

## Paranoia Strikes Deep: The Press and Rand Paul

*The absurd lengths journalists have gone to portray the Kentucky senator as if he's hiding something dangerous*

By: Conor Friedersdore – June 19, 2013

---

Critiques of democracy are as old as the excesses of the Athenian variety. Here's a classic: The unmediated masses are as capable of doing an injustice as any aristocracy or tyrant. In America, it's acceptable to say, as shorthand, that we're living in a Western liberal democracy. But the fact is that we live in a federal, constitutional republic, because the Framers mistrusted democracy, and the vast majority of Americans retain a great part of that mistrust. We've extended the franchise, amended the Constitution to permit the direct election of senators, and we're likely to eventually abandon the electoral college and elect presidents by the popular vote. But there is broad, deep support for anti-democratic features of our system, like the Bill of Rights.

All of this is totally uncontroversial -- unless it is uttered by Senator Rand Paul, the national politician most likely to evoke irrational paranoia from the political press. Serial anti-libertarian Jonathan Chait is the latest to demonstrate this truth in an unintentionally revealing item at *New York*.

Here's how he begins:

The most unusual and interesting line in Julia Ioffe's highly interesting profile of Rand Paul is Paul's confession, "I'm not a firm believer in democracy. It gave us Jim Crow." Of course, that's an awfully strange way to condemn Jim Crow, which arose in the distinctly *undemocratic* Apartheid South (it was no coincidence that the dismantling of Jim Crow and the granting of democratic rights to African-Americans happened simultaneously).

This is an uncharitable beginning. If a scholar of political thought said of ancient Athens, "I'm not a firm believer in democracy -- it required slavery, war, or both, to subsidize the lower classes while they carried out their civic duties," no one would think that a strange formulation - it is perfectly coherent to talk about democracy in places that didn't extend the franchise universally, given how the term has been used and understood for two thousand years of political history.

What's more, if we include the context that Chait stripped out in his excerpt, Paul's point is perfectly clear. He was visiting a historically black college:

To approving nods, he talked about how urban renewal had really meant "urban destruction" and about how "they tore down a lot of black businesses so people would go to white stores." He found that this crowd, if not totally convinced, was receptive. Though he would still not give them a definitive answer on his position on the Civil Rights Act, he did say that he believed federal intervention had been justified. "I'm not a firm believer in democracy," he explained. "It gave us Jim Crow."

Even in the article, we have no idea what sentences Paul spoke immediately before or after that. Suffice it to say that if anyone else in the United States said, of federal intervention in the Jim Crow South, "They did the right thing overruling decisions made locally in Alabama and Mississippi, even though it was anti-democratic," no one would blink, let alone criticize the speaker.

But Chait takes the quote and turns it into a conspiracy. "It's not just a gaffe or another historical misrepresentation," he writes, "rather, it's an authentic clue into an ideology Paul has been busily concealing as he has ascended into mainstream politics." What hidden ideology does Chait discern?

Rand Paul, like his father, is deeply influenced by the political-economic philosophy of Ayn Rand. Paul usually soft-peddles his Randism, though he sometimes communicates to fellow believers through dog whistles, like playing Rush (who once dedicated an album to "the genius of Ayn Rand") at his victory speech.

Rand's philosophy is a kind of inverted Marxism, imagining politics as a struggle between a virtuous producer class that creates all wealth and the parasites who exploit them. (Marx believed the workers produced all wealth and the capitalists robbed it from them; Rand believed roughly the opposite.) Also like Marx, Rand considered conventional democratic government as a cover for this kind of exploitation. If the majority could tax the rich to benefit itself, this was tyranny.

He goes on:

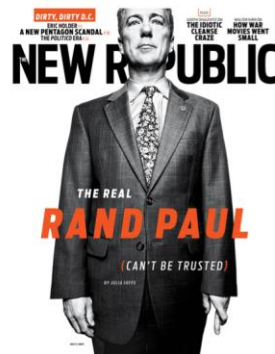
Here's Rand summarizing her aversion to democracy: "I do not believe that a majority can vote a man's life, or property, or freedom away from him," she argued. A less militant version of this philosophy is now the dominant credo of the Republican Party.

As I read this, I couldn't help but think of Chait as a left-leaning analogue to the character in Bob Dylan's "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues." *Those Objectivists were coming around / They were in the air / They were on the Ground / They wouldn't give me no peace.* For 2,000 years, critics of unmediated democracy have warned about the masses abusing individuals and minorities. The American system was built from the very beginning to check democratic excesses.

But if Rand Paul distrusts democracy he must've gotten it from Ayn Rand.

It's also interesting that Chait regards Rand's formulation as "militant." Let's look at it again. "I do not believe that a majority can vote a man's life, or property, or freedom away from him." Does Chait believe that a democratic majority should be able to vote a man's life or freedom away? I know that Chait (like Rand Paul) believes that the government can tax a portion of a citizen's wealth. Should a democratic majority be able to single out an individual man and vote away his property? Believing otherwise is certainly not unique to Objectivists, libertarians, or Republicans.

What Chait did is hardly unique. In the political press, it happens again and again: libertarian leaning folks are portrayed as if they're radical, extremist ideologues, even when they're expressing ideas that are widely held by Americans across the political spectrum. Here is the absurd cover *The New Republic* chose for the issue in which the Paul profile appears:



TNR

This would seem to imply that, relative to other politicians, the guy who went on Rachel Maddow to discuss the nuances of his take on the Civil Rights Act is the one hiding his "real" self from us. Remember the conservatives who kept saying, "Obama is hiding something -- he's not one of us"? That magazine cover is what it looks like when liberals cave to a similar pathology.

Let's peek inside the story that Julia Ioffe wrote (which, despite some flaws, is a lot fairer than the magazine cover, which it doesn't support). Here's how she characterizes Paul's philosophy:

... though he has staked out more moderate or traditionally Republican positions than his father, at his core, Rand retains the same pre-New Deal vision of hyper-minimalist government and isolationist foreign policy. In other words, Paul has managed to take the essence of his father's radical ideology -- more radical than that of any modern presidential candidate -- and turn it into a plausible campaign for the Republican nomination.

And here's a passage from later on in the article:

At a Tea Party event in Louisville, I sat down with Paul and asked him to explain his theory of government's proper role. "What the Constitution says," he told me curtly. "The Constitution has about 19 enumerated powers; that's what it should do. Primary among those, at the federal level, is national defense, and that's the primary function of what the government should be doing." As always, Paul wore a red penny on his lapel, a Tea Party invocation of the national debt. He continued: "There are other things that we've been doing for quite a while, and what I would say is that we try to make them as efficient as possible. Things like Social Security and Medicare need to be made solvent."

This seemed to be a departure from his father, who refused to accept Medicare and Medicaid in his private practice because he deemed it "stolen money."

If Paul's avowed position is that we should keep doing Social Security and Medicare as efficiently as possible, a concession his father never made, then how is it accurate to write that "at his core, Rand retains the same pre-New Deal vision of hyper-minimalist government" as his father? \* The piece goes on to add nuance and contradict that "core" passage, to its credit, but that's sort of the point: Even in the face of contradictory evidence, the most extremist portrayal is asserted as if it's true. Like the cover surrounding the magazine story, everything is wrapped in paranoia.

Then there's what is missing from the piece.

I'm still waiting for a profile of Paul that grapples with his actual behavior in the U.S. Senate. As I wrote earlier this year:

When Rand Paul emerged on the national scene in 2010, staffers at places like The Cato Institute and *Reason* backed him more enthusiastically than any other U.S. Senate candidate. Like all Tea Party-affiliated pols, Paul favored smaller government, tax cuts, and free-market

reforms. Unlike Marco Rubio or Christine O'Donnell, the Kentucky Republican was expected by right-leaning libertarians to oppose the bipartisan excesses of the post-9/11 era. As Radley Balko argued that spring, Paul would be better on civil liberties than President Obama and most Senate Democrats. Few non-libertarians believed him, as evidenced by the skeptical replies of progressive writers Adam Serwer and Jamelle Bouie, savvy civil libertarians in their own right.

Three years later, it is beyond dispute: Paul is a leading opponent of civil-liberties abrogations, executive-power excesses, and militarism. Safe to say, after last week's filibuster, that his stands on those issues are the most visible and consequential that he has taken in the Senate. Even prior to that 13-hour spectacle, Paul mounted high-profile, sometimes lonely efforts to reform the Patriot Act; formally end the president's authorization to wage war in Iraq; reform drug laws; prevent indefinite detention; extend Fourth Amendment protections to electronic communications; require warrants for drone surveillance; reform overzealous TSA screening procedures; and stop an anti-piracy bill that would have onerously infringed on free expression online.

He's also opposed calls to wage war in Libya, Syria, and Iran.

In light of this record, the establishment press ought to reflect upon the fact that its 2010 coverage utterly failed to anticipate the most important consequences of electing Paul to the Senate.

Alas, the political press is mostly blind to the radicalism of the establishment politicians and policies that Paul is critiquing. Secretly building a pervasive surveillance state? Not treated as radical. And consider: even if Obama sends American troops into Syria, Chait will regard Paul as more dangerous.

Will the irrational double standards ever end?