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Why Rand Paul's 2016 Moment Never Arrived

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After rising to stardom on the promise of transforming the Republican Party, Rand Paul was once viewed as a leading contender for his party's presidential nomination in 2016.

But by the time he dropped out of the race for the White House Wednesday, he was struggling to even qualify to appear on the same debate stage as his fellow candidates.

In the wake of his presidential hopes' demise, Paul's campaign aides and allies pointed to the rise of the Islamic State abroad and Donald Trump's fortunes at home as the two primary factors that created a political landscape inhospitable to his libertarian-infused message.

"Rand will be back. There's no doubt about it," FreedomWorks president Adam Brandon said. "At the end of the day, what I really don't want to see is people to start saying it's an obituary for the libertarian movement."

Every presidential hopeful, regardless of stature, was forced to deal with the emergence of Trump and the hordes of media attention he's attracted over the course of the race. But as national security rose to the forefront of GOP primary voters' minds in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, Paul's noninterventionist views put him at a disadvantage competing for the remaining oxygen.

After the pair of terrorist attacks last fall, Paul's GOP rivals played up their muscular foreign policy visions even more. Trump pledged to "bomb the hell out of ISIS." Ted Cruz said he would "carpet-bomb" ISIS, adding that he wanted to see "if sand can glow in the dark." Marco Rubio spoke of a "clash of civilizations."

"It seemed like all of the other candidates were trying to out-hawk the other one," said Matthew Nye, chairman of the Republican Liberty Caucus, which endorsed Paul. "The pendulum swung way too far to the other side."

Paul didn't downplay the threat but continued to warn of the risks of intervening in conflicts abroad. By that point, he had already been lagging in the polls, so a comeback in the redefined environment was already an uphill slog.

"Senator Paul is very strong on the issue, but has a different set of opinions on a lot of it," Paul's chief strategist, Doug Stafford, said on a conference call with reporters Wednesday. "Political environments are not made by campaigns; they're made by external events. And the environment as we came into the full swing of this race was not as friendly to Senator Paul on foreign policy."

National security was the top concern cited by respondents in a Fox News poll conducted in early January, with 43 percent of Republican primary voters saying it was their most important issue. That was up from Fox's poll in November, conducted before the Paris attacks, when 26 percent of Republicans said national security was their top issue, as economic issues ranked No. 1.

Paul was the first choice for many libertarian leaders, but they don't see his demise as a warning sign for the movement as a whole.

Since Cruz's limited-government views on economic matters mostly align with their own, some libertarians are already planning to sign on with him. Nye said he expects the Republican Liberty Caucus to endorse the senator from Texas in the coming days. Cruz finished second in the group's presidential straw poll.

FreedomWorks doesn't get involved in presidential contests, but Brandon said the activists and donors he spoke with Wednesday "overwhelmingly" feel "very comfortable shipping to Senator Cruz." He added that some are also "more or less OK with Senator Rubio."

Not every libertarian sees another viable option. Cato Institute cofounder Ed Crane said the super PAC he helped form, Purple PAC, will stay out of the GOP presidential primary now after spending \$700,000 in TV ads to boost Paul ahead of the Iowa caucuses.

"The primary's up to the crazy Republicans," Crane said. "They can do what they want."

Paul placed fifth in Monday's Iowa caucuses, and the road ahead didn't appear promising, as recent polls showed he was on pace to finish even further back in New Hampshire and South Carolina. Plus, he was strapped for cash. At the end of 2015, his campaign had just \$1.3 million in the bank.

The senator from Kentucky also wasn't able to fully inherit the organization and support from libertarian-leaning Republicans that boosted his father's two presidential bids. The younger Paul took less than 5 percent in Monday's Iowa caucuses, after former Rep. Ron Paul finished with more than 21 percent in 2012, good enough for third place.

One culprit was Cruz, who made inroads with libertarian-leaning voters throughout the campaign. Evangelicals are at the core of Cruz's base, but he has also made a concerted effort to court former Ron Paul supporters in Iowa and around the country. Although libertarians are a small slice of the Republican Party, Cruz siphoned off enough to help him form a winning coalition in the first nominating state—and put another roadblock in front of Rand Paul's effort.

For his part, Paul can now turn his focus to his Senate reelection campaign in Kentucky. Stafford said Paul won't make an endorsement in the primary, but he isn't likely to disappear from the national stage anytime soon.