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Pimp My Ride

On the road with Ron Paul's merry band of misfits and his hooker fan club.

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The first thing I learned from driving around Nevada with Ron Paul for a couple of days: People really hate the Federal Reserve. This became clear midway through a speech Paul was giving to a group of Republicans at a community center in Pahrump, a dusty town about 60 miles west of Las Vegas. Pahrump is known for its legal brothels (Heidi Fleiss lives there), but most of the people in the audience looked more like ranchers than swingers. They stood five deep at the back of the room and listened politely as the candidate spoke.

Until Paul got to the part about the Fed. "We need a much better monetary system," he said, a system based on "sound money, money that's backed by something." Paul, who is small and delicate and has a high voice, spoke in a near monotone, making no effort to excite the audience. They cheered anyway. Then he said this: "The Constitution gives no authority for a central bank." The crowd went wild, or as wild as a group of sober Republicans can on a Monday night. They hooted and yelled and stomped their feet. Paul stopped speaking for a moment, his words drowned out. Then he continued on about monetary policy.

Wow, I thought. The constitutionality of a central bank is not an issue you see on many lists of voter concerns. (How many pollsters would think to ask about it? How many voters would understand the question?) Yet a room full of non-economists had just responded feverishly when Paul brought it up. Hoping for some context, I went outside and found a Paul staffer. He didn't sound surprised when I told him about the speech. "It's our biggest applause line," he said.

Our biggest applause line? There are two ways to interpret a fact like that: Either the Ron Paul movement is more sophisticated than most journalists understand, or a lot of Paul supporters are eccentric bordering on bonkers.

One thing you can say for certain: The crowds at Ron Paul rallies aren't coming to be entertained. Stylistically, a Paul speech is about as colorful as a tax return. He is the only politician I've ever seen who doesn't draw energy from the audience; his tone is as flat at the conclusion as it was at the beginning. There are no jokes. There's no warm-up, no shout-out to local luminaries in the room, no inspiring vignettes about ordinary Americans doing their best in the face of this or that bad thing. In fact, there are virtually none of the usual political clichés in a Paul speech. Children may be our future, but Ron Paul isn't admitting it in public.

Paul is no demagogue, and probably couldn't be if he tried. He's too libertarian. He can't stand to tell other people what to do, even people who've shown up looking for instructions. On board the campaign's tiny chartered jet one night (the plane was so small my legs were intertwined with the candidate's for the entire flight), Paul and his staff engaged in an unintentionally hilarious exchange about the cabin lights. The staff wanted to know whether Paul preferred the lights on or off. Not wanting to be bossy, Paul wouldn't say. Ultimately, the staff had to guess. It was a long three minutes.

Being at the center of attention clearly bothers Paul. "I like to be unnoticed," he says, a claim not typically made by presidential candidates. "That's my personality. I see all the excitement and sometimes I say to myself, 'Why do they do that?' I don't see myself as a big deal." Ordinarily you'd have to dismiss a line like that out of hand—if he's so humble, why is he running for president?—but, in Paul's case, it might be true. In fact, it might be the key to his relative success. His fans don't read his awkwardness as a social phobia, but as a sign of authenticity. Paul never outshines his message, which is unchanging: Let adults make their own choices; liberty works. For a unified theory of everything, it's pretty simple. And Paul sincerely believes it.

Most Republicans, of course, profess to believe it too. But only Paul has introduced a bill to legalize unpasteurized milk. Give yourself five minutes and see if you can think of a more countercultural idea than that. Most people assume that the whole reason we have a government is to make sure the milk gets pasteurized. It takes some stones to argue otherwise, especially if nobody's paying you to do it. (The raw-milk lobby basically consists of about eight goat-cheese enthusiasts in Manhattan, and possibly the Amish.) Paul is pro-choice on pasteurization entirely for reasons of principle. "I support the right of people to drink whatever they want," he says. He mocks the idea that "only government can make sure we're safe, so we need the government to protect us. I don't think we'd all die of unsafe food if we didn't have the FDA. Someone else would do it." If you know Ron Paul primarily from watching the Republican debates, you probably assume he spends most of his time ranting about September 11 and the Iraq invasion. In fact, his real passion is Austrian economics. More even than the war, Paul despises paper currency, which he considers a hoax, "fiat money." He can become emotional talking about it. Caught in traffic in downtown Vegas on the way to an event, Paul looked out the window at the casinos and mused aloud: "Can you imagine when all those slot machines used real silver dollars? All that silver ... " His words trailed off, as in a pleasant daydream.

Paul trusts coins, and he has bought them all his life, first as a childhood collector, then as an investor. During the 1980s, as he ran unsuccessfully for the Senate and the White House, he became involved in a coin business, Ron Paul Coins. Numismatics, he says, is a labor of love. "You only make five or ten dollars a coin. You've got to sell a lot of coins to get rich. I was just promoting something I believe in." It's a rare person who admits something like this. Everybody knows the gold standard is for cranks. It's complicated, unwieldy, and basically incompatible with the modern world. Worse, it's boring. Paul doesn't care. "It's been over one hundred years since that issue has been talked about in a presidential election," he told me with apparent pride.

Over dinner at the coffee shop in the Saddle West Hotel, Casino, and RV Resort, Paul and his staff talked about little else. There were eight or nine of us at the table, with the 72-year-old obstetrician-congressman at the head in a gray suit, working over a chicken platter and discussing hard money. It had the feel of a familiar conversation, a dialogue that doesn't really end but that never diminishes in intensity. At one point, Paul's assistant checked his BlackBerry for the latest gold and silver prices and read them aloud to the table.

For Paul, the original sin in monetary policy took place in 1933, when FDR uncoupled the currency from gold. This removed limits from federal spending, allowing Congress an endless supply of money it could print at will, while leaving citizens vulnerable to the inflation that inevitably resulted. But, worst of all from Paul's point of view, it was compulsory. Private currencies are forbidden, so Americans had no choice but to participate. The whole system is a mandatory Ponzi scheme, built on faith in the government. Except that, now that the bottom has dropped out of the dollar, it's clear there's no reason to have faith in the government or its money.

That's Paul's essential argument. His solution: allow competing currencies.

If individuals want to circulate gold or silver coins (or scrip backed by metal reserves), let them. Give citizens the chance to decide which money they trust.

The owners of NORFED, an Indiana coin company, gave it a shot. The company minted and sold thousands of silver Ron Paul dollars, complete with the candidate's face in profile, before federal agents showed up in November and confiscated their entire remaining inventory. In its affidavit for a

search warrant, the FBI accused NORFED of trying to “undermine the United States government’s financial systems by the issuance of a non-governmental competing currency for the purpose of repealing the Federal Reserve and Internal Revenue Code.” That may be a crime, but it’s also pretty close to Ron Paul’s stump speech.

It’s hard to think of a presidential candidate who’s ever drawn a coalition as broad as Ron Paul’s. At any Paul event, you’re likely to run into self-described anarcho-capitalists, 9/11-deniers, antiwar lefties, objectivists, paleocons, hemp activists, and geeky high school kids, along with tax resisters, conspiracy nuts, and acolytes of Murray Rothbard. And those are just the ones it’s possible to categorize. It’s hard to say what they all have in common, except that every one is an ideological minority—or, as one of them put it to me, “open-minded people.” To these supporters, Paul is a folk hero, the one person in national politics who doesn’t judge them, who understands what it’s like to be considered a freak by straight society.

Which is odd, because, in person, Paul doesn’t seem like a freak. He seems like someone’s grandfather. I first met up with Paul after a rally at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He apparently hadn’t known I was coming but accepted my arrival with Zen-like calm, welcoming me into the seat next to him in the minivan and offering me baked goods from a plate on his lap. We were both finishing our brownies when he mentioned they’d been baked by a supporter. I stopped chewing. Where I work, this is a major taboo (Rule One: Never eat food sent by viewers), and my concern must have shown. Paul grinned. “Maybe they’re spiked with marijuana,” he said.

If so, it would have been his first experience with illegal drugs. Though Paul argues passionately for liberalizing marijuana laws and is beloved by potheads (Timothy Leary once held a fund-raiser for him), he has never smoked pot himself. He sounded shocked when I asked him. “I have never seen anyone smoke marijuana,” he said. “I don’t think I’d be open to using it.” For some people, libertarianism is the philosophical justification for a zany personal life. Paul, by contrast, describes his hobbies as gardening (roses and organic tomatoes) and “riding my bicycle.” He has never had a cigarette. He doesn’t swear. He limits his drinking to an occasional glass of wine and goes to church regularly. He has been married to the same woman for 50 years. Three of their five children are physicians. Ron Paul is deeply square, and every bit as deeply committed to your right not to be. “I don’t gamble, but I’m the gambler’s best friend,” he says, boasting of his support for online casinos. He is a Second Amendment absolutist who doesn’t own a gun. “I’ve only fired one a couple of times in my life. I’ve never gotten around to killing anything.” It’s an impressively, charmingly principled world view, though sometimes you’ve got to wonder how much Paul has in common with many of the people who support him.

Before we left the speech in Pahrump and headed across the state, I’d called a friend of mine in Carson City named Dennis Hof. Dennis owns the Moonlite BunnyRanch, probably the most famous legal brothel in the country and the setting for an HBO series called “Cathouse.” Dennis isn’t very political, but he’s smart, and I suspected he might lean libertarian. I told him Ron Paul was speaking the next morning in Reno. He said he’d drive down to see it.

I wasn’t planning on showing up at Paul’s press conference with a bordello owner and two hookers, but unexpected things happen on the road.

I’d arrived with the campaign at the Best Western Airport Plaza Hotel in Reno at two in the morning the night before, and, at some point while I was sleeping, the power in the hotel went out, disabling my alarm. By the time I woke up, Paul and his staff had left. So I called Dennis for a ride. He was there in ten minutes, in an enormous stretch limo with a BunnyRanch logo on the side. He’d brought two of his girls, Brooke and Air Force Amy, as well as his driver, a middle-aged man in a cowboy hat and Western wear. It was a conspicuous group.

Probably because they didn’t fully understand who I was coming with, the Paul people waved the limo through a roadblock outside the auditorium and brought us in through the loading dock. A Paul aide informed us that press conferences are for press only. That’s us, said the girls, and we walked right in.

The other, actual journalists looked confused. Dennis is built like a linebacker and was dressed entirely in black. Brooke and Air Force Amy looked like hookers because they are. All three slapped on Ron Paul stickers ("we could use these as pasties," Air Force Amy said, giggling) and sat near the front. Pretty soon, Paul showed up and did his 15 minutes on liberty and Austrian economics. If he noticed there were prostitutes present, he didn't show it.

The first time I heard Paul talk about monetary policy, I'd felt like a hostage, the only person in the room who didn't buy into the program. Then, slowly, like so many hostages, I started to open my mind and listen. By the time we got to Reno, unfamiliar thoughts were beginning to occur: Why shouldn't we worry about the soundness of the currency? What exactly is the dollar backed by anyway? And, if the gold standard is crazy, is it really any crazier than hedge funds? I'd become Patty Hearst, ready to take up arms for the cause, or at least call my accountant and tell him to buy Krugerrands. I looked over at Dennis and the girls. They looked like they might be having the same thoughts.

Once the press conference ended, Paul left to do interviews with local TV reporters. Dennis and the girls stood at the podium and had their pictures taken under the Ron Paul sign. Air Force Amy hammed it up. What I really want more than anything, she told me, is to get my picture taken with Dr. Paul. She meant it.

I considered trying to explain to her that I was not actually affiliated with Ron Paul, merely writing about him for a political magazine back in Washington. But I didn't. Instead, I led all three of them into the back room where Paul was doing his interviews. Paul was talking on camera and never saw us. But his staff was on high alert. They looked more uncomfortable than I have ever seen a campaign staff look. Air Force Amy didn't appear to notice. Dressed in red, her Dolly Parton hairdo and 36DDs at full attention, she sidled up to Lew Moore, Paul's campaign manager, and made her pitch. "Hi," she said. "I'm Air Force Amy, and I'd like a picture with Ron Paul." I knew right away it wasn't going to happen. "I've got a concern, I've got to be honest," Moore said, tense but trying to be nice. "If that picture surfaces, it could be very damaging to him politically." Dennis stepped in to take up Air Force Amy's cause, but Moore wasn't budging. "The mainstream in the early primary states is not moving in that direction," he said.

I really thought Air Force Amy was going to cry. She looked crushed. Like a child of alcoholic parents, she immediately started to rationalize away the pain. "It wasn't Ron's decision," she told Moore. "It was yours. So I can't take it personally." But it was obvious that she did. It was awful. There wasn't much left to say, so Dennis and the girls and I left and went downtown to a casino for pancakes. There were no hard feelings. They wore their Ron Paul stickers all through breakfast. If I'd had one, I would have worn it too.

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