

POLITICO

The One-Man Think Tank

By David Nather
September/October 2014

Where do Rand Paul's ideas come from? The short answer: himself. Until now, the Kentucky senator has been able to call his own shots—one day, he warns about drones attacking American citizens; another, he rips into the harsh sentences given to drug offenders. The common thread from one idea to the next is usually his libertarian, small-government philosophy—an ideology that can often put him at odds with his own party.

It also makes him what the anti-tax activist Grover Norquist calls “the most interesting thinker and promoter of ideas within the modern Republican Party”—and gives him a tendency to shoot from the hip. His political operation has been staffing up as he openly contemplates a White House bid. But for policy, Paul until now has relied mainly on just a few Senate aides.

That's not going to work if he's serious about 2016. So, very quietly, starting in the spring, Paul's advisers have been bringing in the experts to get him up to speed for long, freewheeling chats in Paul's office and at the venerable Capitol Hill restaurant the Monocle.

There's no doubt Paul surrounds himself with a more eclectic group of policy advisers and allies than most Republicans. On foreign policy, his instincts run dovish but he's at ease rattling off facts and figures about Iran's nuclear program with establishment types at the Council on Foreign Relations too, and his closest advisers are in the GOP mainstream: a former arms control negotiator and a former State Department official in both Bush administrations. And for his lawsuit over the National Security Agency's surveillance programs, he brought together Ken Cuccinelli, the former Virginia attorney general and anti-Obamacare crusader, and the American Civil Liberties Union. Says one informal adviser: “I would have thought of him as being ideologically rigid, and he's not like that at all.”

While he's consulting widely these days with the think tankers at the Heritage Foundation and the more libertarian-minded Cato Institute, by all accounts his real policy team is still pretty much Paul and his Senate staff. But it's clear all this studying up is designed with a presidential campaign in mind, and presidential campaigns need a network of policy experts to churn out all those policy papers—especially so with an ideas-minded candidate like Paul.

By all accounts, up until now Paul has been an ideas guy without an ideas team; many of the usual suspects in Republican policy circles haven't even dealt with him at all, they told me. Brian Darling, a Heritage alum who serves as a Senate counsel and spokesman for Paul, describes him as a "one-man think tank."

But that won't be the case for long. Herewith, then, a guide to the players, present and future, in the Rand Paul Institute for Big Ideas.

INNER CIRCLE

Doug Stafford. Paul's top political aide, the executive director of RAND PAC is mainly known for building the senator's political operation. But he's also a policy guy: The guitar-playing conservative activist is certain to have a big hand in assembling Paul's advisers for a presidential run and shaping the overall issue themes.

John Gray. Paul's legislative director wrote the plan the senator proposed to balance the budget in five years, eliminate four Cabinet departments, cut discretionary spending to fiscal 2008 levels, overhaul Social Security and Medicare, and create a flat tax.

Lorne Craner. Craner has been helping to organize Paul's foreign policy chat sessions and has become the go-to defender of Paul's skeptical views on military intervention. A former State Department adviser in both Bush administrations, Craner is also a former head of the International Republican Institute, which promotes democracy in foreign countries. He describes Paul as a "voracious reader."

Richard Burt. Paul's other main foreign policy adviser, who runs his arms control briefings, is a former arms control negotiator, ambassador to Germany and lobbyist. A veteran of the Reagan administration and the first Bush administration, Burt was the head U.S. negotiator of the original Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty in 1991, and is now the U.S. chair of Global Zero, an organization dedicated to eliminating nuclear weapons.

ALLIES

Families Against Mandatory Minimums. Paul worked with the group on the sentencing reform proposal he introduced last year with Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy, which would free judges from having to impose mandatory minimum sentences. The group was started in the 1990s by a Cato Institute official whose brother had to spend five years in jail for growing marijuana.

American Civil Liberties Union. The group worked with Paul, at his request, in his lawsuit over NSA surveillance. Why the ACLU? Laura Murphy, director of the group's Washington legislative office, notes Vice President Joe Biden was once caught on camera telling Paul, "The only [interest group] I really respect, and I don't agree with them most of the time, is the ACLU. ... They have principles."

Ken Cuccinelli. Paul turned to the former Virginia attorney general to be lead counsel on his NSA lawsuit. Cuccinelli, now the president of the Senate Conservatives Fund, says

he mostly helped Paul with the legal specifics, but not the broad argument. Cuccinelli recalls: “For a nonlawyer, he has a pretty well-developed view of constitutional law.”

OUTER CIRCLE

Stephen Moore. The Heritage Foundation chief economist has organized briefings by economists from around the country on tax and budget reform, regulatory policy, Social Security and welfare. Moore says Paul was interested in creating a tax credit that rewards work by supplementing the wages of low-income employees: “He admits he doesn’t have all the answers, which is refreshing.”

James Jay Carafano. He’s a Heritage expert who specializes in foreign policy, and he has headed up a series of defense briefings along with former Sen. Jim Talent, a Heritage fellow who was one of Mitt Romney’s top national security advisers. Carafano, a vocal critic of the defense cuts that Paul has vehemently backed, says the talks have focused on “how do you match your capabilities to the emerging threats.”

Grover Norquist. Why is the tax-cutting head of Americans for Tax Reform talking with Paul? Because he likes Paul’s views not just on taxes, but also on civil liberties and sentencing reform, as well—and is impressed with his outreach to young adults and the tech community. Norquist says that Paul is “playing the long game.”

Arthur Laffer. Yes, Paul has reached out to the “father of supply-side economics.” Laffer says they’ve talked several times about, among other things, how to make a flat tax work. “He asks all the right questions. ... He seems to be intellectually open-minded,” Laffer says.

Randy Barnett. During his Senate filibuster over drones, Paul quoted from the Georgetown University law professor’s book *Restoring the Lost Constitution*, which argues that the courts shouldn’t presume a law is constitutional just because it passed. When the two later met, Barnett says Paul did most of the talking. “He had a great understanding of not only the passage he quoted, but also the core thesis of the book,” says Barnett.

David Boaz. He’s the executive vice president of the Cato Institute and the author of a primer on libertarianism. Boaz says he and Paul are definitely in sync on the importance of a free-market economy and small government—and on the need for a more restrained foreign policy, a message Boaz drove home by sending Paul a collection of reading materials about the dangers of military intervention in other countries.