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Is Ron Paul left of Obama, or a throwback to Ike?

Carolyn Lochhead

Friday, January 6, 2012

ANKENY, IA - JANUARY 03: Republican presidential candidate, U.S. Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) (L) waves to supporters as U.S. Army Corp. Jesse Thorsen looks on during a rally on the night of the Iowa caucus at the Courtyard Des Moines Ankeny on January 3, 2012 in Ankeny, Iowa. According to early results U.S. Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX) came in third in the Iowa GOP caucus behind former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and former U.S. Sen. Rick Santorum, who were neck and neck. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Washington -- GOP presidential candidate Ron Paul's antiwar stand is considered so out of sync with his party that rival Rick Santorum put him in league with liberal Democrat Dennis Kucinich, to the left of President [Obama](#).

But to his supporters, Paul is returning the GOP to its cautious foreign policy roots, articulated in President Dwight Eisenhower's 1961 warning about "the military-industrial complex."

In their view, the Republican Party lost its way starting with the Reagan military build-up in the 1980s and reaching a crescendo with former President George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003.

"George Bush was the worst thing that ever happened to the Republican Party," said Paul supporter Robert Nadeau, owner of Nadeau Family Vintners in Paso Robles (San Luis Obispo County). "When I look at the Republican Party going back to World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, the Republican candidates were the end-the-war candidates."

"The party of Eisenhower and Nixon has now become the war party," he said. "How did that happen? How is it we're willing to borrow \$1 trillion from the Chinese so we can throw bombs on people whose regimes we propped up?"

Trillion-dollar deficits at home and a war in Iraq that is estimated to have cost at least that much are creating dissonance among Tea Party, evangelical Christian and traditional Republicans in conservative regions of California and the nation.

Compelling message

For some voters who once supported Sen. John McCain and George W. Bush, the small-government, antiwar message from Paul, a 76-year-old candidate who critics say looks like he could be feeding pigeons, is compelling.

Establishment Republicans give Paul zero chance of winning the GOP nomination, but the party's neoconservative wing is alarmed enough about his message that former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson accused Paul's supporters of trying to "erase 158 years of Republican Party history," including Abraham Lincoln.

"He really is not resonating with establishment Republicans," who consider Paul's opposition to sanctions on Iran as "extremely dangerous," said GOP analyst Ford O'Connell.

Still, polls show Paul headed for a second-place finish in the New Hampshire primary on Tuesday, behind Mitt Romney, boosted by the state's open primary that allows independents to vote. Paul doubled his showing in Iowa from four years ago, capturing 21 percent of the vote there on Tuesday.

Exit polling from the Iowa caucuses showed Paul picking up 18 percent of participants described as evangelical Christians, outpacing Romney and Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who each got 14 percent of those voters. Santorum, who finished in second place, just eight votes behind Romney, got 32 percent of those voters.

Paul also matched Romney among Tea Party supporters, at 19 percent, while Santorum won the Tea Party bloc at 29 percent. In New Hampshire, however, Santorum is lagging behind Paul, drawing 8 percent support to Paul's 18 percent, according to a poll released Thursday by Suffolk [University](#) in Boston. Romney is drawing 41 percent.

Analysts say Paul's appeal is limited to a loyal bloc of diehards.

Popularity ceiling

"He hits a ceiling at 25 percent," said David Paleologos, director of the Suffolk University Political Research Center, which runs the poll. "The only state where he can break above 25 percent is Virginia, and that's only because he's one of two candidates on the ballot" along with Romney.

John Dennis, a San Francisco activist for Paul who ran as the Republican challenger to House Minority Leader [Nancy Pelosi](#), D-San Francisco, two years ago when she was House speaker, said Paul's loyal supporters have doubled in the past six months.

"The Republican Party was non-interventionist, but the neoconservatives took that over," Dennis said. "But our roots are still there because it makes common sense to conservatives not to go to war simply from a fiscal point of view."

The Paul campaign's strategy is to collect delegates with an eye toward influencing the party platform. Caucuses in Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, North Dakota and Washington can allow passionate followers an outsized influence because open balloting is conducted among small local groups, compared with statewide primaries with secret ballots.

Political analysts are skeptical, however, that Romney or any of the other GOP contenders would embrace Paul's libertarian positions, which include not just his antiwar stance but his opposition to the war on drugs, the Federal Reserve and other issues.

At the same time, the eventual candidate can ill afford to alienate Paul's followers if he continues to rack up vote shares in the 20 percent range.

Getting a little help

Boosting Paul's visibility is a war-weary public, record deficit spending and a sitting Democratic president who many Democrats believe has continued Bush policies on terrorism, civil liberties and war, said David Boaz, executive vice president of the libertarian Cato Institute.

Paul has "brought together this concept of economic conservatism, social moderation and staying out of unnecessary wars," Boaz said. "That combination hasn't been offered by any other Republican presidential candidate in a long time."

But Michael Denny, a San Francisco volunteer for the Paul campaign who described his political views as "Old Right revivalist," said the sentiment he has encountered among many GOP voters is that "war is religion," and that faction shows little sign of change.

"I can't say I'm seeing a shift among those who have taken a hard-line position," Denny said. "But for those who are undecided or feel queasy about the way the government is going, Ron Paul gives them an alternative voice."

E-mail Carolyn Lochhead at clochhead@sfchronicle.com.