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Rand Paul's Libertarian La-La Land

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By Eugene Robinson
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Not so fast, everybody. Rand Paul can't abruptly disavow the extremist views on civil rights that he's been espousing for years and expect us all to just move along. Was he lying then? Is he lying now? Or has the Tea Party movement's newly crowned Mad Hatter changed his mind?

Republican crisis managers wisely [didn't allow Paul to stray within range of the Sunday talk shows](#), but they can't keep him hidden away in some Kentucky cave until November. Sooner or later, the Senate candidate is going to have to answer a direct question: Was he being untruthful on the occasions when he said the federal government has no authority to outlaw racial discrimination in private businesses such as restaurants? Or is he being untruthful now in [claiming he would have voted for the Civil Rights Act of 1964](#)?

Actually, there are quite a few direct questions that Paul will be asked. Does he still believe it ought to be permissible to deny Americans access to housing because of the color of their skin, as he argued a few years ago? I have a personal stake in this one, since I live in a neighborhood where a legal covenant once kept African Americans out. Is this sort of thing cool with him?

I'd also like to know whether Paul really believes in a conspiracy among the U.S., Canadian and Mexican governments to turn North America into a "borderless, mass continent" bisected by a 10-lane superhighway. Because that's what he said in 2008.

["It's a real thing," he said of the imaginary threat to U.S. sovereignty](#), "and when you talk about it, the thing you just have to be aware of is that if you talk about it like it's a conspiracy, they'll paint you as a nut."

Very little paint is needed.

And while we're at it, what about [Paul's recent analysis](#) of the catastrophic [oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico](#)? The Obama administration faces growing criticism for not being tough enough on BP for its failure to stop the gushing flow of crude that is fouling Louisiana's ecologically sensitive coastal marshes. Paul, however, sees things differently. "What I don't like from the president's administration is this sort of, 'I'll put my boot heel on the throat of BP,'" Paul said. "I think that sounds really un-American in his criticism of business."

The "un-American" part is consistent with the campaign by Republican cynics and Tea Party wing nuts to delegitimize Obama's presidency. But the general idea -- that it's wrong to hold private firms strictly accountable for disasters such as the gulf spill -- appears to be something that Paul really believes, since he also dismisses the recent West Virginia mine explosion in which 29 miners were killed.

"We had a mining accident that was very tragic," he said. "Then we come in, and it's always someone's fault. Maybe sometimes accidents happen."

But maybe accidents are less likely to happen when appropriate safety standards are established and enforced. This kind of cause-and-effect reasoning is meaningful only to those who live in the real world, however. From all evidence, Paul lives in Libertarian La-La Land, where a purist philosophy leads people to believe in the purest nonsense.

Now that he is running for the Senate as a card-carrying Republican, Paul is going to have to abandon, or pretend to abandon, many of his loopy beliefs. This won't be easy, as illustrated by the hemming and hawing he did before finally endorsing the Civil Rights Act. Even then, he suggested that the law was justified only by the prevailing situation in the South. As soon as Paul is allowed out of his cave, someone should ask him whether the landmark legislation properly applies to the rest of the country.

Sarah Palin accused reporters of practicing "gotcha" journalism in seeking to elicit Paul's views. As we know from the 2008 campaign, Palin's definition of a "gotcha" interview is one in which actual questions are asked. But think about it: Did anyone imagine that the Republican Party could field a candidate who makes Sarah Barracuda sound like the voice of reason?

Republican National Committee Chairman Michael Steele wouldn't have been eligible to move to my neighborhood, either, if Paul's view had prevailed. On Sunday, [Steele ventured that Paul's philosophy is "misplaced in these times"](#) -- but also said he ["can't condemn"](#) it.

That's pathetic, Chairman Mike. Rand Paul can't have it both ways. Neither can the GOP, and neither can you.

The writer will be [online](#) to chat with readers at 1 p.m. Eastern time Tuesday. [Submit your questions and comments](#) before or during

the discussion.

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