



Ayn Randroids and Libertarians Join Forces: Will Her Noxious Philosophy Further Infect America?

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Gary Weiss has published a new book about the influence of Ayn Rand on U.S. society, [Ayn Rand Nation](#).

Ayn Rand is a toxic figure to many people in America today, even on the right. Look how Paul Ryan, chairman of the House Budget Committee, [backpedaled](#) furiously (and unconvincingly) to deny that he was an acolyte of the Russian-born novelist. Though her extremist, atheistic vision of laissez-faire capitalism has gained traction from the Heartland to the intelligentsia, she remains a controversial figure.

That's why this recent bit of news is so startling: John Allison, a former bank CEO and a leader of the Rand movement, has just become president of the Cato Institute, the oldest and most influential libertarian think tank. This received only a modest amount of attention when it surfaced late last month, and you had to be a real political junkie to even be aware of it. But it is a seminal event in recent political history—a dramatic indication of the mainstreaming of the radical right.

What it means is that the Rand movement, which was little more than a cult when the Atlas Shrugged author died thirty years ago, has effectively merged with the vastly larger libertarian movement. While many differences are likely to remain—particularly as far as Ron Paul's fading candidacy is concerned, given the Randers' support for abortion and opposition to his foreign policy views —this means that Objectivism, Rand's quasi-religious philosophy, is going to permeate the political process more than ever before.

Allison, former CEO of North Carolina's BB&T Bank, is not just going to be the Cato Institute's sugar daddy. He replaces Ed Crane as president, meaning that he will have day-to-day control over the most significant libertarian organization in the country. Allison is a board member of the Ayn Rand Institute, the orthodox, no-compromise Randian organization, and is best known for his foundation donating free Rand books to thousands of schoolchildren across the nation—a crass exploitation of the fiscal troubles besetting primary schools.

Ayn Rand hated libertarians, so it would be easy to suggest that Rand would be rolling over in her grave at this news. But I don't think so. I think she'd exult at the news, because it means that the Randers have effectively gained control over what had once been the "enemy." Rand despised others on the right who didn't march in lockstep with her extremist brand of no-government capitalism, laced as it was (and is) with strident atheism and rejection of humanist and Western values. Her most bitter enemy was the pious Catholic William F. Buckley Jr. She sneered at the John Birch Society for failing to promote capitalism with sufficient aggressiveness, and was contemptuous toward Barry Goldwater (even though she endorsed him). But she reserved some of her most heated invective for libertarians.

In 1971, she wrote in her newsletter: "I disapprove of, disagree with and have no connection with, the latest aberration of some conservatives, the so-called 'hippies of the right' who attempt to snare the younger or more careless ones of my readers by claiming simultaneously to be followers of my philosophy and advocates of anarchism." The libertarian economist Murray Rothbard, once a Rand acolyte, became a fierce critic of Rand, and the antagonism toward Rothbard lingers today among Randians, 17 years after Rothbard's death.

But as far as the Rand movement is concerned, the libertarians have reformed in a serious way since then. The reason for that boils down to one factor: foreign policy.

Rand herself was very much an isolationist during the 1930s, and opposed U.S. entry into World War II. You can always tell a Randian True Believer because he or she will always agree with Rand on that, or at least not disagree, and Allison passed that test with flying colors when I interviewed him for Ayn Rand Nation. Allison explained to me that Rand argued that if we hadn't entered the war, "the Germans and Russians would have killed each other off, and we would have been better off. Which is possible."

"That goes back to this premise that we've all been told that being in World War II was a good thing," he continued. "I'm not sure we shouldn't have gotten in World War II but I think her argument is a very—you know, would these bad guys have killed each other off?"

"And the answer is, they might have," he said. He chuckled at the prospect.

Allison was careful not to contradict Rand on that point. "It's hard to know if it's true or not," he said. "We helped the Russians a lot, and set ourselves up for a lot of cost and risk after World War II." True, Germany

declared war on the U.S., but “she would argue that we helped set up Pearl Harbor by how we treated the Japanese.”

Such controversial views were as much a part of the Rand persona as her foreign policy transformation late in life, in which she became a strong supporter of Israel. Many libertarians agree with her on Israel—but not the Libertarian Party and Ron Paul. When I interviewed Yaron Brook, president of the Ayn Rand Institute, he described Paul and the Libertarian Party as “anti-American” in their foreign policy views. But Brook made it clear to me that he felt that the libertarians in general had changed significantly, and for the better, since the old days.

Allison can be expected to bring Randers into key positions at Cato, and I expect that his formidable financial resources will also be brought to bear on behalf of the think tank. True, he’s not anywhere near as wealthy as the Koch brothers, and I am sure the left will be rejoicing at the departure of the Kochs. Don’t be.

Allison is more than just a deep pocket. He is a committed ideologue who is Randian to the core, even sharing her atheism. He understands that the fight over capitalism is at bottom a moral fight, between the Rand vision of morality, which embraces greed and selfishness, and the opposing view held by most Americans.

In a [statement to Forbes](#), Allison made it clear that he’s seeking just that kind of ideological battle. “One of the things that I really want to do is make this a moral fight instead of a fight around the technical aspects of economics. The libertarian vision is a moral vision and we own the moral high ground. A free society is the only society in which people can think for themselves and pursue their rational self-interest.”

Randers have been seeking for years not just to defend laissez-faire capitalism, but to make the rest of us embrace it—to fall in love with the Randian Big Brother, a world in which corporations of limitless size would run roughshod over the rest of society, restrained only by their “rational self-interest” (a favorite Randian catchphrase which Allison faithfully parroted). In other words, restrained by nothing.

Although CATO is poles apart from the religious right, its alliance with a stone-cold atheistic movement, one that embraces the right to abortion, is a serious potential irritant.

By exposing the extremism that has come to infect the libertarian belief system, Allison’s ascendancy at the Cato Institute has done progressives and moderates an enormous favor. The only question is whether they will recognize it for the blessing that it clearly is.