 142 countries around the world. We've had bases in Germany, Japan, and South Korea, among other places, for something like 50 years. Where do you think we should have U.S. troops stationed abroad?*

**Barr:** It's appropriate to have some U.S. military presence in many places. I believe it's appropriate to have Marines at our embassies and consulates around the world. I believe it is important to have military attachés at various diplomatic posts. I believe it is important to maintain a certain military presence in those locations where we have landing or port facilities.

But I agree with your point that right now, we have far too many troops in far too many places. We have troops stationed at over 700 facilities around the world. I don't recall the exact number of countries where we have bases, but whatever it is, it's far too many — particularly with those countries that are clearly capable of defending themselves, such as South Korea, Japan, and Germany. I see absolutely no reason to continue the massive U.S. military presence in those countries.

**TNA:** *Let's talk about the Middle East for a moment. How serious do you take the threat of Muslim extremism, the jihadists, and the so-called war on terror?*

**Barr:** I take very seriously any legitimate, verifiable, identifiable threat to the United States, our interests, and our citizens. But I do not buy into this notion that we must then conduct a worldwide war on terrorism.

What we need is sound, reliable intelligence that provides a realistic assessment of exactly what the threats are, where they are based, who supports and sponsors them, and how serious they are. This should provide the basis for taking action against specific, identifiable, immediate threats to the United States.

But I do not agree that there is a mass movement out there that necessitates a war on terrorism, such as is being used by the current administration to justify all manner of intrusions into American lives.

**TNA:** *Let's shift from international issues to a major domestic topic, taxation. Many conservatives are in favor of a flat tax or a national sales tax, the so-called "fair tax." Meanwhile, Senator Obama wants to increase taxes on the oil companies and wealthy investors. What is the Libertarian Party's position on the federal income tax?*

**Barr:** Simple. We believe it is an inappropriate, overly oppressive, way-too-complex way to provide necessary funds for the government to carry out its appropriate and necessary activities. We want to abolish the income tax and repeal the 16th Amendment.

As president, the first thing I would do is to dramatically reduce federal spending. That's first and foremost. If we don't start reducing spending, then whatever system of taxation we have is going to



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require too much of the people's money.

Once we've begun to cut spending, I would move dramatically to reform our system of taxation. I would call for the repeal of the 16th Amendment, which allows the federal government to have a progressive income tax. Then we can move toward a much fairer system of taxation. That might be a national sales tax, a version of the fair tax, or something else. But first we must cut spending.

**TNA:** *Earlier you mentioned abolishing the Department of Education. Are there any other federal departments that you want to get rid of? Not reduce. Not streamline. Not make more efficient. But eliminate entirely?*

**Barr:** There are any number of them. As president, I would institute a commission to examine every agency, office, and department of the federal government and to ask, "What is the constitutional justification of that activity — that is, where in the Constitution is it authorized?"

Next, I would require a very clear description of the necessary function that it is carrying out. In other words, what is it doing that cannot better be performed by state or local government, even if there is a constitutional justification for that agency, office, or department?

And thirdly, I would demand to see a cost-benefit study done for each and every such activity, to make certain that the benefits we are getting outweigh the cost.

Such a study would provide the blueprint for a prioritization of those agencies, departments, and offices that could be dramatically scaled back, and in many instances eliminated entirely. For example, I think that the Department of Education would be at the top of that list. I suspect the Department of Commerce would be way up there. I'd be surprised if we couldn't eliminate the Department of Energy and the Department of Homeland Security as well. Whatever legitimate and necessary functions those two Cabinet offices perform could be handled much better (and much cheaper) by smaller agencies and offices.

**TNA:** *You said you want to see the constitutional justification for a federal program. How strict a constitutionalist are you? And have we had such a creature in the White House in your lifetime?*

**Barr:** Not in my lifetime, and probably not for a long while before that. But let me point out, Chip, that these things are not going to happen overnight. It's taken us a long time to get to the point where we have the federal government so massively involved in virtually every aspect of our lives. We now have the federal government telling us what kind of light bulb we can use. A few years ago, the federal government told us what sort of toilet we can have in our homes. This is outrageous! It's just one more example among many of how the nanny state has grown to completely overshadow the system of limited, constitutional government we once took for granted.

We need to begin to reverse that process, but it's going to take time. It's going to take educating the American public. But we have to begin somewhere. And we have to do it now.

**TNA:** *On the website for your campaign, you say, "We're in it to win it." Do you really mean that? Do you really think you have even a remote chance of winning the presidency this year?*

**Barr:** Yes, I honestly believe it is possible that we could be elected the next president of the United States. It's certainly a long shot, I'll grant you. But we're already well ahead of where any third-party nominee has been at this point. We're certainly doing much better than any Libertarian nominee ever has.

When you see the lack of enthusiasm for the Republican nominee, when you see the non-partisan polls



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which show that upwards of 80 percent of the American public believe the country is going in the wrong direction, clearly there is a yearning for something new, something different. Ron Paul tapped into that. Senator Obama has tapped into it as well.

I believe there is a huge reservoir of voters out there who aren't wedded to the status quo, who don't believe we should have two and only two political parties in this country. They are ready for something different from the choices their parents and grandparents had. I believe there is an historic opportunity in front of us today.

**TNA:** *Let's talk about one of the most critical factors of all in this regard, the nationally televised debates. Will you be included in the debates that the Republican and the Democratic nominees have agreed to?*

**Barr:** We certainly intend to be included in those debates, but we recognize that it's not going to be easy. Basically, two things have to happen. One, we need to be polling at 15 percent nationally. I think we can get there by the time they make those decisions in late September or early October.

The other thing that needs to happen is that one or both of the major political parties has to agree that we should be included in the debates. We hope that both the Democrat and the Republican parties will acknowledge that a fair and objective debate should include us. Back in 1992, Ross Perot did participate in the presidential debates. At the time, he was polling slightly in excess of 15 percent. He was able to get in the debates because one of the parties — at that time it was the Republicans — believed it would be in their best interest for him to be there.

**TNA:** *Care to speculate on which party is more likely to welcome your participation?*

**Barr:** I don't know if either of them would welcome my participation. But I do believe that if enough Americans contact the major networks, the national media, and the two major political parties, and say, "We demand that you open up these debates to the Libertarian nominee, Bob Barr, and we're not going to watch them unless you do," that may create enough of a groundswell so they sit up and take notice.

**TNA:** *You mentioned that you need to poll nationally at 15 percent or better. Where are you now? And what's the best that a Libertarian candidate has done in the past?*

**Barr:** Right now [as of late August], we're polling at about six percent nationally, and in double-digits — that is, 10 percent or better — in some states. So we have a very good base from which to work. I don't believe the Libertarian Party ever received one percent of the votes in a presidential contest before this.

**TNA:** *Whatever the numbers were in the past, clearly you expect to do massively better than any Libertarian candidate for president has done before this. And it seems that many others are also expecting you to, as well. Recently a leading libertarian publication, Reason magazine, had this to say: "The Libertarian Party has its greatest chance to affect the presidential election in 28 years."*

*What are your objectives between now and November 4? What do you expect to accomplish over the next three months?*

**Barr:** Our objectives are three-fold, Chip. First is to make this a competitive three-way race. That includes being invited to participate in the so-called official debates. If we do that, we can, in fact, win. If I have an opportunity to go toe-to-toe, eye-to-eye, mano-a-mano, so to speak, with Senators McCain and Obama, I believe we can win.

In a competitive three-way race, you don't have to get a majority of the votes, you simply have to get a plurality. That can be accomplished with a relatively small number of states — about 12 or 13. So, it is



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possible. It's a long shot, no doubt about it. But that is our first and biggest goal.

Our other two important goals are, first, to open up the process so that no longer will Americans have as their only choice for president the lesser of two evils. Americans deserve better than going into a polling booth and holding their nose. We intend to show them that they do, in fact, have a real choice. They can send a real message to Washington.

Our third goal is simply to raise and discuss a number of substantive issues that but for our presence, but for my participation in this process, will not be raised. All you have to do is reflect on the campaigns thus far by Senators Obama and McCain to realize how little of substance is being discussed by them.

**TNA:** *Have you asked Ron Paul for his support? Do you expect to get it?*

**Barr:** I've talked with Ron a number of times, both before becoming the Libertarian Party nominee and afterwards. He's told me that he remains committed to working within the Republican Party, and I respect that. But I'll continue to maintain contact with him. He has an awful lot to offer this country. Our goals and our principles are very much the same

**TNA:** *Bob, thank you so much for your time this afternoon. We'll follow the campaign with great interest. And hopefully, we'll be seeing you on the national debates.*

**Barr:** Thank you, Chip. And thanks to your readers, for their dedication to the cause of liberty.

**W.W. "Chip" Wood** writes a weekly column called "Straight Talk," which is free for the asking at [www.straighttalkletter.com](http://www.straighttalkletter.com).





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