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## Rebels With a Far-Right Cause

A new generation of libertarians is being groomed for Republican leadership.

By Cole Stangler – August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013

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Libertarians tend to think of themselves as outsiders, principled rebels at war with the gridlocked, heavy-spending American political establishment.

At least, this is the narrative promoted by organizers and attendees of the fifth annual Young Americans for Liberty (YAL) national convention, a gathering of 300 of the organization's top campus leaders at the libertarian mecca of George Mason University. YAL was founded by young Ron Paul supporters in the aftermath of the candidate's failed 2008 presidential bid. The convention serves as a means for YAL to showcase the libertarian movement's supposed impact on the Republican Party. As evidence, the convention, which lasted from July 31 to August 3, featured the attendance of a handful of relatively fresh faces in Congress: Sens. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), Ted Cruz (R-Texas) and Mike Lee (R-Utah) and Reps. Justin Amash (R-Mich.), Raul Labrador (R-Idaho), Mick Mulvaney (R-S.C.), Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) and Walter Jones (R-N.C.).

And though they may have allies on the Right in official Washington, these young enthusiasts of the so-called "liberty movement," like the ubiquitous supporters of Paul 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns, fashion themselves to be rebels fighting the mainstream.

Most of YAL's members consider their movement to be different from traditional American conservatism because of their stances on militarism, social issues and faith in "big government." If you ask a libertarian what he believes in, he'll typically describe his vision as being grounded in liberty—that is, freedom from government intervention and freedom for self-expression and individual economic prosperity. The central political conflict for libertarians is between free markets and state power. Of course, this belief is grounded in the myth that capitalism is inherently at odds with the state. Setting aside that critical historical inaccuracy, the libertarian worldview is, at least in the eyes of its proponents, at odds with politics-as-usual in Washington: government surveillance, economic regulations and nation building abroad are all social ills that need to be combatted.

YAL's supposed political nonconformity is also matched by a kind of anti-establishment, vaguely counter-cultural style. These guys aren't afraid to let loose a little and they want everyone to know it. The opening panel with Sens. Paul, Cruz and Lee on Wednesday night had a noticeably frat-like atmosphere: Paul cracked jokes about smoking weed and drinking, which earned the raucous applause of the crowd, already slightly buzzed from the more than hour long cocktail

reception beforehand. At one point, Paul, sporting blue jeans and cowboy boots with his blazer, declared that the GOP needs to do a better job of attracting “brown people, black people” and “people with pony tails, people with tattoos.”

While the crowd was almost exclusively white, Paul was picking up on the fact that a surprising number in the crowd did have tattoos, beards and piercings. Libertarians like to promote this looser image. YAL’s communications staffer runs a blog called “The Hipster Libertarian,” which features photos of guinea pigs and GIFs next to quotes from the Austrian School economist Ludwig von Mises and Ron Paul. When I joined some of the conference attendees for a cigarette outside a bar on Wednesday night, one of them commented, “Wow, a liberal who smokes.”

YAL wants to advance the narrative that there is a substantial intellectual and political divide between these young libertarian renegades and their more established counterparts in the Republican Party. Or as the press often puts it, the conflict between “the old guard” of the party and “the new guard.”

“They see the growing involvement of libertarians within the party, people like us mixing up the party,” Amash told a panel discussion, speaking about the old guard GOP. “It makes them nervous, it makes them scared because they’re used to the party being a certain way.”

It is true that some libertarian-leaning politicians are shaking up the Republican Party on a handful of issues and drawing worthwhile national attention to them. For one, the relative success of the bipartisan Amash-Conyers amendment, which would have ended the NSA’s practice of bulk data collection and failed by a close 217-205 vote, was due in part to the efforts of representatives like Amash, Massie and Mulvaney to rally support on the GOP side.

At the same time, the convention underlined what has long been evident to critics of the uniquely American ideology of libertarianism. The “liberty movement” has deep financial and institutional ties to the conservative establishment it claims to oppose. The conference included sessions organized by the Heritage Foundation and the Leadership Institute, which has provided training to such mainstream Republican figures as Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Christian Coalition founder Ralph Reed, and the pro-war, surveillance-state partisan Karl Rove. Ultimately, it seems that the real purpose of the Young Americans for Liberty convention is to link rising young politicians to some of the country’s most prominent right-wing think tanks and organizations—in other words those institutions at the forefront of the decades-long war on American workers and progressive regulations.

With an array of these organizations tabling at the conference and some of them sponsoring panel discussions, the convention provided impressive opportunities for networking. Students could chat with representatives from FreedomWorks or the Heritage Foundation, touch base with the National Rifle Association, sign up for “citizen journalism” initiatives à la James O’Keefe with the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity or learn more about pursuing graduate studies through scholarships from George Mason’s Institute for Humane Studies.

Matt Howerton, a YAL leader at Lone Star College in the Houston area, says that this was his second YAL convention. He’s looking forward to “being with all these dozens of organizations.” He says, “Just a ton of networking is one of the biggest advantages.”

“I would agree,” says Samuel Clark, a YAL activist at Southern Methodist University. “Networking and getting liberty out there.”

The convention featured a number of sessions devoted to growing the YAL movement on college campuses. But it included others focused on attracting the roughly 300 attendees to seek employment in one of the many different arms of the conservative movement, like the series of sessions on Friday afternoon devoted to “A Career of Liberty.” The Campaign for Liberty sponsored a panel on “Working on the Hill,” the Institute for Humane Studies sponsored a panel on “Becoming a Professor,” and the Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation and State Policy Network all organized a panel on “Working for a Think-Tank.”

At that last session, panelists offered advice on how to market oneself to think-tanks and discussed the benefits of their respective organizations.

Rachel Kopec, coalitions coordinator of the State Policy Network, a coalition of more 50 think tanks and advocacy groups focused on the state level, put in a plug for her organization, which works closely with the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). Things may be more difficult at the federal level, she acknowledged, but noted with a smile, “You see things moving in state legislatures.” She boasted about her group’s role in getting right-to-work passed in Michigan earlier this year.

“As a movement we may have differences,” said Angelise Schrader of the Heritage Foundation, in reference to the array of different groups tabling in the hallway outside. “But our end goal is liberty for all.”

Inside the convention, the lines between outsider and insider, libertarian and conservative, old guard and new guard, are virtually non-existent.

Correspondingly, for a movement that prides itself on its supposedly sound theoretical vision and adherence to principle, some of its biggest proponents and allies seem all too willing to compromise. The libertarian emphasis on individual liberty and free market purity has its limits, particularly when it comes into conflict with conservative social causes or corporate power.

Three of the congressmen at the convention, for instance—Reps. Massie, Mulvaney and Labrador—voted for the roughly \$200 billion farm bill, which did not include funding for food stamps. However the bill did include a roughly \$9 billion expansion in the federal crop-insurance program, which provides subsidies for big agriculture.

I asked the three congressmen at a press conference if their support for agricultural subsidies conflicted with their free market principles. “The first farm bill was horrible and the second farm bill was a little less horrible,” said Massie, a freshman congressman from Kentucky. “There are a lot of things that we would change, the question is are you going to allow your congressman, if he needs to get to C, can he go to B before, if he’s coming from A? Or are constituents going to require that we only vote for the pure things. And if you do, we’re just not gonna have enough votes to change things.” Labrador noted that the bill included some spending reductions, and Mulvaney remarked that separating agricultural spending from nutrition assistance—i.e. making it easier to gut food stamps for the poor—was a “huge, huge win.”

Libertarians in Congress also seem to subscribe to a version of individual liberty that doesn’t apply to workers.

At a separate press conference on Wednesday, I asked Sens. Paul and Mike Lee if they supported the ability of employers to fire workers for being gay or transgender. Neither of them are co-sponsors of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, which would make that practice illegal. Only Lee replied, saying there was no widespread evidence of that being a problem.

I asked one of the students I met at the convention, Aaron McEvoy, an activist with the YAL chapter at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, if he found that stance to be problematic. If the movement's all about individual liberty, shouldn't gays be allowed to work—maybe even create a little wealth—without fear of being fired? Then I ask him if there's a need for any employment discrimination laws at all, like the existing federal protections on race, sex and religious affiliation.

“It's such a divisive discussion. The whole point of talking about that is to put people in one camp or another,” says McEvoy, a PhD student in nuclear engineering. “So I'd rather not get really into the depth of that. I really think that that's just a divisive thing. We in this movement we're about bringing everyone together. The concepts of freedom and liberty are something everyone can believe in regardless of age, sex, creed, whatever.”

Whatever they may think about Edward Snowden or drones or legalizing marijuana, clearly these young activists are very dangerous people. These aren't high schoolers commenting on YouTube videos of Milton Friedman or debating *Atlas Shrugged* in Ron Paul internet forums. These students are being actively courted by some of the most dangerous and powerful right-wing organizations in the country. Among this group of 300 young people are the future speechwriters, policy advisors and politicians of the most corporate-friendly Republican Party in history. So too are the future academics, policy experts, pundits and communications staffers who will be justifying its policies.

Many of the conference attendees I spoke with think that minimum-wage laws are counterproductive, and should be repealed in the long run. Other young liberty lovers want to abolish Social Security. Members from a chapter at a community college in Chicago, frustrated with student debt, tell me that college education is too expensive because the government is providing too much financial aid.

While maintaining links to the Republican mainstream through groups like the Leadership Institute or Heritage Foundation, YAL also includes members who subscribe to the fringe conspiracy theories of the far-right. For instance, YAL's national field coordinator Joshua Parrish, once called the Federal Reserve “a plank of the Communist Manifesto,” and used to organize with the Orlando chapter of We Are Change, a 9/11 truther organization. Parrish did not respond to questions about his involvement in We Are Change or if he believes the U.S. government was involved in the planning of 9/11.

And in spite of its socially liberal image, the YAL umbrella has also apparently made space for racism. Rand Paul's former aide Jack Hunter, for one, is a director of outreach at YAL—a part-time position. Hunter recently resigned from his job with Rand Paul after being outed as the radio personality “Southern Avenger.” Under that name, Hunter bitterly criticized Abraham Lincoln, advocated for Southern secession, and said that he celebrates John Wilkes Booth's birthday every year with a “personal toast.”

On its website, Young Americans for Liberty encourages students to hold “Affirmative Action Bake Sales,” which charge different prices for food based on the ethnic background of the consumer. The site even includes suggestions of what prices to charge—\$1.50 for Asian Males,

\$1.00 for White Males, and \$.25 for African-American and Hispanic Females. What's more: "Native Americans and everyone else eats for free!"

I asked McEvoy, the nuclear engineering student at UW-Madison, what he thought of the bake sales.

"It's intended to highlight the underlying inequality in the way that the government creates law," he said. "If you want everyone to be treated equally, that's what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wanted more than anything, he didn't want one person, one group of people to be treated with some sort of preference. He wanted equality—true, unadulterated equality for all."

"That's an interesting take," I reply. "Although I wonder what Martin Luther King would say about bake sales like that."

"You're focusing on the event as though it exists in a vacuum," says McEvoy. He appears puzzled when I mention that some student groups have protested these bake sales for being racist. "I can't speak for them," he continues. "I don't know why they're getting angry. I would actually—I would really enjoy talking to them and find out why they get angry. Why would that anger them that we're highlighting that?"