



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 16, 2014

Has Rand Paul “De-Reaganized” Himself?

For roughly a century after the Civil War, Republicans felt duty-bound to “get right with Lincoln.” Indeed, reverence for “Honest Abe” became so thoroughly ingrained in the nation’s political thinking that by the middle of the last century, nearly all presidential hopefuls of whatever party would claim to be “right with Lincoln.” As Lincoln scholar David Donald noted in his 1956 book, *Lincoln Reconsidered*, in the 1948 election the Truman Democrats, Henry Wallace and his Progressive Party and, of course, Tom Dewey and the Republicans all claimed to be the political heirs of the Great Emancipator. Strom Thurmond and his followers in the States’ Rights or “Dixiecrat” party, on the other hand, were likely more restrained in their praise of Lincoln, if they mentioned him at all.



Republicans today seem obsessed with the need to “get right with Reagan.” Any policy or proposal must be judged by the degree to which it conforms with or departs from the principles espoused by the “Gipper.” Thus when Senator Rand Paul (shown, R-Ky.) said in an interview with ABC’s Jonathan Karl that the United States should consider a policy of containment of, rather than military confrontation with, Iran over that nation’s nuclear program, the *Washington Post’s* resident superhawk, columnist Jennifer Rubin, [declared](#) Paul was “seemingly oblivious to the implications of what he was saying.” What’s more, Paul had committed the unpardonable sin: He had “de-Reaganized” himself. To be sure, Paul, a likely 2016 presidential hopeful, appeared to distance himself from the Republican establishment as much as or more than from the Obama administration by his dissent from the line that the mere containment of a nuclear Iran is unthinkable.

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“I’ve repeatedly voted for sanctions against Iran. And I think all options should be on the table to prevent them from having nuclear weapons,” Paul said on Sunday’s *This Week* program. But he would not rule out a policy of containment, should efforts to thwart a nuclear program be unsuccessful. “They said containment will never ever, ever be our policy,” Paul said. “We woke up one day and Pakistan had nuclear weapons. If that would have been our policy toward Pakistan, we would be at war with Pakistan.” Yet regarding Iran, some people “beat their chest and say, by golly, we’ll never stand for that, they’re voting for war,” he said.

“No GOP elected leader or 2016 contender would agree with him. In fact, no elected Democrat probably would, either,” Rubin wrote in her “Right Turn” column at the *Post*. “It has been the position of three presidents that a nuclear-armed Iran is intolerable. It is an existential threat to Israel. It is not simply that it is ‘not a good idea’ for Iran to get the bomb. He is far, far outside the mainstream on this — and



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far to the left of President Obama. Hillary Clinton would eviscerate him on that point and win over a chunk of Republicans. Whatever her faults on foreign policy, at least she understands that we can't allow Iran to get a bomb and that suggesting we could consider it destroys our negotiating position and military threat."

Obviously, it won't do to have a Republican presidential contender less wedded to military threats than GOP elected leaders, or even Hillary Clinton. If that attitude had prevailed a dozen years ago we might have missed the chance to go to war with Iraq. Analysts have noted that, in fact, Paul's statement, far from constituting appeasement, raises the question of why he has supported even the economic sanctions against Iran, since all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies have yet to discover evidence that Tehran has begun to "weaponize" its nuclear program. And if a nuclear-armed Iran would be "an existential threat" to Israel, why not let Israel, already a nuclear power, deal with that possibility?

One poll after another has shown that after simultaneous protracted wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (where the war continues in its 13th year), war-weary Americans are not itching for another military conflict. This goes for Iran as well as Ukraine. Even as U.S. warships are "buzzed" by low flying Russian fighter planes in the Black Sea, most Americans are not eager to bait the Russian Bear.

"Unsurprisingly all the polls show that Americans don't want to get too involved in Ukraine's problems with Russian encroachment, just as they have been disinclined to get drawn into other recent world trouble spots, including Syria, Egypt and Libya," according to an April 1 Pew report. "This is not surprising because in record numbers, Pew Research Center surveys find Americans saying the U.S. should mind its own business and let other countries get along as best they can." Yet Rubin insists Paul's remarks in the *This Week* interview will "haunt" him, with the ghost of Ronald Reagan following him from now to 2016.

"It definitively de-Reaganizes him," Rubin wrote. She continued, "Reagan did not say maybe we wouldn't *necessarily* respond to a Soviet strike or maybe they'd win and we lose the Cold War." (Emphasis in original.) Actually, Paul didn't say anything remotely like that with respect to Iran. He was not talking about an Iran attack, but about the possibility of Iran possessing nuclear weapons. A policy of containment implies the element of deterrence: A potential enemy is deterred from using his nuclear weapons by the certainty of a retaliatory attack that would destroy his country as thoroughly, if not more so, than his attack has destroyed his foes.

"The idea that Reagan would consider allowing a reckless enemy of the United States with terrorists at its beck and call get the bomb is preposterous," Rubin claimed. "One Republican wisecracked via e-mail, 'Ronald Reagan is probably spitting his coffee out up in heaven this morning.'"

And some Americans no doubt spilled their coffee upon hearing of the Iran-Contra scandal that erupted midway through Reagan's second term. Jonathan Chait, writing on *New York* magazine's "Daily Intelligencer" blog, noted how greatly at odds the confrontational policy espoused by Rubin is with Reagan's actual dealings with Iran.

"Reagan would never allow a reckless enemy with terrorists at his beck and call to develop serious weapons," Chait wrote with obvious sarcasm, parroting Rubin. "He might give them weapons on his own, sure. But he'd never say something reasonable about the subject." The reference is to the Reagan administration's sale of arms to Iran in an effort to obtain support for release of Americans held hostage by pro-Iranian terrorists in Lebanon. According to a *New York Times* report of December 4, 1987, the United States over a year's time "shipped Iran 2,004 TOW anti-tank missiles, 120 Hawk anti-aircraft



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missiles and various missile spare parts.” This, of course, was during the Iran-Iraq war, where we supported and armed Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

Granted, they weren’t nuclear weapons we gave to Iran, but it was a formidable supply of weapons that could kill a lot of people, including Americans soldiers should we in fact go to war with that portion of what President George W. Bush labeled the “axis of evil.” And it was sent to Tehran with the blessings of the man the Republicans have all but canonized: the great Ronald Reagan.

Photo of Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.): AP Images



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