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EDITORIAL DIRECTOR: DAVID HAMPTON, (601) 961-7240

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Politics of individualism

Rand's appeal curious

■ The ideas of writer Ayn Rand strangely attract politicians of all stripes

By **Eric Thomas Weber**
Contributing columnist

Since President Barack Obama's election, the works of Ayn Rand have surged in popularity. Among the fans of Rand's work is U.S. Sen. Rand Paul from Kentucky. Contrary to popular misconception, Paul was not named after the famous author. He has been vocal, however, in calling attention to her ideas.

Rand is a strange heroine in American politics. She has fans and critics in both parties. Beyond her ardent defense of free markets, she favored free love and sex. She was for birth control and presented idolized lead characters in her books who committed adultery time and again. She was a strong supporter of abortion rights. The Ayn Rand Center for Individual Rights calls abortion "an absolute right."



Weber

She is also a role model for some working women, presenting examples like Dagny Taggart, the brilliant vice president in charge of operations at Taggart Transcontinental and protagonist of *Atlas Shrugged*.

A compassionate person should have trouble with Rand's elitism, however. People who advocate for families, for religion, for children, or for persons with disabilities should feel a great tension with her ideas. Rand despised psychological weakness, counting religion as one, as well as dependency. Children have no clear place in books like *Atlas Shrugged*.

How can a medical doctor like Sen. Paul be such a fan? As a doctor, he nobly provided treatment to underserved areas, offering "eye exams and surgery to needy families and individuals," according to his website.

Paul's idol would be unimpressed with such selfless behavior. She believed charity is sometimes acceptable, but is not a good thing. In her view, it usually perpetuates reliance on others. The ideals of Christian charity and goodwill toward fellow citizens, which John Winthrop and



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A painting of Ayn Rand by Nicholas on display at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum on June 17, 2003 in Washington, D.C.

later on, President Ronald Reagan espoused, run counter to the approach she thinks is best for society. So her match as a heroine for many GOP leaders is at least surprising.

Where does Rand fit in American politics?

Most would probably call her a libertarian. She certainly was an advocate for free markets. It is odd, however, for Christians and conservatives to idolize her. Simply put, Ayn Rand was

strongly opposed to conservatism, explicitly rejecting the label "conservative." Some of her followers, who call themselves Objectivists, argue for legalizing prostitution and drug sales, even if they find the practices unwise. So, while Rand is for free markets, conservatives usually do not want them to be quite as free as she would have them.

Sen. Paul and other fans, like Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin or com-

mentators Glenn Beck and Rush Limbaugh, surely do not look to atheist Rand for religious guidance. But, many accept her economic ideology. More mainstream economic liberalism holds that industry is the path to peace and improved standards of living for all. This means ultimately, though, that the value of markets has to do with when and how they benefit everyone's lives.

Hardline believers in industry see limitations on free enterprise as obstacles to individuality and to the benefits of competition and association. It is reasonable to ask, however, why it is a Christian or a conservative should necessarily have unwavering faith in markets and self-interest, particularly when excess focus on oneself is such a central vice according to Scripture, and desire for dollars is commonly taken to be worship of worldliness.

Rand's most famous follower today is Alan Greenspan. Greenspan believed thoroughly in the power of markets and in the virtue of deregulating them. People right and left have credited the economic growth during Greenspan's chairmanship of the Federal Reserve to his efforts. He was shocked, however, to see the recent economic downturn.

In light of the last few years' economic hardships, it is remarkable that people today can continue to follow Rand as thoroughly as her fans like Sen. Paul do. After all, when markets undermined themselves, Greenspan admitted that his ideology was clearly flawed.

"Those of us who have looked to the self-interest of lending institutions to protect shareholders' equity, myself included," Greenspan said in 2008, "are in a state of shocked disbelief."

When asked about his ideology and whether he still believes it to be right, Greenspan conceded: "I've found a flaw. I don't know how significant or how permanent it is. But I've been very distressed by that fact."

Some ideologues will want to lay the blame on government whenever

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they can, calling attention to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Those respondents are surely right to add all players into the mix of responsibility for the recent recession. At the same time, economic wizard Greenspan did not forget about those institutions when he made his admission. He realized that markets can foolishly sabotage themselves, devastating not only them and their shareholders, but also the nation's and the world's economies.

Excessive belief in any ideology is the problem. The

answer is not communism. It is not anarchy. The right thing to do is almost always a matter of reconciling competing values. The trouble with the recent surge in Rand's popularity is that it has directly correlated with a widening schism of ideologies that close their eyes even to lessons from their champions, like Greenspan.

Though Rand's ideas are quite radical, she could be a heroine to many groups. Liberal Democrats may like some of her social ideas. Small government Republicans may love her views about industry

and the individual. But conservatives who like Ayn Rand are an odd match. Rand would be an ardent critic of many of their initiatives, including the proposed "personhood amendment" initiative, which may end up on Mississippi's 2011 ballot.

If conservatives or economic liberals of any stripe want a more mainstream hero, why not look to Adam Smith? Smith was not dismissive of charity. He believed the central value of industry was its contribution to the general welfare of humankind.

It is well known that Smith wrote *The Wealth of Nations*, but he also wrote a book called *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, largely unknown to advocates of free enterprise.

Smith was a moral philosopher who would welcome the following questions: What are markets good for? Why seek economic growth? If the answers are to raise the standard of living for all, to improve the welfare of the worst off in society, then he would think the goal is noble. Markets are good when they help people. When they do not, regulation becomes nec-

essary and either charity, government action, or both must fill the need to help fellow human beings flourish.

The belief that people are better off when industry is entirely free clashes with conservative values and constraints on many markets. It also ignores the abuses some businesses commit.

Of course, representatives of government can make mistakes or do wrong. When troubles spread, however, the common denominator is neither business nor government. It is people acting carelessly and unchecked.

So yes, value industry highly and watch over government, Smith would argue, but never forget to be thy brother's keeper.



Eric Thomas Weber, Ph.D., is assistant professor of Public Policy Leadership at the University of Mississippi. His second book, *Morality, Leadership, and Public Policy*, comes out this July and his third book, *Democracy and Leadership*, will be released in 2012. He is expressing his own viewpoint in this article. To contact, visit EricThomasWeber.org.