



Rand Paul, Michael Gerson, and Logic 101

In his July 18 article, “Rand Paul can never be a mainstream Republican,” former George W. Bush speechwriter and *Washington Post* writer Michael Gerson can barely contain his glee over what he perceives to be the Kentucky senator’s fall from grace. “For a while,” Gerson writes, Paul “succeeded in a difficult maneuver: accepting the inheritance of his father’s movement while distancing himself from the loonier aspects of his father’s ideology.” But given recent revelations regarding the “neo-confederate” background of one of his senior staff members, Paul “has fallen spectacularly off the tightrope.”

Yet his staffer’s “disdain for Lincoln is not a quirk or coincidence,” Gerson is quick to note. What he calls “Paulism” demands “more than the repeal of Obamacare. It is a form of libertarianism that categorically objects to 150 years of expanding federal power,” the “main domestic justification” of which “has been opposition to slavery and segregation.” From this perspective, “Lincoln ... exercised tyrannical powers to pursue an unnecessary war,” and the 1964 Civil Rights Act “violates both states’ rights and individual property rights.”

None of this means that the “Paulites” are “racists,” Gerson assures us. However, it does mean that they are “opponents of the legal methods that ended state-sanctioned racism.”

Gerson is not yet finished. Paul and his supporters “tend to hate war and federal coercion in any form, even in causes generally regarded as good. They opposed the Cold War and nearly every post-World War II American exercise of power. They equate the war on terror with militarism, imperialism and empire. And they remain unhappy with the War of Northern Aggression.”

Gerson’s verdict is unambiguous: It is “impossible for Rand Paul to join the Republican mainstream.”

Let’s simplify Gerson’s argument. It goes like this:

1. Rand Paul’s supporters “tend to hate war and federal coercion in any form.”
2. They also tend toward “neo-confederacy” inasmuch as they are “opponents of the legal methods that ended state-sanctioned racism.”
3. Therefore, Rand Paul can never “join the Republican mainstream.”



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on July 30, 2013

Considered individually, the inaccuracy of Gerson's claims can easily be exposed. The largest problem with his argument, though, isn't the substance of its parts, but its *incoherence*.

If Paul's supporters were the "neo-confederate" quasi-racists Gerson says they are, defenders of "a regime founded on slavery" and de facto defenders of "state-sanctioned racism," then we would surely have to consider carefully Gerson's admonishment regarding Paul.

And if Paul's supporters really did "hate war and federal coercion" under and any and all circumstances, then, again, the wise would have to take to heart Gerson's counsel against backing Paul.

But Gerson would have us think that these libertarians are *at once* consumed by an inordinate passion for liberty *as well as* an equally inordinate passion for "a regime founded on slavery," a burning hatred for war, the penultimate emblem of coercion, *and* a comparably intense affection for the coercion required by "state-sanctioned" racism.

Paul and his supporters love liberty and they hate liberty. They love coercion and they hate coercion. They are statist and anti-statist.

Gerson's position is what we may call an "argument from the kitchen sink": an argument in which the arguer tries to throw everything and the proverbial kitchen sink against his target in the hopes that eventually something will stick.

It is also what logicians have long recognized as an argument against the person — the old *ad hominem* attack.

Whatever name we choose to give to it, Gerson's argument is bad, even pathetic. We should, unfortunately, get used to it, for Rand Paul's rivals — the Gersonians of the Republican Party — promise to haunt us with it in one form or another until Paul has been discredited.



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