

Ready for Rand?

Americans hate Rand Paul's libertarianism. They just don't know it yet.

By Kevin D. Williamson

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Rand Paul's admirers, and more than a few of his enemies, believe the country is having a "libertarian moment"—from Tea Partiers in Topeka to Silicon Valley techno-separatists who dream of going Galt. We've had these moments before, but each time they come and go without the elevation of a libertarian to high office or the advancement of libertarian ideas. There's a reason for that, and Sen. Rand Paul is just learning why now.

The problem for libertarian politicians is that Americans [hate](#) libertarianism. They like [Social Security](#) and [minimum-wage hikes](#), they are still somewhat wary of [free trade](#) and they resent that the world is full of conniving and frequently swarthy foreigners who are scheming to provide us with goods and services in exchange for little green pieces of paper. [Four times](#) as many Americans support pulling out of NAFTA or renegotiating it as support staying in. Paul, on the other hand, wants to make the whole world a free-trade zone: He scores [100 percent](#) on the libertarian Cato Institute's free-trade index. Libertarian ideas might appeal to voters on principle—in a poll last fall, [22 percent](#) of Americans said they identify as or "lean" libertarian. But in the voting booth Americans don't have principles; they have interests.

Nearly every election cycle, a [poll](#) comes out suggesting that many Americans, and a big chunk of swing voters, think of themselves as "fiscally conservative but socially liberal," and therefore possibly open to libertarian candidates who want to police the deficit but not your sex life. These voters are the political equivalent of people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." It's basically an empty formulation to avoid picking a side or a fight; it's shallow, but it sounds good. The problem, at least for Rand Paul, is that "fiscally conservative but socially liberal" is not a long way of saying "libertarian." Paul's libertarianism is intended to offer a little something for everybody, on the left and right—spending cuts for the Republican base, legal relief for potheads, a presidential pat on the head for gay people. But if he gets serious about substantive reform along these lines, his libertarianism is instead going to offer something to outrage everybody.

Start with the so-called fiscal conservatives. Spend a few hours listening to second-tier talk radio or engage with some real-life American voters for a few hours, and you will discover that there is

practically no market for fiscal conservatism. Ask them how they think we should go about balancing the budget, for instance, and they'll inevitably respond: by cutting foreign aid, which American voters believe makes up about [a third](#) of the federal budget. Rand Paul's repeated calls to end foreign aid—to Egypt, to countries where the American flag is burned, to anybody else he can think of—is a reliable applause line for the gentleman from Kentucky; giving away aid is just one more of those foreign entanglements George Washington [warned](#) us about. But what many of his admirers do not understand is that his opposition to foreign aid isn't principally fiscal but ideological: Foreign aid's portion of the budget is actually miniscule—closer to 1 percent. Even if we cut it all, the savings would be trivial.

When it comes to balancing the budget, Paul is more likely to cut off aid to your mom. That's where the money is. We spend almost all of the federal budget on a handful of programs: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and defense. So any plausible, politically sustainable campaign to impose some sanity on America's national finances is going to mean reforming—i.e., cutting—*all* of those. How unpopular is that? [Solid majorities](#) of Americans oppose cutting Social Security and Medicare benefits *and* raising taxes to pay for them, even though a larger majority also believes that the cost of those programs will create economic problems. The number of people who think we [spend too much on the military](#) hasn't topped the 50-percent mark since the Vietnam War. Think about George W. Bush's attempt at Social Security reform, which left him the loneliest man in Washington. Or consider that in 2012, fiscal conservative wonk-emperor Paul Ryan ran for the vice presidency on a campaign that blasted the Obama administration for making Medicare cuts. Which is to say, even the man in Washington most associated with the words “fiscal conservative” knows better than to run as one. Fiscal conservatives might applaud Rand Paul when he talks about getting Afghan President Hamid Karzai off of welfare, but they'll scream if he comes within five miles of their Social Security checks. Any candidate who's serious about fiscal reform is going to be a hard sell in 2016—or any other year.

If the fair-weather fiscal conservatives don't like Rand Paul, the phony social liberals are going to loathe him. Here's where the English language fails us: “Liberal” and “libertarian” come from the same linguistic root, meaning “liberty,” and many libertarians will describe themselves among friends as “classical liberals”—political heirs to the Whigs and the Manchester free-traders. But “socially liberal” and “socially libertarian” today mean almost precisely opposite things. If there is one thing our “social liberals” hate, it is liberty. In their view, you're free to do as *they* please.

Take the case of the Christian bakers and photographers who do not wish to participate in same-sex weddings because of their religious and moral views. Paul takes the classical liberal view, which is that people should be allowed to make their own decisions based on their own values, and that if a baker's belief offends you, then you can criticize him, boycott him, give him the full *Duck Dynasty* treatment—but you cannot use the strong arm of the state to compel him to put two tuxedoed gentlemen on top of a cake.

America's so-called social liberals think that amounts to Jim Crow for gay people. Paul's instinct is to get marriage entirely out of the federal tax code and to let the states define marriage for themselves. For social liberals, that is, at best, a punt. On the subject of gay marriage, they do not want a skeptical federalist—they want a president who is categorically in favor of gay marriage.

They do not want somebody *tolerant*, but somebody *committed*, and willing to use the federal government to make their own preferences national policy. They don't want marriage written out of the federal tax code—they want gay marriage written into it. They demand a pro-gay president even if, like Barack Obama in 2008 and 2010 and half of 2012, he claims to be against gay marriage for reasons of cynical political self-interest. Liberalism is a subculture; they know their own. Rand Paul isn't one of them—and probably won't get their votes. In fact, whether it is abortion, guns, public-school curricula or the all-important issue of dropping the federal civil-rights hammer on nonconformist bakers, Paul can count on bitter, unified opposition from liberal social-issue voters.

It seems like a thousand years ago, but Paul came to national prominence during a different and earlier libertarian moment, one based on foreign policy. His views were a rallying point for Republicans who wished to distance themselves politically and intellectually from the unpopular legacy of Bush's war in Iraq and on terror at home. Paul enjoyed a swell of popularity when he staged a filibuster last year to force discussion of drone-strike assassinations of U.S. citizens. (Along with the usual filibuster fuel, he treated the Senate to a reading of my *National Review* columns on the subject.) The senator has been successful in his critique of the garrison state in part because he's right, but in larger part because nothing brings out the libertarian strain among Republican voters faster than a Democrat in the White House; Barack Obama helped Republicans rediscover the separation of powers and their distaste for executive overreach. But unfortunately for Paul, nothing puts the GOP's libertarian strain back in the bottle faster than a Russian army on the march. Many Republicans who admired Paul's foreign policy stance when his foil was Obama are going to feel differently when his foil is a traditional power-to-the-Pentagon Republican. If a serious foreign policy crisis turns 2016 into a saber-rattling contest, Paul will be poorly equipped for it.

Paul's challenge is to seek a smaller state while not advocating cuts to anything anybody's grandmother cares about, to sell a live-and-let-live social policy to busybodies and bluenoses on both sides and to articulate a foreign policy that is less reliant on the projection of national strength without projecting weakness instead. Trouble is, he has to do all that to the satisfaction of an electorate whose members mostly think that a libertarian is somebody who works in a library, courting the debased descendants of Patrick Henry as they shout with one voice: "Give me liberty, or give me a check!"

In 2016, they're going to vote for the check.

Kevin D. Williamson is roving correspondent for National Review and author, most recently, of The End Is Near and It's Going To Be Awesome.