

Presidential Hopeful Rand Paul Backs Obama on Cuba Deal

By Olivia Nuzzi
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Out of step with his own party, the libertarian-leaning senator plays to his original base. But at what cost?

Likely Republican presidential candidate Rand Paul found himself out in the wilderness of his own party on Wednesday, following President Barack Obama's decision to normalize relations between the United States and Cuba. Paul first quietly flailed for cover, before publicly stating his support for lifting the embargo the next day.

While libertarians, who make up much of the junior Kentucky Senator's base of supporters, have long-supported ending the 50-year embargo, establishment Republicans, who Paul needs in order to succeed in the party's presidential primaries, feel quite differently.

The only words he had on the subject were bland at best: "In the past, Senator Paul has stated that he believes in more trade not less, and that includes Cuba," a Paul spokesman told The Daily Beast. "Peace through commerce is one of Senator Paul's firm beliefs."

That sounds a lot like he supports Obama's pledge to work to lift the embargo, but saying as much would be bad politics ahead of the Republican primary. Paul seemed reluctant to say anything further.

"Sorry I can't give you more, but at this time our office has no comment," his spokesman, Sergio Gor, said.

However by Thursday morning, Paul had found his footing. On News Talk 800 WVHU with Tom Roten in Huntington, W. Va., he stated, matter-of-factly: "The 50-year embargo just hasn't worked. ... If the goal is regime change, it sure doesn't seem to be working and probably it punishes the people more than the regime because the regime can blame the embargo for hardship. ... In the end, I think opening up Cuba is probably a good idea."

It's not difficult to understand why Paul was initially reluctant to voice his beliefs on the matter, seeing as the rest of the likely Republican presidential candidates were sprinting in the opposite direction.

Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida, whose Cuban parents fled the revolution, spent much of Monday morning campaigning against Obama's decision, going as far as to say he would block the move in Congress.

Sen. Ted Cruz, another likely 2016 contender whose father was born in Cuba, said the policy would be remembered as a “tragic mistake.”

Former Florida governor Jeb Bush, who on Tuesday announced that he would “actively explore” jumping into the GOP primary, has vocally opposed lifting the embargo, and argued instead that, “We should consider strengthening it.”

Spokespeople for New Jersey Governor Chris Christie and Texas Governor Rick Perry have not responded to requests for comment from The Daily Beast.

While Paul’s position on the embargo puts him at odds with his party and in sync with its Enemy In Chief, it does give him credibility among the libertarian base that propelled him into the Senate in 2010.

The libertarian Cato Institute, for instance, declared it was “Time to End the Cuba Embargo” back in 2012, saying that it had “failed to liberate the Cuban people” and that the policy itself “obviously has failed.”

And Paul’s father, libertarian icon, former Texas congressman, and two-time presidential candidate Ron Paul, has long been a vocal opponent of the embargo. In 2012, he went as far as to defend Beyonce’s and Jay-Z’s decision to vacation in Cuba.

Paul’s supporters, many of whom he inherited from his father, have previously expressed fears that he would do just about anything to win, even if it meant compromising the sometimes unorthodox beliefs that garnered him fans in the first place. His decision to stick to his convictions on Thursday is no doubt positive news for them.