

# The Paleocon Dilemma

The Ron Paul campaign illustrates the choices facing the antiwar Right.

By **W. James Antle III**

RON PAUL isn't just running for president. The antiwar 10-term congressman from Texas hopes that as titular head of the Republican Party, he can nudge the Right in a less interventionist direction, both at home and abroad. In fact, reviving an older, less reflexively hawkish conservatism may even be a more important motivation for Paul's long-shot campaign than actually capturing the GOP nomination.

There's just one problem: the movement Paul is trying to lead, or at least influence, is filled with people who think he is some kind of crazed left-wing radical. The popular conservative website RedState.com has effectively banned Paul supporters from signing up as commenters and promoting their candidate, partly on the grounds that such people are liberal Democrats merely pretending to be Republicans. FreeRepublic.com founder Jim Robinson, whose website was once more open to constitutionalists than Republican boosters, asserted that "Paul equals Hillary on the War." *National Review* senior editor Richard Brookhiser has opined that Paul backers are "wicked idiots."

Syndicated columnist Mona Charen dubbed Paul a "kook," saying that although he shouldn't be president, "[h]e might make a dandy new leader for the Branch Davidians." Dean Barnett of *The Weekly Standard* devoted a similar piece to taunts along these lines, calling Paul the "crank-in-chief" and "undisputed owner of the "'Don't tase me bro' vote." Averring that "Crazy people love to have a cause," Barnett observes that "America's lunatics" have

"taken such a shine to the formerly obscure Ron Paul"—since all Paul really wants is to "wear a powdered wig without being ridiculed in public."

When not dismissing Paul as too far to the Left, his conservative critics allege that he has ties to unsavory elements of the far Right. Political journalist Ryan Sager, who has described Paul's fundraising success and modest rise in the polls as a "crackpot revolution," told *New York Sun* readers, "it's also worth noting that [Paul is] pretty racist and also an anti-Semite." Ron Rosenbaum, writing on his blog for Pajamas Media, said that Paul might not be an anti-Semite, but "some of his followers exhibit some disturbing tendencies."

The feeling is mutual. Not to be outdone, Paul's proponents can be equally vitriolic in describing other Republicans and large parts of the mainstream Right. The paleolibertarian LewRockwell.com has emerged as an indispensable source of news about Paul's campaign, but few if any of the website's contributors think much of the party that Paul is trying to lead. During a Florida debate held by various social conservative groups, the site's bloggers repeatedly called the sponsors "Falwellofascists"—and then applauded when Paul placed second in the Falwellofascists' straw poll.

Although a decade ago Lew Rockwell hoped to mobilize grassroots conservatives on behalf of anti-statism, during the Bush era he has detected a whiff of "red-state fascism" among the Republican base. Other LewRockwell.com writers prefer terms like "neoonofascist."

GOP frontrunner Rudy Giuliani is often affectionately called "Benito."

Such sentiments aren't limited to Paul's supporters in the blogosphere. Attending a Paul rally, it quickly becomes clear that the other Republicans are hardly more acceptable than Hillary Clinton to most of those in attendance. At a recent GOP straw poll in Virginia (which Paul won), Paulites shouted over former Virginia governor and future U.S. Senate candidate Jim Gilmore. At other events, they have drowned out Giuliani, and some witnesses on a Mackinac Island Ferry ride claim a band of Paul supporters once threatened to literally drown Giuliani by throwing him overboard.

The mutual hostility illustrates an enduring problem for those described as paleoconservatives—an unsatisfactory but familiar term that is increasingly applied to all conservatives who reject the foreign and many of the domestic policies of the Bush administration. The paleos and their allies wish to vie for the term "conservative" while being held in contempt by many—perhaps most—Americans who understand themselves to be conservatives while also returning that contempt in equal measure. Call it the paleo dilemma.

While dissident conservatives have many disagreements, their tactical differences speak most directly to this problem. Some paleoconservatives prefer to work within the mainstream movement, hoping to take it back from those they view as squatters. Others believe that movement is either too far gone, or was fatally flawed from the

beginning, and instead seek to forge a “real Right” that will supplant mainstream conservatism. A third group believes that changing American foreign policy should take precedence over all other ideological concerns and therefore favors the creation of a Left-Right anti-neoconservative coalition.

In the Ron Paul campaign, there are elements of all three approaches—each of which has obvious flaws. It is difficult to see how a “real Right” could be politically viable in the United States’ non-parliamentary system of government. Many paleos hope that the recent growth of right-wing parties in Europe portends the eventual defeat of multiculturalism and transnational leftism, but the trend could just as easily represent the Right’s last gasp. And one needn’t agree with David Frum’s indictment of “Unpatriotic Conservatives” to envision how easily hard-Right politics attracts undesirables and worse—true racists, anti-Semites, fascists, and neo-Nazis.

Left-Right coalitions are similarly problematic. They almost never end up being dominated by the Right. John O’Sullivan’s dictum that all organizations that are not explicitly right-wing become left-wing over time applies to most of the groups that have sprung up in opposition to the Iraq War. Every antiwar conservative has at some point been confronted by his ideological brethren with the antics of MoveOn.org or ANSWER’s communist ties. However effective trans-ideological alliances can be when working together on an ad hoc basis, the politics of strange bedfellows has its limits.

The media has taken notice of Paul’s support from across the political spectrum, and so have the candidate’s conservative detractors. A McClatchy News Service dispatch on pro-Paul crowds observed, “There are people who supported Democrat Howard Dean four years ago and others who backed con-

servative Republican Pat Buchanan in the 1990s.” Republicans apparatchiks often cite Paul’s more liberal supporters as evidence that his campaign is some kind of left-wing conspiracy within the GOP. Liberals for Paul could also be a liability in a more practical sense—they are less likely to be eligible to vote for him.

Potentially more damaging is the small but vocal group of genuine racists who have gravitated toward Paul in order to attach themselves to a more mainstream figure, as well as the kind of generic malcontents that Canadian conservative leader Preston Manning once described as “bugs drawn to the light.” A \$500 contribution from neo-Nazi Don Black, combined with the campaign’s ineffectual response, tarnished a positive news cycle that would have otherwise been dominated by Paul’s impressive fundraising. If Paul’s multimillion-dollar hauls are accompanied by further improvement in the polls, support from people like Black will only become a bigger problem.

But by virtue of running for the Republican presidential nomination, Paul has staked his campaign on working within the party and the mainstream conservative movement. If he does not run as a third-party candidate in the general election—and so far he is insisting that he won’t—his success will be determined by how effectively he does so. In New Hampshire and nationwide, several polls show Paul hovering just below the double digits in surveys that mainly capture his more conventional Republican supporters. That puts Paul roughly where Huckabee was when the press started taking the former Arkansas governor seriously this summer.

At this writing, Paul hasn’t had a Huckabee-style surge into the top tier. A major impediment: the binary Left-to-Right political spectrum. While Paul’s Republican supporters usually consider him the most conservative candidate,

many other likely GOP voters consider his outspoken opposition to the Iraq War an inherently liberal position. When Paul began expressing his antiwar views in forums with his party’s other presidential contenders, the head of the Michigan Republican Party—backed by a bevy of conservative commentators like columnist Michelle Malkin—advocated his exclusion from future debates.

The very idea that one could be conservative and yet also dissent from the Bush Doctrine seems inconceivable to some party regulars. “These days, according to some loudmouths,” wrote conservative homeschooling activist and Paul supporter Isabel Lyman, “I have more in common with the ‘antiwar moonbats’ that hold Sunday peace rallies in [Amherst, Massachusetts] than the Republicans that are presently in power.”

Ron Paul isn’t alone. His House colleague Walter Jones faces one of the most spirited Republican primary challenges in the country due to similar partisan and ideological constraints. Since his election in 1994, Jones has been known as one of the most conservative members of Congress. His lifetime American Conservative Union rating is 91.9 percent, and he achieved a perfect score four times. Jones supported the initial invasion of Iraq and famously led the charge to designate French-fried potatoes “freedom fries” on congressional menus in protest of France’s opposition.

Jones hasn’t changed his views on the Bush tax cuts, which he still favors, or abortion, which he adamantly opposes. But he has turned against the war in Iraq. Jones now believes his pro-war vote was a mistake and has been trying to make amends by supporting multiple bills aimed at securing a U.S. withdrawal. He has also introduced a resolution requiring the president to get Congress’ approval before widening the war into Iran.

These positions have cost Jones the support of many Republican leaders in his heavily military North Carolina district, which houses Camp Lejeune and voted 68 percent for President Bush in 2004. It has also attracted a GOP primary opponent, whose website purports to document “Walter Jones’ shift to the political left.” While there are a few debatable domestic-policy votes in the challenger Joe McLaughlin’s dossier, most of the indictment features votes related to the war.

The particulars: Jones is one of two Republicans to vote twice for a Democratic bill that included a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. He also voted against the Military Commissions Act, which set guidelines for “enhanced interrogation” of terror detainees, and an extension of the Patriot Act. Jones is one of only four House Republicans with a consistently antiwar voting record. The site features photographs of Jones with his “new liberal friends,” including Cindy Sheehan and Dennis Kucinich (half the pictures also include Paul).

According to McLaughlin’s campaign website, Jones is the most liberal Republican in the South—they claim 10 congressional Democrats are more conservative—and the third most likely Republican to vote with Democrats. Of course, *National Journal’s* ratings system penalizes conservatives for opposing the party leadership from the right as well as the left, which is why scores of such mainstream Republicans as Jeff Flake and John Sununu have taken a hit.

Concerning Jones’s foreign-policy independence, American Conservative Union chairman David Keene—in a *Hill* column otherwise critical of Jones for voting with the Democrats on the war—acknowledged that “many conservatives share Jones’s misgivings about the way our role in Iraq has morphed from liberator to policeman and nation-builder.”

Yet Jones’s break with his fellow Republicans on the war has led him to cast votes that make it difficult to continue working within the party. He has criticized the talk-show hosts Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, both popular among GOP primary voters, and referred to their more partisan listeners as “Kool-Aid drinkers.” FoxNews drew Jones into the Limbaugh “phony soldiers” controversy. He has supported some Democratic earmarks, a fact that McLaughlin cites with relish, and Jones has voted to advance articles of impeachment against Vice President Dick Cheney, a minority position even among congressional Democrats.

Jones’s story is a classic example of the paleo dilemma. For breaking with President Bush and the Republican congressional leaders on an issue that for many Americans defines the Left-Right divide, he is called a liberal by politicians who in many cases have less conservative records than he. Jones responds to the attacks by distancing himself even further from the GOP leadership with which he has grown disillusioned, sometimes voting with a minority of Democrats and just a handful of members of his own party.

There are Republicans who have opposed the war without apparently endangering their political careers—Jones’s House colleagues John Duncan of Tennessee and Howard Coble of North Carolina come to mind. But they are few. They are also conservatives for whom opposition to the Bush foreign policy is important, but not the defining issue. For many on the Right, however—both hawk and dove—Iraq isn’t just one issue. It is the only issue.

For that reason, the editors of *The Weekly Standard* would likely vote for a liberal hawk like Joe Lieberman—or perhaps even Hillary Clinton—over an antiwar Republican. And Paul, despite his obvious desire to remain a Republican,

would surely refrain from endorsing any of his rivals for the nomination because of their foreign-policy positions.

Some even view the paleo-neo divide itself as the most important political issue. Paul Gottfried, for example, has praised Paul’s staff (which he describes as “honeycombed with paleolibertarians and paleoconservatives”) as “people itching to settle scores with the neocon usurpers of the American Right.” Gottfried regards Hillary Clinton as the “lesser evil” compared to Giuliani. Similarly, Bill Kristol told the *New York Times* in 2004 he would vote for John Kerry over Pat Buchanan “or any of the lesser Buchananites on the right.”

In this climate, do paleos have a future in American politics as something other than an intellectual curiosity? Perhaps their best ideas, at least, do. As recently as the 1990s, the Right seemed open to non-interventionism. No less a neoconservative than Jeane Kirkpatrick hoped that our Cold War victory meant the United States could be “a normal country in a normal time.” Despite *The Weekly Standard’s* protestations, Buchanan finished second in the 1996 GOP primaries, and a majority of Republican congressmen opposed the Kosovo War. The trend toward the immigration-restrictionist position has continued even through the Bush administration’s amnesty advocacy.

Ultimately, this will be the real test of whether Ron Paul’s campaign is a success, even more than the number of votes he receives in the Republican primaries: Will his campaign be the start of a movement that will endure past 2008? Or will it be remembered as a brief, eccentric, and incoherent coalition? The answer will reveal much about the future of the paleoconservative project. ■

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# Faith of His Fathers

If Mitt Romney wins the Republican nomination, it will be due in large measure to his splendid and moving defense of his faith delivered Dec. 6 at the George Bush

Presidential Library.

The address was courageous in a way John F. Kennedy's speech to the Baptist ministers was not. Kennedy went to Houston to assure the ministers he agreed with them on virtually every issue where they differed with the Catholic agenda and that his faith would not affect any decision he made as president. He called himself "the Democratic Party's candidate for president who happens also to be a Catholic."

It was like saying: "I happen to be left-handed. I can't help it."

Romney did not truckle. He did not suggest that his faith was irrelevant to the formation of his political philosophy. While declaring, "I will serve no one religion, no one group, no one cause and no one interest," he did not back away an inch from his Mormon faith.

"There are some for whom these commitments are not enough," said Romney. "They would prefer it if I would simply distance myself from my religion, say that it is more a tradition than my personal conviction, or disavow one or another of its precepts. That I will not do. I believe in my Mormon faith, and I endeavor to live by it. My faith is the faith of my fathers. I will be true to them and to my beliefs."

"If this costs me the presidency," said Romney, "so be it."

That is the kind of defiance this country can never hear enough of.

What Romney was saying was if you so dislike or resent my faith you will not

vote for me if I stay true to it, don't vote for me. But that may say more about you than it does about me.

Questioned repeatedly on what he, as a Mormon, believes about Jesus Christ, a matter crucial to evangelicals, Romney replied, "What do I believe about Jesus Christ? I believe that Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. My church's beliefs about Christ may not all be the same as those of other faiths. Each religion has its own unique doctrines and history. These are not bases for criticism but rather a test of our tolerance. Religious tolerance would be a shallow principle if it were reserved only for faiths with which we agree." Surely that is right.

After defending his own faith, Romney declared himself a fighting ally of traditionalists and conservatives in the culture war against a militant secularism that is hostile to all faiths rooted in supernatural beliefs and that seeks to de-Christianize America.

"[T]he notion of separation of church and state has been taken by some beyond its original meaning," Romney said. "They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgement of God. Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in the public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America—the religion of secularism. They are wrong.

"We should acknowledge the Creator as did the Founders—in ceremony and word. He should remain in our currency, in our pledge, in the teaching of our

history and, during the holiday seasons, Nativity scenes and Menorahs should be welcome in our public places."

Romney understands that while the First Amendment proscribes the establishment of religion, it guarantees the free expression of all religions, even in the public school. Supreme Court, take note. "I will not separate us from the God who gave us liberty," said Romney.

This was a *tour de force*, and it was delivered before perhaps the largest audience Romney will have for any speech before the January caucuses and primaries. It will be the subject of editorials and columns in coming weeks. And it is hard to see how Romney does not benefit hugely from what was a quintessentially "American" address.

With this speech, Romney has thrown on the defensive his main rival in Iowa, Mike Huckabee, the Christians' candidate who, when asked if Mormonism is a cult, left the impression it might well be.

The issues of religious tolerance, what it means to be a Christian in politics, and secularism versus traditionalism are all now out on the table and will likely be the social-moral issues on which the race turns between now and January.

To this writer, Romney is on unassailable grounds. Nor is he hurt by the fact that his wife and five children testify eloquently that he is a man of principles who lives by them.

Mike Huckabee's ascendancy and Romney's address defending his faith, refusing to disavow his beliefs and making this a test of tolerance while launching an offensive against secular humanism, tell us that God is back—in the presidential campaign. ■