

John David Dyche | Rand Paul prepares for White House run

Iowa speech courts social conservatives

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Written by

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Yesterday's Drudge Report linked to a *Los Angeles Times* story about a speech that Kentucky's junior U.S. Sen. Rand Paul gave at the Iowa Faith and Freedom Coalition last Friday. That speech is on YouTube in two parts and merits watching.

What is the takeaway from it? As presumptive 2012 Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney is on the ballot against Sen. Paul's father, Texas congressman Ron Paul, in Kentucky's pointless Republican presidential primary next Tuesday, the senator himself is busily burnishing his Christian social conservative bona fides in the first-in-the-nation caucus state.

Make no mistake — Rand Paul is preparing to run for president in 2016. He is readying himself regardless of whether Romney beats President Barack Obama in November. One cannot help but view the elder Paul's continued quixotic (if not guerrilla) campaign against Romney through the prism of the younger Paul's presidential ambitions.

Romney ought to be very relieved that the younger Paul is not running this year. The Kentuckian would have been a more formidable foe than most of the mediocrities (Newt Gingrich excepted) who took up stage space and time in the many "American Idol" style events the media referred to as debates. Paul *filis* certainly would have exceeded Paul *père*, who, despite his cult following, was often nearly incoherent.

The Iowa speech shows Paul the younger prudently attempting to pre-empt Catholic social conservative Rick Santorum given the GOP's predilection for

awarding its nomination to the prior campaign's runner-up. Paul talked about his personal faith journey, his strong pro-life credentials, and his support for traditional marriage. By mixing such traditional Republican messages with his almost-but-not-quite isolationism and his trademark fiscal conservatism, Paul appeals to those forced to Santorum this year by their reluctance to back Romney.

Paul's speech was also witty, literate and less strident than many on the right can manage. His opening joke drew real laughs. He invoked Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" and Remarque's "All Quiet on the Western Front." His easygoing manner is a welcome contrast to his dad's scolding lectures. In terms of both substance and style, Paul is proving himself to be as ready for the big time as any of the other 2016 hopefuls.

Most people, like Drudge, will focus on Paul's caustic gay marriage comments. Of Obama's recent conversion of political convenience, he said, "Call me cynical, but I wasn't sure his views on marriage could get any gayer." Noting that Obama used a "biblical reference" as justification, Paul asked, "What version of the Bible is he reading?" There is no "need to be harsh and mean and hate people," Paul said, "but that doesn't mean that we have to go ahead and give up" 6,000 years of tradition.

Family Research Council President Tony Perkins and Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus were among those rebuking Paul. But the Kentuckian has previously demonstrated the ability to not only withstand criticism of his controversial comments, but to politically prosper from them.

In staking out this territory in the heart of Christian conservatism, Paul parts company with some of his usual supporters. For example, his friends at the legally beleaguered Cato Institute make a libertarian case for gay marriage. He also opted against the conservative case for gay marriage as necessary to protect the ideal of exclusive lifelong relationships between two people against the many casual, open and temporary alternatives that threaten social stability much more seriously than gay marriage does.

Perhaps Paul is utterly sincere in his social conservatism. Or maybe he is just much more politically realistic than his father is. Either way, the essential outlines of a Paul presidential candidacy were clearly visible in his Iowa foray.

Closer to home, Paul has endorsed Kentucky 4th Congressional District candidate Thomas Massie. By doing so, Paul ignores the hard lesson learned by Kentucky's senior U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, who endorsed Paul's senatorial opponent in 2010 and lost some political luster in the process. But Paul also proves his loyalty since Massie, the Lewis County judge-executive, backed him in that primary while Massie's main opponents, state Rep. Alecia Webb-Edgington and Boone County Judge-Executive Gary Moore, did not.

If Massie wins, Paul will emerge even more confident and powerful. National Republicans will then watch with interest to see what, if any, role Paul plays at the convention and in Romney's campaign.