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Ryan the RINO?

Is Congressman Paul Ryan a RINO — Republican in name only? Or is he instead a committed champion of the conservative agenda in his role as speaker of the house? The following article sheds light on how conservative Ryan actually is by surveying his public record, including key votes he has cast.



For months, GOP insiders in Washington have been watching the Trump campaign with bated breath, hoping against hope that one of their own could blunt the brash billionaire's momentum. As rival after rival fell by the wayside along the electoral trail, the GOP establishment considered another tack: draft a Washington insider unsullied by the mudslinging of this electoral primary season, and send him into the fray on a figurative white charger to unite the party faithful and cast out Trump and his insurgent legions. The choice for a white knight, to the GOP establishment, was clear: Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, the mild-mannered, consensus-building congressman from Wisconsin, known far and wide as Mitt Romney's 2012 vice-presidential running mate.

Ryan, as it turned out, was not interested in the job of Trump-spoiler, and returned to his thankless duties in the House. In characteristically cautious form, he declined to utter the sort of scathing condemnations of Trump that have contributed to the rift between the Trump camp and the rest of the GOP. But neither did he offer his support.

The plot thickened when, after the Indiana primary, Senator Ted Cruz, Trump's only viable remaining rival in the primary race, withdrew, leaving Trump the presumptive candidate. Once again, Ryan was in the spotlight, with the media and GOP allies wanting to know if he was willing to endorse Trump now that he was likely to be the GOP nominee. Ryan replied, in his usual tactful but telling way, "I'm just not ready to do that at this point. I'm not there right now." He added that he considered the primary responsibility for unifying the GOP to rest on Donald Trump.

The Trump campaign responded with characteristic bluntness when asked at a rally whether it hurt to have the leader of the Republican Party withhold his endorsement of Trump. Trump campaign manager Corey Lewandowski pointed at Trump and said, "That's the leader of the Republican Party."



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Within a few days, however, the Trump campaign adopted a more conciliatory posture. Donald Trump began making the rounds in Washington to seek support from the GOP establishment he had so recently reviled — including GOP presidential candidates he had slighted. Among others, he met with Paul Ryan — and both men emerged from the confidential meeting committed to mending fences. While not yet ready to offer his endorsement, Ryan expressed optimism that Trump and his supporters would find much common ground with GOP conservatives, among whom Ryan numbers himself. “We will have policy disputes. There is no two ways about that,” Ryan told the press. “The question is, can we unify on the common core principles that make our party? And I’m very encouraged that the answer to that question is yes.”

Coming from Paul Ryan, a statement such as this is a signal on behalf of the Republican establishment that they are open to welcoming Trump into their ranks. But of Ryan himself — in contrast to Trump — Americans know little, outside of his vice presidential candidacy and his rise to the House speakership to replace John Boehner last fall. Unlike Trump, Paul Ryan’s life has not played out on national television, and his personality is devoid of the flamboyance that has made Trump a folk hero and media star. But within the Beltway, Paul Ryan, as the ranking member of the House of Representatives, wields an enormous amount of power. His gavel can set the agenda by determining which bills get debated, which issues get a hearing, and which spending projects get priority. Once upon a time, when the letter of the U.S. Constitution was still respected, the speaker of the house — as the leader of the body that holds the purse strings — was the most powerful figure in Washington. And like every other member of the House, Paul Ryan’s career and voting record speak for themselves.

Cruising Through Congress

Paul Davis Ryan was born in 1970 in Janesville, Wisconsin, at the same time that Mitt Romney, his future presidential running mate, was a newlywed student at Brigham Young University. Although he was a high-achieving student and athlete, Ryan’s youth was marred by the death of his father, whom Ryan discovered dead in his bed from a heart attack when he was 16. He went to college at Miami of Ohio to major in economics and political science. There, a libertarian professor, Richard Hart, introduced him to the writings of Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman. Hart also acquainted Ryan with *National Review*, William F. Buckley’s magazine that served as the mouthpiece for the conservative and neoconservative establishment.

Thanks to a recommendation from Hart, Ryan secured work as a summer intern with Wisconsin Senator Bob Kasten (who at last reckoning had endorsed Donald Trump and become a member of Trump’s foreign policy advisory team).

After graduation, Ryan stayed on in Washington, first as a legislative aide to Senator Kasten and later (after Kasten’s 1992 loss to Russ Feingold) as a speechwriter for the conservative advocacy group Empower America. Jack Kemp, one of the founders of Empower America, became Ryan’s mentor during that time. In 1995, Ryan signed on with Kansas Senator Sam Brownback as legislative director, where he worked for two more years before returning to Wisconsin.

By 1997 Ryan, a fifth-generation Wisconsinite, had decided to represent his home state in Congress. He ran successfully for office in 1998, when he was elected representative in Wisconsin’s First District at the age of 28. At the time of his inauguration, Ryan was the second-youngest member of the House.



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Two years after his election to Congress, Ryan married a tax attorney from Oklahoma named Janna Little, and the two have subsequently produced three children.

In his 18 years in the House, Ryan has become known as a consensus builder to his allies and a saboteur of limited government to his detractors. This electoral cycle, he faces a strong primary opponent in businessman Paul Nehlen, a flamboyant Tea Party endorsee and Trump supporter who has portrayed Ryan as complicit in the decline of Wisconsin's manufacturing base.

Ryan's legislative record is a mixed bag, to say the least. Once an ardent student of Ayn Rand and von Mises, Ryan seems to have retreated more than a little from the ideals of limited government and free market capitalism he once wholeheartedly espoused. Ryan's Freedom Index score, as tabulated over the years by The New American, is a tepid 58 percent, earned in no small measure because of his fondness for big spending bills — conservative campaign rhetoric notwithstanding.

Fresh in constituents' memories is Ryan's supporting vote for last December's H.R. 2029, a gargantuan omnibus appropriations bill that authorized \$1.15 trillion in spending for fiscal 2016. Included in the measure were a whole host of sops to congressional Democrats, such as continued funding for President Obama's 2012 amnesty for illegal aliens, amnesty that allowed for illegal aliens to receive work permits and access to federal entitlements. Also included in the bill was funding for refugees from the Middle East and funding for Planned Parenthood, the abortion provider recently caught red-handed attempting to traffic in body parts from aborted babies. In all, the bill raised discretionary spending by five percent over the previous year.

No sooner was H.R. 2029 passed than Ryan began lobbying members of the House Freedom Caucus — many of whom did not support his candidacy for speaker — to garner support for still more big spending envisioned for fiscal 2017 and beyond. In February he met behind closed doors with members of the caucus, and encountered stiff resistance to his plans.

Much of the rancor directed at Ryan was in response to his infamous compromise with Democrats in 2013 to lift the "sequester" caps on government spending, in place since 2009. That effort, a collaboration between Ryan and Senator Patty Murray (D-Wash.), one of the most liberal Democrats in Washington, opened anew the floodgates of spending and debt that had been kept mostly shut since the depths of the Great Recession. The so-called Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013 did not reduce government spending, but instead hiked spending dramatically, and, while no new taxes as such were levied to pay for all the new goodies, airline fees were raised dramatically — which amounted to a tax increase, although called by a different name, as many Republican critics of the deal were quick to point out. By jettisoning the sequesters, the House GOP sent a clear signal to exultant Democrats. "[This plan] makes promises to the American people that are false," Congressman Raúl Labrador (R-Idaho) pointed out at the time. "Today the Democrats realized they were right all along, that we would never hold the line on the sequester."

That deal, which effectively ended what little fiscal discipline Congress had managed to impose on itself in the wake of the Great Recession, was a major reason for skepticism among Freedom Caucus members about Ryan's candidacy for speaker. And with the passage of H.R. 2029 (otherwise known by the unwieldy name of the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016) under Ryan's leadership, their skepticism was borne out.

Ryan is best-known legislatively for his advocacy of such omnibus big-spending bills, but he has also



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supported a wide array of other measures that are just as objectionable on either fiscal or constitutional grounds. In October 2015, Ryan voted in support of H.R. 1314, which eliminated the debt ceiling until March 2017, and also raised caps on discretionary spending for 2016 and 2017. This piece of legislation, essentially a continuation of the sabotage of sequesters and the debt ceiling begun with the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2013, did little to endear Ryan to his more conservative GOP House colleagues.

Ryan voted on two separate occasions in June of 2015 to support Trade Promotion Authority (TPA, also known informally as “fast-track authority”), a measure that would give the president sole negotiating authority over foreign trade deals, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and would limit congressional oversight of such deals to an up-or-down vote on their entirety. Such authority, a popular panacea for Beltway gridlock, amounts to an unconstitutional delegation of authority from the legislative to the executive branch. In the name of streamlining trade negotiations, many in Congress, including Paul Ryan, are apparently willing to cede to the president the authority to “regulate commerce with foreign nations,” as provided for in the U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 8. But perhaps this is not too surprising in light of the many other legislative powers granted Congress in that same section — such as the power to declare war — that have been in effect delegated to the executive branch.

In April 2015, Ryan, along with a large majority in the House, voted in favor of H.R. 1731 (the National Cybersecurity Protection Advancement Act of 2015), a measure that strengthened the already considerable unconstitutional powers of surveillance given to the Department of Homeland Security. In this case, the Homeland Security’s National Cybersecurity Communication and Integration Center was designated the sole federal agency to handle information on alleged cybersecurity threats to public and private networks. As Congressman Justin Amash (R-Mich.) pointed out on the House floor with reference to this and another allied cybersecurity bill, “These bills violate the Fourth Amendment, override privacy laws, and give the government unwarranted access to the personal information of potentially millions of Americans.”

In March of 2015, Ryan voted along with a large bipartisan House majority in support of House Resolution 162, a nonbinding resolution that called on the president to provide military support for Ukraine in its territorial squabble with Russia. This resolution endorses unconstitutional foreign aid — another type of usurpation that has become routine since the post-World War II Marshall Act — and also seeks to involve the United States in yet another overseas conflict that, simply put, is none of our business. While not technically unconstitutional, enlisting the energies of the United States to take sides in foreign conflicts (or “broils,” in the preferred Jeffersonian terminology) was routinely condemned by the Founders as unnecessary and unwise. As late as 1820, no less a founding *eminento* than John Quincy Adams famously reminded his countrymen (some of whom were eager for the United States to take sides in Greece’s war of independence against the despotic Ottoman Empire) that America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” This counsel, unfortunately, has been utterly set aside by American politicians since the mid-20th century, resulting in a seemingly unending loss of American life and treasure in defense of one vaguely defined overseas military objective after another.

Along similar interventionist lines, Paul Ryan voted in June 2014 in opposition to Amendment 51 to H.R. 4870 (the Defense Appropriations Bill), an amendment that would have prohibited any funds from that



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bill to be used in support of Syrian rebels. Representative Jeff Fortenberry (R-Neb.), who introduced the amendment, warned the House that it was impossible to tell friend from foe in the Syrian War, and that weapons sent to supposed “good guys” could easily end up in the hands of extremists. In point of fact, Fortenberry’s (and others’) misgivings have proven prophetic; since the middle of 2015, Syrian Kurdish militias backed by the U.S. military against ISIS have advanced into the Aleppo area — bringing them into direct and repeated conflict with CIA-backed “moderate” Syrian Arab militias fighting the Assad regime. Yet Paul Ryan, along with a House majority still convinced America ought to take sides in the Syrian conflict, voted down Amendment 51.

Ryan also voted against two other amendments to H.R. 4870, Amendment 52 (which would have barred the transfer of military surplus material such as armored personnel carriers, aircraft, drones, and grenade launchers to local police forces) and Amendment 56 (which would have sunsetted the Authorization for Use of Military Force [AUMF] in December 2014, when all U.S. military personnel were slated to be withdrawn from Afghanistan). By opposing both amendments, Ryan went on record, along with the usual majority of his colleagues, in supporting the militarization of America’s local police and the open-ended executive authority to wage war contemplated by the AUMF.

Nor are these recent votes unique. Back in May of 2012, for example, Ryan (along with the usual House majority) voted against an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act that would have ended the unconstitutional practice of indefinite military detention for those suspected of terrorist activities. The previous month, Ryan voted in favor of the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act (CISPA), which gave private corporations legal protection in return for sharing customer data with the government, effectively wiping out consumer privacy and ignoring the Fourth Amendment.

Ryan’s affection for big spending bills did not originate recently, either. In May of 2009, when the nation was still reeling from the Great Recession, Ryan voted in favor of H.R. 2346, a mammoth supplemental appropriations bill to provide \$96 billion in additional taxpayer dollars, above and beyond what had already been spent that fiscal year, for the undeclared wars in Iraq and Syria, \$10 billion in unconstitutional foreign aid, and \$2 billion for flu pandemic preparations.

Even as a junior congressman, before the world-altering events of 9/11, Ryan’s voting record was already spotty, with votes in favor of unconstitutional government pork such as education grant programs (H.R. 2, October 1999) and foreign aid (H.R. 2606, August 1999), as well as mandatory background checks for buyers at gun shows (H.R. 2122, June 1999), to name but a few lapses.

At the same time, Ryan has been fairly consistent in his support of key “social conservative” issues, such as the right to life. In April 2000, for example, he voted in favor of H.R. 3660, which would have banned partial-birth abortions.

By all accounts, Ryan is a personable, decent family man with strong religious convictions and a tremendous work ethic. However, he is less than consistent on many issues — ranging from foreign aid to government spending to the growth of the domestic police state — with strong constitutional implications. His is very much the voting profile of a “big government conservative” in the tradition of Beltway neocons who have always been selective in their professed reverence for limited, constitutional government.

In view of his record, Ryan’s recent votes and willingness to accede to key agenda items of the Democratic Left should be surprising to no one. Whether he can learn from his many staunch



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constitutionalist colleagues in the House — such as Justin Amash and Raúl Labrador — and become something other than “John Boehner with better abs,” as one of his colleagues recently styled him, remains to be seen.

Photo of Congressman Paul Ryan: AP Images



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