

Ray and Carol: A Life Steered by Libertarian Ideals and Unyielding Values

By Brian Mullis

“The threats to our Founding principles have never been greater in my opinion, at least not during my lifetime,” Ray Cunningham says.

In an era when political and ideological convictions often seem transient, the story of Ray and Carol Cunningham stands out for its unwavering commitment to libertarian values and a life steeped in intellectual rigor. Their journey underscores the significance of maintaining consistent values and the capacity for adaptability in a dynamic world.

The Cunninghams have thrived thanks to the power of values-driven living. In addition to providing for continuous personal growth, their core values—integrity, empathy, resilience, authenticity, gratitude, open-mindedness, responsibility, compassion, fairness, and lifelong learning—have also been the bedrock of their political and philosophical journey. Living in San Francisco in the 1970s during the early years of their marriage, the Cunninghams were very active in establishing libertarian ideas and reasserting the ideas into the public discourse.

Ray started his libertarian journey while a cadet at the US Coast Guard Academy and then as a commissioned officer for 10 years. “I chanced to read a paperback copy of Ayn Rand’s novel *Anthem* during lunch hour while on a cadet training cruise,” Ray

says. The book ignited a lifelong passion for libertarian thought and, over the next few years following graduation in 1964, Ray found more of Rand’s novels, which led him to “The Objectivist Newsletter,” publications from the Foundation for Economic Education, and *Reason* magazine. By 1971, Ray noticed ads for the formation of the Libertarian Party (LP).

“I had never registered to vote and was very cynical about politics, but the LP platform and objectives were consistent with my own views,” Ray recalls. “So I joined despite my cynicism.”

Shortly after resigning his Coast Guard commission on June 30, 1974, Ray was elected vice chairman of the California LP, and in 1975, he ran for mayor of San Francisco. He built on the experience by chairing the 1976 California LP presidential, 1978 California LP gubernatorial, and 1980 LP presidential campaigns.

It was during these years in San Francisco that Ray and Carol began working with Cato Institute Founder and President Emeritus Ed Crane to build organizations that advanced their beliefs.

“We were aware of Ed’s efforts together with Charles Koch’s with respect to Cato’s startup,” Ray says. “In fact, we hosted a modest reception at our apartment about



Longtime Cato Sponsors Ray and Carol Cunningham reconnected with Cato staff, scholars, and fellow Sponsors at the 2023 Benefactor Summit.

that time that Charles, a most gracious and unpretentious individual, attended personally along with other local libertarians.”

Eventually the Cunninghams left San Francisco as their engineering careers took them to Connecticut and later to the Philippines for 17 years to lead a massive multipurpose dam construction project. As they have been part of Cato’s community from the start, we have welcomed the opportunity to reconnect at events in recent years. They see the Institute’s growth since its founding in San Francisco as “nothing short of amazing.” Cato’s staff and leadership are also grateful to know that Ray and Carol have included the Institute in their estate plans to help secure continued

growth and influence.

“Life over the past 80-plus years has been very good for Carol and me,” Ray says. “We wish the same could or will be true for our extended families, friends, neighbors, and others.” ✦

For information on Cato’s Legacy Society, please contact Brian Mullis at bmullis@cato.org. To learn more about planned giving, please visit Cato.org/plannedgiving.



Scan the QR code to the left with your phone’s camera to become a Sponsor of the Cato Institute.