



Meet the Most Dangerous Man in Politics

GOP insiders fear Sen. Rand Paul, perhaps for good reason.

By Lara Brown

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This week at the Conservative Political Action Conference, party activists are going to be listening to speeches from the large field of Republican presidential aspirants and voting for their personal favorites in the conference's annual straw poll.

Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul has won the honor the last two years. Surely, all of his likely opponents – from former Gov. Jeb Bush to Texas Sen. Ted Cruz and Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker – have their supporters working extra hard to make sure that it doesn't happen again this year.

For Paul and his nascent campaign team, this "Hunger Games" dynamic (temporarily gang up with competitors to take out other rivals) likely feels familiar. For as Paul's presidential prospects have risen, GOP insiders from across the conservative spectrum have declared him "dangerous."

From Commentary's Jonathan Tobin to Washington Post columnist Jennifer Rubin to New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie to former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton, Paul is not a candidate to be supported. The latest to enter the increasingly desperate sounding "Don't Stand With Rand" chorus is former House Speaker Newt Gingrich's personal presidential nomination funder and casino mogul Sheldon Adelson. Branding Paul's foreign policy positions "dangerous" appears to have begun with the master "angler" himself: Vice President Dick Cheney.

But if all of these Republicans have come together to stop Rand, one has to wonder what his real threat is. According to the American Conservative, the problem with Paul is that he "says he would have opposed going to Iraq in 2003" and that "all wars should be declared by Congress." More recent criticism relates to his support for engagement with Cuba. In short, he's more constitutionally-constrained and intellectually-circumspect than the group of neoconservative war-hawks who lead former President George W. Bush's foreign policy efforts for eight years.

If the Republicans had any ability to objectively reflect on Bush's tenure, they'd realize that this is not a bad thing. Bush's choice to pursue a war in Iraq doomed his presidency. And according to political scientist Gary Jacobson, "the Obama presidency is primarily a legacy of George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq."

Why would the GOP embrace a failed foreign policy from the past, which severely tarnished the reputation of its last president and resulted in a Democratic White House? Because most seem to think that President Barack Obama's apparent fecklessness (and by extension that of his former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the likely Democratic nominee) in dealing with the Islamic State group and Russia is going to be evident enough to excite Americans to re-engage more forcefully in the world. They don't seem to realize that in the 2016 debate over where we'd rather go in the future, few Americans are going to want to go back to Bush to prevent a continuation of Obama.

The only way to break this "referendum" argument (which Obama won in 2012 and his current approval ratings suggest he'd win again if the election were held today), is to create a "new third way." Paul is offering the GOP this, but whether Republicans can stomach the change is going to be anyone's guess. The president of the Cato Institute appears hopeful that the Republicans will.

Former Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele got it right: Paul is " the most dangerous man in politics."