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Atlas Spurned

By JENNIFER BURNS | Palo Alto, Calif.

EARLY in his Congressional career, Paul D. Ryan, the Wisconsin representative and presumptive Republican vice-presidential nominee, would give out copies of Ayn Rand's book "Atlas Shrugged" as Christmas presents. He described the novelist of heroic capitalism as "the reason I got into public service." But what would Rand think of Mr. Ryan?

While Rand, an atheist, did enjoy a good Christmas celebration for its cheerful commercialism, she would have scoffed at the idea of public service. And though Mr. Ryan's advocacy of steep cuts in government spending would have pleased her, she would have vehemently opposed his social conservatism and hawkish foreign policy. She would have denounced Mr. Ryan as she denounced Ronald Reagan, for trying "to take us back to the Middle Ages, via the unconstitutional union of religion and politics."

Mr. Ryan's youthful, feverish embrace of Rand and his clumsy attempts to distance himself from her is more than the flip-flopping of an ambitious politician: it is a window into the ideological fissures at the heart of modern conservatism.

Rand's atheism and social libertarianism have long placed her in an uneasy position in the pantheon of conservative heroes, but she has proved irresistible to those who came of age in the baby boom and after. They found her iconoclasm thrilling, and her admirers poured into Barry M. Goldwater's doomed 1964 presidential campaign, the Libertarian Party and the Cato Institute. After her death, in 1982, it became even easier for her admirers to ignore the parts of her message they didn't like and focus on her advocacy of unfettered capitalism and her celebration of the individual.

Mr. Ryan is particularly taken by Rand's black-and-white worldview. "The fight we are in here," he once told a group of her adherents, "is a fight of individualism versus collectivism." If she were alive, he said, Rand would do "a great job in showing us just how wrong what government is doing is."

Rand's anti-government argument rested on another binary opposition, between "producers" who create wealth and "moochers" who feed off them. This theme has endeared Rand, and Mr. Ryan, to the Tea Party, whose members believe they are the only ones who deserve government aid.

Yet when his embrace of Rand drew fire from Catholic leaders, Mr. Ryan reversed course with a speed that would make his running mate, Mitt Romney, proud. "Don't give me Ayn Rand," he told *National Review* earlier this year. "Give me Thomas Aquinas." He claimed that his austere budget was motivated by the Catholic principle of subsidiarity, which holds that issues should be handled at the most local level possible, rather than Rand's anti-government views.

This retreat to religion would have infuriated Rand, who believed it was impossible to separate government policies from their moral and philosophical underpinnings. Policies motivated by Christian values, which she called "the best kindergarten of communism possible," were inherently corrupt.

Free-market capitalism, she said, needed a new, secular morality of selfishness, one she promoted in her novels, nonfiction and newsletters. Conservative contemporaries would have none of it: William F. Buckley Jr. criticized her "desiccated philosophy" and Whittaker Chambers dubbed her "Big Sister."

Mr. Ryan's rise is a telling index of how far conservatism has evolved from its founding principles. The creators of the movement embraced the free market, but shied from Rand's promotion of capitalism as a moral system. They emphasized the practical benefits of capitalism, not its ethics. Their fidelity to Christianity grew into a staunch social conservatism that Rand fought against in vain.

Mr. Ryan has attempted a similar pirouette, but it is too late: driven by the fever of the Tea Party and drawing upon a wellspring of enthusiasm for Rand, politicians like Mr. Ryan have set the philosophy of "Atlas Shrugged" at the core of modern Republicanism.

In so doing, modern conservatives ignore the fundamental principles that animated Rand: personal as well as economic freedom. Her philosophy sprang from her deep belief in the autonomy and independence of each individual. This meant that individuals could not depend on government for retirement savings or medical care. But it also meant that individuals must be free from government interference in their personal lives.

Years before *Roe v. Wade*, Rand called abortion “a moral right which should be left to the sole discretion of the woman involved.” She condemned the military draft and American involvement in Vietnam. She warned against recreational drugs but thought government had no right to ban them. These aspects of Rand do not fit with a political view that wedds fiscal and social conservatism.

Mr. Ryan’s selection as Mr. Romney’s running mate is the kind of stinging rebuke of the welfare state that Rand hoped to see during her lifetime. But Mr. Ryan is also what she called “a conservative in the worst sense of the word.” As a woman in a man’s world, a Jewish atheist in a country dominated by Christianity and a refugee from a totalitarian state, Rand knew it was not enough to promote individual freedom in the economic realm alone. If Mr. Ryan becomes the next vice president, it wouldn’t be her dream come true, but her nightmare.

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