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GOP candidate Ron Paul's dream: To restore the Republic

By Michael Brendan Dougherty - The American Conservative

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At first glance, he looks like every other congressman in the Canon Building. His suit is dark. His tie is striped. He is convivial with his colleagues, who genuinely like him. But there is something different about Ron Paul.

You can hear congressmen when they walk down the hall, strutting their own importance. After all, there are regulations to be implemented, special interests to serve, a teetering American Empire that would collapse without their management. They wear black or cordovan leather shoes -- captoes, wingtips and brogues -- clacking down the hall, their bellies full of medium-rare steak from Capital Grille. They are surrounded by ambitious interns and legislative aides. They fiddle with their BlackBerries. You can't miss them tromping out of the elevators.

Ron Paul is easy to overlook. He takes the stairs; he does not have an entourage. You can't hear him coming because he's wearing plain black tennis shoes. In a bag he carries a can of soup that he will heat for himself in the microwave in his office. Beneath pictures of Austrian economists Frederick Von Hayek and Ludwig Von Mises, he will eat his lunch alone and in peace.

What is the purpose of Ron Paul's candidacy for the presidency of the United States? Some longshots run because their egos demand it. Others want to raise their lecture fees. Some run because they have plenty of money and nothing better to do. Following a flood of viewer requests, the Texas congressman recently appeared on Fox News to explain himself. His answer was buoyant though laconic: "I want to be president because I have this dream. I'd like to reinstate the Constitution and restore the Republic." His answer was also revolutionary.

Paul's doggedness in advancing the causes of individual responsibility and limited government could intimidate almost anyone who clings to the label "conservative" or "libertarian." Perhaps that is why he avoids those abused designations and calls himself a "constitutionalist." His philosophy is simple: "no government intervention, not in personal life, not in economic life, not in affairs of other nations."

Naturally he opposes almost everything Congress does. The physician cum congressman earned the nickname "Dr. No" early on. His opposition to what he considers unconstitutional spending even earned the grudging respect of GOP leaders. When Newt Gingrich cracked the whip on party members to support a messy budget compromise, he excused Paul from the duty to support the budget, and the "Ron Paul exemption" entered the congressional vocabulary. What did it take for other members to earn this privilege to buck the party? A voting record that opposed all unnecessary federal spending, even in their home district. No one else has been granted the exemption.

When Paul does propose legislation, it is simple, direct and radical. He's compiled an impressive list of bills that remain ignored to this day. HR 1146: To end membership of the United States in the United Nations. HR 776: To provide that human life shall be deemed to exist from conception. HR 1658: To ensure that the courts interpret the Constitution in the manner that the Framers intended.

His cheerful consistency doesn't end there. Paul not only votes against nearly all government spending, he has refused to be the beneficiary of it as well. As a physician specializing in obstetrics and gynecology, he has delivered more than 4,000 babies. He accepted no money from Medicare or Medicaid, often working for free for needy patients. With his support, his five children finished school without subsidized federal student loans. He has refused a congressional pension.

Monetary policy is the issue that brought Paul into politics in the '70s. Having read deeply in the Austrian school of economics, he was incensed at President Richard Nixon for going off the gold standard and ran in a special House election in the 22nd district of Texas.

It still preoccupies him. Paul gave a thrill to surviving goldbugs in the first GOP debate this year when he referred to "sound money." Since bimetallism and William Jennings Bryan shuffled off the political stage, widespread passion about monetary policy has been in short supply. But for Paul, the issue is still one that pits the people against the Beltway: "I think it's very convenient for them (politicians) not to worry about it -- whether they are spending money they don't have for a war, whether you are liberal

and like big welfare or a neoconservative and you like entitlements. They know somehow or another if the taxes come up short, there is a system, of course they know we borrow it and they complain about that, but I complain about the printing to pick up the shortfall. It's such a serious problem."

This is what he refers to as the "inflation tax." With a paper currency, Paul says, "You get too many bubbles. And people suffer. Whether it's the NASDAQ bubble or the housing bubble. It's also the reason people are poor. ... There is this transfer of wealth from the poor to the middle class to the very wealthy. And it leads to conflict. There are lots of people in this country who haven't had an increase in real wages in 30 years. The Republicans deny it. And the Democrats say, 'Well we need more taxes on those who have too much.' They tax productivity to give it to others. I would not immediately close the doors on the Federal Reserve. But the doors may get closed if there is a monetary crisis. There are no paper currencies that last for a long period of time."

While he lost his first re-election to a Democrat, Paul came back to win in a 1978 rematch, then won again in 1980 and '82. He later lost a 1984 Senate GOP primary to Phil Gramm. Not wanting to be a lifelong politician, he returned to the practice of medicine full time. Tom DeLay won his seat.

Paul ran as the Libertarian candidate for president in 1988, "just to talk to about the issues" in his own recounting. He drew a meager 0.47 percent of the vote but found an enthusiastic following.

In 1995, he decided to run for the 14th Congressional district, which had been redrawn to include his home in Lake Jackson. His opponent, Greg Laughlin, despite being a recent Republican convert, received the support of the party establishment, including then-Gov. George W. Bush. Paul's return to congressional politics was based on the results of the '94 Republican Revolution: "I thought, 'Maybe they are serious and they will shrink the size of big government.' " Paul sighs recalling that burst of optimism, "but there was no truth to that."

His second go-around in the capital focused on many of the same issues that animated his first tour. His principles never changed, though some of his libertarian supporters have been dismayed by his stands on trade deals and immigration.

While Paul considers himself a staunch free trader, he opposed CAFTA and deplored its predecessor, NAFTA. Paul explains, "I was on the side of the protectionists, and I'm not a protectionist. It's not true free trade. It's special-interest trade. It's managed trade. ... I didn't like the trade deal because it was another level of government and a loss of sovereignty."

On immigration, Paul finds himself on the side of restrictionists. On LewRockwell.com, Paul outlined a six-step approach:

1. Physically secure the border.
2. Enforce current visa laws.
3. Reject amnesty.
4. End welfare state incentives to immigrants.
5. End birthright citizenship.
6. Standardize legal immigration rules and waiting periods.

When questioned about what he'd say to libertarians who disagree with him, Paul was brusque: "If they don't agree, they'd have to be anarchists, and I'm not. I do believe in a responsibility to protect our borders, rather than worrying about the border between North and South Korea or Iraq and Syria, and I think that's a reasonable position."

Increasingly, foreign intervention has come to dominate the political discourse. "I had concentrated on monetary policy," Paul said. "Over the years I've learned to tie that in with the war policy. You can't fight wars without inflation. You never have a war without inflation. ... The '70s were hectic times. We had 15 percent inflation, interest rates went to 21 percent, we had the highest unemployment since the Depression. It came as a consequence of the philosophy of guns and butter. And of course the same thing exists today, except one thing is a lot worse: There are many more dollars circulating around the world, and we've lost our manufacturing base."

He believes the Republican Party lost its way by not remaining the peace party. Recently, when speaking to a group of skeptical conservative journalists, Paul pointed out in his grandfatherly tone, "In 1952, Eisenhower ran as a peace candidate. In 1968, Nixon ran on obtaining peace with honor." Paul also mentions that Bush won, in part, by touting a "humble foreign policy." Even warmongers won elections that way: "Wilson ran on peace. FDR, same thing."

When he is inevitably asked if he is running for the right party, Paul states plainly, "I don't think the Democrats have any intention to change our policies in the Middle East. I want the antiwar position to be traditional, conservative and constitutional, and not only for the far Left. I don't object to the Left being opposed to the war. But that Michael Moore image is not going to persuade housewives. I think a lot of Republicans have forgotten their traditional position of being antiwar."

Making the antiwar message broadly appealing may be difficult for Paul because of his temperament. The exchange between Paul and Rudy Giuliani in the South Carolina debate raised Paul's profile nationally but was thought to have been the moment when Giuliani won the debate. After Paul explained that terrorists attack the United States not because they hate our freedoms but because they hate our policies, Giuliani rephrased his answer to suggest Paul thought America "invited" the attacks. He said he'd never heard such an idea and declared it "absurd." Paul didn't back down, but he gave a technical response about "blowback" that, while correct, didn't connect with the audience emotionally. He was hit hard, and while he didn't drop to the mat, he didn't hit back.

At a press conference later, Paul presented a list of books to inform Giuliani that, indeed, policies do have consequences. On the list were the "9/11 Commission Report," "Blowback" by Chalmers Johnson, and "Dying to Win" by Robert Pape. Michael Scheuer, former head of the CIA's Osama bin Laden unit and author of "Imperial Hubris" appeared alongside Paul. The press conference underscored both the strength and weakness of Paul's personality as a candidate: His professorial approach makes it difficult to dismiss his views as "loony," but the academic style doesn't motivate people to rally to him. His manner is always refreshing but rarely stirring.

When asked how he would confront his opponents' charges, Paul's answers are as straight and flat as a Texas highway. "The media would love it if you got real, real personal. But I just have trouble drifting from the issue itself. ... I'm challenging them to think about policy. Nobody, liberals or conservatives, Republicans or Democrats wants to challenge overall Middle East policy. It is sacred. There's oil. There's the neocon idea of spreading democracy. There's Israel. You just shouldn't dare challenge our eternal presence in the Middle East. So they attack the messenger in a personal way."

When asked if any Republican constituents who had initially supported the war have thanked him for his foresight, he shrugs and says, "Some, but not too many. Someone told me once: 'They never forgive you for being right. They'll always forgive you for being wrong if you apologize.' "

Paul understands that electing him president wouldn't by itself "reinstate the Constitution and restore the Republic." He is a realist: "You just can't turn one switch and solve every problem. You have to build coalitions. I'd put a lot of pressure on Congress to live up to their responsibilities." He does know what he can do on Day 1 of the Paul presidency. His first act would be to begin cleaning up the mess we've made in the Middle East: "What you could do in 10 minutes to send a signal to the world that things were going to be different is tell the Navy to turn around and leave the shores of Iraq. We have two aircraft carriers there, another arriving, and seven ships that just moved into the Persian Gulf. I would just tell them to turn around and leave. Tell the region that this isn't my approach, and I'm willing to talk. I think that would immediately raise our standing in the world tremendously."

It's a vision that will inevitably be ridiculed as naive by the imperial intelligentsia who helped American into this mess. But it's also so noble in its simplicity that it is already causing Americans who are tired of the warfare state to look at this mild-mannered physician and see the politician they've always wanted: a man of unbending conviction, of proven fidelity to a strict interpretation of the Constitution.

After his latest debate appearance, Ron Paul's name leapt ahead of Paris Hilton in Google searches. Bill Maher, who had given him a tough time weeks earlier on his HBO show "Real Time," became desperate to invite him back for this season's finale, declaring "he's my hero."

Grover Norquist has said of the good doctor that in Congress "one Ron Paul is grand; and 218 Ron Pauls would be even grander; but 20 Ron Pauls could cripple the party since the usual half-steps toward less government and less taxation might not find support among the more ideologically rigorous."

Fanatics, dreamers and constitutionalists long for the day when hundreds of Ron Pauls disinterestedly discuss monetary policy and the philosophy of the founders each morning between the trees that line New Jersey and Independence avenues. In the afternoon, they can go into the Capitol and maintain the Republic by leaving most of us alone. On weekends, they can fly home. We'll even let them wear comfortable shoes if they want.

But until the day when scores of Ron Pauls overrun the Capitol building in sneakers, we have one man who heats his own soup and fights for the Republic, not the Empire. If America elects him president, he'll sit atop a bucking federal beast that withstood the taming of convinced small-government riders like Ronald Reagan and Calvin Coolidge. It would be a wild ride for the thin, unassuming Texan. He

might never forgive us for putting him in the saddle.

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