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The imaginary libertarian Republican divide over Trump

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Washington Post reporter Dave Weigel's recent story, "The new 'Dr. No': Rep. Justin Amash, marooned in Congress," explores, among other things, how the libertarian congressman's often critical approach to President Trump contrasts with other libertarians, including fellow Republican Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul, who has been cast as a Trump defender.

The divide is real. Some anti-Trump libertarians cheer Amash's independence, but are fed up with Paul for defending the president. Some libertarians favorable to Trump cheer Paul yet accuse Amash, R-Mich., of "virtue signaling" or being a "RINO" simply for opposing Trump. Passions often run high.

But the divide also isn't real.

Here's a question: Though one is a congressman and the other is a senator, can you find many, or any, examples of Amash and Paul voting differently? Can you find where they have significantly divergent views of the Constitution, foreign policy, civil liberties, the drug war, over-regulation, the Federal Reserve, the size of government, or virtually anything else?

Even on some public disagreements, like recently over the Supreme Court worthiness of nominee Brett Kavanaugh, though they might have reached different conclusions, do both men not agree that Kavanaugh's past Fourth Amendment views have always been the primary concern? An issue virtually no Republican cares about other than a handful of libertarians?

No, while Amash and Paul are their own men with different ideas, styles, and political approaches, when it comes to their core beliefs, the basic reasons they ran for office in the first place, they are largely indistinguishable philosophically. There's a reason Amash strongly supported Paul for president. There's a reason Paul has dutifully supported Amash's high profile legislation. Their principles and priorities are almost identical.

Here's another question: What Republican senator has voted against Trump more than any other? John McCain? Susan Collins? Jeff Flake?

Nope. It's Rand Paul.

But wait, isn't Paul a "stooge" for Trump? A "Putin-puppet?" The president's "wingman?" And he still votes against the president the most? How can that be?

What are we really talking about here?

For anti- and pro-Trump libertarians alike, who insist Amash and Paul are now somehow fiercely oppositional figures based on little more than critics own feelings about the president, I marvel at how liberty partisans who typically pride themselves on being logical and emotionally-detached are actually just as susceptible to tribalism as the political mainstream they lampoon.

The true division is that Amash appears to believe Trump is bad for libertarians, while Paul tends to find the president is good for some libertarian causes. Amash emphasizes the bad things, Paul emphasizes the good.

They differ, but don't differ in principle—yet, both men are right.

There is no clear-cut pro- or anti-libertarian agenda when it comes to Trump. Both Amash and Paul's critiques of the president from a liberty perspective are primarily true and not even that contradictory despite how hard that is to consider for anyone who can't see anything beyond absolutely loathing or loving Trump.

For example, Amash is right when he tells the Washington Post, "Things have really taken a turn for the worse, in terms of the growth of libertarianism in Congress. You have some bright spots here and there. But for the most part, the party's become more nationalistic, more anti-trade."

This is unquestionably true. Republicans' new embrace of protectionism and nationalism is certainly antithetical to so many libertarian ends. You could also add to this list Trump and the Republican Congress' massive spending that already outpaces Obama's spending.

On Trump and foreign policy, Amash added, "Are we still droning people? Yeah. Are we still running covert operations that weren't authorized by Congress? Yeah. Is the government still spying on Americans without warrants? Without due process. Yeah."

All of this is also true. Any self-identified libertarian who now supports tariffs, massive omnibus bills, reckless drone policy, running unauthorized covert operations abroad, unwarranted mass surveillance—all simply because they love Trump—really has sold their soul.

Yet, I know few if any self-described libertarians who would defend any of these things, no matter their feelings about Trump.

Rand Paul doesn't agree with any of these things and has criticized much of it directly. But Paul has also praised the president for doing things no other Republican or Democrat running in 2016 would have done other than a libertarian. In addition to Trump's tax cuts and deregulation, and healthcare freedom initiatives, it's almost impossible to imagine a President Jeb Bush or Hillary Clinton or Marco Rubio or Ted Cruz sitting down with Russia or North Korea.

When it comes to liberty, Trump is a complex mix. Consider the following from longtime backer of libertarian causes and Trump supporter Peter Thiel in Swiss weekly Die Weltwoche:

“I still think of myself as philosophically quite libertarian: I do believe in a smaller government, free markets, socially moderate positions, less interventionist foreign policy... I would actually strongly defend president Trump on libertarian grounds. I know lots of libertarians would not agree with this. The dimension that is always very important is the foreign-policy one from a libertarian point of view. Trump represents a major break from the super-aggressive foreign policy of the Bush administrations or even the Clinton and Obama administrations.”

This is also true and echoes Paul. Frankly, if there weren't a major libertarian figure like Paul putting historic events like Russian and North Korean diplomacy into a proper liberty perspective, I would be pulling my hair out over the inability and immaturity of the movement I belong to do so. I'm very glad Paul does this.

If there were not a prominent libertarian figure like Amash pointing out the where Trump is so often an enemy of liberty, I would also be disappointed. We can't ignore these affronts to the Constitution and basic sanity, from spending to drones and beyond.

Weigel's Washington Post story was also in large part about how different libertarian camps—the Reason Magazine and Cato Institute-affiliated, DC-based libertarians and Ludwig von Mises-aligned “paleolibertarians”—split on Trump, a subject I devoted a 10,000 word essay to at Rare in January 2016 as Trump began his presidency. I would argue so much of this chasm is more about largely emotion-based partisanship too, whether over Trump or old squabbles going back decades, more than actual libertarian principles. I will save that argument for another time.

In the meantime, Paul is traveling to Russia next week with the Cato Institute to complement the president's diplomatic efforts. I bet if you asked Amash about it, he would consider it a good move. So would most paleolibertarians I've known.

The libertarian divide over Trump is real—but if viewed comprehensively and soberly, it also really isn't.