The Revolution: A Manifesto

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Ron Paul’s The Revolution is adamant on one point: to solve the problems in modern America, Americans need to return to Constitutional values. ‘In times like these, we need a return to fundamentals’ (p. 168). The specific fundamentals to which Paul refers are as often the values of Austrian School economists as they are the Founding Fathers. The Revolution makes a call for widespread political change, based on a particular reading of the Constitution in which the potential activities and scope of government is strictly limited. American prosperity would be guaranteed not by political institutions, but a celebration of individual liberty, and in particular an adoption of free-market economic orthodoxy. As such, The Revolution is unquestionably a call for wholesale governmental reform. ‘We need to rethink what the role of our government ought to be, and fast’ (p. 172). Such rethinking need not involve reinventing the wheel, however. All it will take for American to return to the right path is to recover the 18th-century approach to government, without which ‘our American Revolution would have been impossible’ (p. 171).

Economic and civic liberty lie at the heart of Paul’s political philosophy. In a 180-page book, nearly half is given over to analysis of the economic crisis of the late 2000s; much of the rest of the book concentrates its fire on governmental intrusion into personal freedoms. Unsurprisingly, the book reflects the particular concerns of the 2008 electoral cycle. It is difficult to imagine a contemporary book by a Republican candidate spending so much time advocating a non-interventionist foreign policy, for example; it is almost certain that had Paul been writing in 2016, much more of his narrative would have been given over to the Affordable Care Act as the avatar of government overreach. Instead, Paul’s argument attacks the rationale beyond intervention in Iraq, calls for a comprehensive dismantling of the national security state, and advocates significant reform of the economic establishment. The common thread through these particular themes is the need for limited government. Historically speaking, Paul pitches his tent on the ground of the American Revolution, arguing that America’s founding principles demanded a watchful jealousy over and a strict limitation on the actions of government. These principles would, in turn, allow prosperity through the flourishing of the talents of the individual.

The Revolution begins with a denunciation of the ‘false choices of American politics’. Paul presents mainstream Republicans and Democrats as cut essentially from the same cloth. Whether manifest through an endorsement of foreign wars, or a disappointingly half-hearted attempt to cut government waste, Paul
laments ‘frustrated Americans have begun referring to our two parties as the Republicanrats’ (p. 4). The true path Americans should follow is rather a return to two older political traditions: the Republican tradition embodied by Robert A. Taft, and ‘a peaceful continuation of the American Revolution and the principles of our Founding Fathers: liberty, self-government, the Constitution, and a noninterventionist foreign policy’ (p. 6).

Paul’s historical sources for a non-interventionist tradition are familiar. Washington’s Farewell Address is celebrated for its disavowal of engagement in European wars; Jefferson’s First Inaugural for advocating ‘peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none’. The argument is further developed through John Quincy Adams warning that an interventionist foreign policy would cause American government to ‘insensibly change from liberty to force’. Paul thus advocates a view of early American foreign policy that is more than mere ‘isolationism’. America’s gift to the world, he argues, should not come through military intervention, but rather in providing an example of good government to the rest of the world. The ideal foreign policy is thus not isolationist for the sake of playing ostrich, but rather a policy which recognizes the universal values of promoting domestic liberty and free commerce.

Aware that critics would point out that the modern world is decidedly more interconnected than the world of the Founding Fathers, Paul also seeks historical credibility for his foreign policy stance through reference to the ‘old Right, or original Right’, who ‘considered foreign interventionism to be the other side of the same statist coin as interventionism at home’ (p. 29). War is the act of an imperial government, not a government conceived in liberty. Citing speeches from Robert A Taft, as well as conservative scholars such as Richard Weaver and Robert Nisbet, Paul argues that he is the true standard-bearer for and inheritor of a Republican foreign policy tradition derived not only from the early republic, but also the 20th century.

Paul’s criticisms of Big Government are not limited to the neoconservative warmongering of the Bush Administration; his views on the limited scope of American foreign policy are subsequently mirrored in his discussion of the constitutional extent of the federal government’s power. He begins his chapter on the Constitution with further reference to Jefferson, hoping that a ‘watchful’ people may rally around the text of a written constitution when government has violated its powers. Paul’s interpretation of the origins of the Constitution is derived from modern-day conservative thinkers, who emphasize the Founders’ fears of tyrannical and arbitrary government. Paul identifies Jefferson primarily as a proponent of the ‘strict construction’ of the Constitution, making particular reference to his famous opinion against the constitutionality of Hamilton’s plan to create a National Bank. In this telling of the early republic. Paul favors the oppositional Jefferson of the 1790s to the President Jefferson of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Context aside, however, Paul grounds his calls for limited government through the 10th Amendment and a narrow reading of Article I, Section 8 of the US Constitution – stating that any attempt to exercise power beyond the specific enumerations of the Article is prima facie unconstitutional.

The primary historical cover for this interpretation comes from Jefferson and Madison. Paul, however, does not only celebrate the tradition of the most famous Founding Fathers. He also draws on the Anti-Federalist ideas of Patrick Henry, Edmund Randolph and John Taylor of Caroline. It is not hard to select excerpts from all these writers criticizing the extension of governmental powers. Yet to group all four Virginians together so cavalierly obscures as much as it illuminates. On any specific issue relating to government, it would be hard to find all four gentlemen in agreement; the inference that their ideology was coherent in anything more than the most general sense would be historically misleading. It is clear, therefore, that ideology matters more to Paul than historical context: he relies on the weight of the Founders’ patriotism when it assists his argument. When their actions do not fit so neatly into an anti-governmental framework, they are strangely absent from the narrative.

It is in these kinds of details that Paul’s interpretation of the Constitution loses some of its coherence. In his lengthiest chapter, dealing with the need for economic reform, Paul relies extensively on his reading of Austrian School economics. In terms of policy prescriptions, he advocates the repeal of the income tax, looking at the history of its implementation to show how government, once given a small wedge, will use its
power to extend programs well beyond their original intent. So far, so convincing – original arguments in favor of income taxes certainly did not envisage the development of the IRS. Yet Paul does not deal at all with the 16th Amendment – the use of popular power to enact governmental change in accordance with the very document that Paul reveres so strongly in the rest of his book. It thus becomes clear in the second half of The Revolution that Paul’s interpretation of the small government Constitution serves a primarily presentist purpose: if the Founders’ original intent was to limit federal power, then he can justify rolling back the modern-day state to allow a fuller implementation of Austrian School principles.

This reliance on establishing the Founders’ ‘original intent’ is central to The Revolution’s broader argument. While he recognizes that many of his specific policy prescriptions are an enormous change from modern practice, the establishment of a declension narrative in which the concerns of the Founders have been systematically ignored over time allows Paul to argue that his platform is simultaneously radical and a restoration of familiar ideals. This appeal to universality later veers into a kind of conspiratorial populism, in which Paul suggests that money has become ‘the forbidden issue in American politics’. The Revolution does not only posit a declension narrative in terms of the overreach of the federal government; the economic stability of America has similarly declined since the abandonment of the gold standard. The specifics of Paul’s historical economic analysis lie beyond the expertise of this reviewer. Nevertheless, Paul’s economic policy arguments are of one piece with his foreign policy and constitutional pronouncements. America must govern according to older principles if it is to restore its previous prosperity and prestige.

Given such a romanticized view of the American past, it is unsurprising that Paul had a tendency to use history as a crutch, rather than engaging deeply with the nuances and complexity of the past. When discussing his opposition to the draft, for example, he jumps from Robert Taft to Ronald Reagan and back to Daniel Webster. Such a disjointed connection of ideas, divorced from their immediate context, is a little dizzying to the historian; it smacks of coming up with the answer first, and finding the evidence later. This is particularly illuminating of the sometimes shallow reading of history evident in The Revolution: a more considered view of the American founding would have given abundant evidence of suspicion of a government-controlled military. Revolutionary-era support for the militia remained steadfast even as Washington and other officers of the Continental Army argued vociferously for the strategic necessity of a standing army. Paul could have bolstered many of his arguments had he drunk deeper from the historical well.

The unconstitutionality of many recent actions of the federal government is a recurring theme. The Patriot Act, FISA, and other pieces of national security legislation are particularly taken to task. Interestingly, in these cases Paul does not spend much time harking back to constitutional precedent. Indeed, there are times when it seems like the Founding Fathers are trotted out to provide ballast for some of Paul’s more controversial arguments. When the actions of the Bush Administration are most easily portrayed as unconstitutional, the 18th century disappears from view. When contemporary opinion is less settled, Washington, Jefferson and others are wheeled in to provide as much moral as substantive support.

It is perhaps unsurprising to find such a blind eye to favorable parallels in history, given that Paul’s thinking is not heavily influenced by the work of academic historians. His reading list, in which he lists titles that have been most influential on his way of thinking, consists mainly of economists and political theorists. As such, when Paul does introduce historical events into his manifesto, they are filtered through the lens of those who have used founding-era history to argue specific ends.

Yet while Paul frequently references the most celebrated of the Founding Fathers, it is telling to look at the historical figures who appear alongside the American sainthood. For The Revolution is as apt to cite an oppositional strand or dissenting tradition within American politics. When discussing 20th-century foreign
policy, for example, Paul relies heavily on the isolationism of Robert Taft, as opposed to the foreign policy convergence of Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. In dealing with revolutionary and early republic era concerns on the limits of government, Paul is as likely to cite Anti-Federalists or Old Republicans such as John Taylor of Caroline as he is Jefferson or Madison. Paul is thus right to note that many of his ideas have a long history as part of American political discourse. Without closer attention to the discourse, however, historical arguments are drawn more for their rhetorical appeal than establishing the foundational importance of the idea. This, in turn, undercuts some of the weight of Paul’s interpretation of the Constitution. In turning to figures like Taylor, who were more generative of pamphlets than they were of government precedent, Paul actually highlights the difficulty of establishing any kind of ‘original intent’. Yes, Founding Fathers were suspicious of governmental power in a general sense. But debate and discord characterized early interpretations of constitutional practice – yet there are times that Paul seeks to draw from both sides of the historical aisle.

The conspiratorial parts of Paul’s argument are reflected in the other historical figure to which he refers throughout his argument: Adolf Hitler. Introducing the specter of Godwin’s Law would be too simplistic, yet fascism is used as a convenient deflection mechanism. Paul is well aware that when he uses the language of states’ rights to oppose federal regulation (in many areas, but notably on the issue of abortion), he is using the same term that was and is used by racists to justify slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. Selected quotations from Mein Kampf thus litter the text as a reminder that centralized government can also institute horrifically racist policies. Paul refers to racism as ‘a disorder of the heart’, and thus turns a convenient blind eye to the ways in which the early federal government subsidized and supported the institution of slavery. By invoking fear of fascist totalitarianism, Paul is able to use the conspiratorial parts of his thinking to elide tougher questions about how a libertarian approach to government might address social tensions that have existed throughout American history.

The Revolution generally applies a consistent approach to its interpretation of American history. It outlines a declension narrative, in which a failure to adhere closely to constitutional limitations on the extent of government power has fundamentally corrupted American society, which in turn has allowed a corrupted elite to consolidate their own power by destabilizing the economy and making money the forbidden issue of American politics. As regards his reading of the American Founding, he offers a constant interpretation of Constitutional principles. This interpretation, however, is all too often a simplistic reading of scholarship from economics, legal scholars and political scientists, presented in a manner completely devoid of context. Paul uses quotations from the Founding Fathers like the proverbial drunken man uses lampposts: for support, rather than illumination.

Ultimately, this is where we see the shallowness of Paul’s historical learning on fullest display. At the end of chapter five, he quotes George Washington as saying ‘Government is not reason; it is not eloquent; it is force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master’ (p. 135). Such a quotation nicely illustrates Paul’s contention that the Founding Fathers were suspicious and wary of extending governmental power. The only problem with this quotation is that it was never uttered by Washington. The earliest known citation of the phrase was in 1902. (1) This is a fitting metaphor for Paul’s approach to history. It is certainly possible to identify the historical lineage of many of the ideas he puts forth in The Revolution. They are, however, more marginal, more obscure, and more recent than the iconic figures of the American Revolution with which Paul seeks to associate himself.

Notes


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