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Rand Paul's Mixed Inheritance

By SAM TANENHAUS and JIM RUTENBERG. JAN. 25, 2014

The libertarian faithful — antitax activists and war protesters, John Birch Society members and a smattering of “truthers” who suspect the government’s hand in the 2001 terrorist attacks — gathered last September, eager to see the rising star of their movement.

With top billing on the opening night of the Liberty Political Action Conference, Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky told the audience at a Marriott in Virginia that a viable Republican Party must reach out to young people and minorities.

But not long after the applause died down, Mr. Paul was out the door. He skipped an address by his father, former Representative Ron Paul, as well as closing remarks by his own former Senate aide, an ex-radio host who had once celebrated Abraham Lincoln’s assassination and extolled white pride.

The senator was off to an exclusive resort on Mackinac Island, Mich., where he again talked about the future of the party. But this time he was in the company of Karl Rove and other power brokers, and his audience was of Republican stalwarts who were sizing up possible presidential candidates.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE ... Senator Rand Paul has been his father’s apprentice, aide, surrogate and, finally, libertarian successor. Portraits of the two hang in the senator’s conference room. Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

As Rand Paul test-markets a presidential candidacy and tries to broaden his appeal, he is also trying to take libertarianism, an ideology long on the fringes of American politics, into the mainstream. Midway through his freshman term, he has become a prominent voice in Washington’s biggest debates — on government surveillance, spending and Middle East policy.

In the months since he commanded national attention and bipartisan praise for his 13-hour filibuster against the Obama administration’s drone strike program, Mr. Paul has impressed Republican leaders with his staying power, in part because of the stumbles of potential rivals and despite some of his own.

“Senator Paul is a credible national candidate,” said Mitt Romney, who ran for president as the consummate insider in 2012. “He has tapped into the growing sentiment that government has become too large and too intrusive.” In an email, Mr. Romney added that the votes and dollars

Mr. Paul would attract from his father's supporters could help make him "a serious contender for the Republican nomination."

But if Mr. Paul reaps the benefits of his father's name and history, he also must contend with the burdens of that patrimony. And as he has become a politician in his own right and now tours the circuit of early primary states, Mr. Paul has been calibrating how fully he embraces some libertarian precepts.

"I want to be judged by who I am, not by a relationship," Mr. Paul, a self-described libertarian Republican, said in an interview last week. "I have wanted to develop my own way, and my own, I guess, connections to other intellectual movements myself when I came to Washington."

Coming of age in America's first family of libertarianism — he calls his father, a three-time presidential aspirant, "my hero" — Rand Paul was steeped in a narrow, rightward strain of the ideology, according to interviews, documents, and a review of speeches, articles and books.

Some of its adherents have formulated provocative theories on race, class and American history, and routinely voice beliefs that go far beyond the antiwar, anti-big-government, pro-civil-liberties message of the broader movement that has attracted legions of college students, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and Tea Party activists.

That worldview, often called "paleolibertarianism," emerges from the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Alabama, started with money raised by the senior Mr. Paul. It is named for the Austrian émigré who became an intellectual godfather of modern libertarian economic thinking, devoted to an unrestricted free market.

Some scholars affiliated with the Mises Institute have combined dark biblical prophecy with apocalyptic warnings that the nation is plunging toward economic collapse and cultural ruin. Others have championed the Confederacy. One economist, while faulting slavery because it was involuntary, suggested in an interview that the daily life of the enslaved was "not so bad — you pick cotton and sing songs."

Mr. Paul says he abhors racism, has never visited the institute and should not have to answer for the more extreme views of all of those in the libertarian orbit.

"If you were to say to someone, 'Well, you're a conservative Republican or you are a Christian conservative Republican, does that mean that you think when the earthquake happened in Haiti that was God's punishment for homosexuality?' Well, no," he said in an earlier interview. "It loses its sense of proportion if you have to go through and defend every single person about whom someone says is associated with you."

Still, his 2011 book, "The Tea Party Goes to Washington," praises some institute scholars, recommending their work and the institute website.

And he has sometimes touched on themes far from the mainstream. He has cautioned in the past of a plan to create a North American Union with a single currency for the United States, Mexico

and Canada, and a stealth United Nations campaign to confiscate civilian handguns. He has repeatedly referred to the “tyranny” of the federal government.

Since becoming a national figure, Mr. Paul has generally stayed on safer ground. His denunciations of government intrusion on Americans’ privacy have been joined by lawmakers in both parties and have resonated with the public — though no other member of Congress as yet has joined him in his planned class-action suit against the National Security Agency.

He has renounced many of the isolationist tenets central to libertarianism, backed away from his longstanding objections to parts of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and teamed with members of the Congressional Black Caucus in calling for an easing of drug-sentencing laws. He recently unveiled a plan for investment in distressed inner cities.

Much of that is in keeping with the left-right alliance Mr. Paul promotes, an alternative to what he dismisses as a “mushy middle.” Such partnerships, he says, “include people who firmly do believe in the same things, that happen to serve in different parties.”

In recent months, potential rivals for leadership of the Republican Party have depicted him as an extremist. Before the recent investigations into political abuses by his administration, Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey said Mr. Paul’s “strain of libertarianism” was “very dangerous.” And Senator Ted Cruz of Texas told donors in New York that in a national campaign Mr. Paul could not escape Ron Paul’s ideological history.

Mr. Paul is not the first political son encumbered by a father’s legacy, but his mantle is unusually heavy. He has been his father’s apprentice, aide, surrogate and, finally, successor. Side-by-side portraits of father and son adorn one wall in his Senate conference room.

“We both believe in limited government,” Mr. Paul said. “We believe in a strict, or originalist, interpretation of the Constitution. We both believe that foreign policy has been too overreaching.”

Still, he has seen the consequences of Ron Paul’s unwavering approach. “Unlike his father, he’s not interested in educating,” said John Samples, an analyst at the Cato Institute who knows both Pauls. “He’s interested in winning.”

If so, some libertarians wonder, how faithful will Rand Paul remain to the movement that nurtured him?

Ronnie, his older brother, said, “My dad stuck with, pretty much, ‘If it ain’t in the Constitution — boom’; pretty hard core, and that gave him 10 percent of the country that would die for him, absolutely.”

He predicted that his brother would cede ground where he must, but stay true to the grand cause. He “is willing to work with them a little bit on things that in his mind really aren’t important,” Ronnie Paul said. “But there’s no question he’s still trying to get to the same place.”

Apart From the Crowd

Mr. Paul, 51, stands out in the somber Beltway forest of dark suits. An ophthalmologist, he has the rumpled mien of a graduate student, with his unkempt graying curls, wrinkled khakis and floral ties. He sometimes pads onstage in sneakers, and aides cringed at images of him on a visit to Silicon Valley last spring wearing the black mock turtleneck he refuses to bury in a drawer. At 5-foot-7 or so, he will sometimes step in front of a lectern, lest he disappear behind the microphone as he talks about the evils of taxation or a Big Brother “surveillance state.”

Mr. Paul’s marathon filibuster in March instantly transformed him into a leader of a party seeking a fresh message, even as he found unlikely fans in the American Civil Liberties Union and Jon Stewart.

But tucked into Mr. Paul’s lengthy monologue — its 76,000 words would fill a 300-page manuscript — was another narrative, told in a sprinkling of obscure references. He cited the Posse Comitatus Law of 1878, which restricted the federal government’s use of the military to enforce laws in this country and is seen by libertarians as a vital barrier to totalitarianism; *Lochner v. New York*, a 1905 Supreme Court decision that struck down Progressive-era workplace regulations; and the theories of Lysander Spooner, a Massachusetts abolitionist who turned against the North in the Civil War, which he deplored as unjust aggression against the Confederacy.

These arcana drew little notice — except among dedicated libertarians, who took them as evidence of Mr. Paul’s solid mooring in a subset of ideological axioms. The Spooner reference, in particular, excited those attuned “to the dog whistles of anarchism,” said Brian Doherty, a libertarian writer. “In my particular community, that was a big, big day.”

The education of Rand Paul began in the movement’s political center in the mid-1970s: the kitchen table of his family’s ranch house in Lake Jackson, Tex., a suburb of Houston.

Ron Paul, an obstetrician who disliked Medicare and Medicaid and other government programs that he viewed as encroaching on personal freedom, was infuriated when Richard M. Nixon instituted wage and price controls and took the nation off the gold standard.

Mr. Paul ran for Congress in 1974 and lost to the Democratic incumbent. But it was the first of many occasions in which the house at 101 Blossom Street doubled as campaign headquarters, often drawing the libertarian movement’s philosophical vanguard and grass-roots supporters.

“There were always people there,” recalled Mary Jane Smith, who managed several of Mr. Paul’s campaigns. “There were books all over the place.” When the grown-ups gathered in the kitchen to plot election strategy or discuss political philosophy, Rand — then called Randy — hovered nearby, “always listening,” Ms. Smith said.

Ron Paul encouraged his children’s interest. “I’d come up with a question, and he would say ‘Here, read this book,’ or ‘Here’s a book that I started with when I was first asking those questions,’” Ronnie Paul said. “He would just feed us as we asked.”

There was plenty to absorb. Libertarianism had reached a critical stage.

Sketching the Outlines

Adherents often trace its roots back to the small-government ideals of Thomas Jefferson. The term libertarian — adopted by 19th-century European anarchists — would eventually become the movement associated today with the novels of Ayn Rand, the economics of Milton Friedman and the antitax campaigns of Grover Norquist, as well as quixotic causes like full legalization of drugs.

But during the tumult of the late 1960s, when many people rebelled against Washington and the two parties, a small band of intellectuals sketched the first outlines of the alliances Rand Paul has embraced.

One of those thinkers was Karl Hess, a former speechwriter for Senator Barry M. Goldwater, the Arizona conservative. “Libertarianism is the view that each man is the absolute owner of his life, to use and dispose of as he sees fit,” he wrote in *Playboy* magazine in 1969. Who needed politics and its two calcified parties, Mr. Hess argued, when citizens could govern themselves through “voluntary” association and cooperation?

This principle would reach fruition in the digital age, with its informal networks, entrepreneurial problem solving — and community of underground hackers.

Mr. Hess, who died in 1994, was ahead of many others in envisioning this brave new world. “Instead of learning how to make bombs,” he suggested in 1970, “revolutionaries should master computer programming,” the better to commit “clerical sabotage” against government “bureaucracy.” One of his disciples, Louis Rossetto Jr., would later start *Wired* magazine, the original bible of the Internet age.

If Mr. Hess was the movement’s visionary, its political strategist was Murray N. Rothbard, an economic historian at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. Formerly a “hard-right” Republican, he, too, had been seeking to break the stranglehold of the two parties, which he argued had perpetuated an oppressive “warfare” and “welfare” state.

Together, they urged campus conservatives, many of whom opposed the Vietnam draft, to work with the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society. Out of this strange-bedfellows coupling came the Libertarian Party, which fielded its first candidates in 1972, though they drew little notice and few votes.

But when the left-right alliance came unglued over drug use and sexual freedom, Mr. Rothbard and others reoriented the movement back to the right.

It was then that Ron Paul emerged, offering a refreshing new face and voice. He was grounded in libertarian doctrine, but presented it as homespun common sense. Clean-cut (many libertarians had beards and long hair) and plain-spoken, he personified heartland values, with his small-town

medical practice and his large family of honor students and sturdy athletes. Rand Paul and his two brothers starred on their high school swim team.

In 1976, Ron Paul made it to Congress. Alone among his siblings, Rand interned in his father's Capitol Hill office during summer vacations. When Mr. Rothbard visited from New York, Rand chauffeured him to the airport. He also made the drive to work with his father and his chief of staff, Llewellyn H. Rockwell Jr., a former book editor who had brought out new editions of Ludwig von Mises' work.

"I got to hear all kinds of great conversations on the way to work about philosophy, politics, religion, you name it," Rand recalled in 2009 as a guest on Mr. Rockwell's online radio program.

Ron Paul's brain trust also included Hans F. Sennholz, a professor at Grove City College, a Christian college in Pennsylvania, and columnist for American Opinion, the showcase publication of the John Birch Society. Gary North, a Paul aide, was a proponent of "Christian Reconstructionism," the Bible-based political ideology that propelled Michele Bachmann into politics. This blend of economic and religious themes shaped Mr. Paul's congressional agenda.

He introduced dead-end bills to abolish the Federal Reserve, eradicate the Department of Education, neuter the Environmental Protection Agency and curtail the Supreme Court's jurisdiction over abortion. Mr. Paul, who declined interview requests, occasionally found common cause with liberals, especially in opposing Cold War military spending.

Rand was engrossed in his own course of libertarian study: He received a set of Ayn Rand novels for his 17th birthday. And he followed the rock band Rush, some of whose lyrics had libertarian themes.

Gary L. Gardner Jr., a high school friend, said: "I remember even back then being on a swim team bus and a Rush song comes on. I think it was the song 'Trees' — and he said, 'Man, listen to the words of this, you know those guys have got to be conservative.' "

"The Trees" tells the story of maples, overshadowed by tall oaks, that form a union to bring equality to the woods "by hatchet, ax and saw."

Austria and the Old South

Rand Paul's difficulty separating himself from harder-edge libertarianism was brought home last summer. The Washington Free Beacon, a website tied to hawkish conservatives, reported that one of his Senate aides, Jack Hunter, had a long trail of provocative statements — some made when he was a radio host calling himself "the Southern Avenger."

A leader of the Charleston, S.C., chapter of the secessionist League of the South, Mr. Hunter had praised John Wilkes Booth. For two weeks, Mr. Paul stood by him amid news media attention, but finally let him go.

Why, some conservatives were asking, did the senator not act more swiftly? And why was Mr. Hunter — whose commentary Mr. Paul called “stupid” — even on his staff?

One explanation might be that Mr. Hunter, who was the official blogger in Ron Paul’s 2012 presidential campaign and co-author of Rand Paul’s Tea Party book, was respected by some libertarians. Another might be that his hostility to Lincoln and the North was not so different from the views of close associates of the elder Mr. Paul, Mr. Rothbard and Mr. Rockwell. In 1982, they founded the Mises Institute.

Housed in a brick-and-limestone building near Auburn University’s football stadium, the institute is overseen by Mr. Rockwell, who declined to be interviewed. When a New York Times reporter requested a tour recently, Mr. Rockwell asked him to leave, saying he was “part of the regime.”

The institute sponsored lectures, seminars and conferences to promote the teachings of Mises and other “Austrian School” economists. But its offerings also range further afield. A conference this month in Houston — with Ron Paul as a speaker — included lecture topics like “Do We Live in a Police State?” and “American Fascism.”

Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Rothbard, both Northerners, became sympathetic to the Old South and its politics of states’ rights. Mr. Rockwell continues to praise the South’s resistance to civil rights legislation, while Mr. Rothbard, who died in 1995, promoted writings of Lysander Spooner — the anarchist mentioned in Rand Paul’s filibuster speech — that he said accurately assessed Lincoln’s war policy of “militarism, mass murder and centralized statism.”

They envisioned a libertarian alliance with “cultural and moral traditionalists” who shared a dislike for everything from environmentalism to postmodern art. Mr. Rothbard applauded the “right-wing populism” of David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan member who ran for governor of Louisiana, and ridiculed “multiculturalists,” lesbians and “the entire panoply of feminism, egalitarianism.” Some of these ideas found their way into Ron Paul newsletters that became an issue during his campaigns.

Both Pauls have disavowed such sentiments, though they have praised Mr. Rothbard’s writing on free-market economics. Rand Paul describes Mr. Rothbard in his first book as “a great influence on my thinking” when he was a young man.

Several current Mises fellows and associates are regulars on the Ron Paul speaking circuit and affiliated with his home-schooling curriculum or foreign policy institute. Thomas E. Woods Jr. was a co-author of “Who Killed the Constitution?,” which denounced the Supreme Court decision desegregating schools, *Brown v. Board of Education*, as “a dizzying display of judicial imperialism.”

Walter Block, an economics professor at Loyola University in New Orleans who described slavery as “not so bad,” is also highly critical of the Civil Rights Act. “Woolworth’s had lunchroom counters, and no blacks were allowed,” he said in a telephone interview. “Did they

have a right to do that? Yes, they did. No one is compelled to associate with people against their will.”

Rand Paul has offered a similar critique. Such arguments derive from an economic precept embraced by many libertarians: Government should not impede the free flow of commerce or dictate the personal or business transactions of citizens.