

3 January 2012

And you, sir, are no libertarian

[Chris Berg](#)



Last week, the *New York Times* editorialised the Ron Paul newsletters could "leave a lasting stain" on libertarianism and the libertarian movement. Who knew the Newspaper of Record was so concerned about the reputation of small government and individual liberty?

Yes, the newsletters matter. Libertarians mustn't pretend they don't reflect poorly on Ron Paul himself. But, no, the actions, or even views, of a presidential candidate 20 years ago don't discredit a philosophy of government.

Published in the late 1980s and 1990s under titles like *The Ron Paul Survival Report*, they purported to be written by their namesake. Some of them are foul. They're racist and homophobic and shrill. Like "We can safely assume that 95 per cent of the black males in [Washington DC] are semi-criminal or entirely criminal". Or "I miss the closet. Homosexuals, not to speak of the rest of society, were far better off when social pressure forced them to hide their activities".

There's a lot more of those quotes. They're no better – often worse – when read in context.

Until recently libertarianism was a niche philosophy. Its tenets have been held by few, and professed by even fewer. The content of Paul's old newsletters reflects a strategy by some libertarians in the 1990s to build a coalition with cultural conservatives – to bring those cultural conservatives to radical free market economics.

This paleolibertarian strategy was formulated by Lew Rockwell and the economist Murray Rothbard, both friends of Ron Paul. Writing in 1990, Rockwell said the

"Woodstockian flavour" of contemporary libertarianism was off-putting. It was time for libertarians to abandon the "Age of Aquarius" and ground themselves in religion, the family, Western culture, and the middle class. Libertarianism and libertinism are not the same thing; paleolibertarianism was supposed to sever whatever connection there was between the two completely.

That was the theory. The practice was the reactionary racism seen in the newsletters. Many libertarian commentators believe Rockwell ghost-wrote the most incendiary material. It is fairly well established Paul did not, and few believe he holds – or held – any of the views attributed to him by the newsletters.

Yet that isn't quite an excuse. Paul may not have written the newsletters personally, but he signed off on the paleo strategy, gave his name to it, and handed his byline to its advocates. He didn't write them, sure, but they went out with his blessing.

Strictly, libertarianism is only a philosophy of government. It does not offer a vision of the good or moral life. A libertarian can, in theory, hold any social belief they like. All they have to do is oppose the government forcing those beliefs on others.

Yet it is hard to square the racism of the newsletters with the understanding of human worth that underpins libertarian philosophy. It does not make sense to place individuals at the centre of your politics then to denigrate people based on their group membership. Ayn Rand famously said racism is the most primitive form of collectivism.

And libertarians have always emphasised the role of markets promoting toleration, because toleration is a good thing.

So the paleo fusion was awkward. Re-read the quotes at the start of this column. They're not remotely libertarian. Society was better off when all gay people were in the closet? How do you reconcile that claim with a belief in the moral autonomy of free individuals?

And as a political strategy, it didn't work. Libertarianism isn't now popular because Lew Rockwell decided to play on white resentment. It is popular because it is the only philosophy of government that takes individual liberty seriously across all policy areas.

The issues animating the libertarian resurgence in 2012 are "cosmopolitan", not paleo. Keynesian economics and the response to the global financial crisis. Drug law reform. The expansion of presidential power. Just last week Barack Obama authorised the indefinite detention without trial of US citizens suspected of terrorism. Not even George W Bush did anything so draconian, yet Ron Paul is the only presidential candidate opposed.

As Ed Crane, president of the Cato Institute, wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* on Saturday, Paul is the sole contender who believes in constitutionally limited government. All candidates have talked big about small government; only Ron Paul means it.

And Paul's arguments on civil liberties (on, for example, the Bradley Manning case) have meant that his political base is now college students, not survivalists.

Paul's most questionable policy views are the ones calibrated to the latter audience. His opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement is less about the virtues of bilateral trade deals and more about "sovereignty". In 2006 he claimed NAFTA was a stalking horse for a North American Union that would have a common currency, international bureaucracy, and "virtually borderless travel". This is conspiracy theory stuff. The newsletters are full of it.

Views like those detract from the seriousness of Paul's other messages. A recent feature on the *Daily Beast* of "10 Outrageous Ron Paul Quotes" lumped his NAFTA allegations with his support for property rights and drug reform, as if they were all equally crazy.

It's disappointing that Paul's run crowded former New Mexico governor Gary Johnson out of the Republican debates. Johnson doesn't have a paleo bone in his body. He has none of Paul's baggage. In many ways he is also more libertarian. Johnson switched to the Libertarian Party in December.

I wrote earlier that the past actions or views of a candidate don't discredit a political philosophy. That's not quite true. It's never the scandal that hurts, it's the cover-up.

Yes, many progressives have jumped on the newsletters to attack Paul while excusing the appalling civil liberties record of the Obama administration. Such is politics.

But if those who support Ron Paul in 2012 pretend the newsletters are no big deal (or worse, try to rationalise them) it will suggest to others intrigued by the philosophy of freedom that there is a relationship between racism and libertarianism.

There isn't. And libertarianism is about more than Ron Paul.

[Chris Berg](http://twitter.com/chrisberg) is a Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs. Follow him at twitter.com/chrisberg