



The Attempt to Pin Ron Paul's Shortcomings on Libertarianism

By Conor Friedersdorf

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The author of the expose on Paul's racist newsletters attempts to take down his whole ideology in the pages of The New Republic.

In a short piece in *The New Republic*, Jamie Kirchick, who first [reported](#) on Ron Paul's racist newsletters back in 2008, tries to argue that the controversy discredits the libertarian movement. "Why Don't Libertarians Care About Ron Paul's Bigoted Newsletters?" the title of his piece states. It is a curious title, given that *Reason* magazine, the libertarian movement's leading magazine, has been openly critical of Paul's newsletter [since the story broke in 2008](#), as its editor, Matt Welch, reminded us this week in a post titled "[Ron Paul's Foul Old Newsletters Back in the News](#)." The Cato Institute has been critical of the newsletters too. David Boaz wrote a 2008 post titled "[Ron Paul's Ugly Newsletters](#)" that included the following passage:

Those words are not libertarian words. Maybe they reflect "paleoconservative" ideas, though they're not the language of Burke or even Kirk. But libertarianism is a philosophy of individualism, tolerance, and liberty. As Ayn Rand wrote, "Racism is the lowest, most crudely primitive form of collectivism." Making sweeping, bigoted claims about all blacks, all homosexuals, or any other group is indeed a crudely primitive collectivism.

Libertarians should make it clear that the people who wrote those things are not our comrades, not part of our movement, not part of the tradition of John Locke, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, Ayn Rand, Milton Friedman, and Robert Nozick. Shame on them.

Here is Megan McArdle in 2010 [explaining](#) that the racist newsletters are one reason why she didn't cast a protest vote for Paul last time around. And countless libertarians whose names you've never heard of are disgusted at the racism in the newsletters and openly critical of Paul too. There are, as well, a lot of libertarians, Republicans and independents who either think, incorrectly, that the fact Paul didn't write the letters absolves him of responsibility, or whose opposition to foreign wars, drug prohibition, and/or the Federal

Reserve cause them to support the candidate despite his flaws. But it hardly follows that the latter group "doesn't care" about the newsletters.

Moving beyond the headline, here is a passage from Kirchick's piece:

The voluminous record of bigotry and conspiracy theories speaks for itself. And yet, four years on, Ron Paul's star is undimmed. Not only do the latest polls place him as the frontrunner in the Iowa Caucuses, but he still enjoys the support of a certain coterie of professional political commentators who, like Paul himself, identify as libertarians. Most prominent among them is *Daily Beast* blogger Andrew Sullivan, who gave Paul his [endorsement](#) in the GOP primary last week, as he did in 2008. But he is not alone: Tim Carney of *The Washington Examiner* recently [bemoaned](#) the fact that "the principled, antiwar, Constitution-obeying, Fed-hating, libertarian Republican from Texas stands firmly outside the bounds of permissible dissent as drawn by either the Republican establishment or the mainstream media," while Conor Friedersdorf of *The Atlantic* [argues](#) that Paul's ideas cannot be ignored, and that, for Tea Party Republicans, "A vote against Paul requires either cognitive dissonance--never in short supply in politics--or a fundamental rethinking of the whole theory of politics that so recently drove the Tea Party movement."

Andrew Sullivan, who identifies as a conservative, wrote back in 2008 that the Paul newsletters "are a repellent series of tracts, full of truly appalling bigotry. They certainly seem to have no echoes in his current campaign, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't be taken seriously." He went on to conclude that "Paul needs to say not only that he did not pen these excrescences, he needs to explain how his name was on them and disown them completely. I've supported Paul for what I believe are honorable reasons: his brave resistance to the enforced uniformity of opinion on the Iraq war, his defense of limited constitutional government, his libertarianism, his sincerity. If there is some other agenda lurking beneath all this, we deserve to know. It's up to Ron Paul now to clearly explain and disown these ugly, vile, despicable tracts from the past."

Shortly after the Tim Carney column quoted by Kirchick went live, it was criticized by a colleague who argued that the Ron Paul newsletters very much matter and are deserving of scrutiny -- and Carney [affirmed](#) that he was right.

As for my own quote above, a fuller version is more instructive as to my meaning:

Paul's very presence in the race, and especially his strong showing in Iowa polls, puts every Tea Party voter who supports any other candidate in the uncomfortable position of voting *against* the more principled, consistent proponent of small government, and *for* the guy they regard to be more electable, or partisan, or better at formulating zings against liberals.

There is nothing inherently wrong with factoring electability into the candidate one votes for in a primary, or backing a candidate who is less conservative on domestic policy because one agrees with his foreign policy views. But these are the sorts of tradeoffs and compromises that many Tea Partiers have spent a lot of time disparaging when other people were making them. A vote against Paul requires either cognitive dissonance --

never in short supply in politics -- or a fundamental rethinking of the whole theory of politics that so recently drove the Tea Party movement.

The argument wasn't that every Tea Partier should support Paul, but that Paul's candidacy forces them to confront the limits of the naive view of politics they've been expounding since 2009. There is also the fact that 90 minutes or so before Kirchick's piece posted -- but likely after he wrote it -- I stated in clear and aggrieved terms that [I very much care](#) about the Ron Paul newsletters. All of this is to say that a core premise of Kirchick's piece is wrong.

Libertarian journalists very much care about the newsletters, as do the institutions of the movement. For now, I'll refrain from speculating about the inner thoughts of libertarian voters except to say that Kirchick presents no evidence about them, and that not all Paul supporters are libertarians. To the Paul supporters who don't think the newsletters are fair game for inquiry: you're wrong.

In critiquing Paul supporters, Kirchick does get some things right. The candidate does inspire fervent, sycophantic support from some backers. It's off-putting at times. But so was Hope and Change. And the exaggerated praise of Bush's leadership after 9/11. Welcome to politics.

It is indeed too bad that some Paul fans fall prey to hagiography. "This is not the fervor of a healthy body politic -- this is a less savory type of political devotion, one that escapes the bounds of sober reasoning. Indeed, Paul's absolutist notion of libertarian rigor has always been coupled with an attraction to fantasies of political apocalypse," Kirchick writes.

And yes, there is some of that, but has Kirchick been observing only Paul and his supporters for the last four years? We are talking about a primary election in the party of Birthers, wild theories about Kenyan anti-colonialism, and loose talk about how Obama is deliberately destroying America -- and it's Paul's supporters alone that Kirchick wants to single out as beyond sober reasoning? "A constant theme in Paul's rhetoric, dating back to his first years as a congressman in the late 1970s, is that the United States is on the edge of a precipice," Kirchick writes -- and how many of the candidates in the GOP primary have made that same argument?

Says Kirchick:

Over the years, Paul has added other potential catastrophes to his repertoire of dark premonitions. In the early 1990s, it was racial apocalypse, with Paul dispensing "survivalist" tips to the readers of his newsletter like the admonition to stock up on guns and construct fall-out shelters. More recently, he has argued that America's foreign policy was a "major contributing factor" to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, an argument that has earned him admiration from some liberals. The 2008 financial crisis, the Obama administration's continuation of many Bush anti-terror policies (and the launching of the Libya War), and the formation of the Tea Party have all boosted Paul's image as a prescient sage.

I am not sure why arguing, after the fact, that American foreign policy was a "major contributing factor" to 9/11 is cited as a "dark premonition." Moreover, Kirchick glosses over or is totally blind to the fact that Paul, for all his talk of America being on a financial precipice, is constantly trying to talk the rest of his party out of terrifying themselves into stupid policies, whether the War in Iraq or the bailouts or bombing Iran or fighting the War on Drugs. Often times he counsels calm and restraint, assuring his followers that radical solutions can pose a greater danger than our problems.

It's no wonder he sometimes seems prescient.

There is one more passage I want to highlight (emphasis added):

...while it's true that Paul has not said anything explicitly racist in public, the same cannot be said for his promotion of conspiracy theories. He appears regularly on the radio program of Alex Jones, perhaps the most popular conspiracy theorist in America ([profiled](#) by TNR in 2009), where he often indulges the host's delusional ravings about the coming "New World Order." He continues to associate with the John Birch Society, the extreme-right wing organization that William F. Buckley denounced in the early 1960's after it alleged that none other than President Dwight D. Eisenhower was a "dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy." Asked about the group in 2007, Paul [told](#) the *New York Times*, "Oh, my goodness, the John Birch Society! Is that bad? I have a lot of friends in the John Birch Society." Indeed, Paul [delivered](#) the keynote address at the organization's 50th anniversary dinner in September. In May, Paul [said](#) President Obama's order to execute Osama bin Laden "was absolutely not necessary." This statement earned a rebuke from Judson Phillips, founder of Tea Party Nation, a movement one would presume would be quite favorable to Paul. "If there is any doubt that Ron Paul should not even get near the Oval Office, even on a tour of the White House," Phillips said, "he has just revealed it."

Two reactions. 1) Some of the kooky folks with whom Paul associates are indeed marks against him. 2) Kirchick acts as if he's going to tell us about conspiracy theories Paul promotes, but he doesn't in fact quote Paul asserting the truth of any conspiracy theory, and bizarrely includes the argument that bin Laden's execution wasn't necessary in the "conspiracy theory" section.

Says Kirchick:

Surely, those who agree with Paul would be able to find a better vessel for their ideas than a man who once entertained the notion that AIDS was invented in a government laboratory or who, just last January, alleged that there had been a "CIA coup" against the American government and that the Agency is "in drug businesses." Why, for instance, do these self-styled libertarians not throw their support to former New Mexico Governor Gary Johnson, who, unlike Paul, can boast executive experience and doesn't have the racist and conspiratorial baggage?

I too wish they'd throw their support to Gary Johnson, who just left the Republican primary race. I wish conservatives would back Huntsman, or would've backed Mitch Daniels, instead of this bizarre succession of Bachmann/Perry/Cain/Gingrich. And that circa 2000 the whole GOP wouldn't have rallied around an out-of-his-depth Texas

governor; and that Bill Kristol and John McCain hadn't elevated Sarah Palin in 2008.

Why are so many libertarians still backing Paul rather than a less imperfect vessel for the same views? I've been trying all my life to figure out why Americans don't throw their support behind better politicians. What I can say is that the answer doesn't lay in a flaw particular to libertarians or their political movement. And I say that as someone who acknowledges that the movement, like all ideological movements, has many flaws.

In spite of them, there is a strong argument to be made that the movement is heading in the right direction. Back in 2008, Julian Sanchez and Dave Weigel described the ugly, immoral strategy of the folks who wrote the Ron Paul newsletters:

The newsletters' obsession with blacks and gays was of a piece with a conscious political strategy adopted at that same time by Lew Rockwell and Murray Rothbard. After breaking with the Libertarian Party following the 1988 presidential election, Rockwell and Rothbard formed a schismatic "paleolibertarian" movement, which rejected what they saw as the social libertinism and leftist tendencies of mainstream libertarians. In 1990, they launched the *Rothbard-Rockwell Report*, where they crafted a [plan](#) they hoped would midwife a broad new "paleo" coalition.

Rockwell explained the thrust of the idea in a 1990 *Liberty* essay entitled "The Case for Paleo-Libertarianism." To Rockwell, the LP was a "party of the stoned," a halfway house for libertines that had to be "de-loused." To grow, the movement had to embrace older conservative values. "State-enforced segregation," Rockwell wrote, "was wrong, but so is State-enforced integration. State-enforced segregation was not wrong because separateness is wrong, however. Wishing to associate with members of one's own race, nationality, religion, class, sex, or even political party is a natural and normal human impulse."

The most detailed description of the strategy came in an essay Rothbard wrote for the January 1992 *Rothbard-Rockwell Report*, titled "Right-Wing Populism: A Strategy for the Paleo Movement." Lamenting that mainstream intellectuals and opinion leaders were too invested in the status quo to be brought around to a libertarian view, Rothbard pointed to David Duke and Joseph McCarthy as models for an "Outreach to the Rednecks," which would fashion a broad libertarian/paleoconservative coalition by targeting the disaffected working and middle classes.

Said Sanchez and Weigel near the end of their article:

Visitors to LewRockwell.com or Mises.org since 2001 are less likely to feel the need for a shower. One can almost detect what sounds like mellowing in [Rockwell's reflections on the high and heady paleo days](#), unburdened by ominous warnings of the looming race war. Nowadays the fiery rhetoric is directed at the "pimpily-faced" Kirchick, "Benito" Giuliani, and the ["so-called libertarians"](#) at **reason** and Cato.

But perhaps the best refutation of the old approach is not the absence of race-baiting rhetoric from its progenitors, but the success of the 2008 Ron Paul phenomenon. The man who was once the Great Paleolibertarian Hope has built a broad base of enthusiastic

supporters without resorting to venomous rhetoric or coded racism. He has stuck stubbornly to the issues of sound money, "humble foreign policy," and shrinking the state. He [wraps up his speeches](#) with a three-part paeon to individualism: "I don't want to run your life," "I don't want to run the economy," and "I don't want to run the world." He talks about the disproportionate effect of the drug war on African-Americans, and appeared at a September 2007 [Republican debate](#) on black issues that was boycotted by the then-frontrunners. All this and more have brought him \$30 million-plus from more than 100,000 donors; thousands of campaign volunteers; and the largest rallies he's ever spoken to, including a crowd of almost 5,000 in Philadelphia.

Kirchick is right to hold Paul accountable for his ugly past. Having done so -- and now that Paul and his movement have grown bigger by disavowing that past and running inclusive campaigns against wars, prohibition, and profligate spending -- perhaps Kirchick can continue his critiques of movements that use paranoia and bigotry. I can point him to candidates and ideological warriors fretting about the imposition of sharia law in America, the need for racial profiling in airports, the special oath Muslim appointees should have to take, what needs to happen in Saudi Arabia before Muslim Americans should be allowed to build mosques in New York, the supposedly corrosive effect that gays are going to have on the military, and whether or not they can be "cured." Having so recently examined libertarianism, Kirchick should have no trouble reaching the folks on the right who most consistently and vociferously speak out against such nonsense.