

POLITICO

Rand Paul's kinder, gentler libertarianism

The 2016 hopeful is redefining himself.

By James Hohmann

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Rand Paul used to be libertarian. Now he describes himself as “libertarian-*ish*.”

It’s a slight distinction, but an important one.

The senator is using his presidential campaign kickoff tour this week, including a Thursday afternoon speech at the U.S.S. Yorktown aircraft carrier in Charleston, to present himself as a kinder and gentler version of his father, long the movement’s standard-bearer, while also showcasing a scaled-back, sanded-down form of libertarianism that’s more palatable to the Republican rank-and-file.

There’s no talk from the Kentuckian about ending the Federal Reserve, no quoting Friedrich Hayek and no laments about how the U.S. deserves a share of blame for terrorism – all hallmarks of Ron Paul presidential campaign rallies. Doom-and-gloom has been replaced by sunny optimism; the language of revolution has been supplanted by something that sounds a lot more incremental and a lot less edgy.

The focus now is on humanizing Rand Paul. Glossy videos at his campaign events show him coaching little league soccer, traveling to Guatemala to give free medical care and visiting with African-American college students. His stump speech includes a poignant story about how his ailing grandmother inspired him to become an eye doctor. “As her vision began to fail, I became her eyes,” he tells crowds. Those introducing Paul at events repeatedly describe him as “compassionate.”

Libertarians of all varieties understand why the 52-year-old is bowing to pragmatism and playing the inside game. Most are okay with what they see as a delicate balancing act; they recognize that not enough libertarians are out there to win the Republican nomination. But others, especially those who identify with the Libertarian Party, have a word for Paul: sellout.

“There are a lot of libertarians who will sit down and talk with you for hours on end about the Fed and macroeconomic theory and Hayek and so forth,” said Bob Barr, who represented Georgia in Congress for five terms before running for president as the Libertarian Party’s

nominee in 2008. “That’s great, but the average voter doesn’t know who Hayek was, doesn’t know who Milton Friedman was and doesn’t know what the Federal Reserve does.”

“Rand is much more founded in the real world than his dad was when he was a candidate,” Barr continued. “Rand understands that if you want to win a national election as a libertarian – that is with a small ‘l’ – you have to appeal to a lot of Republicans. We have, after all, a two-party system – period, end of argument.”

Gary Johnson, the Libertarian Party presidential nominee in 2012, chastises the younger Paul for supporting a budget that includes sizable increases in military spending and for cozying up to evangelicals. Paul continues to personally oppose gay marriage and does not call for the legalization of marijuana.

“He is running as a Republican,” said Johnson. “If he were libertarian, he’d be running as a libertarian.”

Johnson, who served two terms as New Mexico’s Republican governor, briefly joined the GOP field in 2011 before leaving to accept the Libertarian Party’s nomination. He won 1.2 million votes in the general election, or 1 percent of the popular vote. He said he hopes to run for president again in 2016, partly to offer a contrast to Paul.

“If you Wikipedia [classical liberal](#), that’s what most Americans are and that’s certainly what libertarians are all about,” he said by cell phone as he walked between meetings in New York City. “If I do [run again], it’s still a ways away...I would like to do it, but no timetable at this point.”

Several ideologically-pure libertarians mused about what they viewed as the staleness of Paul’s presidential stump speech: calls for term limits, a constitutional amendment to require a balanced budget and a law requiring senators to read bills before they vote on them.

“The balanced budget stuff goes back to the ‘80s, and the term limits stuff was big in the ‘90s,” said Brian Doherty, a senior editor at the libertarian magazine Reason. “None of that’s fresh. None of that’s a new vision ... It’s not really distinctly libertarian.”

Doherty, author of the book “Ron Paul’s Revolution,” said Rand is determined to avoid a repeat of his problematic 2010 appearance on Rachel Maddow’s show, during which he suggested that portions of the Civil Rights Act might be unconstitutional because they restricted the freedom of segregationist business owners.

Doherty said Rand, unlike his father, does not want to get burdened with theoretical debates about what happens when his philosophy is applied in full. “He doesn’t want moments like that,” the editor said. “I think that’s the root of the prickliness...If you’re a typical party hack of whatever sort, everyone understands you’re just a politician ... No one expects intellectual coherence from you.”

Asked in an interview Tuesday why he talked about conservatives and liberals but did not mention the word “libertarian” in his kickoff speech, Paul [said](#) “labels can be all-consuming sometimes.”

“The label that I’ve chosen more often than not is actually ‘constitutional conservative,’” he said. “My favorite are the articles on the Internet that blare: ‘Rand Paul is not a libertarian.’ Guess what? I’m a Republican, you know? When I describe it, I say ‘I’m libertarian-*ish*,’ which means I have *some* libertarian impulses.”

Paul still nods to the privacy concerns that animate the libertarian movement – holding up a cell phone in his stump speech and promising to end warrantless wiretapping on day one as president. But he now starts his point about the National Security Agency by declaring, as he did in New Hampshire on Wednesday, “To defend our country, we need to gather intelligence on the enemy.”

While his dad called for an *end* to the war on drugs, Rand merely talks about rolling back the harshest criminal penalties and applying justice equally to people of all races.

The Cato Institute’s David Boaz, who has been at the libertarian think tank since 1981, said that Paul’s announcement speech Tuesday was “not a traditional Republican speech.” He praised him for talking about signature libertarian causes like privacy, criminal justice reform and “nudging” foreign policy.

“At some point, we’re going to stop comparing him to his father,” said Boaz, who published “The Libertarian Mind” earlier this year and wrote the Encyclopedia Britannica [entry](#) on libertarianism. “He’s trying to talk about the issues that matter to him in a way that is appealing and politically plausible.”

Boaz said libertarians must get comfortable with the idea that Rand Paul is trying to win so he can actually govern and thus affect change.

“Bill Buckley gave different speeches than Ronald Reagan,” Boaz said of the founding editor of National Review. “They were coming from a similar place, but Reagan was trying to be president and Buckley was trying to be the editor of an intellectual magazine.”

Former Kentucky Secretary of State Trey Grayson, whom Paul defeated in the 2010 GOP Senate primary, sees an evolution in Paul’s style and approach. Rand in 2010 was “not quite as polished, a little more doctrinaire libertarian, a little harder line on issues [and] definitely more of a dove on foreign affairs than he is now.”

“He doesn’t have that same sort of hard edge,” said Grayson, who had the backing of Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell in that race. “It’ll be interesting to see if he can pull off this fusion.”

Last year, Rand happily embraced his role as one of the GOP’s most sought-after surrogates. At the request of party leaders, he went to several Senate battlegrounds to campaign for the

Republican nominee — with a focus on places where a third-party libertarian was polling well enough to play the role of spoiler. He cut several ads for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which endorsed Grayson over him in 2010.

The libertarian candidates Paul campaigned against understood why he was doing it.

Sean Haugh, the libertarian nominee for Senate in North Carolina, supported Ron Paul's presidential campaign in 2012. He even briefly registered as a Republican to support delegates aligned with the former Texas congressman at the state convention. Last year, as Haugh polled in the high single digits, Paul traveled to the state to campaign for Republican nominee Thom Tillis, who narrowly beat a Democratic incumbent.

“A lot of it is seeing where his father failed because he was so uncompromising in his rhetoric,” said Haugh. “I long ago made my peace with the fact that Rand Paul is running for president; that means he'll do and say a lot of things to pander to the base of the Republican Party and pacify the establishment.”

Haugh, who works as a pizza deliveryman and plans to run for Senate again in 2016 against Republican Sen. Richard Burr, said he retains many mutual friends with the Pauls, and they regularly reassure him that Rand is shifting rhetorically to win but that “his goals remain more or less intact.”

In 2016, Haugh would support Gary Johnson over Rand Paul. “Even though I may be personally skeptical,” he said, “what's important to me is that he's igniting this section of the electorate that's very independent minded and very thoughtful.”

In Alaska last year, where Democratic Sen. Mark Begich was running ads to boost Libertarian candidate Mark Fish's vote share, Paul cut competing commercials aimed at getting libertarians to back Republican challenger Dan Sullivan.

“I understand that anybody that's going to be president of the United States certainly has to be pragmatic,” Fish said of Paul this week. “There are a lot of balls in the air that have to be juggled... Out of necessity, he's giving social conservatives a few things to chew on, hoping that libertarians will understand why he's doing that.”

Carla Howell, the political director of the national Libertarian Party, thinks Rand might ultimately hurt the cause by “pandering to Republican elitists and special interests.”

“The question is: which side will he help more?” asked Howell, the Libertarian nominee against Mitt Romney when he ran for governor of Massachusetts in 2002. “Will he deliver on advancing freedom more? Or will he saddle us with more big government by helping politicians like Mitch McConnell and whoever ends up being the 2016 Republican nominee?”

Kyle Cheney contributed to this report.