

“CRACKPOTS DON’T MAKE GOOD MESSENGERS”

For the record, I have no intention of voting for Ron Paul in the General election (though depending on how the GOP primary rolls out, I might consider crossing over to vote for Paul in the MI primary, for similar reasons as I voted for John McCain in the 2000 primary: because I knew my vote wouldn’t matter in the Democratic primary and I hoped a McCain win might slow down George Bush’s momentum and focus some attention on campaign finance reform, McCain’s signature issue at the time).

I don’t want Ron Paul to be President and, for all my complaints with Obama, he is a less bad presidential candidate than Paul.

But that’s an entirely different question than the one Kevin Drum purports to address with this post:

Should we lefties be happy he’s in the presidential race, giving non-interventionism a voice, even if he has other beliefs we find less agreeable? Should we be happy that his non-mainstream positions are finally getting a public hearing?

Drum doesn’t actually assess the value of having a non-interventionist in the race, or even having a civil libertarian in the race (which he largely dodges by treating it as opposition to the drug war rather than opposition to unchecked executive power), or having a Fed opponent in the race.

Instead, he spends his post talking about what a “crackpot” Paul is, noting (among other things), that Paul thinks climate change is a hoax, thinks the UN wants to confiscate our guns, and is a racist.

Views, mind you, that Paul shares in significant part with at least some of the other crackpots running for the GOP nomination.

Of course, Paul does have views that none of the other Republicans allowed in Presidential debates share. And that's what Drum would need to assess if he were genuinely trying to answer his own question: given a field of crackpots, several of whom are explicit racists, several of whom make claims about cherished government programs being unconstitutional, most of whom claim to believe climate change doesn't exist, is it useful that one of the candidates departs from the otherwise universal support for expanded capitulation to banks, authoritarianism, and imperialism? Is it useful to do so leading up to a General election with a Democrat who has been weak against banks, expanded executive authority, and found new Muslim countries to launch drone strikes against?

Before I get into the reasons why it is, let me address a completely false claim Drum makes.

Ron Paul has never once done any of his causes any good.

Paul, of course, succeeded in getting a limited audit of the Fed's bailout done. That hasn't resulted in the elimination of the Fed, but it has educated a lot of people about the vast power of the Fed and showed how far government efforts to prop up the banks really went in 2008 and 2009. Of course, he did so in partnership with Alan Grayson, someone who doesn't embrace all of Paul's views but nevertheless demonstrates why Drum's advice that those who share some views with Paul, "should run, not walk, as fast as you can to keep your distance from Ron Paul" is bad advice. We live in a democracy, and it's far easier to get laws passed if members of both parties support them.

And it's not just the Fed. By providing space to support civil liberties and oppose the war on

the right, Paul slowed the steam roll in support of the PATRIOT Act, SOPA, the detainee provisions of the NDAA, and the wars. In these areas, he may not have had the limited but notable success he had with the Fed, but if—for example—Dianne Feinstein’s effort to specifically exclude Americans from indefinite military detention has any success, it will in part be because Paul and his son mobilized opposition to indefinite detention on the right.

But all that explains why it has been useful to have Paul—bolstered by his 2008 campaign, which seems to disprove Drum’s promise that, “in a couple of months he’ll disappear back into the obscurity he so richly deserves”—in the House. That doesn’t explain why it is useful to have him polling at almost 20% in the GOP race in IA.

Because that is, after all, what we’re talking about. So when Drum scoffs at those who have, “somehow convinced yourself that non-interventionism has no other significant voices except Ron Paul,” when we’re talking about the Presidential race, I want to know what race he’s been watching? While Gary Johnson supports non-interventionism, he’s not a significant voice. In this presidential race, which is what Drum purports to be talking about, there are no other significant voices supporting non-interventionism or championing civil liberties.

And without a such a candidate—without someone playing the role Obama sort of did until July 9, 2008—then the focus of the billion-dollar political debate in the next 11 months will focus primarily on who will more aggressively crack down on Iran and how many more civil liberties the President must dissolve to wage war against significantly weakened terrorists. Ron Paul’s presence in the race not only exposes voters to commonsense but otherwise impermissible observations—such as that the detainees we’re holding are, with just a handful of exceptions, suspects, never proven to be terrorists in a trial. But his presence also raises the cost for Obama for not addressing his

past claims and promises on civil liberties.

And then, of course, we lefties are supposed to be trying to defeat these right wing nutjobs. Drum may think Paul toxic, but his views are equally toxic to the rich donors paying for these Republican candidates. And while Paul doesn't threaten to become a viable anti-Mitt, he can (and did, in 2008) stay in this race long enough to be an annoyance to GOP claims to unity. All the time by differentiating himself with issues—anti-imperialism, civil libertarianism, and anti-banksterism—for which Paul is the only significant voice in this election. Twelve years ago, my support for a policy that I supported, championed by a flawed messenger, contributed in a small way to making Bush spend more money and reveal his loathsome (if transactional) racism in South Carolina. That didn't make Al Gore the winner, but it didn't hurt. Why would we categorically oppose something similar to happen to Mitt Romney?

As Drum himself notes, there's no danger that by calling out those areas where Paul is good, he's going to be elected President and implement his more loathsome ideas. "Ron Paul is not a major candidate for president." But for those guarding the DC common sense, support for Paul in these areas does seem to present real danger.

It's telling, ultimately, that Drum's piece, which doesn't prove what it purports to (that having Paul in the Presidential race is bad for lefties) but does call him a crackpot crackpot crackpot, is a near mirror image to this Michael Gerson column, which points towards the very same repulsive stances—as well as some downright commonsense ones—as Drum to call Paul a scandal.

No other recent candidate hailing from the party of Lincoln has accused Abraham Lincoln of causing a "senseless" war and ruling with an "iron fist." Or regarded Ronald Reagan's presidency a "dramatic failure." Or proposed the legalization of prostitution and heroin use. Or called America the most "aggressive,

extended and expansionist" empire in world history. Or promised to abolish the CIA, depart NATO and withdraw military protection from South Korea. Or blamed terrorism on American militarism, since "they're terrorists because we're occupiers." Or accused the American government of a Sept. 11 "coverup" and called for an investigation headed by Dennis Kucinich. Or described the killing of Osama bin Laden as "absolutely not necessary." Or affirmed that he would not have sent American troops to Europe to end the Holocaust. Or excused Iranian nuclear ambitions as "natural," while dismissing evidence of those ambitions as "war propaganda." Or published a newsletter stating that the 1993 World Trade Center attack might have been "a setup by the Israeli Mossad," and defending former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke and criticizing the "evil of forced integration."

Each of these is a disqualifying scandal. Taken together, a kind of grandeur creeps in.

Neither wants to deal with the downright logic (and deserved widespread support) of some of Paul's views. They both seem to want to, instead, suggest that any deviation from the DC consensus is lunacy (and lunacy of a kind not exhibited by Bachmann, Perry, Newt, and Santorum).

The question of whether it is good to have Paul audibly in the Presidential race—which is fundamentally different from whether we want him to be President—is ultimately a question of whether it is good to have a diversity of views expressed in our democratic debates. Neither Drum nor Gerson object here to the lunacy espoused by the other GOP candidates, per se—the ones that espouse lunacy embraced by the DC consensus, what Drum approvingly calls the

“mainstream.” So what is so dangerous in having Paul’s ideas—both sound and repulsive—expressed?

I’m perfectly comfortable having Paul exposed—as he has been—as a racist over the course of this race. Why are Drum and Gerson so upset that the other candidates might be exposed as authoritarians and imperialists in turn?