



Episode 1,195: Did Trump Eclipse the Libertarian Moment?

Guest: Dan McCarthy

WOODS: You have an article in *The Spectator* which is very interesting and I think will be interesting to the folks listening. Any time you write something, I want to talk about it, but this particular piece I thought is really food for thought. And it may not be what libertarians and a libertarian audience will want to hear, but we don't shy away from telling other people what they don't want to hear, so it might be useful for us to listen to what you have to say. Your thesis is that when Trump came along, he basically sucked the energy out of the so-called libertarian moment, and that what we're actually seeing now is quite a startling reversal of fortune when we look back at the energy of the Ron Paul campaigns. To see what there is in its place now is — well, even some people who thought, *Sure, there's going to be some retrenchment without Ron Paul around*, might think, *Wow, I didn't think it would be quite like this*, and that all the energy would be transferred to another movement.

MCCARTHY Well, that's right. You've seen that just a few weeks ago, it looked like libertarians would have a chance to maybe keep Mark Sanford in the U.S. Congress and to nominate in Virginia for the U.S. Senate a guy by the name of Nick Freitas, who seemed to be fairly libertarian-leaning for a Republican. And Mark Sanford lost his primary. Freitas also lost his primary. And in both cases, the candidates, these libertarian-leaning Republicans were seen as being insufficiently pro-Trump by primary voters. And Trump himself came out and was very critical of Mark Sanford.

So the liberty movement, the freedom movement, what everyone wants to call it, had had some significant successes within the past decade. If you look at after Ron Paul's first run for the presidency as a Republican in 2008, you had this sort of ground swell of libertarian-leaning Republican candidates. You had people like Justin Amash and Thomas Massie get into the U.S. House, and of course you had Rand Paul get elected to the U.S. Senate. But since then, the tide seems to have gone out again, and this year has been off to a very bad start for libertarian-leaning Republicans.

WOODS: Let me just think about the enthusiasm level. Trump had a very high enthusiasm level, but it doesn't seem to be the same demographic that was enthusiastic for Ron Paul. So it's not necessarily that those people just shifted over to Trump. I mean, a handful of them did, but I don't think most of them did, so is it right to say that Trump did this, or could it just be the lack of a viable libertarian alternative to this?

MCCARTHY Well, I'd say that most Republican grassroots and conservative-leaning grassroots, however one wants to define that, you know, they weren't necessarily libertarians. They weren't necessarily Trump-style nationalists, either. There's a lot of voters out there on the

political right, broadly defined, who are kind of waiting for someone to come along and to clarify their philosophy and clarify the battles that need to be fought right now. So it's not the case necessarily that Ron Paul voters switched over en masse to become Donald Trump voters or anything like that; it's rather that the kind of voters who were not necessarily aligned with anything but who were hungry for a powerful and polarizing message, who were willing to listen to someone like Ron Paul back in 2008 and 2012, I think those voters and a large number of others wound up being very excited by what they heard from Donald Trump in 2016 and have continued to hear from him.

And I think the reason for that is simply that Donald Trump in 2016 was by far the most anti-establishment Republican candidate. He was someone who was genuinely exciting to grassroots voters because he seemed like the guy who was coming along and was going to completely sweep away — "Drain the swamp" of course was the phrase he used — but sweep away so much of what it was that Americans had come to find extremely frustrating about their government in Washington.

WOODS: Now, you say in this piece that Rand Paul ran a campaign that a pundit writing about him would easily have been able to distinguish from that of, say, a Ted Cruz or a Marco Rubio. But when you're looking at Republican primary voters, not to say that these aren't necessarily intelligent people, but a lot of them are people who don't specialize in observing politics, and they just in their spare time catch a glimpse of one or the other, and it's not clear that the distinctions that a pundit might observe are going to be evident to the average voter. And Rand, for all his distinguishing factors, was not — and it seems like, as you say in your piece, it was a deliberate strategy to distinguish him a bit, but not all that much. And I think that was a strategy to try to appeal better to the Republican base. The trouble is the Republican base would then say: well, why don't I just go with Ted Cruz then? Because at least he's not wacky on foreign policy, or at least unreliable on policy. Yeah, I've heard Rand's objections that he would do this or that intervention, but I'm not sure I believe it.

So my question is: at the time — because you now look at this and you say that turns out to have been a mistake. And maybe specialists at the time couldn't have known that was a mistake, because it seemed like the sensible thing to do from the point of view of just strategic politics. But then when Donald Trump changed all the rules we realized that maybe that was an out-of-date strategy. At the time, I'm just curious, did you favor Rand's approach to campaigning?

MCCARTHY Up to a point, but you know, I have this memory — and I not can't recall whether it was early sort of in the 2012 cycle with Ron Paul or in the 2016 cycle with Rand. I was thinking it was Rand, but now I kind of halfway think it may have been with Ron Paul's second campaign. But I remember getting a piece of campaign literature right at the beginning of cycle from one of the polls where the entire piece of campaign literature was all about term limits for Congress. Now, this was —

WOODS: Oh my gosh, I'm falling asleep already.

MCCARTHY [laughing] Term limits was, you know, one of the dorkiest ideas of the 1994 so-called Newt Gingrich revolution, and it didn't really go anywhere, and you could make a case for term limits, sure, but you could also make a case against them, because what it winds up doing is actually weakening Congress and congress people in particular relative to their own staff, who stay and become sort of experts and learn how to manipulate their congressmen.

And also relative to the executive branch, which tends to also have people who kind of rotate in from time to time. But in any case, term limits, why on earth was this the thing that any libertarian-leaning Republican would choose to focus on?

So whether or not that was actually Rand, and I have this horrible feeling now that it may actually have been a piece of 2012 Ron Paul literature — but in any case, you see this weakening of the Ron Paul revolution, the Ron Paul insurgency that got started in 2008, and just gradually it becomes more and more a kind of, "Yes, we're Republicans; we're just like all the other Republicans, but we're slightly different. We're going to cut taxes a bit more. We're going to take down regulations a bit more. And we're really serious about term limits this time, guys. Newt Gingrich may be running for office again, but you can't trust him, but we'll do the term limits stuff." It's just what political consultants think is a nice kind of middle-of-the-road way of getting conservative voters.

And of course, that's not the approach that Ron Paul personally took. Ron Paul was always out there challenging voters. He was saying things that shocked people about foreign policy in particular when he confronted Giuliani in South Carolina in 2007, for example. And Donald Trump did the same thing. Donald Trump also went to South Carolina and blamed the Bush family, the Bush dynasty for the Iraq War, said it was a disaster. And these kinds of really confrontational approaches to politics that you saw with Ron Paul and then with Donald Trump turned out to be much, much more successful than dredging up term limits again from 1994 and trying to basically be an ordinary, generic Republican, only a little bit more of a generic Republican than the others.

WOODS: I still recall a conversation you and I had where we were doing a postmortem on the Ron Paul presidential campaign, and I don't know which one it was, but you were saying to me that, regardless of what failings the campaign staff may have had, the fundamental problem that Ron is coming up against is that Republican primary voters are turning on their televisions and they have a preexisting set of expectations of what should be coming out of the mouth of the person they're going to vote for. And it's great that Ron generates a lot of energy among a lot of new people for the things he says, but he's not — it turns out that the people who are just uttering platitudes about America and limited government and our future are actually singing from the hymnbook of these people. And Ron isn't, and so they don't vote for him. Am I remembering that conversation more or less correctly?

MCCARTHY You know, I don't remember myself, but I will say, obviously, there are a lot of habitual Republican voters, the sort of people who voted for Mitt Romney in 2012 or voted for John McCain in 2008. I think Ron Paul did pretty much everything that it was possible for him to do, with a very sort of uncompromising pro-liberty, constitutionalist message, and I don't think there was much of anything that Ron Paul could have done that would have dramatically changed the results of either of his runs in 2008 or in 2012, which does raise an important point. Even aside from the fact that a lot of voters have pretty conventional ideas, even the voters who have a more sort of drain-the-swamp and sort of throw-the-bums-out-of-office approach are not necessarily wanting to drain the swamp or throw the bums out simply because they have libertarian instincts.

I think Murray Rothbard was actually very correct when he talked about the need for a kind of — libertarian populism wasn't really his word, but he certainly looked at the populist elements of the Pat Buchanan campaign in the 1990s, and he said this is something that libertarians need to understand. They need to figure out why middle Americans really hate the way their

government has developed. But not just their government. They also hate the way our popular culture has developed. They hate the way kind of cultural elites have been depicting their sort of lower-class citizens or the citizens who are sort of politically unfashionable and politically incorrect. And Rothbard was, you know, I think much more correct about how to go after those voters than I think anyone who could have sort of advised a libertarian-leaning campaign. The professionals don't think about this stuff, but Murray Rothbard did.

WOODS: I remember in one of the debates Rand interrupted – if you're going to interrupt, it'd better be really good. He interrupted to point out that Trump alone on that stage refused to say whether he would endorse the nominee. Now, I think later on he did pledge that he would endorse the nominee, under tremendous pressure. But he wouldn't make that pledge, and Rand interrupted to say, *Look, everybody, you see? He won't pledge to support our nominee.* Why was that actually ineffective, do you think?

MCCARTHY It's just not – I mean, if you're up there on the stage and your whole point is there's a reason you're running, that you're the only person who can defeat Hillary Clinton, for example, that you're the only person who represents whatever true version of conservatism you might be up there to present, whether it's libertarian, whether it's constitutionalist or something else, neoconservative, whatever – but if you're willing to say that if anyone on stage can do the job just as well as you can, I think it really undercuts your sales point. But also it's just a kind of – again, it's the go-along-to-get-along, let's-all-be-just-the-same-team, let's-all-be-generic-Republicans kind of approach.

Now, that said, you pointed out even Donald Trump comes along and sort of truckles to that in the end. There's a tremendous amount of political pressure. It's really something where the party has a lot of – you know, they'll come at you from all sides to get you to do it. So it's not like there's a – it's not like I would be disappointed in a candidate who wound up saying that he was simply going to vote for the Republican nominee. But you can see what the problem is. The problem is that it's an opportunity for you to resist and to show your independence and to show why you're uniquely valuable, and if you don't take that opportunity, it winds up undercutting you.

WOODS: Do you think Rand could have competed with Trump if he had run differently? Or was it rather that the man and the moment had met, and moreover, the message was the message of the moment and that really Rand, given the constraints of the positions he holds, really could not, no matter what fancy campaign strategy work he did, have made a respectable showing?

MCCARTHY I tend to think that's right. I think the thing that – only a radical, radical kind of campaign – which, at the time, I certainly would not have recommended to Rand – would have had the remotest chance of upending Donald Trump or creating a completely new movement, which probably would have wound up leaving the Republican Party. And that is if Rand had taken the kinds of positions that his father had had taken, if he had been really bold on something like the Iran deal, for example, and on sort of getting out of various foreign commitments – if he had basically outflanked Donald Trump with an anti-establishment libertarian message instead of an anti-establishment nationalist message, as Trump had – I still think that probably would have lost, but there would have been maybe a 2% chance that that could have shaken things up in a really, really dynamic way. Instead, I think Rand took a very realistic approach, but a very realistic approach against someone who's as much of a game-changer as Donald Trump was turned out just to be ineffective.

And we saw that with all the other candidates as well, and they all had very well-paid consultants and they'd all spent years kind of cultivating these positions for themselves as Mr. Conservative – you know, Scott Walker, he was someone who was very well liked by movement conservative types. Ted Cruz had obviously sort of owned himself very carefully to become a kind of constitutionalist who was not necessarily a libertarian. And all of them fell short. Hurricane Donald swept through them all, and that's because Donald was something totally new and also something totally where, you know, just grassroots voters could look at Donald Trump, they could look at the way he behaved onstage, the way he talked about the media, the way he talked about the left, and they could say: this is a guy who's going to fight for us. And I think they looked at all the others and they said: you know what? These guys have their programs, and they have their policies and advisors, but none of them have a sort of fight in their hearts. And I think when people feel like there's a great urgency, then you're going to go with the fighter. You're not going to go with someone who's a technocrat.

WOODS: So what it boils down to is that what some people may have mistaken for a libertarian moment was really an anti-establishment moment that then got more or less swept away by the Trump anti-establishment moment, because he was perceived to be the most anti-establishment guy around. So what does this mean for libertarians today? Do they have any prospects? Or for them to have any prospects, what would they need to do, in your opinion?

MCCARTHY Well, I think there are two signs of hope for the libertarians. On the one hand, there is this idea that the next generation in politics is going to be very different from what we've seen up to now. So I think groups like Young Americans for Liberty, for example, any number of other libertarian youth-focused efforts, they're having an effect. They're electing people to state legislatures, and there will come a time when these people who've been elected to state legislatures are prepared to run for national office. And they might be very impressive, and they might stick to a very strong kind of libertarian program. Similarly, maybe the country is going to move in a kind of culturally left-libertarian direction, as well. Maybe Millennials and the generation behind them as well are going to be people who like the idea of entrepreneurship and like the idea of free markets, but who also tend to be kind of culturally drifting towards kind of left-wing identity politics or something. Those things might happen.

But it seems to me that we have a political system that is fundamentally drained of legitimacy. It's fundamentally drained of any connection with the public. And it's not just the elected offices. It's not just – I mean, if you look at polling, it's shocking what the American people, what their approval rating is when it comes to Congress. Congress is meant to be the branch of government that's closest to the people, but instead, Congress routinely has single-digit or low double-digit approval ratings from the public. That's a sign of a dramatic loss of legitimacy.

And it's not just these formal institutions, however. This loss of legitimacy applies to the very class of people – highly educated, sort of technocratic in their approach, living in cities for the most part. This entire ruling class is seen as being not only illegitimate, but even hostile to the interests of people who live in Iowa, for example. Maybe not the ethanol addicts out there, but ordinary Iowans. Someone like Donald Trump was able to come along and crystalize that. He was able to say: look, there is an entire sort of system here that is against you, and I'm going to come here and disrupt that system and I'm going to do it on behalf of the voters

in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin — these middle American states that have been kicked around.

I think libertarians conceivably could also kind of appeal to that sentiment, but to do that, I think they have to, again, revisit Rothbard. They really have to reconnect with the idea of what it is that drives this anti-elitism and anti-establishment politics. And it may not be a fundamentally libertarian philosophy that drives that, but I think it's also not a fundamentally any other kind of philosophy either. It really is just a sentiment, an awareness that the people who run this country are generally not running it for the benefit of ordinary Americans.

WOODS: I've spoken to a lot of Tea Party groups and conservative groups, and I give them libertarianism, but I explain it to them in a way that their brains are ready to accept. And I don't mean to make these people sound like aliens. I mean that would be true of any group that's unfamiliar with what I'm going to say. I know who they are. I've stood in their shoes before. I know the categories they use, the way they think, and I can explain what I believe in ways that get them on their feet, cheering. So I'm still convinced that the right messenger can convey these things to them in ways that would be effective and that would resonate with them. The question is: who is that person going to be? Now, in 2020, it seems highly unlikely that anybody is seriously going to primary Trump — unless you're just grandstanding to try to build up your name recognition, but that doesn't seem like a good long-term political strategy for anybody. So first of all, how do you see 2020? Is it a certainty that Trump will run again?

MCCARTHY I think it's a certainty. There's a lot of talk in Washington, D.C. from people who may or may not have specialized knowledge. I wouldn't say inside knowledge, exactly, because I don't think there's any inside knowledge that really counts unless you're inside Donald Trump's head, and there's only one guy who's inside Donald Trump's head and that's Donald Trump. But no, there are a lot of people in D.C. who think that Donald Trump doesn't want to run again, and that just doesn't match with my observations at all. I think Donald Trump will definitely run again, and I think he's got a very, very good chance of reelection, simply because I look at the Democratic field and I don't see anyone who looks to me as if they're going to win Ohio back or Pennsylvania back or Michigan or Wisconsin back. It seems to me that the Democrats, they're devoted to identity politics and they're devoted to being the party of anti-Trump, and that's not good enough. I think people really want someone who's going to be seen as fighting on their side against a ruling class that is contrary to their interests and their values.

WOODS: Say a quick word about *Modern Age*. I think I've written a book review and an article for *Modern Age* over the years. This is the — Well, I'll let you tell people what it is. I was about to take all the life out of it. Here you go.

MCCARTHY Yeah, *Modern Age* is a conservative quarterly, but it's conservative in a very broad way, which incorporates a lot of libertarianism and libertarian perspectives. And so we've been delighted to feature your work in the past. Rothbard was also featured in the journal back when he was alive. And it's really a place that brings together sort of the top minds among conservatives and libertarians and various other sympathetic people. to really delve deep into the theory and the history and literature of economics, political philosophy, and literature as well, and philosophy — which I think I've already said [laughing], but I'll reemphasize the philosophy just because there's a lot of it.

WOODS: [laughing] Okay.

MCCARTHY So the website is ModernAgeJournal.com. The journal itself is published on a quarterly basis, and I very much think listeners to *The Tom Woods Show* who want to have a kind of straight-up shot of sort of serious, philosophical, thoughtful conservative or libertarian writing will really enjoy the journal. So I think if people check it out, they'll find out it's something that they might very well want to subscribe to. And it's really I think a journal that's ahead of the curve in so many ways. And when it comes to talking about the relationship between populism and conservatism or libertarianism and conservatism, it's a journal which has always had the most interesting material. Again, Rothbard outlined some of his key ideas in the journal. Frank Meyer, whose idea of fusionism, bringing together traditionalism and libertarianism, was actually a lot more philosophically nuanced than most people realize. It was not a cynical political coalition-building trick; it was —

WOODS: No, absolutely.

MCCARTHY Yeah, it was an attempt to find a shared Western tradition that both libertarians and conservatives could draw upon. And I actually think that could have very dramatic political implications down the line if people were to rediscover what it was really all about.

WOODS: Yeah, and these days, it's very fashionable to dismiss that as just a dumb idea, but it wasn't a dumb idea. I read a lot of Frank Meyer when I was in college, and I thought he was really on to something. And just to make clear that what Dan is telling you is absolutely correct, when Rothbard's four-volume history of Colonial America came out, *Conceived in Liberty*, every single volume was reviewed in *Modern Age* and reviewed extremely enthusiastically. So this is not going to be the kind of conservative publication that a lot of us roll our eyes at. I mean, this is very, very much worth reading, and almost anybody who was anybody for all those years has written for it at one time or another. So ModernAgeJournal.com. Dan, thanks so much for your time. I'm going to link at TomWoods.com/1195 to *Modern Age* and also to the article that we discussed today. Thanks again.

MCCARTHY Thanks, Tom.