



“Weeping Nazi” Christopher Cantwell went from libertarian to fascist — and he’s not alone

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One of the more curious trends of the 2016 election campaign was the tendency among many young libertarians to jump onto the Donald Trump bandwagon. As Salon’s Heather Digby Parton recently discussed, some more conscientious libertarians have begun to confront this problem directly.

At first glance, Donald Trump hardly seemed like a candidate that committed libertarians would even consider voting for, let alone support enthusiastically. On paper, the best Republican candidate for libertarian voters was no doubt Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky, the son of libertarian icon Ron Paul. Like his father, he advocated a free-market fundamentalist worldview that was sharply critical of big government and American interventionism. By contrast, Trump built his campaign on xenophobic rhetoric, authoritarian posturing and anti-free-trade diatribes. If there was one candidate who seemed sure to be rejected by libertarians, it was Donald Trump.

Yet, the opposite happened. While certain libertarians did support Rand Paul’s unsuccessful candidacy, countless others became diehard Trump supporters and went on to shape what is today known as the “alt-right.”

In an insightful article for The Washington Post last year, Matthew Sheffield (now a Salon reporter) examined this trend and provided important historical context that sheds some light on Trump’s appeal to a certain subset of libertarians. According to Sheffield, it was the libertarian movement — or, more accurately, the “paleo-libertarian” movement long associated with Ron Paul — that paved the way for Trump’s racialized rhetoric.

“Formally, Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) may be his father’s political heir,” Sheffield wrote. “But there’s no question that the paranoid and semi-racialist mien frequently favored by Trump originates in the fevered swamps that the elder Paul dwelled in for decades.” Sheffield traced the paleo-libertarian movement — which is essentially a merging of free-market fundamentalism and far-right cultural populism — back to the “anarcho-capitalist” economist Murray Rothbard, who is famous for, among other things, advocating child labor and claiming that parents should have the legal right “not to feed [their] child [and] allow it to die.” Rothbard was a co-founder of the Koch-funded think tank Cato Institute, and later the Ludwig von Mises Institute, which “enabled the fledgling [libertarian] movement to establish affinity with the neo-Confederate Lost Cause movement.”

“To solve the problem that few Americans are interested in small government,” Sheffield explained, “Rothbard argued that libertarians needed to align themselves with people they might not like much in order to expand their numbers.” These people included Evangelical Christians and neo-Confederates (i.e., white supremacists) who despised the federal government — especially after it stepped in to defend the civil rights of oppressed African-Americans in the South during the 1960s.

Paleo-libertarianism was, in other words, a thoroughly reactionary ideology that combined the very worst aspects of both libertarianism and right-wing populism. This makes it distinct from the broader libertarian movement, which tends to be more socially liberal or at least socially tolerant. The “alt-right” was an outgrowth of this unholy alliance.

This becomes clear when looking into the biographies of top figures on the “alt-right,” such as Richard Spencer, the neo-Nazi who coined the term “alt-right.” Before becoming a full-fledged white supremacist leading “hail Trump” rallies, Spencer was a fan of Ron Paul and hosted the then-congressman at an event for his Robert Taft Club in 2007 (courtesy of CSPAN). Another leader of the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville earlier this month was Mike Peinovich (aka Mike Enoch), a white supremacist podcaster and blogger who marched alongside David Duke. Like Spencer, he also ran in libertarian circles and supported Paul before embracing his inner racist during the 2016 election.

The list goes on and on, but there is one particularly notorious individual who is worth looking at in more detail. This is Christopher Cantwell, the overtly fascist star of Vice News’ widely-viewed documentary on the Charlottesville protests, who became the most infamous man in America following the tragedy in Virginia (and the most mocked after posting a teary-eyed video online and getting banned from OkCupid). At this point it should surprise no one that Cantwell, like many of his fellow white supremacists in the “alt-right,” started out as a libertarian.

In fact, Cantwell still considers himself to be “foundationally” a libertarian. In a March interview on YouTube, the white supremacist said that he is a libertarian at heart and believes that “everything should be done through property rights and contracts.” He came to the conclusion, however, that “the idea that most of the people we live around today would be property owners in the absence of the state is hysterically, obnoxiously stupid.”