

How would Rand Paul destroy ISIS?

By John David Dyche

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Kentucky's junior U.S. Senator, Rand Paul, has said that if he was president he would "call a joint session of Congress, lay out the reasoning of why ISIS is a threat to our national security, and seek congressional authorization to destroy ISIS militarily." Exactly how he would accomplish ISIS's destruction remains unclear.

President Obama proposes to do it with U. S. and allied airstrikes and ground action by others, including so-called "moderate" Syrian rebels whom America would arm and train. Paul calls arming Syrian rebels "a terrible idea" and was among 12 Senate Republicans who voted against Obama's recent request for funding to do it.

Like Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Paul blames past American policy mistakes for the rise of ISIS. But now, Paul says, "Toppling [pro-Iranian Syrian strongman] Assad will lead to a new chaos and greater danger from the jihadists."

"We must now defend ourselves from these barbarous jihadists, but let's not compound the problem by arming feckless rebels in Syria who seem to be merely a pit stop for the arms that are inevitably scarfed up by ISIS," Paul said on the Senate floor. "Sending arms to so-called moderate Islamic rebels in Syria is a fool's errand and will only make ISIS stronger."

But expert opinion is virtually unanimous that destroying ISIS will require some military action on the ground in Syria. Who does Paul propose carry that out? U.S. troops? The Assad regime? Kurds? Or does he alone believe just American air strikes can do the job?

As national pundits often say, having willed the end of ISIS's military destruction, Paul must now will the means to achieve it.

Just a month ago, Paul's office said President Obama should answer the following questions: What is the plan for success? What is victory? What are the costs? What will it look like when we stop? Can we do it without reengaging ourselves in Iraq militarily for years?

Will Paul now answer these questions himself since he has declared for destroying ISIS militarily? He has not done so yet. Until he gets specific about his plan he will face legitimate questions and harsh attacks.

So who will fight ISIS on the ground as part of a war Paul said he accepts as "necessary?" Asked for comment, Paul's office said it would be best to talk with the Senator directly. This columnist eagerly awaits that opportunity.

Writing in *The Hill*, Brent Budowsky called Paul a "warrior wimp." Budowsky says Paul wants "to destroy the ISIS terrorists and prevent them from mass-butchering Middle Easterners and attacking Americans," but since he opposes both "military aid to the Free Syrian Army" and "American ground forces," Paul would "presumably ... attack ISIS with press releases and incoherent speeches."

The political question is whether Paul panicked and too quickly abandoned his trademark non-interventionism when it looked like it might hurt his quest for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. To some, his recent reversal reeks of political opportunism.

Paul could have continued in his apparent initial position that no one has shown that ISIS is an actual threat to the U.S., as opposed to being "merely" a threat to certain U.S. "interests." And he could have kept on contending that any further American intervention in the Middle East, including against ISIS, is another mistake fraught with unintended consequences.

But after ISIS broadcast its beheadings of two Americans, Paul changed from a doctrinaire libertarian dove into a common war hawk of the species to which he had just assigned former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. That political box checked, critics can claim, Paul returned to real form by opposing Obama's proposal to arm Syrian rebels.

Was his metamorphosis sincere or a cynical attempt to convince the broader GOP nominating electorate that he was not an isolationist and could support some military actions? Only the Senator knows for sure. Meanwhile, we are left to wonder how the Kentuckian would actually accomplish his stated goal of destroying ISIS.

The *Weekly Standard's* John McCormack says Paul, "like President Obama, reluctantly followed public opinion, which increasingly demanded something be done about ISIS. ... But by 'playing the game' on matters of war, Paul has opened himself up to potentially devastating attacks that could keep the rest of the GOP from giving him a second look."

Since his emergence on the national scene four years ago Paul has survived some missteps that would have mortally wounded lesser politicians. Paul's performance as political prodigy prompted John Samples, a native Kentuckian now a vice president at the libertarian Cato Institute, to tell the *Washington Post*, "The question is, is this guy a political genius or not? Can he pull this off?"

Good question. Paul's present predicament resembles the end of Batman episodes. The superhero seems trapped and doomed, but somehow always manages to escape. Will he again?