



No matter who wins Iowa, Ron Paul's winning the war of ideas

Published: Tuesday, January 03, 2012, 1:07 AM Updated: Tuesday, January 03, 2012, 7:07 AM



Paul Mulshine/The Star Ledger

By

I've been following this Republican presidential primary campaign for close to a year, ever since the candidates kicked it off with appearances at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Washington.

I have heard roughly 9 million speeches in which the candidate invoked "American exceptionalism."

I have heard perhaps 8 million in which the candidate promised to balance the budget without raising taxes.

I have heard maybe 7 million in which he or she invoked the name of President Ronald Reagan.



Ronald Reagan: The last Republican president worth mentioning

But I can't recall a single instance in which I heard a candidate ever bring up President Bush. And I'm including both George W. and George H.W. I'm sure someone did at some time. I just can't recall it.

I attribute this to something I remember hearing in my youth. The old-timers used to remark that it was always the Democratic presidents who started the wars. That remained true until Reagan left office. Then 20 years ago this month, the first President Bush got us involved in a war in the Mideast. It's been going on in some form ever since.

Maybe Ron Paul's not so crazy after all.

It's been great fun watching his rise to the point where he actually has a chance at winning the Iowa caucuses. And it's been even more fun watching the TV talking heads try to figure it out.

I am not a great fan of TV correspondents. Just between you and me, these guys and gals are hired for their looks, not their brains. They employ stereotypes instead of analysts. Someone who doesn't fit the stereotype simply cannot be reported on. That's what happened to Ron Paul.

Even after he finished in a statistical dead heat with Michele Bachmann at the Iowa straw poll, he was being left out of the "top tier" — the stereotype the TV talking heads employed to include Mitt Romney and two candidates who can expect to be back in their day jobs in the near future.

New Jersey's own Jon Stewart had great fun with this as well. During his "Daily Show," Stewart lampooned the talking heads with clips showing the great lengths they'd go to in an effort to avoid reporting on the only candidate who was saying something interesting and original.

The audience loved it. These were mostly young people, yet they were going nuts for the oldest guy in the race. Something was

going on here. But it didn't fit into the stereotypes, so the talking heads ignored it.

A couple of weeks ago, the polls began to show Paul had a chance to win the Iowa caucuses. The TV guys were forced to cover the story. That meant they needed a stereotype. They found one in some old newsletters issued under Paul's name. Some unknown writer had made some politically incorrect remarks. Racism? Anti-Semitism? The talking heads had a template to drop down on him, and they dropped it with a vengeance.

But if they're not listening to Paul on the issues, his opponents are. A good example is monetary policy. A TV clip of a debate in the 2008 race shows Romney smirking as Paul warns about the Federal Reserve. After the housing bubble burst, Paul looked like a prophet. This time around, Fed-bashing is compulsory for a candidate. So is calling for the elimination of governmental departments, even if you can't remember which ones.

Strict adherence to the Constitution? Check. Quotes from the founders about limited government? Check. The only area in which the others have not followed the Texas congressman's lead is on foreign policy. There, they compete to see who's got the most enthusiasm for starting a war with Iran.

Let's assume that Romney finishes well today, wins the New Hampshire primary next week and goes on to solidify his hold on the nomination. The smart money says he will and I wouldn't bet against it.

But I would bet my maximum political bet, which is a six-pack of beer, that he tones down the neocon rhetoric the moment he's got the nomination. Romney's a smart guy, too smart to defend the Bush legacy. That bomb-Iran rhetoric may work when you're preaching to the choir. But it's not the sort of debate you want to have with the guy who occupies the bully pulpit.

Those Republican candidates might not want to mention George Bush. But Barack Obama will be only too happy to do so.

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