



Can Rand Paul stand for big military without losing libertarians?

By Sean Cockerham

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WASHINGTON — With an aircraft carrier as his backdrop, Rand Paul will seek Thursday to reassure hawkish Republican voters and donors during his presidential campaign roll-out week that he isn't the same politician who called for cutting defense spending in 2011.

But in getting tough on defense and foreign policy, the Republican senator from Kentucky risks losing his luster among libertarians whose passion fueled his rise and the presidential campaigns of his father, libertarian superstar Ron Paul.

“There’s definitely a perspective on the part of what you might call the anti-imperial wing of the Ron Paul fan base that isn’t so excited,” said Brian Doherty, senior editor at the libertarian Reason magazine and author of “Ron Paul’s Revolution: The Man and the Movement He Inspired.”

He’s talking about voters like Jim Parrish, an independent from College Park, Md., and a Ron Paul supporter who isn’t sure if he is going to back Rand.

“Rand’s more of a politician; his father just told it like it was,” Parrish said.

Rand Paul has a risky line to walk as he speaks Thursday in South Carolina. He needs to keep the enthusiasm of libertarian-minded backers while winning over more voters in early Republican primary and caucus states who have national security and foreign policy toughness as high priorities, said Republican pollster Kellyanne Conway.

Paul, who compared acceptance of same-sex marriage to a “moral crisis” and opposes abortion rights, is not much different from the other Republican candidates on those social issues, Conway said. So his positions on national security are critical to his differentiating himself in the eyes of libertarians, particularly those who don’t like government regulation of social issues.

“It’s that much more important that he be seen by libertarians as non-interventionist when it comes to foreign policy and national security,” Conway said. “I think that really raises the bar for him.”

Two weeks ago Paul proposed increasing military spending by \$190 billion. He declared during the Tuesday rally to kick off his presidential campaign that “the enemy is radical Islam and not only will I name the enemy, I will do whatever it takes to defend America from these haters of mankind.” His anti-interventionist father was given no speaking role at the rally.

Rand Paul did criticize American “nation-building” at the rally, but he also recently proposed a Middle Eastern nation for Kurds. He scheduled his Thursday speech on defense in front of the USS Yorktown, a World War II aircraft carrier at Patriot’s Point in Mount Pleasant, S.C.

Paul, though, is continuing to excite libertarian-minded voters on issues like his call to end the National Security Agency’s bulk collection of Americans’ phone records, said Chris Edwards, an economist at the libertarian Cato Institute, who does not see other candidates taking that support from him.

“I don’t see any of the other candidates trying to outflank him on the libertarian side,” Edwards said.

At least one Paul supporter signaled a willingness to accept some political pragmatism to win the White House.

“I think Rand has the same fundamental principles as Ron Paul, but I also think that he grew up watching his father not necessarily make it as far as he could have in politics,” said Tony Zore of Conway, N.H., who showed up for Rand Paul’s New Hampshire rally Wednesday holding a yellow flag with the state motto, “Don’t Tread on Me.”

“So I think Rand has learned some of those lessons and learned to, not necessarily play the game, but have more of a coached approach towards politics in order to sort of get America moving in the right direction even it’s not his ideal.”

Some Ron Paul supporters, though, are declining to get on board with the Rand Paul campaign.

“I would prefer he be a little more true to the position he has been a part of in the past,” said Drew Ivers, who chaired Ron Paul’s 2012 Iowa campaign.

Ivers, who said he was concerned with Rand Paul’s proposal to increase defense spending, said he’s sitting out this year and not endorsing any candidate.

Doherty, the editor of Reason magazine, said Paul’s strategy makes sense for waging a campaign even if it carries risks of alienating some of his libertarian backers.

“He’s trying to give any given wing of an imagined Republican primary voter group at least a legitimate excuse to feel like, oh I can vote for this guy,” he said.

But he said it’s an open question whether libertarians will be as enthusiastic about volunteering to work for Paul’s campaign as they were for his father in 2012.

“A lot of how well Ron Paul did in Iowa and New Hampshire had to do with the fact that they had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of kids manning phone banks and out in the streets,” Doherty said. “That requires a level of enthusiasm higher than, just, oh I guess this guy is OK and I can vote for him.”