

Rand Paul's Enablers

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The recent [controversy around Republican nominee for the US Senate from Kentucky Rand Paul](#) seems a little strange and somewhat contrived. After a year and a half of hearing from the right wing that President Obama is a socialist, that any form of government regulation is, in fact, tyranny, and that the federal government can only create problems and destroy our country, it seems a bit much for any conservative to express surprise when Paul extends these ideas to their natural conclusion by arguing that the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which ended a century of post-slavery apartheid, was somehow, at least in part, a bad idea.

This sense of shock is particularly shameless coming from conservatives who sat quietly during the last 18 months, rarely even pushing back against the most bizarre right wing canards, such as those regarding President Obama's place of birth. Conservative responses to this controversy have ducked the serious issues and focused more on Paul's flaws. [Senator Jim DeMint \(R-SC\), one of Paul's most prominent supporters, made comments](#) indicating that DeMint was either unaware of Paul's basic views or thought that Paul needed better media training. [Ross Douthat's New York Times piece on the topic](#) was a somewhat tortured attempt to dismiss Paul as somebody too beholden to ideological rigidity. Both seem bizarrely unaware that Paul's victory is a product of months of ideological hyperbole of the kind that characterizes President Obama as a dangerous socialist. Both DeMint and Douthat conveniently, and wrongly, absolve mainstream conservatives from any blame in the matter.

The Civil Rights Act occupies a special place in the American political consciousness, not least because it was that bill, along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965, that made the US a real democracy where all people enjoyed the rights of full citizenship. It is a major part of the foundation of modern American politics and something upon which we should all be able to agree, but Paul's comments challenge this. After all, why should it be assumed that everybody who rails against the federal government and regulations of any kind would think positively about the Civil Rights Act which, in addition to being one of the most positive and significant pieces of legislation in the last half century, substantially increased the role of the federal government? Moreover, if the words and views of the Tea Partiers, including Paul, are taken seriously, rather than dismissed as simply angry rantings, it can be seen as reasonably likely that had these people been around in 1964, they probably would have viewed the Civil Rights Act as a form of socialism and opposed it.

Therefore, it is hard not to conclude that Paul has made the mistake of saying what so many others in his party think. Paul's assertion that President Obama was "un-American" for criticizing BP after the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is just another example of the candidate from Kentucky saying something that is absolutely consistent with his party's rhetoric, but which is not the kind of thing more savvy Republicans say out loud.

The Paul controversy is also a reminder that issues of race are always complicated in the US; and they remain complicated in the age of Obama. One of the ways this occurs today is that, for many people the standard response to any suggestion of racial bias is not concern about real racism, but claims that race card has been played. This has led to [questions about racism in the Tea Party movement](#), the movement of which Paul is a beneficiary, being met by its leaders' [outraged and tired accusations that liberals are playing the race card](#), but no efforts to address the underlying issue of racism. Of course, these accusations obscure the reality that when you see racist behavior, sometimes you have to play the race card.

If Rand Paul, who may well get elected to the US Senate in November, is saying things that make more buttoned up Republicans feel uncomfortable, these conservatives have only themselves to blame. This is not to suggest that all Republicans are racists who want to return America to its segregated past. That assertion is clearly false. However, in the name of energizing the base and opposing Obama, Republican leaders have acted as enablers for Paul and others who share his racist views. Principled Republicans should have spoken out against the Tea Partiers and others as soon as this racism reared its ugly head. Instead these Republican leaders, to use that term very loosely, thought it was wiser to shield the racists in their midst and accuse their opponents of playing the race card, while keeping silent on actual racism from their allies and supporters until it became too embarrassing to ignore.