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Libertarians: The Paranoid Style In American Politics

Suddenly Libertarianism has become the newest fashion among the paranoid in American politics. But be not deceived; they are just as reactionary and extreme as their more deranged and schizophrenic political brethren on the far, far right who want to "take back" the government they hate in order to cripple it.

But libertarians are getting a measure of respect in much of the main stream press, and approval by 38 percent of Americans, largely as a result of its two most prominent figures, Rep. Ron Paul, a likeable Texas Republican, and his son Randall (Rand), who has captured the Republican nomination for the Kentucky Senate seat being vacated by a true oddball, Jim Bunning, a former star major league pitcher.

Perhaps Rand Paul, a practicing ophthalmologist who ran as a Tea bagger, seemed sane compared to Bunning and the Kentucky Republican establishment that ran Bunning out of office, then endorsed a front man for the GOP regulars. I'm not sure why the Pauls ally themselves with Republicans, most of whom stand for policies, deficit spending, and the kind of central government they hate. They could follow the lead of liberal socialists like Sen. Bernie Sanders, of Vermont, who votes with the Democrats (not all the time) but lists himself as an independent. Rather, as we shall see, these libertarians are not independent from the right-wing Republican Party.

But the Pauls and Libertarianism are getting a relatively friendly press because they are not firebrands and Libertarianism seems a rather benign, principled ideology, which calls for the smallest central government possible. Ron Paul has been a loyal Republican in the House, but when he ran for President in 2008 he seemed more eccentric than threatening. And he has differed from most of the Congress in opposing George Bush's war in Iraq and his violations of civil liberties.

The positions of the Libertarian Party, founded in 1971, seem benign and consisting of mere slogans. It is holding its convention this spring with the theme "Gateway to Liberty," and some of

its positions on civil liberties (not civil rights) and the war in Iraq, which Ron Paul opposed, are admirable. But where principled libertarianism goes off the rails is its insistence on a small government as envisioned by agrarian President Thomas Jefferson. It's not only hypocritical, but useless and dangerous.

I recall ongoing conversation I had some years ago with one of the officials of the Cato Institute, Washington's leading, and richest libertarian think tank. He held that Jefferson made a mistake, in setting a precedent for expanding presidential power when he undertook to make the Louisiana Purchase, 828,000 square miles west of the Mississippi. from New Orleans to the Canadian border for about \$15 million.

My Cato friend argued, as Jefferson's conservative critics argued then, that the Constitution did not specifically permit such presidential power. Jefferson, who feared that the Spanish, French and English could establish colonies along the Mississippi and cut off the nation's western expansion, argued that the Constitution did not prohibit the president from taking such action.

Since then, libertarians have regularly argued that presidents and the Congress have trampled on the Constitution's limitations and expanded government for purposes that limited the freedom of the individual to make his/her own decisions and take responsibility for his/her actions. That is essentially the Cato view, which favors "the traditional American principles of limited government, individual liberty, free markets and peace."

But since Jefferson, the limits of government have been steadily enlarged-by John Adams's Alien and Sedition laws, Andrew Jackson's federal bank, Woodrow Wilson's decisions that brought the U.S. into foreign wars, Teddy and Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. But Cato has rarely protested or lobbied against Republicans.

Instead, aided by its right-wing corporate sponsors, Cato has opposed most industry regulations, most social programs, the income tax, gun control, the Federal Reserve, much of the United Nations actions, and the International Court of Justice, on the grounds that they impinge on the U.S. Constitution and the rights of Americans. And in practice, Cato and the libertarians support most of the conservative Republican initiatives to end Social Security and Medicare.

The last time I was at the Cato Institute, I attended a lecture by then. Rep. Dick Armey, R., Tex., who taught economics at a small Texas college before he became the House Majority Leader, second in command to Speaker Newt Gingrich. They had taken control of the Congress with their "Contract for America," which consisted, among other things, of stripping the Food and Drug administration and the financial industry of regulations dating back to the New Deal. Armey's special cause was, as he put to me, to "wean our old people away from Medicare" by slowly privatizing the program.

At the Cato Institute Armey told the friendly crowd that he, had decided not to participate in Medicare. And he recommended that as a libertarian course, that is, individuals should be at liberty to care for themselves through the free market. Indeed, since then, Armey has sued to permit him and other plaintiffs, to prohibit the government from forcing persons on Social Security to become participants in Medicare Part A. If upheld, such an action by enough libertarians would undermine Medicare's beleaguered Hospital Insurance Fund.

Naturally, the Cato libertarians and every Republican opposed the Affordable Health Care Act, which, among other things saved the trust fund or another 12 years. And Armey, a paid lobbyist,

used his "Freedom Works" organization to round up corporate backing and money for the phony grass roots numbskulls that became the Tea Baggers.

It should be clear that despite the principled intents of those members who think of themselves as independents, libertarians have been right-wing Republican wolves in sheep's clothing and part of what the historian, Richard Hofstadter called "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." It is worth revisiting his famous essay. It was written in 1964, when one of the heroes of libertarianism, Barry Goldwater, had captured the Republican Party.

The essay appeared in Harper's Magazine shortly before the presidential elections began, "American politics has often been an arena for angry minds. In recent years we have seen angry minds at work mainly among extreme right-wingers who have now demonstrated in the Goldwater movement how much political leverage can be got out of the animosities and passions of a small minority...I call it the paranoid style simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind."

Hofstadter, the scholar, traced the paranoid style back to the anti-Masons and the anti-Catholics. But he wrote in the wake of Sen. Joseph McCarthy's crusade against communists, the rise of the John Birch Society, which joined McCarthy in attacking President Eisenhower as a "conscious agent of the communist conspiracy."

Goldwater opposed Medicare, the minimum wage, federal aid to schools and all welfare as "socialism." With a famous speech in support from Ronald Reagan, the Goldwater movement reached its peak during the presidency of a liberal Democrat. It lost the 1964 election to Lyndon Johnson, but Goldwater's libertarian heirs, which supported the non-libertarian, big government, Richard Nixon, solidified their takeover of the Republican right under the leadership of Ronald Reagan. Later in life, Reagan and Goldwater, moderated their views on social issues and would not now qualify for the libertarian pantheon.

Today, the Paranoid style is best represented by the supposed libertarian Tea Baggers (of which Rand Paul is a leader), when they depict another liberal Democratic president as a "Marxist, socialist, communist and Muslim." It turns out that most Tea Baggers are Republicans, but with a special venom for Obama and liberals and the federal government.

What else but deranged paranoia can explain the assertion by non-church goer Newt Gingrich's, a thrice married admitted draft dodger, that the Obama administration and the Democrats in Congress are a "secular socialist machine" that "represents as great a threat to America as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union?" A moderate Republican, TV host and former congressman Joe Scarborough called Gingrich's remarks "sick," and "pure wingnuttery." Libertarians and the rest of the Republican Party remained silent.

That's because-Gingrich's language aside-most Libertarian Republicans, with the Pauls leading the way, are just as extreme in their views. Rand Paul, who says he's for limiting the government's intrusion in our lives, suggested last month to a Russian TV interviewer that the U.S. should abandon its policy of granting citizenship to the children of undocumented immigrants, even if they're born on U.S. soil. That would be a direct violation of the Constitution.(See the 14th Amendment.)

But that isn't the end of it for the Pauls. Father Ron has voted consistently with the lockstep Republicans against every Obama proposal like a good soldier in the Party of No. In 2004 he

was the only House member to vote against a resolution commemorating the 40th anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which he denounced in a floor speech as a violation of property rights. Son Rand, in his heart of hearts, still opposes the part of the 1964 Act (which Goldwater voted against) outlawing discrimination in restaurants and other private establishments open to the public. He also opposes all forms of gun control, even for suspected terrorists and undocumented immigrants.

As Joe Conason wrote for Truthout, libertarians would take us back to the nation of Jefferson's time. "So they would do away with legal restrictions on wages, hours and working conditions, including the minimum wage and child labor laws." And if carried to the principled libertarian extreme, the Pauls would have to support the abolition of Medicare, Social Security, Medicaid, food stamps, public schools or the national parks because private is better than public.

I'm sure that the pressures of practical politics, would mitigate these principles. But the Pauls ought to be grilled in the way Rand was outed by Rachel Maddow's interview to admit his opposition to the Civil Rights Act. How far do his and his father's libertarian principles take them in their opposition to the myriad laws and the actions of the federal government to mitigate inequity and promote "the general welfare" and social justice? I'd like someone to ask them, for example, how they differ from the Republicans.

According to Conason. Dr. Rand Paul, the ophthalmologist, who opposes public programs like Medicare as an intrusion on individual rights, is also opposed to the impending 21 percent cut in Medicare's payment to physicians. So far his Republican brethren have blocked votes on delaying the cut. I don't know how Rand Paul would vote.

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