**The Libertarian Turn: Conservative Politics and the Anti-War Rhetoric of Ron Paul**

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**Abstract:**

Libertarianism, both as a political identity and ideology, has experienced a new lease on life in recent years on the American right. Scholars who study the history of American conservatism often place libertarian ideas within a “fusionist” narrative where they were combined with “traditionalist” conservatism in the twentieth century to form a coherent movement. According to this account, libertarianism’s recent ascendance is evidence of the ideological breakdown of the conservative movement and the disentangling of its constituent parts. This narrative, while appealing, cannot account for the discursive work libertarian political actors are doing on the contemporary right, and reifies the ideology of the conservative movement into a neat synthesized package. To correct these shortcomings, I analyze the political speeches of Ron Paul at two moments in his career, tracing how his rhetoric changed from the 1980s, to the presidency of George W. Bush and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Emerging from this discursive contestation is an innovative conservative political identity where opposition to foreign intervention, anti-statism, political liberty, and a commitment to divine origins of natural rights comes to define what it means to be a “conservative.” This paper sheds light on this emergent libertarian phenomenon, and argues that, if we are to understand the ideological dynamics at work in contemporary American conservatism, we must come to grips with its libertarian turn.

**I. Introduction**

“Matter of fact, if you think back just a short time ago to the year 2000 when George Bush was running, guess what he ran on, and guess what he won on? He was running against an interventionist foreign policy […] There’s nothing wrong with being a conservative and come up with a conservative belief in foreign policy where we have a strong national defense and we don’t go to war so carelessly.

* Ron Paul, 2010 Address to the Conservative Political Action Conference

Libertarianism, both as a political identity[[1]](#footnote-1) and ideology, has experienced something of a renaissance in recent years in American politics. Inflecting the conservative grassroots in the Tea Party, Republican institutional life in Congress, and national politics in Presidential contests, American conservatism has taken an increasingly anti-statist visage premised on the laissez-faire economics and individualistic philosophy of libertarianism. Political commentators in recent years have gone so far as to claim that “libertarianism has gone mainstream” and might “become the dominant wing of the GOP.”[[2]](#footnote-2) While such speculation has proven premature, the champions of this latter day libertarianism in the Republican Party continue to find success and represent a legitimate claim on what it means to be a “conservative.” These libertarians, their discourse, and the movements they’ve inspired have gone woefully under analyzed in the literature of conservative studies and political science generally. This paper seeks to rectify this gap in the literature and explore the following, interrelated questions: 1) How is this libertarianism different than what came before in the conservative movement?, and 2) Why did it emerge how it did, when it did?

To gain conceptual and analytical grip on these questions, the categories and frameworks for understanding libertarianism as a political ideology and force in American politics must be radically rethought. Rather than a structured philosophical system or set of ahistorical ideological principles, libertarianism and the “libertarian turn” in conservative politics should be understood as an emergent political identity forged through the discursive combination of anti-war and anti-statist rhetoric by a number of political actors who both challenged and laid claim to the title “conservative.” This discursive formation was made in interaction with changing political conditions under George W. Bush and his international forays in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The development of this identity, and the difference it is making on the American right, will be shown by first outlining what I mean by the “libertarian turn” and why it is a phenomenon worth studying. Following this, I criticize the extant “fusionist” framework for understanding the ideology of American conservatism and its relationship to libertarianism as both empirically implausible and theoretically impoverished. Finally, I compare the speeches of this new libertarianism’s most visible champion, Ron Paul, at two moments of his political career. First in the 1980s in contrast with Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy and the militarism of the American right broadly, and next in the early 2000s in response to the foreign interventions of George W. Bush. I then bring the tools of discourse analysis to bear to show how Paul creatively sutured anti-statism and laissez-faire politics to an anti-war rhetoric, forging a new conservative-libertarian political identity that is at work in contemporary conservative politics.

**II. The Libertarian Turn?**

Before delving into the question of what led to libertarianism’s recent ascension on the American right, the questions of what exactly the “libertarian turn” is and why it is significant must be answered. This turn describes the rising political identity on the right steeped in a commitment to libertarian inflected anti-statist policies and free market mechanisms as a mode and model of governance. This is not to say that a libertarianism itself is uncontested by political actors, but rather, that various political actors are now engaged with emblematically libertarian ideas and normative commitment that are reshaping conservative politics in innovative ways. This latter day libertarianism, like all political ideologies, defies succinct definition and is best shown through the impact it has had in conservative politics at the grass roots and the Republican Party.

The Tea Party can, in many ways, trace its ideas and principles back to the libertarianism of conservative actors like Ron Paul, whose 2008 campaign was, as some conservative commentators suggest, its “intellectual godfather.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, some have argued that Paul’s supporters represent “the original, uncorrupted Tea Party insurgency.”[[4]](#footnote-4) As Theda Skocpol has shown, libertarians, while at odds with their social conservative comrades in the Tea Party, represent a broad swathe of Tea Party membership who, “In an often uneasy alliance […] have joined social conservatives in this freshly labelled effort.”[[5]](#footnote-5) While social conservatism, anti-statism, and elements of white populism are all present in the Tea Party, the economic message and focus of much Tea Party activism belies its libertarian inflections and opposition to state programs writ large, “Most tea partiers have focused on fiscal, not social, issues – cutting spending, ending bailouts, reducing debt, and reforming taxes and entitlements – rather than discussing abortion or gay marriage.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The anti-statism central to libertarianism is thus a primary ideological motive force in the conservative grassroots.

In perhaps a direct line from the Tea Party’s electoral influence, the libertarian turn has weaved its way into the institutional politics of the GOP in Congress. The policies put forth by libertarian think tanks like the CATO Institute, according to some writers, are only tempered by political prudence by the GOP, “treated like forbidden pornography by Republican staffers, who imagine how deliciously *wonderful* it might be to actually *do* all that, but no, no, no, they just *couldn’t dare*.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The pet projects of intellectuals like Milton Friedman such as school vouchers are implemented in eighteen states, and his “dazzling array of programs based on libertarian principles” such as an all-volunteer army and opposition to the federal reserve now represent a credible position, and sometimes the common sense, of the GOP.[[8]](#footnote-8) Congressional debates over the debt ceiling in 2011 are a case in point, where Speaker John Boehner was pressured by recently elected Republicans with ties to the Tea Party to attach dramatic spending cuts to any debt ceiling increase.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Related to both the Tea Party and the institutional life of the GOP, the emergent influence of the Koch brothers and their political organization “Americans for Prosperity” has lent a trenchant libertarian vision to conservative politics. Committed to “a vision for an America where truly free markets allow for free and prosperous people,” the organization channeled millions into the 2012 election in support of Republican candidates and remains a key donor to the Tea Party.[[10]](#footnote-10) The words of Ronald Reagan, “Government is the not the solution to our problem; government is the problem,” (in spite of his own administration’s embrace of state largess for social and economic reform) pithily sums up the worldview and political vision for this emergent libertarian-conservatism that, perhaps unlike Reagan, makes no compromises in its drive to reduce government spending and obligations.[[11]](#footnote-11)

As Reagan’s statement makes clear, however, libertarian ideas are not exogenous to the conservative movement. Small government, free markets, and fiscal responsibility are nothing new in conservative discourse. What makes the libertarian turn unique, however, are the ways these ideas and principles were creatively refashioned in response to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. These reformulations made libertarian discourse salient and resonant under these changed historical conditions. After all, it is insufficient to simply state that the Republican Party is concerned with the national debt to explain the protracted debates in Congress over the debt ceiling. If it were, then similar debates ought to have happened in the 1980s, 1990s, or early 2000s when various “conservative” political actors had similar opportunities to those in 2011. Moreover, it is not just that libertarianism is “ascendant.” That is to say, it is not simply a matter of degree of anti-statism at play on the American right. Rather, the ways these new libertarians justify their political commitments and anti-statism is different in *kind* from their conservative predecessors. Put yet another way, their definition of what it means to be a “conservative” is novel and seeks to suture anti-imperialism, fiscal responsibility, and moral truths in ways that defy the “conservatism” at work at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Before analyzing the work that went into this novel political identity, however, I turn to an analysis of the standard “fusionist” account of the relationship between libertarianism and the ideology of the American right.

**III. Fusionism as Reification**

Libertarianism’s relationship to the American right is commonly understood as an essential ingredient in “fusionism,” or the “ideological self-scrutiny” pursued by conservatives intellectuals and political actors in the mid twentieth century.[[12]](#footnote-12) They sought to synthesize traditionalism, a set of ideas which “stressed moral order and community” with libertarian economics that “emphasized individualism and freedom.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It is these two streams of thought which, when combined through the goal of overturning the welfare state and opposing communism, make up what is known today as American conservatism. This argument claims that while this synthesis was rife with tension during its development, eventually, libertarian political commitments won out by subordinating traditionalism – resulting in a coherent ideology.

Jerome Himmelstein, in his work *To the Right* (1990), provides the best extant theoretical description of fusionism, and makes the case that the conservative movement should be understood as a fundamentally libertarian project. As this argument goes, the contradiction at the heart of fusionism was a moral one, namely, that libertarianism was, as William F. Buckley Jr. put it, a “crassly materialist position” that only justified its politics through its ability to engender economic growth and material comfort.[[14]](#footnote-14) Conservatism of the libertarian strand was not concerned with the morals and scruples of society. Rather “it regarded values as largely the province of individuals […] [it] thus tended toward a certain moral agnosticism.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This agnosticism colored libertarian commitments to market economics and unfettered or “pristine” capitalism, where market exchange does not “give way to [its] opposites” as economies develop, meaning that “market and commodity relations do not give way to the bureaucratic corporation […] individualism to growing rationalization.”[[16]](#footnote-16) This form of capitalism represents an “absence of constraint” whereby individuals can pursue their own ends without the coercive imposition of a normative standard by the state.[[17]](#footnote-17) Capitalism, in other words, represents the best system whereby human freedom and liberty is maximized. According to this argument, a libertarian defense of capitalism is *not* a moral one, but is instead based in utility and a pragmatic claim that the market “maximizes individual prosperity, happiness, and the capacity to pursue personal goals.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

To shore up this normative ambivalence in the libertarian defense of capitalism, conservatives needed to ground their ideology on a generalized version of traditionalism that “[gave] up virtually everything except its emphasis on an objective moral order.”[[19]](#footnote-19) The self-conscious goal of synthesizing libertarian economics and traditionalist morality was to create a “religious defense of pristine capitalism” by claiming that “the decline of freedom and pristine capitalism went hand in hand with the decay of belief in God and absolute truths.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This synthesis created a political vision which held the market and capitalism to partake in a metaphysical ‘Good,’ rather than simply a pragmatic construction, the usefulness of which ends if it truncates human freedom or happiness. Thus, traditionalism was “*added to*”libertarianism, resulting in a new, morally grounded form of libertarianism that “base[d] all its arguments on an objective moral order […] rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In other words, the conservatism which arose to challenge the collectivist state, fighting the New Deal at home and the communist threat abroad, brought traditionalist morality to bear in the defense of capitalism. Traditionalism was butchered until all that remained was its generalizable moral heart – a heart that pumped normative life and vibrancy into libertarian ideas.

This understanding of libertarianism’s relationship with conservative, with the former effectively dominating the latter, fails to account for the immense disdain for libertarian ideas during the ascent of modern conservatism, however. Contestations over the meaning and associated practices of conservatism were never settled. Instead, the conservative movement was mired in an ideological struggle up through the twentieth century, and the present libertarian turn is but one dramatic shift in a series of ongoing battles for the soul of conservatism.

Militating against the claims of stability by fusionist scholars, libertarian thinkers during the fusionist period, such as Ayn Rand and Friedrich Hayek, were and remained averse to the conservative project. Hayek went so far as to write a chapter in Frank S. Meyer’s ode to fusionism *What is Conservatism?* titled “Why I am not a Conservative,”[[22]](#footnote-22) and Rand told William F. Buckley “you are too intelligent to believe in God.”[[23]](#footnote-23) These animosities were likewise hurled back at the libertarians from the vanguard of mid-century conservatism and on through to the present. L. Brent Bozell, Buckley’s brother in law, challenged libertarianism on the grounds that it “made virtue as difficult as possible,” and that conservatives should properly understand politics as “the promotion not of freedom but of virtue.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The libertarians were, in the words of Russell Kirk, “all guilty of superficial and false assumptions about the nature of man” as un-fallen, and thus ignored man’s inescapable proclivity to vice and avarice in economic affairs. [[25]](#footnote-25) Moreover, Whitaker Chambers – a powerful voice at the *National Review –* wrote a review of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* titled “Big Sister is Watching You” where he quipped “From almost any page […] a voice can be heard commanding: ‘To the gas chamber-go!’” effectively claiming that libertarianism calls for rule by an elite who see themselves as having a right to determine what, and thus *who*, is moral.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Even today, conservative leaders consistently deride libertarians cut from the Randian and Hayekian cloth, with Republican Senator John McCain calling libertarians “impressionable kids in college dorm rooms,”[[27]](#footnote-27) and former Republican Vice President Dick Cheney brushing them off as mere “isolationists.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Many on the right still find the libertarian’s dogmatic commitment to an ideal of “freedom” politically and intellectually naïve: “The most fundamental problem with libertarianism is very simple: freedom, though a good thing, is simply not the only good thing in life.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Thus, there was never a stabilized period of ideological fusion and settlement – contestation was (and is) ongoing.

To be fair, adherents to fusionism might make a weaker claim, that it is only designed to explain a brief and specific moment in the twentieth century of conservative activism. While more defensible, even this still posits an era of relative stabilization and synthesis when there was, in fact, ongoing and vociferous contestation on the American right. A number of recent works examining contemporary tension in the conservative movement do indeed begin with this attractive, if theoretically wrongheaded, assumption. The essays in the edited volume *Crisis of Conservatism?* (2011) all frame their inquiries, in different ways, by asking, essentially, ‘what happened to fusionism?’ and that the “internal strife” of the conservative movement after George W. Bush would “prove difficult to manage.”[[30]](#footnote-30)The framing of these tensions admits an assumption of a prior period of stabilization. That, at some point in the recent past, there was something called “conservatism” with a set of stabilized features, and that it is only recently that the meaning of the term has come into doubt. Journalistic accounts, too, fall into this sort of thinking with Ryan Sager, a writer for Time, in his book *Elephant in the Room* (2006) saying that after Hurricane Katrina, “there was a sudden moment of clarity […] [t]he conservative revolution […] had lost all touch with its former self.”[[31]](#footnote-31) All of these accounts begin with the assumption of a stabilized period where “fusionism” prevailed, thereby reifying the messy and complex tensions present in the conservative movement from its outset. This is not to say that there was never a successful ideological union on the modern American right. Rather, it is to merely point out that the alliance between traditionalists, libertarians, and others cannot be so neatly drawn and that their ideology – while coherent enough to frame political action – was nowhere near an ideal synthesis.

The fusionist narrative is the ideological analogue to “punctuated equilibrium” models in the social sciences which try to account for stability and change by positing that the political world is relatively stable and disputes among political actors are, on the whole, settled. This settlement, for one reason or another, is only rarely perturbed to such a degree that a radical change is necessary to reach a new position of stabilization. These stabilizations are ‘sticky’ and are in many ways determinate of future outcomes. Most often invoked to describe “institutional patterns […] that have deterministic properties,” the underlying logic is just as easily applied to the dynamics of ideologies.[[32]](#footnote-32) Instead, the uneasy alliance of libertarians, traditionalists, anti-communists, populists, and others, which birthed the conservative movement should be understood as an instance of discursive creativity and juxtaposition against American liberalism. In order for their movement in opposition to the welfare state to gain traction, these “conservatives” united to topple the liberal discursive hegemon[[33]](#footnote-33) and common-sense of American politics in the New Deal state. These political actors thus developed a coherent (if unsettled) rhetoric to both frame and enable political action united under the signifier “conservative.”

Shifting from a battle of political ideologies to one of discourses explains why the conservative movement remained internally rent throughout its development; and why libertarianism’s intellectual champions like Ayn Rand, who consistently criticized the moralizing of her conservative colleagues, found a home in the movement as “for all her pyrotechnics, [she] remained for most conservatives merely the leader of a sect.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Framing these tensions in terms of discourse, it is straightforward and coherent to, at once, claim that libertarianism is at home on the American right, but that as a discursive formation “part[s] company with mainstream conservatives over such issues as prisons and sentencing, drug legalization, foreign intervention, and civil liberties.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Instead of stabilization and essentialism, the messy, complicated, and never finished business of rhetorical creativity and identity formation comes to the fore as the real content of conservative politics. All discursive formations are unstable and prone to reformulations and challenges, “the possibilities of meaning […] always threaten to destabilize the fixity of meaning.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Scholars should thus understand the conservative movement as a discourse that generated what Ernesto Laclau calls a “chain of equivalence”[[37]](#footnote-37) between signifiers (drawn from a host of political traditions and ideological genealogies beyond merely libertarian and traditionalist) in an intentional, but imperfect, way in order as to generate a viable political movement. The conservative movement did, of course, rely on a combination of free-market and value laden ideologies, but never in a way that precluded continuous change, destabilization, and contestation.

At stake here are the ways scholars analyze and deal with political “ideology” in their work. Far too often words like conservative, liberal, or progressive are haphazardly invoked in political science scholarship[[38]](#footnote-38) as heuristic devices, used to identify this or that political actor as fitting into an ideological box. Such descriptions trade in ideal types at the expense of political reality. Worryingly, such classifications are often given causal weight in some species of what are called “ideational” explanations, claiming that an actor’s ideological classification made it natural for her to behave in a certain way.[[39]](#footnote-39) For example, to explain why a person voted to increase the minimum wage their “progressive” ideology is posited as sufficient explanation, as though all persons attribute a universal meaning to the term that holds across all contexts. While the motivation behind these claims is understandable, one purpose of this paper is to militate against such thinking. Ideologies, in practice, are never the coherent sets of political or philosophical commitments scholars might like them to be. They are messy, contested, often inconsistent, destabilizing, and above all, work *through* political actors. Treating ideology as a discourse in an ongoing process of recreation and redeployment not only avoids the empirical mistake of assuming stabilization where there is process, it also enriches explanations of political phenomenon where interpretation and meaning play a powerful role.[[40]](#footnote-40)

To showcase this view of amorphous and unsettled ideology in action, I turn now to the efforts of Ron Paul in his early political career in Congress and first presidential campaign during the 1980s.

**IV. Gripes with the Gipper**

For most of his political career, Ron Paul was on the far fringes of the Republican Party. While he remained a member of the GOP over the course of his years in Congress, in his 1996 reelection bid the RNC backed a competing Republican candidate, and he ran for President as a Libertarian in 1988. The ideological disputes in the conservative movement, highlighted above, found their institutional realization in Paul’s strained relationship with the Republican Party. At the moment which many scholars and political analysts claim as the highpoint of conservative triumph, Ronald Reagan’s presidency, Paul (and certainly other hardline fiscal conservatives) were in fact hard at work in their efforts to redefine the meaning of “conservative.”

In his 1988 presidential campaign, Ron Paul ran as the candidate for the Libertarian Party on a platform of generalized anti-statism and opposition to nearly all government spending, including Cold War international commitments. This sort of anti-statism chafed against the Cold War discourses on the American right which made a strong military to check the Soviet Union abroad a central tenet of its political vision and identity. As historian of American conservatism Patrick Allitt puts it, “Anticommunism had been the glue that held their movement together.”[[41]](#footnote-41) When interviewed during the campaign Paul was asked a series of hypothetical questions regarding what he would do on a number of topics were he elected. For social security: “the people should know the truth that it’s bankrupt, that young people won’t get anything and therefore we should start to privatize it.”[[42]](#footnote-42) For public schools: “We should give some competition, we should immediately introduce competition through the voucher system or a tax credit so that we don’t have a monopoly control over the public schools.”[[43]](#footnote-43) When asked about his proposal to remove the income tax and how he would maintain funding for the U.S. government, he responds, “Well you can’t have a government like this without an income tax, but we don’t want a government like this [...] we think the government should be much smaller, if government is small, then you don’t need an income tax.”[[44]](#footnote-44) In terms of his domestic political agenda, Paul stuck to a libertarian vision centered on the political proposals of libertarian intellectuals like Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and others. These appeals were and remain centered on a strict anti-statism committed to a radical rethinking of the roles and responsibilities of government.

Foreign policy too is brought up in the interview. When asked what he would do if the Soviet Union put a missile base in Mexico, Paul responds, “The first thing I would do is stop sending them money” and if the Soviets started sending Mexico money instead, “then the Soviet system would fall even more rapidly […] I think it would be helpful to bankrupt the Soviet Union.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Here already there is a nascent connection between financial language and foreign policy, or, put another way, fighting the Cold War through market competition. Later on in the interview, Paul is asked about what he would do to improve national security and defense at home. He responds, “I would take the money we spend overseas subsidizing rich allies and it should be spent on the defense of this country.”[[46]](#footnote-46) In contrast with the “Bear in the Woods” style of conservative foreign policy of the time, with Reagan saying in 1983, “Some people may still ask: Would the Soviets ever use their formidable military power? Well, again, can we afford to believe they won't?” Paul subordinates military power to fiscal policy.[[47]](#footnote-47) While he is certainly sincere in this effort, the discourse he tries to fashion is merely a rehashing of a libertarian political agenda that had been floundering within political discourse for some time. It is serious and coherent in the abstract, but lacks a connection with the political realities in which his appeals are made.

A number of failed sponsored pieces of legislation from his early congressional career serve as cases in point. In 1982, two years into Reagan’s first term, Paul proposed House Joint Resolution 508 titled: *A Joint Resolution to Provide for the Complete, Orderly Withdrawal of American Military Forces, and our Nuclear Protection, from Europe and Japan*. This Resolution anticipates his interview response cited above concerning his desire to see the U.S. withdraw support and funding from “rich allies.” The Bill did not have a long life. Referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, and then its subcommittees, Paul’s Bill did not bear the signature of a single cosponsor before quietly dying in committee.[[48]](#footnote-48) Similarly, in 1983, he proposed a Bill that would severely restrict the amount of money the United States contributes to the United Nations, tying the contribution to the number of seats granted to the U.S. in representation.[[49]](#footnote-49) This Bill, too, was simply sent to committee without a single cosponsor or whisper of debate.

Contestation over the meaning of “conservative” was, at this time, simply too settled on the question of foreign affairs. Reagan, indirectly, declaimed the fiscal thinking of Paul on foreign affairs in a 1983 speech pitching his expanded defense budget and the Strategic Defense Initiative saying, “Believe me, it wasn't pleasant for someone who had come to Washington determined to reduce government spending, but we had to move forward with the task of repairing our defenses. […] We must not be misled by those who would make defense once again the scapegoat of the Federal budget.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Paul, one of only 28 concurring Republicans, voted against this budget.[[51]](#footnote-51) To be a conservative, at this time, meant to prioritize national defense and international commitments over fiscal concerns.

Paul’s financial emphasis during the Cold War was not altogether foreign to Reagan’s political vision, however. As mentioned above, Paul’s strategy to fighting the Cold War was premised on an analogy to market competition and financial responsibility on behalf of the United States. Pulling back troops from western allies and forcing the Soviet Union to overextend itself in an aggressive posture would lead to Soviet bankruptcy, and thus, total American victory over communism. Reagan shared this “market competition” view of the Cold War, saying to the British House of Commons in 1982, “Overcentralized, with little or no incentives, year after year the Soviet system pours its best resource into the making of instruments of destruction. The constant shrinkage of economic growth combined with the growth of military production is putting a heavy strain on the Soviet people.”[[52]](#footnote-52) However, while Paul and Reagan thought similarly on the proper way to fight the Soviet Union – seeing the Cold War as analogous to market competition where the firm with the deeper pockets and more efficient system prevails (the U.S.) – they come to very different conclusion about international military strategy.

Reagan’s international commitments against Soviet communism were moral in character. As Reagan’s famous characterization of Soviet foreign policy as “the aggressive impulses of an evil empire” emphasized, Reaganite conservatism, in spite of its libertarian language of fiscal responsibility and free markets, remained committed to moral truths in foreign policy – moral truths which trumped its commitments to small government.[[53]](#footnote-53) America thus had a *moral* obligation to maintain its foreign commitments – the funding to “rich allies” and forward bases condemned by Paul. At stake in the Cold War, for Reagan and the conservatism which brought him to power, were the ideological principles fundamental to western ideals of freedom. When the “crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith,” the proper strategy is to double-down on foreign interventions and commitments against Soviet communism regardless of the price tag.[[54]](#footnote-54) Thus, try as he might, Paul’s libertarian fiscal language showcases the point of social theorist Ernesto Laclau that “Not any position in society, nor any struggle is equally capable of transforming its own contents.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Paul’s foreign policy grounded in fiscal responsibility and a retrenchment of U.S. military commitments drove against the ideological grain of Reaganite conservatism.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the conservative movement was no longer so settled on the question of foreign intervention and American military responsibilities. It was in this new context that neo-conservatives made their case for an emboldened U.S. presence in the world to spread the values and institutions of liberal democracy. However, as the popularity of Bush’s wars in Afghanistan and Iraq faded, Ron Paul’s anti-interventionism found a dragon it could slay, rather than breaking upon the bastion of conservative opposition to Soviet Communism. With this change, and new discursive space opened, Paul’s political identity could viably contend for the hegemonic meaning of “conservatism.”

**IV. Foreign Intervention, Neo-Conservatism, and the Hobbling of a Hegemon**

Foreign intervention was the hallmark of George W. Bush’s presidency, and was the realization of what conservative public intellectual Irving Kristol called the neo-conservative “persuasion” where the U.S., as the dominant military power in the world, “[has] responsibilities, whether sought or not, whether welcome or not […] either you will find opportunities to use [power] or the world will discover them for you.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Neo-conservatism – one among a number of competing ideologies vying to stabilize the definition of what it meant to be a “conservative” throughout the twentieth century – emphasized moral realism and absolute truths in international relations. Birthed in the milieu of conservative debates and contestation over the proper response to the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, neoconservatives committed themselves to a vigorous scheme of foreign intervention on the part of the United States as a bulwark of liberal democracy juxtaposed to Soviet-style tyranny. In the twenty-first century and second Bush administration, neoconservative commitments shifted from a robust opposition to international socialism to a belief in the power of the United States to unilaterally remake the world in the image of liberal democracy through military force. Out of this neo-conservative discourse emerged the now famous think tank “Project for a New American Century” (PNAC) in 1997, committed to defending American interests and spreading American political and social ideals abroad.

PNAC saw themselves as decidedly *conservative* political actors. In their statement of principles released to the press at the think tank’s creation, its founders lamented the lack of a coherent and forceful conservative answer to America’s international role post-Cold War saying, “[C]onservatives have not confidently advanced a strategic vision of America's role in the world. They have not set forth guiding principles for American foreign policy.” At fault for this incoherence, they argued, were the “isolationist impulses from within their own ranks.”[[57]](#footnote-57) In contrast to their conservative colleagues who either rejected arguments for a strong interventionist U.S. foreign policy at the conservative movement’s inception, or those who saw the fall of the U.S.SR as the cue for American retrenchment, members of PNAC made a moral case for intervention. U.S. intervention around the globe was necessary to “to promote the cause of political and economic freedom abroad” and “to challenge regimes hostile to our interests and values.”[[58]](#footnote-58) American principles of political liberalism and free markets were, according to these conservatives, true moral ‘Goods’ which the U.S. was obliged to preserve and propagate throughout the newly Soviet-free world. Shoring up their conservative identity, PNAC and neoconservatives called their program a “Reaganite policy of military strength and moral clarity.” Put another way, the program of vigorous U.S. interventionism was truly *conservative* because it sought to impose the moral ideals of American democracy.

The founders of PNAC: Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz, among others, represent a “who’s who” of George W. Bush’s cabinet and senior officials. First Afghanistan and then into Iraq, military interventions – justified through the neoconservative discourse developed by Irving Kristol and manifested in PNAC – stretched over the course of Bush’s tenure in office. With neoconservatism crystalizing as the hegemonic discourse and identity on the American right during these conflicts (especially at their outset), it didn’t take long for political actors on the left and right to pry at chinks in its rhetorical armor. Starting on the left with expected anti-war protests that channeled into the 2004 presidential election, John Kerry emphasized his anti-war credentials: “I will be a commander in chief who will never mislead us into war.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

While a leftist critique of the wars seems relatively straightforward, it is less clear why the political right could (and did) muster the rhetorical and philosophical resources to challenge neoconservative hegemony. According to Elisabeth Anker’s recent work *Orgies of Feeling* (2014), President Bush’s response to the 9/11 attacks and subsequent invasions partook in a powerful “melodramatic” rhetorical genre. This genre generates “orgies of feeling” which, “arise in response to painful experiences that produce a felt powerlessness because they do not have a clear source. In an orgy of feeling, a new experience of victimization arises to generate a new source when none is readily apparent.”[[60]](#footnote-60) Americans were innocent victims of external terrorist aggression, and thus made virtuous by “locating goodness in national suffering.” Conversely, the aggressor became an evil requiring a retributive response through “unilateral state action against dominating forces.”[[61]](#footnote-61) The language of news media reporting on 9/11 and Bush’s speeches reflected and bolstered this narrative of innocent victimization and retribution. However, the orgy can’t last forever. The melodramatic genre, while powerful, has “difficulty sustaining felt legitimation over long periods” because it requires a constant source of external victimization. In other words, its political resonance and power to mobilize political actors “tends to unravel without fresh injury.”[[62]](#footnote-62)

In the absence of fresh wounds from which to draw melodramatic sustenance, popularity for the wars waned across the political spectrum. Public discontent with Bush’s international forays grew in proportion with the conflicts’ duration. By the end of his second term, public support for the Iraq War had ebbed to only 38% from 72% in 2003.[[63]](#footnote-63) Conservative political actors sought to distance themselves as much as possible from Bush’s neoconservative foreign policy and rejected a claim to his legacy in the 2008 election.[[64]](#footnote-64) It was simply no longer politically feasible to build a viable conservative movement centered on foreign intervention. Tensions and contradictions over the role of the U.S. in the world simmering in the conservative movement for decades boiled over and found fertile ground in a new historical context amenable to innovative reformulations of what it meant to be a “conservative.” The foreign interventions of George W. Bush and their weakened neo-conservative discourse enabled libertarians to make their move and couch their ideas and vision in terms that opposed Bush’s foreign interventions. The “isolationist impulses” in the conservative movement feared by the founders of PNAC had a new lease on an ideological life tied to an innovative libertarian-conservatism. Nowhere is this more evident than in the speeches and political discourse of this new libertarianism’s champion: Ron Paul.

**V. The Creative Rhetoric of Ron Paul**

In the technical language of discourse analysis, the libertarian turn on the American right is an emergent political identity that challenged the hegemonic (neo)conservative discourse by reformulating the floating signifier[[65]](#footnote-65) of “conservative” to include anti-war commitments. Put into plain English, as political actors like those of PNAC tried to define “conservatism” writ large as self-same with neoconservatism, other conservative political actors simultaneously destabilized these efforts by juxtaposing libertarian ideas to their neoconservative counterparts which motivated the “Bush Doctrine,” thereby contesting the meaning of “conservative.” This feat was made possible in the historical context of George W. Bush’s foreign interventions which opened up this discursive space for a radical destabilization of what it meant to be a “conservative” in a way that was particularly advantageous to the extant libertarian discourse circulating in the political imaginary. Paul’s central innovation was to tie conservative political commitments to anti-imperialism, thereby constructing a new chain of associations vying for the “common sense” of the American right.

Twenty years after his first presidential bid, Ron Paul ran as a Republican in 2008 and garnered a large and devoted following. In an election where Barack Obama was perceived as the candidate that appealed to a wide audience fed up with Bush, Paul positioned himself as the real candidate of ‘change’ challenging Obama saying, “You offer no change, you have the same foreign policy, you want more troops in Afghanistan […] you don’t want to deal with the monetary/financial crisis in the country.”[[66]](#footnote-66) In this phrasing, two points are clear. First, Paul is challenging both the former Republican administration’s policies and his Democratic contender’s status as something meaningfully different. Second, he makes this challenge in terms of *foreign policy*, and specifically the foreign intervention in Afghanistan. The financial language is secondary. The rhetorical motif mixing economic language with foreign policy remains from his 1988 campaign, but now with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to give it real relevance, the coupling becomes one sided in favor of anti-war signifiers. While his presidential bid was unsuccessful, the discursive assemblage pairing anti-imperialism to economic policy continued into the first term of Obama’s presidency at the height of Tea Party activism and the zenith of the “libertarian turn.”

More than Afghanistan, the war in Iraq became a favored target of Paul’s and a preferred entrée for his libertarian message. Throughout his many speeches and public appearances after his 2008 presidential bid, rarely did his message go without the framing of opposition to the Iraq War. In 2010 he gave a speech saying “After 20 years of killing and a couple trillion dollars wasted […] the fighting continues with no end in sight […] This war is against ourselves, our values, our Constitution, our financial well-being and common sense.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Once again, he couches his economic libertarianism in terms of opposition to expensive and wasteful spending on war. Perhaps more important in this particular formulation is his emphasis on *values*. The excerpt begins by pointing to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan with “this war.” He then highlights the dangers of war for his audience saying that it is “against ourselves,” immediately followed by an invocation of first principles and the document which, for him, is emblematic of how conservatives ought to evaluate political actions with “our values, our Constitution.” The war does violence to the American people and their most sacred beliefs. It is not until all of these rhetorical pieces are brought forth and assembled that he *finally* invokes the financial conservatism so central to his first run for office in 1988 with “our financial well-being.” Even in the initial framing of the phrase, economic language is subordinated to “20 years of killing.” At work here, two years into Obama’s first term, are the formulations and articulations of a new conservative identity.

Hints of this can be found one year prior in 2009 during his speech at the “Florida Liberty Summit.” In this speech he works at a normative registers saying, “There has been a war going on in Iraq now for over 6 or 7 years, a trillions dollars spent, and thousands of American lives have been lost and hundreds of thousands of other’s lives have been lost […] in order to have liberty protected we have to come to our senses on foreign policy.”[[68]](#footnote-68) This loss of life and the loss of “trillions of dollars” stem from, what he saw, as the same moral hubris central to neo-conservative ideology. The moral good of spreading American liberalism and values emphasized by PNAC and neoconservatives has sacrificed Paul’s moral ideal of liberty. Put another way, the values he points to in 2010 are under assault for the same reason Iraqi civilians are killed: an unconscionable foreign policy that destroys liberty which, for Paul’s discourse, is intimately tied to fiscal policy and the flourishing of human life.

The genius of Paul’s political rhetoric though is not just that he was able to press these disparate elements into the service of libertarianism, but rather that in so doing he crafted a new kind of conservative identity; an identity that has inflected all levels of the American right. While his speeches and political rhetoric rely on opposition to the foreign interventions of the previous Republican regime, Paul simultaneously appeals to principles that resonate with mainstream conservatism, shifting what it means *to be* a conservative. Paul’s attempt to bring these disparate elements into his new libertarian-conservative identity is evident in his addresses to the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in 2009 and 2010. He begins by highlighting the hypocrisy of Bush and the Republican Party calling themselves conservatives, “We finally got the conservatives in charge […] and what did we do? We doubled the size of the Department of Education. I thought we were supposed to get rid of the Department of Education.”[[69]](#footnote-69) For Ron Paul, to be a conservative is to be a principled anti-statist, willing to make the hard policy choices when in office to gut the federal government. In other words, those ‘other conservatives’ simply aren’t worthy of the name, and the identity Paul represents ought to be considered the ‘true’ conservatism.

He justifies this ‘No True Scotsmen’ argument – connecting conservatism with isolationism – by appealing to earlier conservatives in U.S. history. “There was a time when Conservatives had a completely different foreign policy. Back in the older days, back when we had a Robert Taft and others […] they believed we had to follow the Constitution and it was designed to defend this country; nothing more than that.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Here Paul asserts that the *real* conservatives, those who stick to the letter of the Constitution and the values it represents, would never have engaged in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He strikes the same chord in 2010, summarizing it nicely saying “But the bottom line, eventually, for all conservatives…will be, how are we going to pay for it? It’s driving us to bankruptcy. We are now spending 1 trillion dollars a year to manage our world empire.”[[71]](#footnote-71) As before, he ties foreign intervention to libertarian economics, but this time in the service of emphasizing the conservative genealogy of his libertarian vision. He is, at once, challenging the “common sense” of what it means to be a conservative, while drawing legitimacy from a reformulated definition of what that term – and its associated political identity – ought to mean.

At the same time however, Paul not *only* claims that libertarianism is a purer form of conservatism. Instead, he uses conservative notions of rights and even invokes something akin to natural law principles to make his case: “Freedom comes to us in a natural way; it’s in a God given way […] there’s no such thing as Women’s Rights and Minority Rights and Gay Rights and all these things. There’s only one type of right and that is an individual right that has come to us from God.”[[72]](#footnote-72) Here Paul is reminiscent of the evangelical right, mixing biblical justification with Lockean-esque language in a way that places the libertarian individual as the real inheritor and subject of political conservatism. Far removed from the atheistic tendencies of mid-century libertarian thinkers like Ayn Rand, Paul is reconfiguring a libertarian-centered conservative identity with the vestiges of the Christian right and traditionalist values left in the wake of neoconservatism’s decline.

This synthesis bears a striking resemblance to the political vision of many Straussian intellectuals on the American right who emphasize the natural rights of the American Founding as the proper guide to statesmanship. These scholars and public intellectuals connect the Declaration of Independence and its Lockean invocation of natural right to notions of liberty and the “genius” of the Founding generation. This approach to political philosophy is prominent in the conservatism of the “Claremont Institute” through its founders like Harry Jaffa who “s[aw] in the Declaration of Independence the *locus classicus* of philosophic insight for the modern soul […] everything that one needs to know about politics is contained in the expression of the Declaration.”[[73]](#footnote-73) Like Paul, these conservatives challenge their neo-conservative rivals on questions of foreign policy, but for fundamentally different reasons. Where Paul sees Bush’s foreign interventions as a betrayal of conservative fiscal principles, Claremont conservatives see the neoconservative “nation building” effort as the application of a misguided political theory. Writing in 2007, senior fellow at the Claremont Institute and editor of its major publication *The Claremont Review of Books*, Charles Kesler assessed the “Bush Doctrine” and its neoconservative inspiration saying, “underlying the neocons' miscalculation was […] a tin ear for the genius of American democracy. […] The self-evident truths of the Declaration of Independence strike them as slightly presumptuous--a little too much like Enlightenment abstractions.”[[74]](#footnote-74) Put another way, the neoconservatives and those in the Bush administration who pushed for the invasion of Iraq fundamentally misunderstood and flattened the meaning of “democracy.” Concurring with Paul’s opposition to the war in Iraq, conservatives of the Claremont strain see any attempt to install democracy through force as fundamentally misguided and premised on a faulty political science. Democracy, for Claremont conservatives, is a rare thing that goes far beyond its institutional trappings saying “many neocons often don't quite see what a high and difficult calling republicanism is […] By underestimating it and what it requires of its citizens, they conclude that democracy is more easily exportable and transferable than it really is.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

While allies in their criticism of Bush’s foreign interventions, Paul’s libertarianism and the Claremont Institute diverge in their visions for American foreign policy writ large. In a polemical example, writing for the “Ron Paul Institute for Peace and Prosperity,” Professor of economics Thomas Dilorenzo calls the Claremont school “warmongers” and that their Straussian lineage only serves to buttress U.S. imperialism, “But that, you see, is what ‘Straussianism’ is all about: telling you that “the truth” is actually the opposite of what your own lying eyes say it is – at least when it comes to war and foreign policy.”[[76]](#footnote-76) This criticism from Paul’s followers results from the careful distinction Claremont intellectuals make between “democratization” and foreign intervention. As they make clear, there is nothing reprehensible or un-conservative about preventative war “The truth is that the punitive and preventive war components of the Bush Doctrine remain vital to national security and eminently defensible before the voters.”[[77]](#footnote-77) For Claremont intellectuals, the goal of nation building and the faith the neoconservatives had in instituting a liberal democracy was the problem with the invasion of Iraq, not the motivating principles behind foreign interventions as such.

As with his ideological tensions with Reagan, Paul’s libertarianism reasons with its conservative alternatives in a similar way, but reaches very different conclusions. Paul’s discursive innovation in response to the Iraq War is to take the extant discursive linkages shared with the Claremont Institute between the Founding, natural law, and markets and put them into the service of an individualist libertarianism. Put another way, Paul replaces the moral skepticism and atheism of mid-century libertarians with normative foundations in individual rights and principles of the Founding which, for Paul, necessarily entail opposition to foreign intervention. Imperialism, in this light, contrasts with the “American spirit” and the conservatives who claim that the U.S.’s role in the world as the crusader for democracy   
“contradicts what the Founders were wanting.”[[78]](#footnote-78) As the similarities between Paul’s discursive assemblage and the basis of the Claremont Institute’s political philosophy show, Paul taps into a set of ideological resources that are endogenous to American conservatism and its earlier periods of discursive contestation. With the unpopularity of the Iraq War, Paul can reformulate those discursive connections in an innovative way that allows them to coherently serve, simultaneously, as a justification for anti-imperialism and libertarian individualism.

Further evidence of this negotiation comes during a speech given during the 2012 presidential primary in Iowa. In this context, perhaps more than any other, Paul has to navigate the multiple discursive streams of American conservatism and develop a political identity that binds them together. In a telling excerpt, he attempts to neatly combine his libertarian notion of natural rights to pro-life moral commitments:

We cannot play God and make those decisions, all life is precious. If we are to defend liberty and allow people to spend their money as they want, go to the church that they want […] you have to understand where that liberty and that life comes from, it does not

come from the government, it comes from our creator.[[79]](#footnote-79)

Nearing the end of his active political career, the phrasing on display here represents the culmination of all the discursive work traced in the preceding narrative. The recurrent rhetorical combination of financial language with some other aspect of conservative identity is creatively reworked once again. Rather than pitch his economic libertarianism as a superior practical vision for both domestic and international politics, here he frames it in religious and moral language. In this phrasing both “allowing people to spend their money as they want” and “go to the church that they want” partake in the same normative justification in the defense of personal liberty. Moreover, this connection is not merely a call to religious pluralism. Rather, it is explicitly designed to buttress a pro-life conservative worldview as liberty “comes from our creator,” a creator whom “we cannot play” by deregulating abortion. Financial freedom is equated with religious freedom, and the same religiously derived principles which prohibit abortion also promote free market exchange.

His libertarianism is not the “crass materialism” and atheism of Ayn Rand. Rather, it weaves normative claims and values in a complex, innovative, and forceful discourse. This discourse carries the marks of the conservative movement of the twentieth century, earlier paleo-conservatives through his invocation of Taft, the connections of Claremont intellectuals, and, in a negative sense, neoconservatism. By rejecting the neoconservatism’s imperial ambitions and claiming to revitalize the compromised principles of the conservative movement, this new identity both disavows and lays claim to the conservative mantle. Paul’s libertarian-conservatism represents a creative reformulation of what it means *to* *be* a conservative, a reformulation of a political identity. For Paul, and the libertarians who emerged in his wake, it means that opposition to foreign intervention, anti-statism, political liberty, and a commitment to divine origins of natural rights should, and indeed must, hang together in a coherent political discourse that can both resonate in, and cope with, the historical reality of the early twenty-first century.

**VI. Conclusion**

Opposing international entanglements, the welfare state, and the conservative movement from which it sprang, the libertarian turn is at the center of an ongoing ideological struggle for the heart and soul of American conservatism. Inflecting conservative discourse in the grassroots through the Tea Party, institutional life in Congress, and on the national stage in presidential politics, a refashioned libertarian-conservative identity has come to redefine, for many, what it means to be a “conservative” in American politics. This emergent libertarianism is not synonymous with the essentialized brand present in some “fusionist” narratives. Instead, it is a discursive assemblage tying together anti-imperialism, natural rights, free markets, and individual liberties into a coherent political identity. Central to its emergence and political force are the speeches of its champion: Ron Paul. Military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan provided Paul and other libertarian political actors the opportunity to re-forge their political rhetoric to take advantage of changed historical conditions. Mustering the ideological resources of earlier moments of conservative contestation, Paul’s creative rhetoric legitimated a new claim on the meaning of “conservatism” in American politics.

While Ron Paul’s libertarianism did not thrust him to the Presidency, nor has it allowed his son Rand to refashion the GOP, its residue lingers and continues to shape the discourse on the American right. Beyond the decidedly libertarian political actors which emerged in Paul’s wake, from the Tea Party to the Koch brothers, as described above, his opposition to foreign intervention continues to shape conservative politics. At the 2016 Republican Presidential Primary Debate in South Carolina, the most heated exchange centered on the foreign interventions of George W. Bush. Donald Trump, in his bombastic style, said “The war in Iraq was a big, fat mistake” to raucous applause.[[80]](#footnote-80) Ted Cruz, in an interview on Fox News when asked whether or not he thought the U.S. should have invaded Iraq he responded flatly “of course not.”[[81]](#footnote-81) While neither of these candidates labels himself libertarian or claims to be a devotee of Paul, they both purport to be “conservatives.”[[82]](#footnote-82) Without the influence of Paul and his renegotiation of the meaning of “conservatism,” it is hard to imagine that a Republican candidate could simultaneously oppose foreign intervention and remain a credible presence on the American right. Discursive contestation is a messy process, with unpredictable and unstable outcomes that often fly in the face of the intent of political actors. From a narrow perspective, Paul may have been unsuccessful in his attempt to revolutionize American conservatism to match his libertarian vision. However, when deconstructed and analyzed as a discourse, it is apparent that his efforts continue to shape, destabilize, and constitute what it means to be a “conservative” in American politics.

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1. “Identity” in this context and throughout this piece refers to the technical concept of political identification central to Discourse Analysis. Political identification is the social process by which a person has an understanding of themselves “through reference to something [they are] not” (Lena Hansen 2006). Divergent meanings of signifiers are juxtaposed to one another creating a coherent political identity that sets itself against its discursive competitors. For instance, identifying as an “American” is self-same with claiming that one is not “uncivilized” “illiberal” or “foreign.” In terms of this investigation, “libertarians” juxtapose themselves to the ideologies, signifiers, and discourses of other “conservatives,” and through this juxtaposition claim that their political identity ought to be synonymous with the meaning of “conservatism” as such. For an in depth discussion of Discourse Analysis as a method of social inquiry, see: Marianne Jorgensen & Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (2002), Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, (2006), and Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James Hohmann, “Libertarianism Goes Mainstream” http://www.politico.com/story/2013/04/libertarianism-89697.html (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Joshua Green, “The Tea Party’s Brain”(2010), http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/11/the-tea-partys-brain/308280/ (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jesse Walker, “The Taming of the Tea Party” (2012), http://reason.com/archives/2012/11/08/the-taming-of-the-tea-party (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Theda Skocpol & Vanessa Williamson, *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* (2012) p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For an analysis of the white populism of the Tea Party, see: Joseph Lowndes, “The Past and Future of Race in the Tea Party Movement” in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (2012) p.226 ; David Kirby & Emily Ekins, “Libertarian Roots of the Tea Party” CATO Policy Analysis No. 705 http://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/libertarian-roots-tea-party (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* p. 613 (2007), emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See: https://www.edreform.com/in-the-states/know-your-choices/explore-choice-programs/ (accessed: June, 2015). ; George H. Nash, “The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945” (1976) p. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See: http://news.yahoo.com/tea-party-role-debt-bill-raises-gop-eyebrows-214619577.html (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://americansforprosperity.org/about/ ; Matea Gold, “Americans for Prosperity Plow Millions into Building Conservative Ground Force” https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/americans-for-prosperity-plows-millions-into-building-conservative-ground-force/2014/10/06/692469b6-4b35-11e4-b72e-d60a9229cc10\_story.html (both accessed March, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ronald Reagan, “First Inaugural Addressed,” http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/reagans-first-inaugural-government-is-not-the-solution-to-our-problem-government-is-the-problem (accessed: June, 2015). ; See: Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties* (1993) chs. 9 & 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jerome Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (1990) p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ibid., 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. William F. Buckley JR., “Up From Liberalism” (1959) p. 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Jerome Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (1990) p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ibid., 47 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. ibid., 54 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jerome Himmelstein, *To the Right: The Transformation of American Conservatism* (1990) p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ibid., 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. ibid., 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ibid., 49 ; emphasis added, 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (1976) p. 175. While it is beyond the scope of my argument here to lay out the details of Hayek’s aversion to conservatism, the following excerpt gets at the essence of his argument that conservatives commit themselves to using state power to avert change, whereas liberal (and libertarians) revel in the spontaneous changes allowed by an unfettered market: “As has often been acknowledged by conservative writers, one of the fundamental traits of the conservative attitude is a fear of change, a timid distrust of the new as such, while the liberal position is based on courage and confidence, on a preparedness to let change run its course even if we cannot predict where it will lead.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Interview with William F. Buckley, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5KmPLkiqnO8, timestamp 3:10, (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since* 1945 (1976) p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. ibid., 161 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Whittaker Chambers, “Big Sister is Watching You” in *The National Review*,December 29, 1957. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Brett LoGiurato, “John McCain Makes Insulting Comment” http://www.businessinsider.com/mccain-rand-paul-drone-lindsey-graham-wall-street-journal-2013-3, (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Fred Luca, “Dick Cheney’s Swipe at Libertarians” http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2014/09/10/dick-cheneys-swipe-at-libertarians-and-obama-over-the-islamic-state-threat/, (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Robert Locke, “Marxism of the Right” (2005), http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/marxism-of-the-right/ (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Eds. Joel D. Aberbach & Gilliam Peele, *Crisis of Conservatism?: The Republican Party, the Conservative Movement, and American Politics after Bush* (2011), p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ryan Sager, *The Elephant in the Room: Evangelicals, Libertarians, and the Battle to Control the Republican Party* (2006), p.85. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. James Mahoney, “Path Dependence in Historical Sociology” (2000) p. 507. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. As with “identity,” hegemony here refers to the technical term present in discourse analysis. The hegemonic discourse is the most sedimented set of sign and signifiers, the connections between which form what is taken as the “common sense” of politics. Political actors strive to supplant the meanings of one concept (sign) with another, and are often even more ambitious and try to push their own discourse into the limelight of common-sense and dethrone the “hegemonic” discourse. Hegemonic discourses, while unstable like all discourses, emerge when “one discourse comes to dominate alone, where before there was conflict, and the antagonism is dissolved.” (Jorgensen & Phillips 2006, p. 48) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945* (1976) p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Joseph Lowndes, “The Past and Future of Race in the Tea Party Movement” in *Steep: The Precipitous Rise of the Tea Party* (2012) p.226. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Marianne Jorgensen & Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (2002), p. 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. A “Chain of Equivalence” is another concept from Ernesto Laclau that requires some explanation. Simply put, in opposition to a hegemonic discourse (say, Progressive Liberalism in the 20th century), a number of competing discourses unite through a collective identification of what “lacks” in the present hegemon. Put another way, these antagonistic discourses seek to redefine the meaning of signs in ways that are ignored by the hegemonic discourse. These competing discourse form a “chain” based on this shared desire to redefine a sign in a certain way, thus they are “equal in their opposition” to the hegemonic discourse (Laclau 1996, p. 40). Continuing the example, the conservative movement was made up of a myriad of different discourses united in their opposition to Progressive Liberalism and its distributive economics. They were a “chain of equivalence” which succeeded, for many, in reformulating the “common sense” of American politics and economics. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Not to mention popular debate! [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Craig Parsons, *How to Map Arguments in Political Science*, (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. This, I contend, is all of them. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas and Personalities Throughout American History* (2009), p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ron Paul, “1988 Interview” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anmlPvmd1Ew, timestamp 6:55, (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. ibid., timestamp 6:45 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. ibid., timestamp 0:50 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ibid., timestamp 5:00 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. ibid., timestamp 7:20 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Here I am referencing Ronald Reagan’s 1984 camping advertisement, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NpwdcmjBgNA, (accessed: June, 2015). ; Ronald Reagan “Speech on Defense and National Security, 1983” http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Defense\_and\_Security.asp (accessed February, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-joint-resolution/508/all-actions-without-amendments (accessed: February, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. https://www.congress.gov/bill/98th-congress/house-bill/3890 (accessed: February, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ronald Reagan “Speech on Defense and National Security, 1983” http://reagan2020.us/speeches/Defense\_and\_Security.asp (accessed: February, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. https://www.govtrack.us/congress/votes/98-1983/h261 (accessed: February, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Ronald Reagan, “Westminster Speech, 1982” http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2002/06/reagans-westminster-speech [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ronal Reagan “Evil Empire Speech” http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3409 (accessed: March, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (1996), p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Irving Kristol, “The Neo-Conservative Persuasion” in *The Neo-Con Reader* (2004) p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Project for a New American Century “Statement of Principles,” http://www.rrojasdatabank.info/pfpc/PNAC---statement%20of%20principles.pdf (accessed: February, 2016). Note that the webpage for PNAC has since ceased operation. The group reformed in the mid-2000s as “The Foreign Policy Initiative,” see: http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/about [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. John Kerry, “2004 Democratic National Convention Speech” http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25678-2004Jul29.html (accessed: November, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Elisabeth Anker, *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (2015), p. 154. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. ibid., 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. ibid., 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. http://www.pewresearch.org/2008/03/19/public-attitudes-toward-the-war-in-iraq-20032008/, (accessed: November, 2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Linton Weeks “McCain Walks Fine Line with Bush’s Legacy” (2008) http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=94180171, (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. “Floating Signifier,” another term from Discourse Analysis, merits further explanation. Floating signifiers are the linguistic lynchpins, the “nodal points” of their respective discourses. It is these sign which competing discourses seek to destabilize in order to redefine the meanings associated with its surrounding signs. When nodal points are challenged in such a way they become “floating signifiers” or, “the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way.” In other words, these sign are “floating” because, paradoxically, they are central in creating the illusion of a stabilized discourse but, as a result, they are also the least stabilized element of that discourse. If successfully challenged, these rearticulations of meaning will radically alter the discourse and, thus, what sorts of political practices and appeals are deemed legitimate (Jorgensen & Phillips 2006, p. 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ron Paul, “Message to Obama” (2008). http://www.ronpaul.com/2008-06-15/ron-pauls-message-to-barack-obama/, (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ron Paul, “No End in Sight” (2010) http://www.ronpaul.com/2010-07-02/ron-paul-the-war-thats-not-a-war/, (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ron Paul “Florida Liberty Summit Speech” (2009) http://www.ronpaul.com/2009-08-08/ron-paul-end-the-wars-and-bring-our-troops-home/ (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ron Paul “2009 CPAC Address” http://www.ronpaul.com/2009-02-27/ron-pauls-speech-at-cpac-2009/ (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Ron Paul “2010 CPAC Address” http://www.ronpaul.com/2010-02-20/ron-pauls-speech-at-cpac-stop-the-wars-end-the-fed-regain-our-liberties/ (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ron Paul “2009 CPAC Address” http://www.ronpaul.com/2009-02-27/ron-pauls-speech-at-cpac-2009/ (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. William B. Allen, http://www.claremont.org/featured/remembering-harry-v-jaf/ (accessed: March, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Charles Kesler “Iraq and the Neoconservatives” *Claremont Review of Books* (Summer 2007) (accessed: March, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Thomas Dilorenzo http://www.ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/featured-articles/2015/november/09/a-warmonger-s-guide-to-militarism-and-imperialism/ [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Charles Kesler “Iraq and the Neoconservatives” *Claremont Review of Books* (Summer 2007) (accessed: March, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ron Paul, “Independence Day: Have We Lost Our Revolutionary Spirit?” http://www.ronpaul.com/2015-07-03/independence-day-have-we-lost-our-revolutionary-spirit/ (accessed: March, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ron Paul “Iowa Primary Speech” http://www.ronpaul.com/2011-08-13/ron-pauls-speech-in-ames-iowa/ (accessed: June, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Fox News Broadcast of South Carolina Republican Debate 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8cxTaaNZrw, timestamp: 1:42 (accessed: March, 2016) [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Colin Campbell, “Business Insider,” http://www.businessinsider.com/ted-cruz-gives-a-clear-of-course-not-answer-on-iraq-2015-5 (accessed: March, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Which, as the most recent issue of the National Review “Against Trump” argues, Cruz might have greater claim to that title than Trump. See: http://www.nationalreview.com/article/430137/donald-trump-conservative-movement-menace, (accessed: March, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)