



Home

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Letter from America

Wanted: a president who believes in liberty



**'At least he's not crazy', Democrats observe, explaining why they'd rather lose to Mitt Romney than almost any other Republican in the 2012 presidential race. Some are comforted as well by Romney's willingness to say anything or be anything to please his target voters. 'At least he's not an ideologue.' A cynic merely pretending to embrace ideas or opinions you disdain is preferable to a true believer.**

Liberal commentators have pilloried Romney for repeating fictions and fantasies about Barack Obama, like the claim that he 'believes that government should create equal outcomes' and an 'entitlement society' in which 'everyone receives the same or similar rewards, regardless of education, effort and willingness to take risk'. As [Steven Benen writes](#), 'Romney seriously wants Americans to believe that the Obama White House wants everyone, regardless of effort or circumstances, to have the same amount of money. This argument is based on... nothing... There is simply nothing in reality to suggest the president accepts as true the radical beliefs Romney ascribes to him.' But, Benen notes, Romney probably doesn't believe his own rhetoric; he seems more like a conman than a crazy person.

Still, he lacks the conman's common touch. Uneasy, inept at retail politics, but perhaps electable, Romney is the proverbial second husband for many Republicans. He just won the New Hampshire primary, after barely winning the Iowa caucuses by an arguable eight votes, partly because he's had the good fortune to run against a collection of crazies – narcissists, self-promoters, theocrats and ignoramuses. Jon Huntsman, the sane, relatively moderate former Utah governor (the Democrats' favourite conservative) is too 'liberal' for Republican primary voters.

To appease those voters, the Republican Party hasn't exactly put its best candidates forward. Newt Gingrich, who enjoyed a brief surge, combines Romney's cynical inconsistencies with bold hypocrisies (crying foul over being subjected to the negative campaigning he practically invented), delusions of grandeur (comparing himself to Lincoln and Jefferson), and petulance – as House Speaker he became known for shutting down the government in the late 1990s in a fit of pique after being relegated to the back of Air Force One. Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, no longer a contender, may be slightly more stable than Sarah Palin but is no better informed. Texas governor Rick Perry, effectively but not formally out of the running, displayed his embarrassing ignorance and ineptitude during the debates. Never mind the buffoonish, positive-thinking, former candidate Herman Cain.

Then there's Rick Santorum, who lost a US Senate seat decisively in 2006 but held Romney to a virtual tie in the Iowa caucuses and briefly enjoyed some 'momentum' heading into New Hampshire, where he fell to the back of the pack. New Hampshire prides itself on its libertarian streak, and Santorum is a conservative religious collectivist, known mainly for his fear and loathing of homosexuality and fierce opposition to abortion rights and contraception; he has even blamed the abortion rate for a decline in the number of young workers and alleged social security shortfalls. As David Boaz, vice president of the libertarian CATO Institute, [points out](#), Santorum is a stated opponent of individual liberty, a critic of what he calls 'the libertarianish right... this whole idea of personal autonomy'.

Libertarians, right and left, have no candidate in the race, except for cranky, occasionally kooky congressman Ron Paul, who placed third in Iowa and second in New Hampshire. (Former New Mexican governor Gary Johnson is running on a Libertarian ticket and could become a third party factor; but, so far, he is practically invisible.) A most imperfect advocate for individual liberty, Paul favours state laws against flag desecration (core political speech) and federal laws against abortion, and he opposes the separation of church and state, so essential to the religious liberty of minorities. Like many religious conservatives, Paul asserts, illogically and counter-factually, that religious majorities are endangered: religion is under siege in our extremely religious country, he claims hysterically, and children are not allowed to pray in schools. (In fact, the law is clear: children are free to pray in school, individually or in groups; school officials are prohibited from forcing them to pray.)

But for all his faults, Ron Paul remains the only major candidate, Democrat or Republican, who has taken a stand against our endless wars (including the war on drugs) and the authoritarian national security state – the most urgent, dire threat to individual liberty today. He has, for example, spoken and voted against the ‘anti-American Patriot Act’ and recent amendments to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act that expanded federal domestic surveillance power and immunised telecom companies for enabling the Bush Administration’s illegal spying. It should be but it isn’t a shock to realise that Paul is the only major candidate to oppose presidential power to assassinate summarily American citizens – power exercised by President Obama when he ordered the killing of Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.

So it’s not surprising that the 76-year-old Ron Paul has attracted younger voters than his Republican opponents, as well as the occasional left-wing civil libertarian (notably *Salon’s* Glenn Greenwald). But liberal support for Paul is weak: leading liberal websites (like TalkingPointsMemo.com) have attacked him repeatedly, citing his conspiracy theories, opposition to the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the racist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, paranoid newsletters published under his name in past decades. You can learn a lot about the dangerous, anti-libertarian drift of today’s liberals and progressives by their attitudes toward Ron Paul: with some exceptions, they tend to focus on Paul’s alleged bigotry and his opposition to anti-discrimination laws, while ignoring his lonely support for fundamental liberties.

You don’t have to overlook or make excuses for Paul’s weaknesses on civil rights or his apparent courting of virulent, right-wing extremists to appreciate and applaud his support for liberty, where it arguably matters most. After all, Paul poses no threat to racial and religious tolerance, civil rights or entitlements. He has virtually no chance of becoming president and his own alleged intolerance is, to say the least, unpopular (and demonstrates the declining respectability of overt bigotry). But he has an opportunity to organise and perhaps empower voters who oppose the Bush/Obama security state. If only that were a priority, for Democrats and Republicans alike.

Presidential candidates, like nominal front-runner Mitt Romney, aggressively advertise their patriotism, their embrace of American exceptionalism, and their love for this titular land of the free. They characterise Obama as anti-American: Santorum has accused him of siding with our ‘enemies’. Romney asserts he knowingly promotes policies harmful to the country and that he will ‘poison the spirit of America’; and then they have the nerve to call him ‘divisive’. But with the exception of Ron Paul, all the Republican candidates, as well as President Obama, share a decidedly un-American disregard for liberty. The question is, how many voters care?

**Wendy Kaminer** is a lawyer, writer and free speech activist. Her latest book is *Worst Instincts: Cowardice, Conformity, and the ACLU*. (Buy this book from [Amazon \(UK\)](#).) A shorter version of this article was first published at [theatlantic.com](#) on 4 January.