

POLITICS

Rand Paul's Mixed Inheritance

By SAM TANENHAUS and JIM RUTENBERG JAN. 25, 2014

The libertarian faithful — antitax activists and war protesters, John Birch Society members and a smattering of “truthers” who suspect the government’s hand in the 2001 terrorist attacks — gathered last September, eager to see the rising star of their movement.

With top billing on the opening night of the Liberty Political Action Conference, Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky told the audience at a Marriott in Virginia that a viable Republican Party must reach out to young people and minorities.

But not long after the applause died down, Mr. Paul was out the door. He skipped an address by his father, former Representative Ron Paul, as well as closing remarks by his own former Senate aide, an ex-radio host who had once celebrated Abraham Lincoln’s assassination and extolled white pride.

The senator was off to an exclusive resort on Mackinac Island, Mich., where he again talked about the future of the party. But this time he was in the company of Karl Rove and other power brokers, and his audience was of Republican stalwarts who were sizing up possible presidential candidates.

As Rand Paul tries to broaden his appeal, he is also trying to take libertarianism, an ideology long on the fringes of American politics, into the mainstream. Midway through his freshman term, he has become a prominent voice in Washington’s biggest debates — on government surveillance, spending and Middle East policy.

In the months since he commanded national attention and bipartisan praise for his 13-hour filibuster against the Obama administration’s drone strike program, Mr. Paul has impressed Republican leaders with his staying power, in part because of the stumbles of potential rivals and despite some of his own.

“Senator Paul is a credible national candidate,” said Mitt Romney, who ran for president as the consummate insider in 2012. “He has tapped into the growing sentiment that government has become too large and too intrusive.” In an email, Mr. Romney added that the votes and dollars Mr. Paul would attract from his father’s supporters could help make him “a serious contender for the Republican nomination.”

But if Mr. Paul reaps the benefits of his father’s name and history, he also must contend with the burdens of that patrimony. And as he has become a politician in his own right and now tours the circuit of early primary states, Mr. Paul has been calibrating how fully he embraces some libertarian precepts.

“I want to be judged by who I am, not by a relationship,” Mr. Paul, a self-described libertarian Republican, said in an interview last week. “I have wanted to develop my own way, and my own, I guess, connections to other intellectual movements myself when I came to Washington.”

Coming of age in America’s first family of libertarianism — he calls his father, a three-time presidential aspirant, “my hero” — Rand Paul was steeped in a narrow, rightward strain of the ideology, according to interviews, documents, and a review of speeches, articles and books.

Some of its adherents have formulated provocative theories on race, class and American history, and routinely voice beliefs that go far beyond the antiwar, anti-big-government, pro-civil-liberties message of the broader movement that has attracted legions of college students, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and Tea Party activists.

That worldview, often called “paleolibertarianism,” emerges from the Ludwig von Mises Institute in Alabama, started with money raised by the senior Mr. Paul. It is named for the Austrian émigré who became an intellectual godfather of modern libertarian economic thinking, devoted to an unrestricted free market.

Some scholars affiliated with the Mises Institute have combined dark biblical prophecy with apocalyptic warnings that the nation is plunging toward economic collapse and cultural ruin. Others have championed the Confederacy. One economist, while faulting slavery because it was involuntary, suggested in an interview that the daily life of the enslaved was “not so bad — you pick cotton and sing songs.”

Mr. Paul says he abhors racism, has never visited the institute and should not have to answer for the more extreme views of all of those in the libertarian orbit.

“If you were to say to someone, ‘Well, you’re a conservative Republican or you are a Christian conservative Republican, does that mean that you think when the earthquake happened in Haiti that was God’s punishment for homosexuality?’ Well, no,” he said in an earlier interview. “It loses its sense of proportion if you have to go through and defend every single person about whom someone says is associated with you.”

Still, his 2011 book, “The Tea Party Goes to Washington,” praises some institute scholars, recommending their work and the institute website.

And he has sometimes touched on themes far from the mainstream. He has cautioned in the past of a plan to create a North American Union with a single currency for the United States, Mexico and Canada, and a stealth United Nations campaign to confiscate civilian handguns. He has repeatedly referred to the “tyranny” of the federal government.

Since becoming a national figure, Mr. Paul has generally stayed on safer ground. His denunciations of government intrusion on Americans’ privacy have been joined by lawmakers in both parties and have resonated with the public — though no other member of Congress as yet has joined him in his planned class-action suit against the National Security Agency.

He has renounced many of the isolationist tenets central to libertarianism, backed away from his longstanding objections to parts of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and teamed with members of the Black Congressional Caucus in calling for an easing of drug-sentencing laws. He recently unveiled a plan for investment in distressed inner cities.

Much of that is in keeping with the left-right alliance Mr. Paul promotes, an alternative to what he dismisses as a “mushy middle.” Such partnerships, he says, “include people who firmly do believe in the same things, that happen to serve in different parties.”

In recent months, potential rivals for leadership of the Republican Party have depicted him as an extremist. Before the recent investigations into political abuses by his administration, Gov. Chris Christie of New Jersey said Mr. Paul’s “strain of libertarianism” was “very dangerous.” And Senator Ted Cruz of Texas told donors in New York that in a national campaign Mr. Paul could not escape Ron Paul’s ideological history.

Mr. Paul is not the first political son encumbered by a father’s legacy, but his mantle is unusually heavy. He has been his father’s apprentice, aide, surrogate and, finally, successor. Side-by-side portraits of father and son adorn one wall in his Senate conference room.

“We both believe in limited government,” Mr. Paul said. “We believe in a strict, or originalist, interpretation of the Constitution. We both believe that foreign policy has been too overreaching.”

Still, he has seen the consequences of Ron Paul’s unwavering approach. “Unlike his father, he’s not interested in educating,” said John Samples, an analyst at the Cato Institute who knows both Pauls. “He’s interested in winning.”

If so, some libertarians wonder, how faithful will Rand Paul remain to the movement that nurtured him?

Ronnie, his older brother, said, “My dad stuck with, pretty much, ‘If it ain’t in the Constitution — boom’; pretty hard core, and that gave him 10 percent of the country that would die for him, absolutely.”

He predicted that his brother would cede ground where he must, but stay true to the grand cause. He “is willing to work with them a little bit on things that in his mind really aren’t important,” Ronnie Paul said. “But there’s no question he’s still trying to get to the same place.”

Apart From the Crowd

Mr. Paul, 51, stands out in the somber Beltway forest of dark suits. An ophthalmologist, he has the rumpled mien of a graduate student, with his unkempt graying curls, wrinkled khakis and floral ties. He sometimes pads onstage in

sneakers, and aides cringed at images of him on a visit to Silicon Valley last spring wearing the black mock turtleneck he refuses to bury in a drawer. At 5-foot-7 or so, he will sometimes step in front of a lectern, lest he disappear behind the microphone as he talks about the evils of taxation or a Big Brother “surveillance state.”

Mr. Paul's marathon filibuster in March instantly transformed him into a leader of a party seeking a fresh message, even as he found unlikely fans in the American Civil Liberties Union and Jon Stewart.

But tucked into Mr. Paul's lengthy monologue — its 76,000 words would fill a 300-page manuscript — was another narrative, told in a sprinkling of obscure references. He cited the Posse Comitatus Law of 1878, which restricted the federal government's use of the military to enforce laws in this country and is seen by libertarians as a vital barrier to totalitarianism; *Lochner v. New York*, a 1905 Supreme Court decision that struck down Progressive-era workplace regulations; and the theories of Lysander Spooner, a Massachusetts abolitionist who turned against the North in the Civil War, which he deplored as unjust aggression against the Confederacy.

These arcana drew little notice — except among dedicated libertarians, who took them as evidence of Mr. Paul's solid mooring in a subset of ideological axioms. The Spooner reference, in particular, excited those attuned “to the dog whistles of anarchism,” said Brian Doherty, a libertarian writer. “In my particular community, that was a big, big day.”

The education of Rand Paul began in the movement's political center in the mid-1970s: the kitchen table of his family's ranch house in Lake Jackson, Tex., a suburb of Houston.

Ron Paul, an obstetrician who disliked Medicare and Medicaid and other government programs that he viewed as encroaching on personal freedom, was infuriated when Richard M. Nixon instituted wage and price controls and took the nation off the gold standard.

Mr. Paul ran for Congress in 1974 and lost to the Democratic incumbent. But it was the first of many occasions in which the house at 101 Blossom Street doubled as campaign headquarters, often drawing the libertarian movement's philosophical vanguard and grass-roots supporters.

“There were always people there,” recalled Mary Jane Smith, who managed several of Mr. Paul's campaigns. “There were books all over the place.” When the grown-ups gathered in the kitchen to plot election strategy or discuss political philosophy, Rand — then called Randy — hovered nearby, “always listening,” Ms. Smith said.

Ron Paul encouraged his children's interest. “I'd come up with a question, and he would say ‘Here, read this book,’ or ‘Here's a book that I started with when I was first asking those questions,’ ” Ronnie Paul said. “He would just feed us as we asked.”

There was plenty to absorb. Libertarianism had reached a critical stage.

Sketching the Outlines

Adherents often trace its roots back to the small-government ideals of Thomas Jefferson. The term libertarian — adopted by 19th-century European anarchists — would eventually become the movement associated today with the novels of Ayn Rand, the economics of Milton Friedman and the antitax campaigns of Grover Norquist, as well as quixotic causes like full legalization of drugs.

But during the tumult of the late 1960s, when many people rebelled against Washington and the two parties, a small band of intellectuals sketched the first outlines of the alliances Rand Paul has embraced.

One of those thinkers was Karl Hess, a former speechwriter for Senator Barry M. Goldwater, the Arizona conservative. “Libertarianism is the view that each man is the absolute owner of his life, to use and dispose of as he sees fit,” he wrote in *Playboy* magazine in 1969. Who needed politics and its two calcified parties, Mr. Hess argued, when citizens could govern themselves through “voluntary” association and cooperation?

This principle would reach fruition in the digital age, with its informal networks, entrepreneurial problem solving — and community of underground hackers.

Mr. Hess, who died in 1994, was ahead of many others in envisioning this brave new world. “Instead of learning how to make bombs,” he suggested in 1970, “revolutionaries should master computer programming,” the better to

commit “clerical sabotage” against government “bureaucracy.” One of his disciples, Louis Rossetto Jr., would later start *Wired* magazine, the original bible of the Internet age.

If Mr. Hess was the movement’s visionary, its political strategist was Murray N. Rothbard, an economic historian at the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. Formerly a “hard-right” Republican, he, too, had been seeking to break the stranglehold of the two parties, which he argued had perpetuated an oppressive “warfare” and “welfare” state.

Together, they urged campus conservatives, many of whom opposed the Vietnam draft, to work with the left-wing Students for a Democratic Society. Out of this strange-bedfellows coupling came the Libertarian Party, which fielded its first candidates in 1972, though they drew little notice and few votes.

But when the left-right alliance came unglued over drug use and sexual freedom, Mr. Rothbard and others reoriented the movement back to the right.

It was then that Ron Paul emerged, offering a refreshing new face and voice. He was grounded in libertarian doctrine, but presented it as homespun common sense. Clean-cut (many libertarians had beards and long hair) and plain-spoken, he personified heartland values, with his small-town medical practice and his large family of honor students and sturdy athletes. Rand Paul and his two brothers starred on their high school swim team.

In 1976, Ron Paul made it to Congress. Alone among his siblings, Rand interned in his father’s Capitol Hill office during summer vacations. When Mr. Rothbard visited from New York, Rand chauffeured him to the airport. He also made the drive to work with his father and his chief of staff, Llewellyn H. Rockwell Jr., a former book editor who had brought out new editions of Ludwig von Mises’ work.

“I got to hear all kinds of great conversations on the way to work about philosophy, politics, religion, you name it,” Rand recalled in 2009 as a guest on Mr. Rockwell’s online radio program.

Ron Paul’s brain trust also included Hans F. Sennholz, a professor at Grove City College, a Christian college in Pennsylvania, and columnist for *American Opinion*, the showcase publication of the John Birch Society. Gary North, a Paul aide, was a proponent of “Christian Reconstructionism,” the Bible-based political ideology that propelled Michele Bachmann into politics. This blend of economic and religious themes shaped Mr. Paul’s congressional agenda.

He introduced dead-end bills to abolish the Federal Reserve, eradicate the Department of Education, neuter the Environmental Protection Agency and curtail the Supreme Court’s jurisdiction over abortion. Mr. Paul, who declined interview requests, occasionally found common cause with liberals, especially in opposing Cold War military spending.

Rand was engrossed in his own course of libertarian study: He received a set of Ayn Rand novels for his 17th birthday. And he followed the rock band Rush, some of whose lyrics had libertarian themes.

Gary L. Gardner Jr., a high school friend, said: “I remember even back then being on a swim team bus and a Rush song comes on. I think it was the song ‘Trees’ — and he said, ‘Man, listen to the words of this, you know those guys have got to be conservative.’ ”

“The Trees” tells the story of maples, overshadowed by tall oaks, that form a union to bring equality to the woods “by hatchet, ax and saw.”

Austria and the Old South

Rand Paul’s difficulty separating himself from harder-edge libertarianism was brought home last summer. The *Washington Free Beacon*, a website tied to hawkish conservatives, reported that one of his Senate aides, Jack Hunter, had a long trail of provocative statements — some made when he was a radio host calling himself “the Southern Avenger.”

A leader of the Charleston, S.C., chapter of the secessionist League of the South, Mr. Hunter had praised John Wilkes Booth. For two weeks, Mr. Paul stood by him amid news media attention, but finally let him go.

Why, some conservatives were asking, did the senator not act more swiftly? And why was Mr. Hunter — whose commentary Mr. Paul called “stupid” — even on his staff?

One explanation might be that Mr. Hunter, who was the official blogger in Ron Paul's 2012 presidential campaign and co-author of Rand Paul's Tea Party book, was respected by some libertarians. Another might be that his hostility to Lincoln and the North was not so different from the views of close associates of the elder Mr. Paul, Mr. Rothbard and Mr. Rockwell. In 1982, they founded the Mises Institute.

Housed in a brick-and-limestone building near Auburn University's football stadium, the institute is overseen by Mr. Rockwell, who declined to be interviewed. When a New York Times reporter requested a tour recently, Mr. Rockwell asked him to leave, saying he was "part of the regime."

The institute sponsored lectures, seminars and conferences to promote the teachings of Mises and other "Austrian School" economists. But its offerings also range further afield. A conference this month in Houston — with Ron Paul as a speaker — included lecture topics like "Do We Live in a Police State?" and "American Fascism."

Mr. Rockwell and Mr. Rothbard, both Northerners, became sympathetic to the Old South and its politics of states' rights. Mr. Rockwell continues to praise the South's resistance to civil rights legislation, while Mr. Rothbard, who died in 1995, promoted writings of Lysander Spooner — the anarchist mentioned in Rand Paul's filibuster speech — that he said accurately assessed Lincoln's war policy of "militarism, mass murder and centralized statism."

They envisioned a libertarian alliance with "cultural and moral traditionalists" who shared a dislike for everything from environmentalism to postmodern art. Mr. Rothbard applauded the "right-wing populism" of David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan member who ran for governor of Louisiana, and ridiculed "multiculturalists," lesbians and "the entire panoply of feminism, egalitarianism." Some of these ideas found their way into Ron Paul newsletters that became an issue during his campaigns.

Both Pauls have disavowed such sentiments, though they have praised Mr. Rothbard's writing on free-market economics. Rand Paul describes Mr. Rothbard in his first book as "a great influence on my thinking" when he was a young man.

Several current Mises fellows and associates are regulars on the Ron Paul speaking circuit and affiliated with his home-schooling curriculum or foreign policy institute. Thomas E. Woods Jr. was a co-author of "Who Killed the Constitution?," which denounced the Supreme Court decision desegregating schools, *Brown v. Board of Education*, as "a dizzying display of judicial imperialism."

Walter Block, an economics professor at Loyola University in New Orleans who described slavery as "not so bad," is also highly critical of the Civil Rights Act. "Woolworth's had lunchroom counters, and no blacks were allowed," he said in a telephone interview. "Did they have a right to do that? Yes, they did. No one is compelled to associate with people against their will."

Rand Paul has offered a similar critique. Such arguments derive from an economic precept embraced by many libertarians: Government should not impede the free flow of commerce or dictate the personal or business transactions of citizens.

But the senator said last week that his libertarian principles do not stretch to "revisionism" about the Civil War or to disagreement about the *Brown* decision. In his 2011 autobiography, though, he endorses books by Mises scholars that make such arguments.

"I'm not saying they don't write some good things," Mr. Paul said in the interview. "I'm just saying I'm not associated with them."

As for Mr. Hunter, his former aide, Mr. Paul said he had dismissed him because he "wanted to make sure that everyone in the public knew we were not associated with any of those ideas." The senator said he had not been aware of "any of his writings."

Mr. Hunter disavowed his Civil War views in an article for *Politico* last fall, though he also wrote, "Senator Paul had known that I used to wear a Confederate wrestling mask" as a radio host and "still sometimes used the Southern Avenger moniker."

For some observers, the episode reinforced a belief that the senator's early immersion in his father's movement can make him tone deaf to how its more provocative theories can sound to outsiders.

“For a normal, politically astute person — regardless of political philosophy — you look at somebody’s résumé and you say, ‘Oh, you were the Southern Avenger who wrote things about how John Wilkes Booth didn’t go far enough,’ that would raise alarm bells,” said Bruce Bartlett, a former Ron Paul aide who worked for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

But of some libertarians, he said: “They spend so much time inside the bubble they forget everybody doesn’t share their commonly shared views.”

Political Groundwork

Rand Paul’s political persona emerged at Baylor University, soon after he arrived on campus in 1981. He headed the local chapter of the Young Conservatives of Texas, a group started by Stephen Munisteri, a former Ron Paul adviser and the current chairman of the Texas Republican Party.

“He impressed everybody with his go-gettiness,” Mr. Munisteri recalled.

In addition to inviting politicians to give talks, the group assessed the performance of Texas state legislators, issuing a report card on their voting records. Raymond Hughes Dillard, an alumnus who was involved with the organization, remembered debating Mr. Paul on issues like drugs, gambling and prostitution, with Mr. Paul making the libertarian case that they were victimless crimes.

“It was clear that growing up he had much different discussions than most people did around the table,” recalled another former Young Conservatives member, Karen Guillory. “What your belief system was, clearly in his family, was a topic of frequent conversation.”

Like his father, Mr. Paul went to Duke Medical School — which accepted him after his junior year on the strength of his stellar Medical College Admission Test scores. But even with demanding course work, he plunged into his father’s 1988 Libertarian Party campaign for president.

On road trips, the two would hold nonstop debates, Ron striking purist positions on foreign policy and military interventions while Rand hewed closer to Republican orthodoxy. “They would have knock-down, drag-out fights,” said Eric Dondero, a Ron Paul aide.

“I’d be driving. Dad would be in the back fumbling with the map,” Mr. Dondero said. “And they’d go at it.”

Mr. Paul’s campaign drew less than 1 percent of the vote, and he retreated to his private practice in Lake Jackson. But Rand stayed active.

After the first President Bush reneged on his “read my lips” promise to resist tax increases, Mr. Paul, then 28, tapped into the resulting ferment, founding the North Carolina Taxpayers Union. “You’ve got the steam, the anger and the heat,” he told a citizens group in Fayetteville in 1991. “Now you’ve got to focus it.”

After moving with his wife, Kelley (she urged him to shorten his name to Rand), to Bowling Green, Ky., in 1993, he renewed his antitax crusade by forming Kentucky Taxpayers United.

The group was small but it gave Mr. Paul a perch on “Kentucky Tonight,” a debate program on the Lexington PBS station KET. A frequent panelist, he fluently advanced libertarian arguments. He equated Medicare with Soviet socialism and charged that critics of President George W. Bush’s proposal to create private Social Security accounts believed “Big Brother” should dictate personal investments since “we’re all too dumb to take care of ourselves.”

Local party leaders, if they noticed Mr. Paul, dismissed him.

“I never took the guy very seriously in his early days,” said Jim Skaggs, a former Warren County Republican Party chairman. “He was sort of a right-wing radical.”

Ron Paul’s 2008 presidential campaign was a boon for his son. He sometimes stepped in for or warmed up crowds for his father, whose antiwar, anti-Wall-Street and anti-drug-war message resonated on campuses.

“The biggest thing I’ve learned from my dad is he’s had adoring crowds of 8,000 at Berkeley, and 6,000 at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University,” Rand Paul said in one of several interviews for this article. “That’s an amazing feat to have people coming out in one of the most liberal universities and one of the most conservative.”

In July 2009, when Kentucky’s junior senator, Jim Bunning, announced his retirement, Mr. Paul sprang forward, drawing on some of his father’s staff, his formula for online fund-raising and his grass-roots following. On

the eve of his formal campaign announcement, Mr. Paul went on the program of the conspiracy-oriented, libertarian-leaning radio host Alex Jones.

At Mr. Jones's urging, Mr. Paul promised to resist any overtures from the so-called Bilderberg Group — more than 100 movers and shakers in politics, industry and finance who meet each year for informal discussion. Mr. Jones claims the group is conspiring to create a unitary “world order.” Mr. Paul also warned against the creation of a North American Union, modeled on the European Union.

Mr. Paul sometimes got tangled in the nettles of his ideology. His noninterventionist foreign policy and opposition to foreign aid — upon which Israel relies — prompted a flood of donations from major Jewish and neoconservative groups to Trey Grayson, the Republican rival who had been backed by Senator Mitch McConnell, the state's most powerful figure.

In a meeting with the editorial board of The Louisville Courier-Journal, Mr. Paul revisited the perceived sins of the Civil Rights Act. Next came a 20-minute grilling by Rachel Maddow, the MSNBC host, in which he tried to explain how the libertarian principle of voluntary association entitled businesses, but not the government, to practice bigotry.

Still, his calls for slashing the budget and eliminating the Department of Education and the Federal Reserve resonated with Tea Party followers. And his criticism of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the Patriot Act and detentions at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, had broad appeal.

“We underestimated Rand's ability as a political maneuverer,” Mr. Skaggs, the former local party chairman, said later.

Once Mr. Paul won the primary, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which had supported Mr. Grayson, sent a senior strategist to lend expertise and channel Beltway advice. The operative, Trygve Olson, seemed an unlikely choice. He had worked in Eastern Europe for the International Republican Institute, a State Department-funded organization that promotes democracy abroad — what Ron Paul denounced in Congress as harmful meddling.

Uneasy about venturing into the alien territory of the campaign headquarters, Mr. Olson surprised Mr. Paul at his ophthalmology office. Mr. Paul readily accepted the help. Among the recommendations: Accept debate coaching from a McConnell adviser, and cancel an imminent “Meet the Press” interview.

Mr. Paul's victory in November was hailed by his father's longtime followers. “The beginning of the end of the globalists is here,” Mr. Jones, the radio host, proclaimed.

As a rookie senator, Mr. Paul initially was perceived as an irritant, his goal not to legislate but to disrupt.

He proposed cutting the federal budget by five times as much as party leaders. He nearly caused the Patriot Act to expire by aggressively seeking changes before its reauthorization. And he tussled over detention policy with Senator John McCain of Arizona, who would later label Mr. Paul and like-minded Republicans, including Senator Cruz, “wacko birds.”

But Mr. Paul had already begun a subtle makeover. His second book, “Government Bullies,” published in 2012, does not mention the Mises Institute or its affiliated scholars. (The book proved embarrassing last fall when journalists discovered that it included plagiarized material, which Mr. Paul attributed to sloppiness.) He emphasized his support for Israel with a visit there last year and told a black audience that he had “never wavered” in support for the Civil Rights Act.

These shifts have alarmed some followers, as has Mr. Paul's increasingly cordial relationship with Senator McConnell, whom he once depicted as the embodiment of the Republican establishment.

In recent months, Mr. Paul has dined with Karl Rove and the donors of the major Republican “super PAC,” American Crossroads. He also met with Rupert Murdoch, whose properties include Fox News and The Wall Street Journal.

Some foreign policy “realists,” who think the Republican Party should temper its approach, have praised Mr. Paul’s emphasis on diplomacy over belligerence. After hearing Mr. Paul make that case in a Washington speech this month, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said in a brief interview, “I was surprised and impressed.”

But plenty of conservatives remain wary. Michael Gerson, a speechwriter for the second President Bush, wrote in *The Washington Post* that Mr. Paul’s ideas on civil rights and America’s role overseas threaten to “demolish a century and a half of Republican political history.”

The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, assailing him for defending Edward J. Snowden, the former National Security Agency contractor who leaked classified documents about the agency’s spying, said he was unsuitable as commander in chief. “As president, Mr. Paul couldn’t behave like some A.C.L.U. legal gadfly,” the editorial said.

Mr. Paul sometimes muses aloud about his prospects in 2016. “Imagine what a general election would be like it were myself and Hillary Clinton,” he said in an interview last June. Asserting that the Democrat would be more hawkish than the Republican, he added, “You’d totally turn topsy-turvy the whole political spectrum.”

Playing the Game

Rand Paul was a presence at the Liberty Political Action conference in September, a reunion of sorts for supporters of Ron Paul’s 2012 presidential campaign, even though he barely flitted through.

“I want a tiny revolution,” said Dave Wahlstedt, from Minnesota, selling T-shirts that read, “Don’t Drone Me Bro!” At a booth nearby, Matt DeVries, from Iowa, complained about the growing infringements of traffic cameras and speed traps. Other tables were sponsored by the Young Americans for Liberty, an outgrowth of Ron Paul’s presidential bids.

“We exist to maintain the infrastructure to mobilize young people willing to work on a Rand Paul campaign,” Jeff Frazee, the organization’s leader and a former Ron Paul aide, said in an interview.

The speakers included a spokesman for the National Association for Gun Rights (formed in opposition to the National Rifle Association, which is seen as too accepting of gun-regulation laws); Bruce Fein, a lawyer who represented Mr. Snowden’s father (Rand and Ron Paul helped enlist him); Brian Bieron, an eBay executive (Rand is a champion of technology and the Internet); and Mr. Hunter, the former aide, who had served as a kind of master of ceremonies at the previous year’s conference but had a diminished role this time.

The night before the convention closed, Ron Paul took the stage to the whanging guitar opening of “Revolution” by the Beatles. He delighted the audience when he facetiously suggested, “Let’s repeal 1913,” the year the Federal Reserve Act and the 16th Amendment, which authorizes a federal income tax, were passed.

The crowd applauded again when Mr. Paul said, “People keep trying to drive wedges between me and Rand.”

Rand, of course, was long gone by then, meeting in Michigan with Republican Party functionaries and donors. But the libertarians at the Virginia conference were not troubled.

Rand is not Ron, was the consensus. Brent Conrad, a videographer from Duncansville, Pa., said: “Rand played the game to stay in the game.”

Research was contributed by Kitty Bennett, Alain Delaqueriere, Jeff Roth and Derek Willis.

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