



The American Spectator and Ron Paul: Setting the Record Straight

Lord's objective, to put it bluntly, is to expose Ron Paul as a faux conservative, a less than fully honest libertarian who aspires to "remake" the conservative movement in the image of his own "metaphysically" and morally corrupt ideology. In Lord's reimagining of the history of American conservatism, Ronald Reagan is the hero while Ron Paul is his nemesis, the "anti-Reagan."



With all due respect to Lord, I find his argument more than a bit peculiar. In order to convict Paul of the charge of being ideologically fraudulent and "metaphysically mad" — Russell Kirk's description of choice for libertarianism — he leads his readers through a series of mazes of names and quotations. In and of itself, this attempt of Lord's to supply us with something on the order of an abridged intellectual history of conservatism is to be commended, and the actual account that he articulates is not without value. Still, while it is valuable as far as it goes, it doesn't go nearly as far as it must if his case against Paul is to succeed. As it stands currently, his argument fails mightily, and what is most ironic, it owes its defeat to nothing other than itself.

Outside of that of William F. Buckley, the two main voices that Lord calls forth in his effort to condemn Paul as an enemy of conservatism belong to Russell Kirk and George Nash. The former is among "the fathers" of the postwar conservative movement that arose in the mid 1940s, and the latter is an esteemed student of this movement, the author of the widely respected *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America since 1945*.

Now, neither Kirk nor Nash ever refers to Paul himself. But they *do* reference *Murray Rothbard*. This, presumably, is germane to Lord's analysis because Rothbard, apparently, is among those whose thought left an indelible impress upon Paul.

Being the historian that he is, Nash neither criticizes nor praises Rothbard but, rather, locates him — along with such luminaries of the classical liberal tradition as F.A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises — within the libertarian branch of the early conservative movement. With Kirk, however, matters are otherwise.



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Because Kirk's reputation as a progenitor of "modern" American conservatism is questioned by none, and because he had no small measure of scorn for libertarianism generally and Rothbard in particular, Lord evidently thinks that by citing Kirk, he will render self-evidently irrefutable his indictment against Paul, for the latter, you see, drew intellectual sustenance from Rothbard.

This argument, like all arguments of this species, is a double-edged sword. Indeed, how can it not be? Once we embark upon the enterprise of implicating so-and-so in the doings of such-and-such on the basis of a relationship of a sort between them that some third party judges to be bad, it is all too easy for the accused to employ the exact same kind of reasoning against his accuser. Lord, we will see, is especially vulnerable to being snared by the trap that he lays for Paul.

The first point of which we must take note is that for one intellect to be inspired by another, they need not fuse into one. To any remotely educated person, I would imagine, this is a proposition the truth of which is obvious. The "guilt-by-association" tactics that he employs against Paul notwithstanding, even Lord, with just some gentle prodding, will have to concede their illegitimacy.

Augustine and Thomas Aquinas are not only two of the greatest Christian thinkers to whom Christendom can lay claim, they are also among the greatest thinkers who have ever lived. Yet Augustine was as ardent a disciple of Plato as Aquinas was a student of Aristotle. In fact, it has been said that Augustine "baptized" Plato into the Christian faith while Aquinas did the same to Aristotle. Both Plato and Aristotle, living as they did centuries before Christ in the ancient Greek world, were pagans or heathens. Would Lord or any one with a modicum of sophistication dare suggest that Augustine and Aquinas are "frauds" because they were inspired by Plato and Aristotle, respectively?

The examples of Augustine and Aquinas are but two among a virtual infinity of such examples that we could enlist to illustrate the folly of thinking that any two people must be intellectual or ideological clones just because the one is in some measure indebted to the other. It may very well be an understatement to say that Lord is a champion of Ronald Reagan. Would he, though, appreciate being identified with *every* policy and *every* action taken, *every* belief held, and *every* word uttered by the Gipper? We should hardly think so.

Or perhaps we should approach the question of the character of Lord's thought in a manner comparable to that in which he approaches the topic of Ron Paul's conservative bona fides. Lord all but claims that no genuine conservative would dare so much as insinuate that Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity — two figures upon whom he heaps endless praise — are anything but rock-ribbed, full-throated conservatives. But from 2001 to the end of 2008, Limbaugh and Hannity provided practically unqualified support to both President George W. Bush and as his Republican-dominated Congress. Yet this was an administration and a Congress that were responsible for an historically unprecedented growth of the federal government. There is scarcely anything that Bush and his Republicans did while they wielded the lion's share of power that any observer with so much as a superficial acquaintance with it could sincerely and credibly confuse with conservatism.

Because Lord is a fan of Limbaugh and Hannity and they were fans of Bush, presumably Lord is a fan of Bush. If so, that is his prerogative. Still, before the next election, it would only be right for him, through his article at a mainstream right-leaning publication such as *The American Spectator*, to inform readers that, in his judgment, in spite of their gestures to the contrary, neither Bush nor the members of his Republican Congress have anything whatsoever for which to apologize. They are conservatives and they governed as such. In any event, if Ron Paul must buy everything that Rothbard sold lock, stock, and barrel because the former admired the latter, then, on the terms of Lord's own reasoning, because Lord



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admires Bush and Republicans such as Limbaugh and Hannity, we are left with no option but to conclude that he endorses every idea that they have ever pronounced upon.

The point here should now be clear: Just because Murray Rothbard had an impact upon Ron Paul does not mean that the latter necessarily subscribes to *all* of the former's beliefs. Rothbard is a self-professed anarchist. Paul, in sharp contrast, is a "constitutionalist" — i.e., he is *a proponent* of government, albeit *constitutional* government.

Secondly, when Russell Kirk delivers his verdict of metaphysical madness upon libertarians of the Rothbardian variety, he has in mind, not *primarily* their policy prescriptions as much as, well, *the metaphysical presuppositions* underwriting those prescriptions. With their doctrines of "atomized individualism" and "the Rights of Man," libertarians were, in his estimation, the heirs of such reckless "rationalists" and "logic choppers" as the *philosophes* of the French Revolution — exactly those against whom his hero and the "founder" of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke, set himself. In fact, it was in response to the robust metaphysical delusions of the rationalism that was rapidly overtaking his generation that Burke gave rise to what has subsequently come to be known as conservatism.

Neither Kirk nor Burke denies that there is a natural law, and neither denies that there is some sense in which human beings can be said to have "rights." However, these rights, far from being the "self-evident," timeless, and universal abstractions of the rationalist's imagination, are in reality the products of a culturally and historically-specific *tradition*.

Interestingly, Kirk's *The Conservative Mind*, the very book from which Lord gathers his quotations of Kirk to convict Paul, via Rothbard, of being "metaphysically mad," is riddled with shots at Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence. Kirk is quick to remind readers that Jefferson, having availed himself while drafting the Declaration of Independence of the very same idiom of "self-evident" and "unalienable" rights upon which the radicals in France would eventually rely, was unsurprisingly an apologist for their bloody revolution. At this juncture, Lord needs to be reminded that it is this rationalistic conception of rights, as it is expressed in the Declaration, that he and his ideological ilk invoke in justifying *their* bloody revolution — a Middle Eastern revolution that our last President euphemistically characterized as a "Freedom Agenda."

Simply put, the very same grounds upon which Kirk judges libertarians to be "metaphysically mad" he can just as easily draw upon to convict Lord and his neoconservative Republican brethren of the same, for underlying the libertarianism of which Paul and Rothbard are representatives and the neoconservatism to which Lord, Limbaugh, Hannity, George W. Bush, Rick Santorum, etc. have pledged allegiance is one and the same metaphysically erroneous ("mad") conception of rights.

Another consideration that militates against Lord's insinuation that it is the standard libertarian foreign policy that Kirk disdains is the stone cold fact that the latter's views on this subject are much closer to those of Paul than those of Lord. Kirk, were he alive today, would be resoundingly lambasted by the Lords of our world for his "isolationism." Kirk, the man who opposed the first Bush's invasion of Iraq and who spared no occasion to awaken his fellow countrymen (and women) to the mutually antagonistic relationship between war and liberty, would be regarded as *persona non grata* by today's "conservatives." Indeed, perhaps it is because of this that, in spite of the incalculable contributions he made to the very *creation* of the modern American conservative movement, he is scarcely mentioned today.

Third, Lord draws upon George Nash's analysis of the conservative movement to imply that Paul and his



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defenders are being intellectually dishonest when they claim that his “noninterventionist” foreign policy is in keeping with the conservative tradition. Yet if Nash can be said to contradict Paul on this score, he can also be said to contradict Lord, for according to Nash’s interpretation, Rothbard and the libertarians as much belong to the postwar American “conservative movement” as did Kirk and his “traditional conservatives” and James Burnham and his “anti-communists.” On Nash’s reading, there would be no American conservative movement without these three groups.

Of course, Lord is free to quarrel with Nash’s narrative. But he is not entitled to accept and not accept it at one and the same time. From Nash’s perspective, Paul *and* Lord are *both correct and incorrect* when it comes to the relationship between “the conservative movement” and “interventionism”: Some of its adherents have embraced a more aggressive American foreign policy while others have resisted it.

Finally, in the 2006 edition of his magisterial work, Nash adds to “libertarianism,” “traditionalism” and “anti-communism” two other components of the American conservative movement: “neoconservatism” and “the New Right” or “the Religious Right.” This is relevant to the present discussion because Lord misleadingly suggests that “the conservatism” with which he contrasts Paul’s libertarianism is the original or historical article that Paul has only recently arrived on the scene to “hijack.” In truth, it is Lord and his ideological brethren who are the real newcomers to the movement, for the only conservatism that they are interested in advancing is *neoconservatism*. As Nash observes, neoconservatives are typically former “New Deal Democrats” and “socialists” who only recently, as far as the life of the conservative movement is concerned, have begun to awaken from the darkness that has blinded them.

In spite of the shoddiness of Lord’s analysis and the lack of charity with which he treats Ron Paul, it is to his eternal credit that he takes the time to remind our contemporaries that the tradition with which they identify does indeed have a storied and complex history. In this, he supplies us with an invaluable service.



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