



Episode 437: Rand Paul, Foreign Policy, and 2016

Guest: Brian Doherty

WOODS: I'm going to be linking to your article on this general subject of Rand Paul and foreign policy that you wrote for *Reason* magazine over on today's show notes page; this is Episode 437, so TomWoods.com/437. This piece of yours of course hits on an issue that has caused controversy among libertarians for quite some time, and it's interesting to note that somebody like Justin Raimondo, who runs *AntiWar.com*, who had been a big, big Rand booster and was very impatient with people who were critical of Rand, has himself become something of a skeptic, let's say, of Rand Paul. What has led Rand to this particular spot that a lot of the people where most devoted to his father are skeptical about him?

DOHERTY: I can't see into his heart, so I don't know if it's merely political expediency, which is an easy explanation to come up with, or a genuine differing of opinion that has led him to do certain things that have led even Justin, who as you said, was his biggest booster, to turn away from him. I would say that the biggest disappointment to Justin and to people who think like Justin was Rand Paul signing on to that horrible Senator Tom Cotton letter to Iran, basically telling them that, you know, hey, you can try to negotiate a nuke deal with President Obama, but we're just going to scuttle it, so don't bother.

For someone like Rand, who in the past had been very sharp on realizing, for example, that sanctions are essentially an act of war, who had at certain times at least tried to block further sanctions — though he's also voted for them, and that's kind of part of the whole problem with Rand, and Justin noted this, that it's actually difficult — and it was never difficult with Ron — for someone to actually know what does this guy think, what does he believe. And most importantly, if you're thinking of voting for him, what might he do if he were actually president of the United States. And certainly he's begun to show himself less than reliably non-interventionist.

And of course, when pressed on it, he excused his signing of that letter with the notion that it wasn't really about foreign policy in content terms. It wasn't really about whether or not we wanted there to be a nuclear deal with Iran or whether or not we wanted to be very bellicose and threaten them with destruction if they don't do what we say, but it was just a matter of constitutional rigor and authority and sort of letting the president know, hey, Congress is supposed to have a say in this. I didn't find that a very convincing explanation.

At least on the surface, it allowed him to both get whatever benefit he thought he would get from signing the Cotton letter – and I don't really know what that is, because the kind of people who love things like that Cotton letter, the kind of people who are obsessed with the notion that we must at all costs stop Iran from getting the bomb, Rand Paul was never going to be their choice. And then he could turn to people like us and go, hey, it was really just a matter of letting the president know that he isn't a dictator and can't run foreign policy on his own. But it was disappointing and it remains disappointing.

And about the same week or around the same time, he also introduced this sort of gimmicky budget proposal for the Pentagon that, rather than cutting Pentagon spending – which you would think he would recognize is an important thing to do, both as a foreign policy imperative to help rein in its mission, and as a simple budget imperative. You know, if he's someone who believes that debt is ruinous – and certainly he still says he believes that at times – you need to rein in the Department of Defense. And he actually introduced a budget proposal that increased Pentagon spending by \$190 billion over two years.

The political gimmick of it, which his spokesman pointed out, was he was trying to differentiate himself supposedly from your Rubios and your Cruzes, not in how much he was willing to spend on defense, which is an insane, overly large amount, but that he was allegedly willing to cut elsewhere in order to balance that. And I mean, that's nice, I guess, from a budgetary hawk perspective, but it still shows complete unseriousness about what he as president would actually have to do to bring sanity back to both foreign policy as it's practiced and to government spending as it's spent. So that all looked pretty bad.

WOODS: Well, and also, if we're to accept that explanation, I think we're being required to accept the idea that the American public is really going to appreciate a subtlety like that.

DOHERTY: Right.

WOODS: What they can appreciate is he's cutting the budget or he's adding to the budget.

DOHERTY: Exactly.

WOODS: But this whole thing, well, I'm adding, but I'm also doing this other thing over here, is not really going to work. And of course, what I think he is trying to do is he's trying to do something impossible. He's trying to win the Republican nomination, the nomination of a party that stands for, on many important issues, the opposite of what his supporters believe.

DOHERTY: Yes.

WOODS: And so he's somehow got to keep his foot in that door, and yet not go so far into the door that he leaves his supporters completely — It's an extremely difficult thing, but — and, you know, it may require some political finessing, but this I thought was just a ham-handed thing, just like his explanation of the Cotton letter.

DOHERTY: Yeah, I agree, and I think one of the problems with his whole mission is as far as I can tell, Rand Paul seems to believe that the educational part — and again, let's just presume that he at least largely is supposedly pursuing the same project that his father did, and sometimes I think that, and some days I don't.

But let's give him the benefit of the doubt and say he is. He seems to not understand that there is still an educational portion of that mission. He doesn't seem to be going out of his way to try to sell the public on his positions. Like if he's facing this dilemma, which you laid out very, very well, that he's trying to win the nomination of a party that doesn't agree with him — or at least the vision that you and I would prefer to have of him — about foreign policy, he needs to do some educating. He can't just do little tricks, like oh, I'm trying to seem really hawkish, but really I'm just making a statement about constitutional war-making powers, or, I seem like I'm really throwing a lot of money at the Pentagon, but I'm really just trying to make a point about the budgetary seriousness of my opponent.

He needs to educate the public, if he has any chance of winning, about why they — especially Republicans — should embrace a more rational and less bellicose foreign policy. And sometimes he says the right thing. He definitely wasn't saying the right thing in those weeks leading up to his announcing for president, but I think he's going to realize, especially when there are debates and when there are votes actually being cast, that he does still have that educational mission that his father understood was so important. He's really going to have to explain who he is and what he believes; he can't just take it that it's a given that, oh, there are voters out there who are agreeing with me, and I just have to find them. I mean, I think there are some, but especially within his party, there's not nearly enough.

WOODS: I find that his supporters are an interesting bunch, because you get people who support him because they feel that he's the best we've got and maybe some good things would happen if he were in charge and so on and so forth. We get other people who treat him the way we were accused of treating his father, almost like a demigod who can do no wrong, and every time he appears to contradict himself, they trot out 12 explanations as to why he's perfectly consistent. That's just beneath especially libertarians. I mean, come on now. Let's at least be honest with each other.

And again, I don't want to discount the difficulty of what it is he's trying to do. I don't want to make it sound like, oh, it's a breeze to do what he's trying to do. It's very hard actually to do what he's trying to do, which is why maybe he shouldn't try. Maybe he should do something different. Maybe he shouldn't try to square the circle.

Here's how I see things going. We already noted that when Ted Cruz got into the race, right away that took some of the wind out of the Rand sails, because a lot of his

people are going to like Ted Cruz, and Ted Cruz is going to be better on Israel and better on evangelical stuff than Rand can ever be.

DOHERTY: Yeah.

WOODS: So those people have no reason to support Rand at all. So the only way he can distinguish himself is to be a little bit harder core of a libertarian than just, "I want a flat tax." I mean, he's got to really distinguish himself from that pack, and what I think's going to happen is the man who will distinguish himself from the pack will be the rule-breaking Donald Trump. Whereas mild-mannered, presidential-style Rand Paul will be sitting there, making his quiet little policy points and be completely left in the dust. Tell me I'm wrong about that.

DOHERTY: Ooh, I hope you're — Donald Trump. Wow. Yeah, I still am sort of living in a world where it's hard for me to really believe that Donald Trump is really, really, really seriously seeking this nomination. I think if Trump is still around and still trying hard come November, December, January, I feel he's going to fall more into the Herman Cain pattern of last year.

WOODS: Oh, but no, what about on the — on that debate stage, the only way Rand's going to break out at this point is if he really has some kind of moment in these debates.

DOHERTY: Sure.

WOODS: Where he doesn't just look like Scott Walker who's just not hawkish enough. You know, a wonkish version of somebody else. If he doesn't distinguish himself as Rand Paul, the guy who's different from all these phonies, he hasn't got a chance, and Trump's going to be the one who will be the big celebrity on that stage.

DOHERTY: Yeah. I do believe — and we have reason to believe; it's not just a wild belief of mine — that Rand will rise to that occasion, as I noted — I have an article in the new *Reason* about his foreign policy, and I noted that most of the really awful things that we were talking about earlier were things that he said and did in sort of the six weeks before he announced for president. Once he announced and was in direct competition with a bunch of people who were worse than him, he really actually started to shine in certain respects.

He was saying in New Hampshire at a GOP gathering after he announced, and I'm quoting him here, "The other Republicans will criticize the president and Hilary Clinton for their foreign policy, but they would just have done the same thing 10 times over. There's a group of folks in our party who would have troops in six countries right now, maybe more" — of course literally we already have them in many more, but I think he means active wars. That was a great thing to hear.

He actually sent out a fundraising letter — and you might be on his email fundraising list, too; I am — in which he complained that, "Many in our party including many

announced presidential candidates, would double down on the failures of the Obama-Clinton foreign policy of reckless engagement." And that was great. So he's willing to say stuff like that. Obviously he knows it's red meat to the people who he thinks will fund him, and it's great that he knows that. To me, I was really actually thrilled to get that fundraising letter, because it was a sign that, wow, he's aware that the people who are most likely to give to him want to hear that.

WOODS: Yeah.

DOHERTY: And that was good to know. So that gives me hope that especially when he's actually faced with all these other people – and Trump especially – that he will rise to the occasion to distinguish himself intelligently on foreign policy.

WOODS: And by the way, I think some people think – well, I know; what do I mean, "I think" – I know that people who are Rand supporters – again, not all of them, but some of them – who want you to be fully on board with Rand and they're going to interrogate you and find out where you stand, they think that you are a libertarian purist if you're criticizing Rand, that, you don't understand; he's got to play the game, and so on and so forth.

DOHERTY: Yeah.

WOODS: Well, as Scott Horton said to me, for one thing, he has to hear some libertarian criticism, because if all the criticism he hears is neocon criticism and he's not bellicose enough, he's going to move in one direction. But if he has libertarian critics, maybe he'll move in the other direction. Well, I never felt like I had to do that with his father. I just shut my mouth and know that well, he's going to do what he wants to do, regardless of what any one of us says.

DOHERTY: Right.

WOODS: But one thing that concerns me is that, although he does say these things, that's true – and by the way, I would say to those who say that we're just being purists that Bruce Fein can make a very good conservative argument against the current foreign policy; Michael Scheuer can make a very good conservative argument against the current foreign policy. It can be done, by the way. But so far at least – any maybe I'm expecting too much before the debates occur – the excitement just doesn't seem to be there. The excitement that we all felt when Ron was running, when everyday we knew he was going to stick it somebody else, stick it to some other sacred cow; he would say some other unscripted thing that we would all love. And I don't get that sense, that there's this unscripted part of Rand. I'm afraid that maybe the package is a little bit too scripted. And again, am I being unreasonable? Am I expecting too much?

DOHERTY: You know, one of the more interesting unscripted things he did say a few months ago, and it was a terrible unscripted thing, was he was sort of spit balling about the notion of, hey, maybe we should try to create an independent Kurdistan.

WOODS: Oh yeah.

DOHERTY: That was not encouraging, and as I say in my story, I asked some people in his circle, who did not want to be named, tell me that, yeah, that was kind of off script and don't expect to hear about that again. It's great that we're not going to hear it again, but it was disconcerting that we heard it at all, right? Especially if that's where his instinct for the off script goes.

It's always really — you know, the whole perception of the excitement, you know, I don't know. One of the aggravating things about trying to study the world of the Pauls is there's really no data that kind of holds up in a sort of rigorous social science/political science way. You know, you and I read a lot of stuff, and we talk about a lot of stuff, and we communicate with people, and we have our sense of things. But I don't know for sure how the people I communicate with, if they're representative — you know, the 100s of the people who I'm sort of hearing from and seeing talk online — if they represent the 2.1 million people who voted for Ron Paul in 2012. I just don't know that.

And I haven't been to any Rand rallies yet, so I don't actually have a feel for who's coming out and who's there, and is it new people or old people? So I'm going to be congenitally optimistic — I just prefer to be that way unless I have enormous evidence to the contrary — and feel that whatever energy that is out there and enthusiasm for him is going to be from people who will encourage him to be more libertarian. He's going to realize, yeah, I actually feed the energy of the people whose energy I need to be a viable candidate by being more like Ron or more hardcore libertarian.

I wrote an op-ed in the *New York Times* in which I basically called him out on this, and even in the places where he comes to conclusions that are pretty libertarian, I'm enough of a picky and hardcore jerk that I'm not even fully satisfied with that. I want him to argue libertarian conclusions from libertarian principles, because I think it's important, and I think that's the most important thing that Ron Paul did. Because the vast majority of Americans only even think about political principles and political philosophy in the context of an election.

And that's what made Ron so refreshing to so many people, is he actually did that. He was consistent. He had a set of ideas; he wasn't just a party hack. He actually surprised people, and that was the magic sauce of Ron Paul, I think. And I don't even know if Rand is capable of dredging that up.

Again, the thing I fall back on when I think about Rand is I do tend to believe that he really is maybe a little more like a hardcore libertarian than he pretends. I don't know this to be true for a fact, but I know his background; I know the community he came out of; I know who his father is — all that. So that leaves me to at least hope that he's misleading the others and he's not misleading me.

But of course, you know, you can be a sucker if you think that. And the NSA thing I thought was good, because that — again, he didn't argue that from the most

libertarian principles, but it's a pretty hardcore position to take, because it kind of ultimately is saying safety is not my highest priority. Liberty is more important.

WOODS: Yeah, I'll admit, that was good, especially because that was an issue on which his rivals were going to be against him, but I think he realized, probably in some of his travels that at the grassroots level, the average Republican is a little bit less naive than the average GOP presidential nominee, thinking that maybe I don't want the president, no matter who he is, or the Executive Branch or the U.S. government in general, to have these sorts of powers. And so he pounced on a weak point, and I think that was a smart political move. Definitely, definitely; I agree with you there.

DOHERTY: Yeah, and it was funny, a lot of his enemies sort of poked at him, like, oh, this is all really just a cynical fundraising point. And once again, I'm like, well, I hope so, because again that's a sign that he recognizes that that's where his competitive edge is.

WOODS: Exactly, that that would raise money. Now, speaking of money — well, a couple things related to money. I guess I just read the other day that he just brought on Mark Spitznagel as an economic advisor, and I think he's a pretty good guy, so I think that's a pretty good move. But I've been reading about, courtesy of Dave Weigel — I suppose you've been reading about it too — the warring super PACS for Rand. The Jesse Benton-run super PAC and now Matt Kibbe's starting his super PAC with Jeff Frazee and some others. Do you have any insights on that, because at least so far, my understanding is that the Jesse Benton-run PAC has not really brought in money.

DOHERTY: Yeah, I'm speculating more than speaking from knowledge. Jesse hasn't talked to me for a long time, sadly.

WOODS: (laughing) Makes two of us.

DOHERTY: But the very fact — you have to leap to the conclusion — and again, no one inside has said this to me directly, whether on the record or off the record — but you just have to know that the very existence of the other one has to be a sign that the first wasn't performing up to speed. And I know they've been lamenting and other people have been lamenting on his behalf — you know, because the whole super PAC trick is of course that's where you can find the singular or the small handful of super rich people to give a ton — you know, if you can't do with the official giving, because of the campaign limits.

And apparently, unless something has happened behind the scenes very recently, and maybe they think Matt Kibbe is going to be the secret to turning this around — they haven't found that moneybags yet. And people — you, I'm sure, remember this pretty well — people will talk about, oh, Peter Thiel was such a big Ron Paul giver, and he gave 2 million, but he gave it to that silly little PAC that didn't really do anything —

WOODS: No, it was not good. Yeah, they did not do good stuff with that money.

DOHERTY: Right. So you know, I have no idea how the people got Thiel to give that money. It's actually kind of amazing.

WOODS: I know, I was running a super PAC; we reached out to him, and he didn't do anything. We were putting out much better ads than these people were.

DOHERTY: Yeah. So yeah, to me it's actually funny that the media sort of, like, Peter Thiel, one of Ron Paul's biggest funders, and to me that's pretty misleading. And of course, there's always, it confuses some people why — oh, the Kochs, because they're supposed to be the libertarians in the Republican Party and blah dee blah. To me there's sort of the movement bad blood going back decades that's probably between sort of perceived factions that the Kochs are on and perceived factions that the Paul family's on that will probably make that never happen.

But if Rand manages to hold out and shine in that first wave in your New Hampshires and Iowas and Nevadas and South Carolinas, I should think that the money could follow. I don't think there's no rich person of libertarian leanings who would step forward for him, if it seems that there's a reason to. And really that we're even having — if I were a rich person being approached by people to give, I would probably have the attitude of it's way too early for that. Like, I have no idea whether it's worth my time to support you right now. It could completely be throwing money down the drain.

WOODS: Yeah, that's true, but on the other hand, somehow Ted Cruz raised a bundle through his PAC, apparently.

DOHERTY: Yeah. I mean, the body of people who Rand is going to appeal to who are super rich is probably a lot more limited than Cruz's, and I actually don't know who the names are who are giving that much to Ted Cruz.

WOODS: Yeah, that I actually am very curious about, exactly the identity of those people. Well, one final thing: the fact that Ron wound up getting about 21% in Iowa — we were seeing polls saying there was a chance he might actually win Iowa — so what would have been a pretty good result in any other situation left us a little bit deflated, we Ron Paul people, because hey, we were this close. And then Santorum, who can't even fill up half a Starbucks with supporters, somehow wins the whole thing? How did that happen? But anyway, the point is, regardless of the numbers, Ron had a strong night in a state that is not really Ron Paul country. I mean, these are people for whom ethanol subsidies are very important, and Ron just came right out, well, then I'm not your man, because I'm dead set against those.

DOHERTY: Yeah.

WOODS: There's a strong, strong evangelical contingent. That's not — I mean, you can make an evangelical case for Ron, but that's not his natural constituency. And yet, somehow by just being honest Ron Paul and talking to those people and explaining how even what they want can come about through freedom — they can also get what they want — he was still able to get that kind of a strong showing. So I hope people in the

Rand can realize that it is possible to just stand there, be who you really in your heart of hearts want to be, and doggone it, you can still do well. You can still stand out from the pack.

DOHERTY: I hope so as well, and in relation to Iowa specifically, I have heard some chatter that I don't know to be verifiably true, that the Rand camp is not so confident that Iowa's going to be a place that they shine this year. I don't know that to be true, and I don't know that even if they think that's true, I don't know if it would really be true.

New Hampshire might be a little bit better, but certainly, I think he does need to do something explosive in those first four states. Like if he's floating around three, behind or near Cruz and Walker, or you're saying Trump — I hope not — that it'll be over. But even then, and here's something I want to say whenever we talk about presidential politics in relation to libertarianism: this is a long, long fight, and as I alluded to earlier, I still think it is really an educational fight.

If Rand Paul does manage through some miracle of maneuvering to win the Republican nomination — I don't think it's impossible; I wouldn't say it's likely, but I don't think it's impossible — he's ahead of the zeitgeist in a way that might well make his presidency a tricky thing. Like in a sense, I'm almost afraid that America isn't ready for a president who is the kind of person who I think Rand Paul probably is. That doesn't mean I don't think it wouldn't be a great thing if he could win. America does have a sort of great leader mentality, and that could work to libertarians' advantage if he actually becomes a nominee, because there are all sorts of people who are just going to start liking him just because of that. There's just a bunch of Republican Party zombies who'll be like, "I'm for Rand Paul; he's my guy." So that would be great.

But if he doesn't manage to pull it off, it does not mean — it's likely that he won't, right? And it's not — it oughtn't be a cause for despair for the long-term project of a revival of liberal/libertarian thought in America. And the fact that he's gotten as far as he has and you can imagine him winning — which I can; you know, some people still can't, but I can — is great. And him not winning doesn't mean that, oh, none of that was true, and those advances haven't been made, and the recognition of the failures of overreaching government and ruinous debt, like, they're still there. In reality, if we truly believe what we believe as libertarians, we do understand that reality's on our side, even if 51% of the voters aren't.

WOODS: Yeah.

DOHERTY: So this is my don't pitch your opinions about the progress of libertarian thought to this campaign too much, I guess is my thought.

WOODS: Right. I guess we've just gotten into that habit because we did it with Ron, and now it just seems like, well, I guess that's just the way it works. Every four years, we see how we're doing.

DOHERTY: Right.

WOODS: But the real work is being done in the trenches; it's being done on the local level; it's being done intellectually —

DOHERTY: Right.

WOODS: And we can't necessarily measure it in this way. And as Ron showed — I think a lot of people who voted for him probably hadn't voted in a long time. There were a lot of people —

DOHERTY: That's the impression I got.

WOODS: Yeah, who aren't expressing their views during these elections. So we shouldn't feel like, well, that's how America thinks. There's a huge slice of America that has simply withdrawn from this whole process out of sheer disgust, and I want to find out who these people are and talk to them and reach those people. And if Rand can do that, then great. Fantastic. This whole thing will be vindicated. We'll wait and see.

But Brian Doherty, I'm going to link, as I said, to your article — very good and balanced article; you talk to people on all sides to get the scoop here on what's going on with Rand and foreign policy — over on the show notes page for today, TomWoods.com/437. Thanks again, Brian; I appreciate it.

DOHERTY: Thanks for having me, Tom.