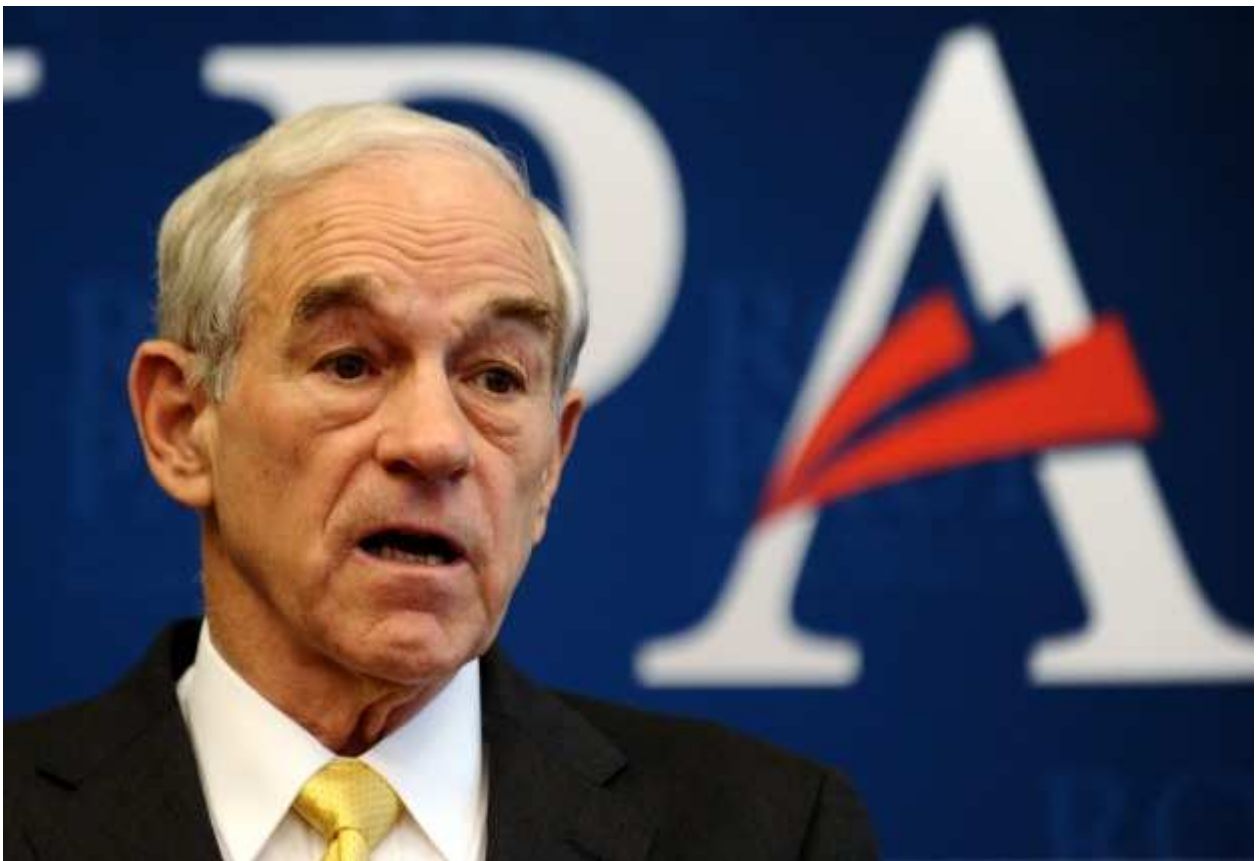




The World According to Ron Paul

Republicans are freaked out about what a libertarian isolationist in the White House would do to American power -- but not all Democrats are.

BY MICHAEL A. COHEN | DECEMBER 23, 2011



In this year's GOP presidential track meet it seems that everyone gets a turn in front -- and this week Ron Paul is the lucky candidate. While still trailing in the national race

numbers, [recent poll results](#) from Iowa suggest that, two weeks until caucus day, Paul has jumped into the lead there ahead of the water-treading Mitt Romney and the sinking Newt Gingrich.

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Paul brings a unusual set of views to the Republican presidential sweepstakes -- on almost every core national security and foreign-policy issue he holds a position that is in fierce opposition to the views of mainstream Republicans.

Indeed, his entire philosophy is largely a renunciation of much of what Republicans believe about America's role in the world. He questions the popular notion of American exceptionalism and has argued in his recently published book, [Liberty Defended](#), that the "United States is an empire by any definition, and quite possibly the most aggressive, extended, and expansionist in the history of the world." This is the kind of language that might cause Ronald Reagan to roll over in his grave.

And that's just for starters. He belittles the [war on terrorism](#) as a "cliché" that is used to "con the people into thinking that all citizens must cooperate and sacrifice our liberties to 'win' the war." He is openly disdainful of the [use of torture](#) and other extrajudicial tactics that have been utilized to fight it. He is dismissive of the need to kill top al Qaeda lieutenants, including [Osama bin Laden](#); blames U.S. foreign policy and meddling in other country's affairs for the "blowback" that contributed to 9/11; and downplays the efficacy of the country's military might. In Paul's view, if the United States simply stayed out of other countries' business we would be left alone. Suffice to say, his opponents in the GOP race have a far more "exceptional" take on U.S. power.

His policy solutions are even more anathema to conservatives. He wants to reduce the military budget, [abolish the CIA](#), pull the United States out of [NATO](#), end financial support for Israel, and do nothing in the face of [Iranian nuclear proliferation, which he claims is a legitimate desire](#) for Tehran to have. In [Liberty Defended](#), Paul is unabashed in his criticism of prominent Republicans. He calls former Vice President Dick Cheney a "chicken hawk"; criticized the "lies" of the Bush administration that led the United States to war in Iraq and directly takes on conservatives who don't share his views noting, "Those who consider themselves to be opponents of big government and yet have an uncritical attitude toward militarism and war are either fooling themselves or haven't thought enough about the problem."

According to Bruce Fein, senior foreign policy advisor to Paul, his campaign is "about changing the conventional orthodoxies" that are articulated by the other GOP candidates. In Paul's view, says Fein, the United States should not exercise global leadership by the end of the sword but rather by the "influence of its example." According to Fein, "Ron

Paul is the greatest hawk of all when it comes to defending America and Americans. He wants every defense resource focused on defending America and not other countries."

Paul uneasily falls into a long-silenced tradition in Republican politics of isolationist thought. While Paul is often quick to note that he is not an economic protectionist (and thus, he claims, not an isolationist) he is, says Christopher Nichols, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania who has written extensively on isolationism, more of a political isolationist. He doesn't want America to turn its back from the world; he wants rather to end all alliances and international arrangements to which the United States is a participant. Indeed, Paul is even more radical in his views than the Idaho Republican Senator William Borah and Ohio Senator Robert Taft, who were the standard bearers of GOP isolationism in the 1930s and 1940s. According to Nichols, Paul's foreign policy attitudes are much more influenced by his libertarian absolutism than by the legacy of Borah and Taft. It's been a long time since such positions have held much sway in the Republican Party -- and based on the reaction from establishment conservatives and the party's rank-and-file it doesn't appear to be gaining much traction, even with Paul's rising poll numbers.

Prominent conservatives from [Rich Lowry](#), editor of the *National Review* to Fox News pundit [Bill O'Reilly](#) have respectively labeled Paul a "blame America firster" with a poisonous view of the United States and a candidate whose foreign policy views "disqualify" him from the presidency.

Indeed, while Republicans might like some of the things that Paul has to say -- about foreign aid, the United Nations, and international trade -- generally speaking, the candidate has a fairly hard ceiling on how far he can rise within the GOP. In fact, his [favorability](#) in Iowa is higher among independent voters than it is among actual Republicans. Fein told me that he is confident once people hear Paul's views and he "racks up a few electoral victories" GOP voters will come around. We'll see, but it seems very difficult to imagine that anyone with Paul's foreign policy views could be the party's nominee in 2012.

What is perhaps most interesting about Paul -- and where his political potential might lie should he choose to run as a third-party candidate -- is in the support that he garners from across the political aisle. His attacks against America's military-industrial complex, his bemoaning of U.S. engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, and his strident criticism of the hyping of threats regarding Iran has endeared him to a host of liberal activists and commentators.

[Rachel Maddow](#) has applauded his lack of belligerency against Iran and even intimated that it's the reason he is leading the Iowa caucus (not really). Liberal activist Glenn Greenwald has attacked those who call Paul "crazy" for being opposed to foreign wars; Bill Maher said he'd [vote for Paul](#) and even progressive-leaning [Jon Stewart joked](#) that he likes Paul as our "idea guy" and imagines the septuagenarian libertarian as "America's Kramer." Paul recently also won the public endorsement of Obama supporter and nominal conservative [Andrew Sullivan](#) who argues that Paul's nomination could "break

the grip of neoconservative belligerence on conservative thought and the Republican party could make space again for more reasoned and seasoned managers of foreign policy."

As [Adele Stan](#), who has covered Paul closely for Alternet said to me, "progressives don't get Paul's anti-war talk from their own people (i.e. Democrats) and to hear it from him satisfies this deep spiritual yearning to hear someone say that we shouldn't be bombing other people around the world." Indeed, after ten years of war it's striking that Ron Paul has become the only presidential candidate -- Republican or Democrat -- talking about the need for a less militaristic foreign policy.

The problem, however, is that there is far more to Paul's view than just his opposition to U.S. military adventurism. Paul also believes that the United States should depart from all international organizations and global alliances. This includes not just NATO, but also the United Nations and the World Health Organization (he introduced [legislation](#) to this effect as recently as this March). He stridently opposes NAFTA, all free trade agreements, and even U.S. membership in the WTO on the grounds that free trade should be free of government interference, global rule-making, or apparently dispute mechanisms. He is opposed to amnesty for illegal immigrants and believes that securing America's borders [should be](#) the "top national security priority."

What about foreign aid? Paul wants to end it completely -- with some vague exceptions made for disaster relief and humanitarian assistance. He claims that "foreign aid never works to achieve the stated goal of helping the poor of other nations." Finally, there is a darker element to Paul's foreign policy views -- a healthy degree of conspiracy-mongering. He has warned against the so-called NAFTA super-highway and the [North American Union](#), a supposed plan to turn the North American continent into an economic union with a single currency and open borders along the lines of the European Union. Paul has even introduced legislation to prevent this non-event from occurring. He has also [claimed](#) that the United Nations "wants to influence our domestic environmental, trade, labor, tax, and gun laws" and that "its global planners fully intend to expand the U.N. into a true world government, complete with taxes, courts, and a standing army."

Sullivan, in endorsing Paul, has said that he does not approve of the candidate's "nuttier policy proposals." But Justin Logan, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, said that while he doesn't agree with everything Paul says, "he's bringing ideas to the table that aren't often heard among Republicans on the campaign trail. He has broadened the debate on foreign policy. Compared to the Bush years, it's like glasnost."

This is often the sort of praise one finds for Paul's foreign policy views. The problem, however, is that a Ron Paul presidency would mean far more than simply an end to foreign wars and the United States playing policeman to the world. In short, he wants to pull up the drawbridge and separate the United States from all official foreign entanglements, not just the military ones. One could certainly make the case that the consequences of such a doctrinaire and unyielding foreign policy vision could do

significant long-term damage to the United States. According to Heather Hurlburt, the executive director of the National Security Network, "A foreign policy that lets our trading partners collapse (in Europe); fails to engage with new ones as they are busily building ties with each other (Brazil, Turkey, Korea, Indonesia); and lets new disease incubate in the food we import and pollution concentrate in the winds we breathe will kill citizens and impoverish our national treasury as surely as the wars Paul critiques."

What's more, there is little evidence that the vast majority of Americans actually want to see the United States so dramatically disentangle itself from international affairs. Many of those supporting Paul or saying positive words about his candidacy may not fully comprehend that under a Paul administration it is quite possible that the United States would no longer be a member in good standing at the United Nations, turn to the World Trade Organization to resolve trade disputes, patrol sea lanes that are transit points for U.S. commerce, work with international organizations to fight global diseases or support economic development, and consult with allies in multilateral forums to deal with global challenges. In short, it's not clear that Americans are as prepared as Paul is for the United States to no longer be a global power.

This might be a case where Paul's adherence to ideological purity will limit his larger political impact or even the strength of his foreign policy message. And that's a shame. Perhaps more than at any point in recent American history there is a need and a yearning for a presidential aspirant who espouses a vision of American power that is more modest and restrained than what is being articulated by both Democrats and Republicans. Alas, for all his current yet likely fleeting appeal, it's hard to imagine that in the end Ron Paul is capable of ultimately being that candidate. His candidacy -- and his foreign policy views -- will in the end be a victim of his own political absolutism.