



## What Rand Paul's Totally F\*\*ked Campaign Says About America

**The candidate's worldview looked appealing for a moment—until the rise of ISIS scared Americans into the neocons' arms once again.**

Olivia Nuzzi

November 24, 2015

In 2013, the case for Rand Paul's presidential bid went something like this: His father, Ron, was able to create a grassroots movement by appealing to people—many of them young—who thought the government was too involved in their lives and too eager to wage war at the expense of American futures and dollars. But Ron Paul, folksy little thing that he was, was the wrong guy to deliver the message. Rand Paul, younger and slicker, could carry on his dad's legacy while also drawing in people who might have backed away slowly if Ron tried to talk to them about the Gold Standard.

It was the perfect time, it seemed, for an antiwar message to stick. Americans whose whole lives had been spent with the country at war would be voting in 2016, and polls indicated that when Ron and Rand voiced skepticism about military intervention, they were speaking for a majority. A *New York Times*/CBS News [poll](#) from June 2013 found that six in 10 people did not want the U.S. to take a lead role in solving conflicts in the Middle East.

But two years later, the world has changed. And what Paul is offering provides voters little comfort to Americans who are scared.

The polls conducted in the wake of the Paris terror attacks (Reuters/Ipsos, Bloomberg, NBC News/SurveyMonkey, ABC News/*Washington Post*) indicate two things: The public, in general, is ambivalent about putting boots on the ground to destroy ISIS, but Republicans support it overwhelmingly.

So what does that mean for a Republican presidential candidate whose identity as a politician is about, in large part, trying to avoid deploying soldiers at all costs?

For Paul, it could mean being condemned to obscurity where he currently resides—polling now at just 2.5 percent—indefinitely.

Paul was campaigning against endless wars before he was ever a candidate. On Jan. 26, 2008, he was on stage in Montana, dressed in a tan blazer and black turtleneck, speaking on behalf of Ron, who was then running for president.

He told the audience to go home and look up a “great YouTube clip” of Dick Cheney in 1995, explaining why the U.S. didn’t intervene in Baghdad under George H.W. Bush. “His arguments are exactly mirroring my dad’s arguments for why we shouldn’t have gone in this time: It would be chaos, there’d be a civil war, there’d be no exit strategy, it’d cost a blue, bloody fortune in both lives and treasure,” Paul said. “And this is Dick Cheney saying this!”

What changed, Paul said, was that Cheney made “a couple hundred million dollars” working for Halliburton, the oil company. When he was back in the White House under George W. Bush, Paul claimed, suddenly war in Iraq seemed like a profitable venture.

Paul used the anecdote to make the case that sometimes wars were fought for the gain of Big Business and at the expense of the American people.

Entering the Senate and mulling a presidential campaign didn’t seem, at first, to change Paul much. Even with the rise of the so-called Islamic State, four years after Rand’s election, he was still worried about an overreaction with permanent consequences.

Just after a video of journalist James Foley’s beheading was released by ISIS in August 2014, I asked Paul if he was concerned that the threat ISIS posed to the United States was being overstated.

“I think that emotions do run high,” he said. “And I admit, frankly, that I’m like anyone else—susceptible, to a certain degree, to the emotions of seeing Americans beheaded.”

He said he didn’t watch the video, but he was aware of it, and aware that ISIS needed to be taken seriously. “I think they are potentially a threat,” he said. “I think it’s a weighing of the facts at any particular time, whether or not someone’s a threat to the United States.”

But he seemed worried, too, about politics. Paul started to make compromises that felt designed to make him more electable to non-libertarians. The assumption was that he would retain his dad’s supporters while bringing new ones into the fold.

First, he announced he would support bombing ISIS in Iraq and Syria, then he rebranded himself as a “conservative realist” modeled after George H.W. Bush, and finally, he signed the Iran Letter despite claiming to favor negotiations with the country, and ultimately came out against the Iran Deal itself (Ron Paul supported it).

The strategy proved politically stupid. Libertarians were unhappy that Paul had, as the libertarian Cato Institute’s David Boaz put it, “rounded off the libertarian edges,” and more establishment conservatives still didn’t take Paul seriously as someone they could support—certainly not as terrorism was fast becoming more important an issue than the economy.

Justin Raimondo, the co-founder of Antiwar.com, has gone from loving Rand Paul to hating him to thinking he's not so bad again. "Rand wanted to be the insider," he said. "He was auditioning for that part and he didn't get the role."

As Raimondo sees it, Paul's fatal mistake was that "early on, he muddied the picture" by backing away from the identity that got him elected. "He tried to strike this middle ground," he said. "This is not a campaign of middle grounds. They want: either or, black or white—for good or bad."

As heightened concerns about ISIS have taken center stage since the Paris attacks, Paul has stood by his assertion that the U.S. shouldn't send troops overseas to fight, but he has also deflected from that position by introducing what Politico called a "dead-on-arrival bill" to deny visas to anyone from a country with a "jihadist movement."

Boaz said that, as a libertarian, "personally I think he's being too harsh on the refugee issue," but "one of the reasons he wants to be seen talking tough about the refugee crisis is because it makes it harder to paint him as a pacifist or isolationist or unconcerned about what happened [in Paris]."

But for hawkish Republicans, no tough talk will ever be enough to distance Paul from charges of isolationism—the label Paul's been (unfairly, in his view) branded with for years, most recently by Marco Rubio during the last debate. And nothing Paul says to make the case that the U.S. should be cautious about deploying troops is likely to convince those who aren't already inclined to such a worldview. "The best time to listen carefully to non-interventionists is when you're about to rush into war in a panic," Boaz said. "Unfortunately it's the least likely time to do so."

In New York City last week, as he slurped tomato soup, Lindsey Graham—a proud neocon and one of the only candidates polling behind Paul, at 0.8 percent—conflated his foreign policy with Obama's ("In many ways he's less robust than Obama") and blamed the two for the rise of ISIS ("The Ron Paul approach, Rand Paul approach—'leave the world alone, fortress America'—is the worst possible approach.")

Paul has often said that toppling "secular dictators" like Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, has contributed to the chaos in the Middle East. Graham scoffed at the idea.

"The bottom line is the Arab Spring is real," Graham said. "Young people in the region, starting in Tunisia, are not gonna live in dictatorships for Rand Paul's convenience. He yearns for the days of Saddam and Gaddafi. Would he raise his kids in those spaces? Young people—and he's supposed to be a champion of freedom and liberty—well, freedom and liberty is just not a western concept. It's just not for us. So young people are not gonna live in Gaddafi's Libya, Saddam's Iraq, and Mubarak's Egypt." (Paul's campaign declined to respond to Graham's statements).

Not that Graham's worldview is helping his campaign much either, but that fact seems owed more to his overall weaknesses as a candidate than anything else.

Donald Trump—whose response to the Paris terror attacks has included claiming he witnessed New Jersey Muslims cheering on Sept. 11, 2001—is the only candidate to have [received a bump in the polls](#) as the focus of the primary has shifted to national security, suggesting that either voters don't care about candidates having specific plans to combat terror, or nativist shouting is comforting in times of heightened distress.

But it's worth noting that Trump's narrative about the Middle East is much more appealing to Republican primary voters than Paul's.

Trump proudly declares he was against invading Iraq—making it harder for Paul to stand out for saying the same thing—but he's also eager to point out that Obama made a mistake by pulling troops out too soon. His position is basically: we shouldn't have gone in at all, but since we did go in, we shouldn't have left when we did.

Whether or not that makes any sense is beside the point. What matters is that Trump can loudly criticize Obama's foreign policy. Paul, on the other hand, has taken a different approach—the approach of his 2008 speech.

When Cheney criticized Obama for how he handled Iraq, in 2014, Paul responded by saying the questions Cheney raised about the president “could be asked of those who supported the Iraq war.”

“You know, were they right in their predictions? Were there weapons of mass destruction there? That's what the war was sold on. Was democracy easily achievable? Was the war won in 2005, when many of these people said it was won?”

People like Cheney, he said, “didn't really, I think, understand the civil war that would break out. And what's going on now—I don't blame on President Obama. Has he really got the solution? Maybe there is no solution.”