

*From the desk of Brad Lips
Chief Executive Officer, Atlas Network*

Freedom at 36,000 Feet

March 2025

Intended for perusal by friends of Atlas Network, this personal newsletter has been compiled during long flights with the goal of entertaining and informing you, whether you're in the air or on the ground. It's an assortment of observations about the freedom movement and world events with firsthand accounts from my most recent travels.

The late decadent rock star Lou Reed once bragged, "More happens in my week than your year."

Since January 20, it feels like all of us are walking on the wild side, Lou Reed-style, with more news headlines in a day than we once got in a month. This complicates the assembly of my 36k Feet newsletter, because I know that the news cycle right now, as you hold this in your hands, will almost certainly be different from the one that exists as I type.

At different times in the past six weeks, I was tempted to begin this newsletter celebrating the end of Peak Woke; worrying about trade wars; cheering the radical transparency effort of DOGE; worrying again about trade wars; and confessing my whiplash of emotions about President Trump wiping clean the geopolitical chessboard he inherited.

Commenting intelligently on this administration is further complicated by how Trump uses provocations to change public conversations and to force others to act. One can look silly by overreacting to what is just an opening gambit—or by seeming to normalize the most outlandish of his moves.

Luckily for me, loyal fans of Atlas Network are not looking to me to render a verdict on Trump 2.0.

Atlas Network donors understand that our organization is authentically nonpartisan. We keep our gaze set on the horizon line, as we work for the principles of free societies, independent of party politics. After all, our business strategy depends on pro-liberty groups from all over the world choosing to engage with us.

Scan the QR code below to explore the materials I mention in this doc ([in blue text](#)) online!



Inevitably, they will have different perspectives on elected leaders of the U.S. and other countries, so it would be counterproductive if Atlas Network had an institutional position on such things.

Of course, I'll be transparent in sharing my personal views on those topics that bridge current politics and the long-term work of the freedom movement. Just know that I (and our team) appreciate that there's no single right way to look at the difficult problems that people aspire to solve through the political process.

The Enduring Importance of Educating in the Classical Liberal Tradition

Yes, today's news headlines are dominated by big policy changes that flow from past efforts to expand the Overton Window of acceptable policy options. As I send this to print, I'm cheering announced plans to end the federal Department of Education to push accountability for schooling back to the local level—a wish list item for fans of liberty that I did not expect to come true. Indeed, many of Atlas Network's independent partners pursue big policy changes like this.

But here I want to draw attention to the important educational work done by other Atlas Network partners and allies. Increasing the ranks of smart and ambitious classical liberals is absolutely essential. At the Think Tank CEO Summits that Atlas Network convenes three times a year, I often discuss this with my peers. While we have a lot of talented young people joining our movement, there's a declining percentage who have deeply studied the ideas of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and other intellectual standard-bearers for our movement.

For this reason, I was very excited that our last Liberty Forum hosted friends from disruptive experiments in higher education: from The University of Austin (UATX) to the new Universidad de la Libertad in Mexico City to the Universidad de las Hespérides, which Gabriel Calzada founded after completing his tenure with UFM Guatemala. The Marxist Left's "long march through the institutions" was undeniably effective, so it's crucial to reverse what happened over decades in higher ed, or at least to provide escape hatches for rising students.

Diogo Costa, a former member of the Atlas Network team from Brazil who now heads the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), based in Atlanta, also gave a wonderful presentation about the new direction of FEE, one of the most august institutions in the freedom movement. Diogo's vision is to build a New Liberty Pipeline for young people (ages 14–24, when ideological leanings are most malleable). FEE's online engagement and school outreach efforts will reach large numbers, but with the distinct purpose of finding those interested in expanding their knowledge. Sincere interest will be met with immersive experiences (e.g., FEE

bootcamps and hackathons) and lead to sustained engagement in the broader freedom movement.

Investing in the future human capital of the freedom movement is an essential task. It's what inspired our late board member Linda Whetstone to devote so much of her life to helping get classic books on liberty into the hands (and in the local languages) of Atlas Network partners in the Global South.

She would explain that it's foolish to expect significant policy change toward liberty by people without a firm grasp of our ideas, and how can we expect people to have a grasp of our ideas if they have no exposure to the great thinkers who have transmitted the freedom philosophy over the centuries?

Long-term investment in ideas does pay off.

There is now an intellectual consensus among young people in Iran that classical liberal ideas are preferable to the authoritarian theocracy that governs the country. This is not just an anti-government movement but a true liberty movement that celebrates individual freedom, yearns for a dynamic entrepreneurial economy, and rejects the illiberal biases of the older generation. Our friend Mohamad Machine-Chian from Iran gave the [Linda Whetstone "Toast to Freedom"](#) at our 2024 Freedom Dinner. He explained one of the important effects of the long-term work he has led to win the hearts and minds of young people in Iran:

Last year (after October 7, 2023) the Iranian people refused to show up for state demonstrations in support of the terrorists of Hamas. To support the regime's anti-Israel narrative Iranian newspapers had to print pictures from Istanbul and Paris. That made it embarrassingly clear that the new generation wants no part in the apocalyptic vision of the Ayatollah.

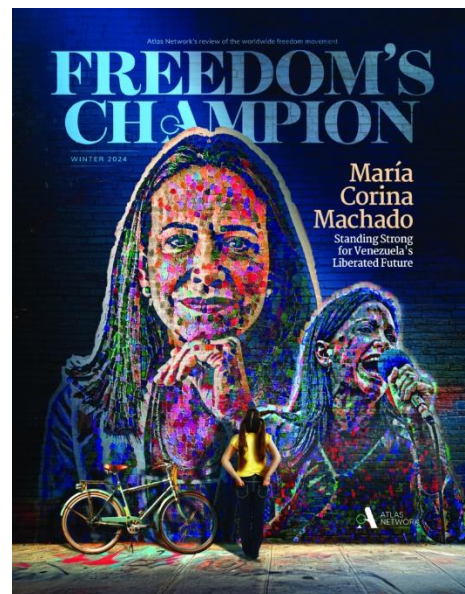
The payoff of long-term efforts to increase human capital for the liberty movement is also seen in The Federalist Society. Four decades after its founding, FedSoc's members are reclaiming the original spirit of our constitutional order, which many feared was irretrievably lost.

In Brazil, the Instituto de Estudos Empresariais (IEE) has similarly impacted generations of business leaders. The IEE engages young business leaders in intensive study of free-market economics, leading to professional networks of ambitious people who are well versed in classical liberal thought. Past leaders of IEE have played important roles in the revival of free-market ideas in Brazil.

Resilience in Venezuela

When our team was in Brazil for our Latin America Liberty Forum in early February, our traditional “Toast to Freedom” was given by Ana Corina Sosa, the daughter of Venezuela’s Iron Lady, Maria Corina Machado. In December, we published a cover story on our two-decade history with Maria and the essential role she has played in Venezuelans’ efforts to recover their freedom.

In January, the dictator Nicolas Maduro inaugurated himself to a new term in office, despite the overwhelming evidence of his lopsided loss, collected via Maria Corina’s 600K volunteer movement. Ana Corina described to our audience what happened when her mother emerged from hiding on that day:



My mother has not been allowed to leave Venezuela for more than ten years, and she has been in hiding for more than six months, isolated, with constant threats against her life. Only a few weeks ago, on January 9, when she came out of hiding to accompany Venezuelans in their peaceful struggle, she was violently detained, kidnapped, shot at, and the brave man driving her motorcycle was shot in the leg and is still in prison today. At that moment, my siblings and I received the call we have feared all our lives, telling us: “The regime has your mom.” What followed were hours that I would not wish on anyone. Twenty years of this struggle taught us very well what they are capable of doing. But even in the darkest moments, I never doubted that she was fighting for what was right. Venezuelans have lived two decades under tyranny, marked by humiliation, without freedom, without dignity, under a crude discourse of lies that seeks to make us doubt ourselves. With a rhetoric of hate that seeks to separate us. But we have said enough! Basta!

I will provide a [translated transcription of Ana Corina’s full remarks](#), so you have the context for the inspiring close. She lifted her glass with freedom’s friends by saying:

Freedom will always be worth fighting for . . . and we will take our fight to the end. This Toast to Freedom weighs heavily on me. I want to dedicate it to all the unnamed Venezuelan heroes who have dedicated their lives not only to the freedom of Venezuela and the future of our country but to the future of generations to come. This is for them. Thank you.

Whether Maduro will maintain his authoritarian grip on Venezuela is one of the great questions of 2025. The recent cancellation of licenses, granted to Chevron by the Biden administration, to do business in Venezuela will deprive the country of approximately \$4 billion of hard currency annually. These revenues have helped sustain Maduro and have propped up other Marxist regimes in the region. If Maduro falls, it will have positive ripple effects in our hemisphere. We will have brave and resilient Venezuelans, to whom Ana Corina offered her Toast to Freedom, to thank.

On Next to Europe

Atlas Network's next big event is the [Europe Liberty Forum](#), which will be held in Brussels this year. Ever since 2022, this event has had a sense of urgency to it. The 2022 Europe Liberty Forum took place in Warsaw, Poland, just 11 weeks after Putin's invasion (and only 15 weeks after we announced the need to relocate from our original destination of Kiev).

There was a palpable sense of history unfolding around us. Our Polish partners had sprung into action. For example, the Warsaw Enterprise Institute succeeded in promoting a reform to facilitate work permits for refugees from Ukraine, assimilating them into the economy rather than creating camps of dependent people.

Our own Tom Palmer was personally delivering humanitarian aid—thanks to private donations to a rapid response fund set up by Atlas Network—inside Ukraine.



Today, Europeans must grapple with the Trump administration's change of American foreign policy toward the war in Ukraine. Friends of Atlas Network may disagree about whether Trump is betraying an ally under attack or rightsizing American taxpayers' commitments to a problem with no easy answers.

Whatever your take on that question, one imperative is clear: Europe's democracies should prepare to play the lead role on security issues in their backyard, and stepping up will be impossible without economic growth.

This is a conversation that Atlas Network partners are well positioned to lead. Last year, when I attended the Freedom Games—a 4,000+ person event convened by our partner Fundacja Liberté! in the city of Łódź—many discussions concerned The Draghi Report, authored by a former European Central Bank president, Mario

Draghi, that rang alarm bells about declining economic competitiveness across Europe. When Draghi was asked by a journalist if his call for a massive cutting of red tape was prompted by a true “do this or die moment” for the continent, he shook his head no: “It’s do this, or it’s a slow agony.”

I know our European partners will not be satisfied with the slow agony they have been feeling. In 2023, our Europe Liberty Award went to EPICENTER, which was concentrating precisely on these issues of how to improve competitiveness and bring down the cost of living. I am hoping to see much more ambition in this area.

Late-Stage Socialism

With the Draghi Report as background, I’d like to suggest some new rhetoric for friends of Atlas Network to try out. It’s a variation on something I learned from disciples of Karl Marx.

The Marxists, of course, are as good at marketing as they are bad at economics. They’ve understood that unearned confidence is eerily persuasive. Marx himself talked about the inevitability of communism. His spell was strong enough that the great Whitaker Chambers was convinced, when he converted to limited-government conservatism from godless communism, he was choosing to join “the losing side of history.”

“Late-stage capitalism” is one great example of Marxist phraseology, taking the inevitability of the communist project as a given. I first came across the phrase in the early 90s, when a member of The Mekons memorably signed a record for me, “Climb about our sex rocket and orbit late-stage capitalism with gloves on!” The Mekons were punk rock minimalists who fell in love with outlaw country music. This mix made for some wonderful records, but their ideological and political sympathies were awful.

I’ve now learned that “late-stage capitalism” actually has a tradition that dates back to Werner Sombart in 1902, but its modern usage is a simple mocking of what Marxists see as inexcusable and unsustainable excesses of free markets. What do you say we turn this on its head? I have absolute confidence that Whitaker Chambers was wrong, and freedom will prevail in the end. So, can we start talking about “late-stage socialism”?

Elon Musk’s DOGE effort has revealed that much of the modern socialist project has been sustained through a parasitic relationship with the unknowing U.S. taxpayer. In this new era of radical transparency—powered by AI tools that can efficiently process unfathomable numbers of laws, regulations, and transactions, looking for

waste and inefficiency—this corrupt arrangement will not survive scrutiny. This could be the late stages of the socialist project indeed.

A Provocative Hayek Quote

All those who wish to stop the drift toward increasing government control should concentrate their efforts on monetary policy. —F.A. Hayek

This quote from F. A. Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* adorned the back cover of a monograph Atlas Network published fifteen years ago as part of an experimental Project on Sound Money that we launched (and then spun off to our friends at American Institute for Economic Research). Judy Shelton directed that project for us, before her star (and in some circles, notoriety) climbed during her eventually scuttled appointment to the Federal Reserve during the first Trump administration.

I got to see Judy again recently at a book talk she gave at the Coolidge House in Washington, DC. While some critics have tried to tag her as a rigid gold bug, Judy approaches our current monetary mess with creativity and pragmatism. Her recent book, *As Good as Gold*, published by the Independent Institute, proposes that the U.S. Treasury issue a new zero-coupon security that would be redeemable either at its face value in dollars or at a specified equivalent in gold at maturity. The idea is to reintroduce gold convertibility—and its disciplining effect on government spending—without requiring any overhaul of the existing monetary framework.

With growing numbers of inflation-sensitive American voters demanding to audit the Fed, Judy's thoughtful proposal should get a strong hearing.

Challenges—and Hope—in Syria

You may have seen emails and a video about Atlas Network's newest partner, the Free Syria Center, which was launched following a visit to Damascus in January by my colleagues Tom Palmer and Adam Weinberg. It's been heartbreaking to follow, in the weeks since this hopeful visit, the increased violence being fomented by Assad loyalists and insurgent militia groups (with support from regimes like Russia and Iran who have a vested interest in continued chaos).

The new Syrian government has a difficult road ahead. I have no doubt that our friend Dr. Mazen Derawan, and others co-founding the Free Syria Center, have an important role to play toward any positive outcome for the country. We need principled liberty advocates to hold the government to commitments it has made toward making Syria a normal country with a functioning economy that will attract investment.

Tom Palmer was interviewed on a major talk radio station in Denver, Colorado to provide insights on what our team saw firsthand in Damascus and how our local allies see the situation in Syria.

What's Next for Atlas Network?

Later this year, we will broadcast a mini-documentary about the efforts of Atlas Network inside Syria.

In the meantime, we are preparing to launch a new video podcast in March. Michael Carnuccio, a long-time friend of Atlas Network, who originally served as CEO of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, is taking the reins as show host. This is just one of the new efforts we have to engage larger audiences with the valuable work being done by Atlas Network partners. Michael is a seasoned on-camera personality. He'll help our audience discover new perspectives in conversations with the inspiring people of the worldwide freedom movement, and I'm sure you'll enjoy seeing how much passion he has for the worldwide freedom movement.

Mostly, however, Atlas Network's agenda for 2025 is simply to double down on a strategy that works: investing in locally designed projects by our pro-liberty partner organizations and bringing them world-class training opportunities, bespoke consulting offerings, and inspiring events to stoke greater ambition and achievement.

It's an exciting time to be growing our model, which compares so favorably to USAID. This was the theme of an email I sent you in February, titled "Atlas Network vs. USAID," when the problems at USAID were front-page news. In that email I said:

Investments to achieve free, prosperous, and peaceful societies around the world are very important. But, how we achieve that vision matters. Atlas Network's approach is fundamentally different, and it works:

- We support locally led projects designed by think-tank leaders who are inspired by the freedom philosophy.
- We design our support as a match of local funding sources, so partners will become self-sustaining to achieve lasting impact in their communities.
- We lean on the principled insights of the freedom movement's great scholars, and the past experiences of others in our network, to accelerate solutions that work.

If this resonates with you, I'll add a gentle reminder that this is a great time to renew your annual support of Atlas Network. Unlike USAID and so many other agencies found to be wasteful, Atlas Network is 100% privately funded, so we depend on donors like you.

In two weeks, we also will send you an informational mailer about our Fisher Legacy Society. I encourage all of our supporters to think about putting Atlas Network into your estate plans. This is something my wife, Stephanie, and I did some time ago, as we are very confident that Atlas Network is built to last.

Do you share our beliefs (1) that the greatest gift you can leave future generations is more freedom, and (2) that Atlas Network's governance can be trusted not to stray from its pro-liberty mission while staying vigilant in pursuit of impact and ROI? If so, you should join me and Steph in making support of Atlas Network part of your lasting legacy.

Joining the Fisher Legacy Society is perhaps the most meaningful way for you to engage with Atlas Network.

You should also know about the most fun ways!

As of March 18, we have three spots left on our donor tour of Belgium, [The Atlas Network Experience](#). Travelling with like-minded friends is very special, especially on a curated tour like this: visiting unforgettable sites in between wonderful meals, while learning about the history of classical liberalism and contemporary challenges to our values.

Check out the QR code on the front page to get more information on this special event for our donors and to explore other items that I've highlighted in blue.

As always, I am grateful for your involvement with Atlas Network.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Brad Lips". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Brad" being more prominent than the last name "Lips".

Brad Lips
Chief Executive Officer