



The So-Called 'Libertarian Moment' Is Engineered By The Christian Right

By Ed Kilgore
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There's been quite the buzz in the chattering classes this week over Robert Draper's suggestion in the New York Times Magazine that the Republican Party, and perhaps even the nation, may finally be prepared for a "libertarian moment," likely through the agency of the shrewd and flexible politician Rand Paul. It's obvious, in fact, that some of the aging hipsters Draper talks to who have been laboring in the libertarian fields for decades glimpse over the horizon a reconstructed GOP that can reverse the instinctive loathing of millennials for the Old Folks' Party.

Unfortunately, to the extent there is something that can be called a "libertarian moment" in the Republican Party and the conservative movement, it owes less to the work of the Cato Institute than to a force genuine libertarians clutching their copies of *Atlas Shrugged* are typically horrified by: the Christian Right. In the emerging ideological enterprise of "constitutional conservatism," theocrats are the senior partners, just as they have largely been in the Tea Party Movement, even though libertarians often get more attention.

There's no universal definition of "constitutional conservatism." The apparent coiner of the term, the Hoover Institution's Peter Berkowitz, used it to argue for a temperate approach to political controversy that's largely alien to those who have embraced the "brand." Indeed, it's most often become a sort of dog whistle scattered through speeches, slogans and bios on various campaign trails to signify that the bearer is hostile to compromise and faithful to fixed conservative principles, unlike the Republicans who have been so prone to trim and prevaricate since Barry Goldwater proudly went down in flames. The most active early Con-Con was Michele Bachmann, who rarely went more than a few minutes during her 2012 presidential campaign without uttering it. It's now very prominently associated with Ted Cruz, who, according to Glenn Beck's *The Blaze* has emerged as "the new standard-bearer for constitutional conservatism." And it's the preferred self-identification for Rand Paul as well.

What Con-Con most often seems to connote beyond an uncompromising attitude on specific issues is the belief that strict limitations on the size, scope and cost of government are eternally correct for this country, regardless of public opinion or circumstances. Thus violations of this "constitutional" order are eternally illegitimate, no matter what the Supreme Court says or who has won the last election.

More commonly, Con-Cons reinforce this idea of a semi-divine constitutional order by endowing it with — quite literally — divine origins. This is why David Barton’s largely discredited “Christian Nation” revisionist histories of the Founders remain so highly influential in conservative circles, and why Barton himself is welcome company in the camps of Con-Con pols ranging from Cruz and Bachmann to Rick Perry and Mike Huckabee. This is why virtually all Con-Cons conflate the Constitution with the Declaration of Independence, which enabled them to sneak both Natural and Divine Law (including most conspicuously a pre-natal Right to Life) into the nation’s organic governing structure.

What a lot of those who instinctively think of conservative Christians as hostile to libertarian ideas of strict government persistently miss is that divinizing untrammelled capitalism has been a growing habit on the Christian Right for decades. Perhaps more importantly, the idea of the “secular-socialist government” being an oppressor of religious liberty, whether it’s by maintaining public schools that teach “relativism” and evolution, or by enforcing the “Holocaust” of legalized abortion, or by insisting on anti-discrimination rules that discomfit “Christian businesses,” has made Christian conservatives highly prone to, and actually a major participant in, the anti-government rhetoric of the Tea Party. Beyond that, the essential tea party view of America as “exceptional” in eschewing the bad political habits of the rest of the world is highly congruent with, and actually owes a lot to, the old Protestant notion of the United States as a global Redeemer Nation and a “shining city on a hill.”

So perhaps the question we should be asking is not whether the Christian Right and other “traditional” conservatives can accept a Rand Paul-led “libertarian” takeover of the conservative movement and the GOP, but whether “libertarians” are an independent factor in conservative politics to begin with. After all, most of the Republican politicians we think of as “libertarian”--whether it’s Rand Paul or Justin Amash or Mike Lee--are also paid-up culture-war opponents of legalized abortion, Common Core, and other heathenish practices. As Heather Digby Parton noted tartly earlier this week:

[T]he line between theocrats and libertarian Republicans is very, very faint. Why do you think they've bastardized the concept of "Religious Liberty" to mean the right to inflict your religion on others? It appeals to people who fashion themselves as libertarians but really only care about their taxes, guns and weed. Those are the non-negotiable items. Everything else is on offer.

And then there’s the well-known but under-reported long-term relationship of Ron and Rand Paul with the openly theocratic U.S. Constitution Party, a Con-Con inspirational font that no Republican politician is likely to embrace these days.

The more you examine the evidence, the more it seems plain that the “libertarian moment” in the GOP, even it’s real, and even if it’s advanced by Rand Paul as a presidential candidate, isn’t necessarily of a nature that’s going to be wildly popular among secular-trending millennials — or among Draper’s hipsters. To the extent it has a mass base, it’s likely as much or more among conservative Christian soldiers who despise government so long as they don’t control it as among dope-smoking free-loving

free-thinking anti-interventionist Reason readers. So the latter might want to think twice before climbing onto the Rand Paul for President bus, or consigning their fate to Republican politics.