



## Homophobia, racism and the Kochs: San Francisco's tech-libertarian "Reboot" conference is a cesspool

By Mark Ames  
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Starting today, San Francisco plays host to the Reboot 2014 conference. According to the event's blurb:

"Reboot 2014 will bring together technical talent and policy advocates to turn ideas into deliverables for liberty."

The word "liberty" is the giveaway, of course. With "Reboot," libertarianism is making its Big Pitch to Silicon Valley. The event features the movement's superstar scion, Rand Paul, as keynote speaker; alongside Nick Gillespie, the leather-jacketed editor of Reason.com, the online edition of Reason magazine, the longest-running and most successful libertarian media outlet, backed by the infamous Koch Brothers. In fact, the entire event is sponsored by the Kochs.

Under the weird banner of "conservatarianism," other key speakers include prominent republicans like Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, chair of the House Republican Conference, and Andy Barkett, CTO of the Republican National Committee.

This is very definitely a Valley event, though, organized by Lincoln Labs: Aaron Ginn and Chris Abrams of StumbleUpon and Garrett Johnson of SendHub.

**[Update:** *After publication of this story, a spokesperson for StumbleUpon emailed to say that Ginn and Abrams have both left the company. On the Reboot site, Ginn is still described as "currently the head of growth at StumbleUpon" while Abrams is described as "a software engineer for StumbleUpon." The StumbleUpon spokesperson added that "We'll be reaching out to Lincoln Labs as well to so it can make the updates, too."*]

Silicon Valley and libertarianism would seem to be a natural fit, given Ayn Rand's reputed popularity in the tech world—at least, according to the caricature. At the billionaire level, a number of Big Tech superstars identify themselves as “libertarian”: Pierre Omidyar, Peter Thiel, Travis Kalanick to name a few. And Reason magazine, based in southern California since 1970, would seem to be the perfect matchmaker between the Bible Belt libertarianism of Rand Paul and Charles Koch, and Silicon Valley's “California libertarianism.” After all, it was Reason that inspired Wired magazine's libertarian founder, Louis Rossetto, when he was a Columbia U student in the early 1970s.

Lately, Rand Paul, the superstar of the libertarian world, has been hard-selling himself to Silicon Valley billionaires. In May, Sen. Paul did a billionaires' crawl in the Bay Area, gloating about “unlimited potential for us in Silicon Valley.” And last weekend, Rand Paul wormed his way into the annual Sun Valley oligarchs' retreat for some quality one-on-one face time with Facebook billionaires Mark Zuckerberg, Sean Parker, and Peter Thiel (who bankrolled Rand's daddy Ron Paul's 2012 run for president).

*[Disclosure: Peter Thiel is an investor in Pando, via Founders Fund]*

So now we have the “Reboot Lab” conference taking place in the heart of San Francisco's SOMA tech district. But if the purpose of the Reboot Lab conference is to merge Koch-brand libertarianism with Silicon Valley “libertarianism,” then the first thing you have to ask is: Why the Hell did they invite a mean homophobic hick like Cathy McMorris Rodgers to the show?

Rand Paul at least does a decent job showboating outrage against Big Brother snooping and drone attacks; at least there's something there to grab onto before you get into the rest of Rand's loonie-right politics. But the other keynote speaker, McMorris Rodgers?

In the, I suppose, quite likely event that Silicon Valley doesn't know who she is, here's a quick primer:

Rep. McMorris Rodgers was homeschooled by her father, and got her higher education degree at an unaccredited Christian fundamentalist institution, Pensacola Christian College (PCC), which bans homosexuality, open Internet (PCC until recently banned all Internet access), and mixed-gender stairwells (male and female students are required to use separate stairs and doors). Pensacola Christian College is the publisher of A Beka textbooks for K-12 pupils, which teach kids that Islam is a “false religion,” Hindus are “incapable of writing history,” Catholicism is “a monstrous distortion of Christianity,” African religions preach “false religious beliefs,” liberals and Democrats are crypto-Marxists, and the United Nations is a “collectivist juggernaut that would crush individual freedom and force the will of an elite few on all of humanity.”

In the mid-late 90s, McMorris Rodgers took office in the Washington state legislature and co-authored a bill banning same-sex marriages, then later earned notoriety for blocking a bill that had already passed unanimously in Washington state's upper house to replace the pejorative “Orientals” with “Asians” in official state documents. As

reported in the press at the time, legislators were dumbfounded as to why McMorris Rodgers would do something as gratuitously mean-spirited as blocking a bill undoing racism against Asians; a few, including the bill's Korean-American author, literally broke down in tears. McMorris Rodgers' excuse, as reported in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer:

“I'm very reluctant to continue to focus on setting up different definitions in statute related to the various minority groups. I'd really like to see us get beyond that.”

Since coming to Congress, she co-sponsored a Constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, voted against bills that would protect the LGBT community from hate crimes and discrimination in the workplace, against the equal pay bill for women, against federal funding for Planned Parenthood, and she opposes legal abortions in the case of rape or incest (unless the mother's life is in danger). The Pensacola Christian College grad did, however, co-author a bill “recognizing Christianity's importance to Western civilization.”

And this weekend she'll be keynoting at Reboot, sharing the stage with LeanIn.org's Andrea Saul, whom Sheryl Sandberg hired last year to “help reach women – and men – so that we can all work together towards a more equal world.”

Indeed.

At first glance it makes no sense to front a rabidly anti-gay candidate like McMorris Rodgers to sell the Kochs' and the Paul family's scrubland libertarianism to a Bay Area audience full of hip disruptors and “anarchist” practitioners of bohemia grooming fads.

But that's because what Silicon Valley folks think of when they hear the word “libertarianism” actually has very little connection to what the libertarian movement actually stands for, and has stood for since the 1970s.

To understand what libertarianism really means to some of the people on stage at the Reboot conference, you need to look back at the archives of Reason magazine — the de facto house magazine of American libertarianism. A magazine whose online editor, don't forget, will also be on the Reboot stage.

For the past few months, I've been sifting back through Reason's archives to try to understand the dark origins of all this flashy libertarian patter that's being repackaged and sold to today's Silicon Valley entrepreneurs as “bold” and “new” thinking.

### **Reason magazine: Predicting Silicon Valley disruption since 1972**

The involvement in Reboot of Reason.com's editor is both telling and entirely appropriate. For all of Silicon Valley's self-celebration and pretensions to progressive values, you can find most of the Big Ideas spouted by Silicon Valley's 21st century

geniuses in Reason's musty, nearly half-century old archives, many of which are only available in print or microfiche via public libraries.

Peter Thiel's floating libertarian islands? The December 1972 "special issue" of Reason magazine proposed abandoning statist America for "new libertarian countries" built on floating ocean platforms. Travis Kalanick's disrupted, deregulated taxi cab free-for-all? Half a decade before Kalanick was born, Reason's February 1972 issue published "Taxis and Jitneys: The Case for Deregulation," a proposal to disrupt taxi cab "monopolies" and licensing laws, published by a DARPA spinoff called General Research Corp (where former Reason editor Robert Poole also worked). Reed Hastings' school reforms (i.e. privatization)? Reason published "The Case for School Vouchers" in April 1971. Elon Musk's private space company? Reason devoted its April 1979 "special issue" to privatizing space. In fact, Reason's Robert Poole and early contributor Mark Frazier are credited with organizing the first major space privatization conference in the mid-1970s.

### **Reason magazine and apartheid South Africa**

And then there's the uglier, darker side of the Kochs' libertarianism on display in Reason's archives: the fringe-right racism and fascism that the movement has tried to downplay in recent years to appeal to progressives and non-loonie techies. Throughout its first two decades, in the 1970s and 1980s, Reason supported apartheid South Africa, and attacked anti-apartheid protesters and sanctions right up to Nelson Mandela's release, when they finally dropped it.

In May 1976, just before the Soweto Uprising when South African police slaughtered hundreds of black youths — Reason's South African correspondent, Marc Swanepoel repeated a common theme in Reason's pages: libertarianism and the white race are one and the same:

"Let the people who advocate immediate majority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia take note. It would be very nice to have a minimal libertarian government and that is what South African libertarians would like to achieve. But as long as the choice is between being governed by a relatively informed white minority and a Socialist black majority, 'apartheid' in South Africa will stay."

Throughout the 1970s, Reason's pages dripped with racist justifications for apartheid, on the racial-economic theory that whites stood for free market libertarianism and individual liberty, while blacks were genetically predisposed towards socialism and looting. Therefore, libertarians could not support majority rule, which was merely a trick to destroy libertarianism.

In 1973, Reason defended the apartheid regime's new policies resettling millions of black South Africans into "Bantustan" statelets:

"The major black ethnic groups lumped together under the general term 'Bantu' are as distinct from one another as Germany and France. They are

largely illiterate, largely uncaring, mutually mistrustful, mutually antagonistic. They are not the great single black mass yearning to be free that sentimentalists and self-servers in other lands try to portray them.”

As for libertarians’ sacred property rights, Reason’s correspondent wrote in 1977 that the only way to secure whites’ property rights was to deny property rights to blacks:

“I regret the fact that honest, law-abiding blacks cannot own property in or near white cities, but I realize that without this restriction separate development will fail — and with it the capitalist system in South Africa.”

For Reason’s libertarians and pro-apartheid whites, this was the great tragedy that loomed: the loss of their free-market paradise, their “liberty,” to black majority rule. Majority rule and socialism were one and the same; for Reason, apartheid was the only thing safeguarding “liberty.” The logic was insane; but it was accepted as a matter of faith in the pages of Reason.

While Reason’s readers fretted over the precarious state of their libertarian paradise, Black South Africans faced very different tragedies, and one of the worst took place in 1977, when the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, Stephen Biko, was beaten to death in police custody.

Biko’s death didn’t warrant a mention; instead, that same year, Reason magazine reminded its libertarian readers that black majority rule was liberty’s mortal threat:

“As all libertarians should know, unlimited democracies tend towards totalitarian systems, with the rulers competing with each other to control the political machinery. Some years ago, the whites realized that a democracy may deteriorate into a dictatorship in the ‘wrong’ hands—**especially when those hands have the wrong color to boot.**”

By 1980, South Africa’s black population was on the verge of exploding, as the apartheid regime beefed up its police state apparatus and its repression of the majority black population. The State of Emergency regime was just a few years away, when Reason cheered:

“It is possible that in the past decade no country has moved further toward a libertarian society than South Africa has. Yes—South Africa.”

## **Is Silicon Valley really libertarian?**

In Silicon Valley at that time, the personal computer industry and tech culture were just beginning to take shape.

The emerging politics in Silicon Valley’s tech world — anti-bureaucratic, anti-politics, idealizing the decentralized and the voluntary — was already like a half-baked, happier version of Reason’s libertarianism. In the late 1970s, Charles Koch looked like he was

making California his libertarian playground. He moved his premiere libertarian think-tank, the CATO Institute (originally named “The Charles Koch Foundation”) from Wichita to Montgomery Street in downtown San Francisco, alongside a handful of other Koch-funded libertarian outfits. Down the peninsula in Menlo Park was the Institute for Humane Studies, Charles Koch’s flagship libertarian think-tank since he took control of it in the 1960s. Reason magazine and the Reason Foundation, with David Koch as director, were headquartered in Santa Barbara; and in 1979 the Libertarian Party, with funds from the Koch brothers, held its convention in Los Angeles, where the Koch-backed political party chose David Koch as its vice presidential nominee for the 1980 race, allowing the Kochs to skirt campaign donation limits.

The two libertarianisms — the hick fascism version owned by the Koch brothers, essentially rebranding Joe McCarthy with a pot leaf and a ponytail; and Silicon Valley’s emerging brand of optimistic, half-understood libertarianism, part hippie cybernetics, part hot-tub-Hayek — should have met and merged right there in the Bay Area.

And yet — they really were different, fundamentally different. The libertarianism of the Kochs is a direct descendant of the Big Business reaction against FDR’s New Deal, when the DuPont oligarchy created the American Liberty League to undo new laws establishing Social Security and labor union rights. Their heroes are the America Firsters led by Charles Lindbergh. And they haven’t stopped fighting that fight to dismantle the New Deal and everything that followed, even though most Americans have only a dim understanding of what that political war was about, and how its redistribution of political power still shapes our politics today. For the Kochs and their die-hard brand of libertarianism, that war with FDR and the New Deal is fresh and raw, and still far from resolved.

### **Rand and Ron Paul’s Neo-Confederate ghost writers**

All of this brings us neatly back to Reboot’s keynote speaker: Rand Paul.

Anyone paying attention to the Paul family knows about Ron Paul’s unhinged racist newsletters, Ron and Rand Paul’s opposition to the Civil Rights Act, and Ron-Rand Pauls’ intimate associations with neo-Confederates, white supremacists, and conspiracy loons.

Last year, Rand Paul’s speechwriter, campaign aide, and ghost writer, Jack Hunter (aka “Southern Avenger”), resigned under pressure — but only after Sen. Paul refused to fire his aide for his decade-plus record of pro-Confederacy activism, and rants like “John Wilkes Booth Was Right”.

By a strange coincidence, Rand’s father, Ron Paul, had the same racism “problem” with his ghost writer or writers of the Ron Paul newsletters (a more complete account here). The “Ron Paul Newsletters” described Washington DC’s black males as “95% semi-criminal or entirely criminal,” quipped that the 1992 LA riots only ended when “when it came time for the blacks to pick up their welfare checks,” and suggested black activist Al Sharpton should rename New York “Welfaria,” “Rapetown,” or “Zooville.” Dr. Paul’s

newsletters also attacked “gays in San Francisco” for dying of AIDS in the early 1990s, claiming “these men don’t really see a reason to live past their fifties,” and that gays enjoyed dying of AIDS because “they enjoy the attention and pity that comes with being sick.”

But the Ron Paul newsletters were most obsessed with Martin Luther King Jr, described as a “lying socialist satyr” and a “comsymp if not an actual party member” who “seduced underage girls and boys,” and who was a “threat” to America both alive and decades after assassination, still “threatening to strangle our culture.” (Ron Paul voted against establishing the Martin Luther King Jr holiday and then lied about it; and more recently, Congressman Paul voted against a symbolic bill commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act.)

## **Old News?**

Some might argue that it’s unfair of Pando to dig up Reason magazine’s long romance with apartheid. After all, apartheid is “old news.” Indeed, Ron Paul tried to use that same defense when the stories broke big in 2008 about his racist newsletter, prompting Reason magazine editor-in-chief Matt Welch to scoff,

“‘Old News’? ‘Rehashed for Over a Decade’?”

Welch answered that by reposting his Lexis Nexis search on the long history of Ron Paul’s flips and flops over his newsletters, changing his story over the years.

Nick Gillespie, the Reason.com editor who’s starring at this weekend’s Reboot, agreed with Welch that the Ron Paul newsletters, dating back to 1978, were “stunning”:

“there is no shortage of truly odious material that is simply jaw-dropping.”

Reason did a good job publicly distancing themselves from Ron Paul by refusing to take this as mere “old news” — and by breaking a “scoop” pinning the newsletters on Ron Paul’s former Congressional aide, Lew Rockwell, with whom Dr. Paul founded the Ludwig Von Mises Institute.

But Reason has two problems here: First, going back to the 1970s, Reason has been hard-selling the alleged “Ron Paul phenomenon” to its readers. Perhaps no other glossy in the 1970s and early 1980s glorified the crusty Old Righter Ron Paul as the New Libertarian Hero as did the Kochs’ Reason magazine (see for example [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).

And secondly, by Reason’s own standards with Ron Paul, Reason needs to account for its grotesque propaganda supporting apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 80s. Not least because the same key figures in charge of Reason during its pro-apartheid years are still around. Robert Poole, who headed Reason from 1970 through 2001, and co-founded the Reason Foundation with David Koch (the nonprofit foundation publishes the magazine,) remains on the Reason Foundation’s board of trustees, as does

David Koch. Poole continued denouncing anti-apartheid sanctions as late as 1989 in the pages Reason.

And looming over it all, the Koch brothers, who backed Reason magazine since Robert Poole got involved in 1970, and whose support in dollars and infrastructure continues through today. Koch money is a major funder of San Francisco's Lincoln Labs, sponsor of the Reboot Labs conference, and of the Liberty Hackathon that took place last autumn. And the Kochs also support Rand Paul, and the Kentucky senator helps the Kochs raise money for their network of libertarian front groups.

### **A Silicon Valley recruiting agency**

Back firmly to present day. Lincoln Labs, the organizers of the Reboot conference, is run by a young Republican Party activist from Texas named Aaron Ginn, and Ginn has acknowledged that he's essentially running a talent scouting agency for the talent-starved GOP, which recently set up offices in Silicon Valley.

Running the GOP operations in Silicon Valley is a former senior Facebook engineering manager named Andrew Barkett, who now works as CTO of the Republican National Committee and partners in a privately held GOP data-mining firm based in San Mateo called Data Trust. Barkett explained how Lincoln Labs helps recruit new GOP foot soldiers:

“We don't need thousands of people; we need dozens,” Mr. Barkett said. “We could do a lot of damage with 30 people. A lot. But they've got to be real engineers.” Of Mr. Ginn, he said: “Aaron gets that.”

To recruit, Lincoln has set up events like Hackathons and “open government” get-togethers at tech venues like Microsoft and StumbledUpon, and bring in celebrities like Rand Paul, who appeals to progressives ignorant about Paul's lesser-known reactionary beliefs and far-right past.

To avoid scaring away the local talent, Lincoln Labs' Ginn confided to the New York Times that he masks his politics:

“I avoid saying ‘Republican’ so people don't think I'm part of crazy right-wing stuff.”

It's funny that he says that, because in the 1970s, Reason magazine published articles arguing that the best way to recruit liberals like those Lincoln Lab faces in the Bay Area is to lie to them — “you can use tricks — and you better, if you really want libertarianism to have a fighting chance,” Reason advised. One article laid out some “simple facts” about tricking others into accepting libertarianism, and it means hiding things like the movement's adoration of apartheid and instead over-emphasizing their opposition to the NSA and the war on drugs. Reason advised:



“To sell libertarianism, you must sell it under a formula which corresponds to the basic convictions of the guy to whom you sell it.”

And that’s exactly what Reboot appears to be: Libertarian sold under a formula tailored to Silicon Valley convictions, while doing everything it can to hide what really lurks beneath.

*To be continued...*

*Pando contacted Koch Industries, Reason Magazine and Lincoln Labs for comment on this article [2+ hours prior to publication.] Only Lincoln Labs responded, saying they would “be back to [us] shortly” and asking “are you planning to attend the conference or are you writing the article in a vacuum?” Pando has applied for media accreditation for the event but have not yet received a response.*