

Paul Ryan, Ayn Rand and U.S. Foreign Policy*

By Elan Journo
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Vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan has credited philosopher Ayn Rand with inspiring him to enter politics—and made her 1,000-plus-page magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, required reading for his staff. "The reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand," he [said](#) in 2005 at a gathering of Rand fans. "The fight we are in here, make no mistake about it, is a fight of individualism versus collectivism." It is a theme that pervades Rand's corpus.¹ While Ryan has distanced himself from Rand's philosophy of Objectivism, he continues to express admiration for *Atlas Shrugged*.

The addition of the Wisconsin congressman to the GOP ticket naturally unleashed a flash-mob of analysts parsing his speeches, articles, and signature proposals for evidence of her influence. On domestic policy, the [impact](#)² of Rand's [ideas](#)³ on Ryan's [outlook](#)⁴ is marked, though uneven and sometimes overstated. Religion, in particular, has driven a wedge between

Ryan, who would enact Catholic dogma into [law](#)⁵, and Rand, an atheist, who championed the separation of church and state. But what has received far less attention is Ryan's outlook on foreign policy—and whether it bears the mark of Rand's thought.

Ayn Rand's foreign policy, if we can construct one from her writings, would be grounded in her view of [man's rights](#) and the [nature of government](#).⁶ Like the Founding Fathers, Rand argues that the ideal government is the servant, not the master, of the individual. In her view, it is a vital institution strictly limited to one function: to safeguard individual rights. By "rights," Rand [means](#) freedom to take "all the actions required by the nature of a rational being for the support, the furtherance, the fulfillment and the enjoyment of his own life." Critically, the protection of an individual's rights "does *not* mean that others must provide him with the necessities of life."⁷

Domestically, this outlook entails a truly [free market](#)⁸ with absolute legal protection of private property, and without regulations,

bailouts, corporate handouts, or entitlement programs like Social Security, Medicaid, and Medicare. (Ryan breaks with Rand by attempting to save, rather than end these programs.) In Rand's political philosophy, however, there is no gulf between economic rights and personal and intellectual ones: for instance, she wrote passionately of the crucial importance (contra Ryan) of the right to [abortion](#),⁹ and regarded [freedom of speech](#)¹⁰ as sacrosanct.

Like her views on domestic policy, a Randian foreign policy would be guided exclusively by the goal of protecting the individual rights of Americans, and only Americans. Accordingly, the U.S. government shouldn't issue handouts to other countries (through foreign aid or international welfare schemes), nor treat its citizens as cannon fodder (through a military draft). Indeed, Rand was scathing in her analyses of the Vietnam War, arguing that it did not serve America's national interest. "[I]t is a pure instance of blind, senseless altruistic self-sacrificial slaughter," she wrote in *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*.¹¹

Of course, there are times when government is obligated to go to war, according to Rand. The crucial standard here is whether the lives and property of Americans are imperiled. The only morally justifiable purpose for war, she wrote, is self-defense. This rules out so-called humanitarian missions, like the tragic 1992–93 mission in Somalia, and the notion that the United States is somehow obliged to serve as the world's policeman. The primary function of the military, in Rand's eyes, should be to deter, and when necessary, defeat foreign aggressors.

Rand regarded any form of [pacifism](#)¹² (including Ron Paul-esque passivity) as destructive to national defense. And undoubtedly she would have supported a

strong military response to the 9/11 attacks (though, as I have argued in my [book](#)¹³ [and sketch out below](#), she would have rejected George W. Bush's conception of the enemy and his entire prosecution of the war).

Rand viewed deterrence as an especially important—and effective—method of defending American freedom. In her view, the power of a morally confident, assertive United States was considerable, though largely unappreciated. For instance, she believed that if the West had truly stood up to the Soviet bloc by withdrawing its moral sanction, ending the flow of aid, and imposing an airtight boycott, the Soviet threat would have disintegrated many years before it actually did, without the need for war.

Perhaps most importantly, Rand argued in favor of genuine free trade—without trade barriers, protective tariffs, or special privileges. In her [words](#): "the opening of the world's trade routes to free international trade and competition among the private citizens of all countries dealing directly with one another." In the 19th century, she argued, free trade liberated the world by "undercutting and wrecking the remnants of feudalism and the statist tyranny of absolute monarchies." Not coincidentally, she observed, this era enjoyed the longest period of general peace in human history (roughly from 1815 to 1914).¹⁴

Taken together, Rand's approach entails a foreign policy based on the morality of "[rational self-interest](#)." To illustrate what that would look like, let us bring Rand's approach to bear on several of today's major foreign policy issues, starting with Iran.

Tehran is a leader of the Islamist movement, the cause animating al Qaeda, the Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood and kindred groups. Iran has inspired and funded jihadist

terrorism and cast itself as an embodiment of the movement's political ideal. It's a regime that tramples on the rights of its own citizens. It ambitiously seeks to kill and subjugate beyond its borders, and, owing to its jihadist ideology, is vociferously anti-American. From Washington's capitulation in the hostage crisis of 1979–80, the regime concluded that it could get away with committing an act of war against America. Rand noted at the time that because we failed to march in with force within days after the hostage taking, the repercussions would be severe.

Since then U.S. policymakers in effect rewarded Iran's aggression with bribes and conciliation, and thereby encouraged a spiral of further [Iranian-backed attacks](#).¹⁵ Witness the Hezbollah hijacking of a TWA airliner; the kidnapping and torture of Americans in Lebanon; the 1983 bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and, later, the barracks of U.S. Marines, killing 241 Americans. The 9/11 Commission [linked](#)¹⁶ Tehran to at least eight of the suicide hijackers. Later, Iranian forces trained and [armed Iraqi and Afghan insurgents](#),¹⁷ who murdered U.S. troops. Considering the U.S. failure to recognize the Iranian regime's character and goals, and assertively end its aggression, Tehran's defiance over its nuclear program should hardly surprise.

We are at war with Iran, but only that country knows it; in the name of self-defense, the U.S. government is morally obliged to eliminate this enemy. A military option is a non-starter, however, in the shadow of the Iraq and Afghanistan failures (more on those in a moment). But even when we have the opportunity to morally support the Iranian people in attempting to remove from power a regime hostile to the freedom of Americans and Iranians alike, as we did with the Green Movement, which arose after the 2009 elections, we refuse to

do so. The reputedly crippling sanctions now in place are of course a forlorn hope, especially considering the large-enough-to-drive-a-truck-through [exemptions](#)¹⁸ that have already been granted.

Part of what has magnified the tragedy of 9/11 is the failure of policymakers to properly identify and vigorously pursue the enemy that attacked us. It was not simply the hijackers' al Qaeda cell, but the jihadist movement, spearheaded by Tehran and bankrolled by Saudi wealth, which had been waging attacks against us for years. In my book, [Winning the Unwinnable War](#),¹⁹ I discuss the nature and malignant goal of that movement, and explore what went wrong in the U.S. response and particularly the policy fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The goal uniting these two wars was Bush's messianic policy of "nation building" and bringing the vote to the oppressed and needy of the Middle East. Clearing out sewage pipes, fixing up hospitals, printing textbooks—these welfare and social services projects may be the province of the Peace Corps, but not the Army Corps, nor is it right to risk the lives of American soldiers for the sake of the world's needy. Just as Rand decried Vietnam as a selfless, purposeless war, so that same criticism applies, as strongly, in Iraq. Much of what went wrong in Iraq and Afghanistan stemmed from a policy of putting an altruistic welfare agenda first, above the self-interested goal of eliminating whatever threat we faced in those countries.

Tragically, despite its unparalleled military strength, the United States mired itself, needlessly, in no-win wars. Baghdad is now under Tehran's [sway](#).²⁰ The continuing strife in Iraq, marked by *only* occasional [suicide bombings](#),²¹ is a testament to how the notion of success has been progressively defined down. In Afghanistan there are no longer

good options. A minimum step toward the right policy—one with a modicum of justice to the now 2,000 American who perished there—is to properly redefine the mission from perpetual "nation building" to expunging the Taliban and allied Islamist forces in Afghanistan and the Pakistani borderlands.

One recent bright spot, seemingly, was the Arab Spring. But the upheavals across the Middle East, it turned out, shared only superficial similarities. One trend that did emerge, though, was the ascendance, notably in Egypt and Tunisia, of political parties sympathetic to or fully embracing Islamist goals. Here, then, is the consummation of Bush's "nation-building" democracy crusade. We now must contend with the emerging threat of an Egypt dominated by Islamists—a regime that our diplomats have been falling over themselves to encourage. At minimum we should refuse to endorse the regime (even though popularly elected) and even shun it.²² To embrace it is to lend the regime an undeserved legitimacy; if any genuinely freedom-seeking Egyptians remain, would they feel anything but demoralized at the [spectacle?](#)²³

U.S. policy has galvanized one group: Islamists. Further evidence of that came on Sept. 11, 2012, in the form of the conspicuously timed attacks on our embassies in Cairo and Benghazi.

Storming the sovereign territory of the world's militarily strongest nation requires considerable temerity. Islamists in Egypt, however, thought nothing of attempting to invade the mission in Cairo and hoisting their flag. In Libya, in what looks like a meticulously calculated assault, the self-professed soldiers of Allah managed to murder the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans. The uproar and riots across the

region, putatively in reaction to a YouTube video critical of Islam, brought to the surface (yet again) the assertiveness of those who seek obedience to religious dogma and revile the free mind and the individual's freedom of speech. What inspires not fear but contempt in the hearts of our Islamist enemies is the [meekness of American foreign policy across decades.](#)²⁴

Meshing with that broad pattern, the Obama administration's response to the embassy crisis was deplorable. It's hard to imagine a more self-abasing reaction than to have the Cairo embassy apologize to the raging mob, while disparaging free speech. Nor can anyone take our government's commitment to freedom of speech seriously when it tries to lean on YouTube to take down the video, and rather than committing to protect the safety of the man behind the film, gives him a perp walk. Compared with *that*, the Romney-Ryan response was better: Yes, America has projected weakness; yes, Washington has undercut real allies, for example, by seeking to distance itself from Israel.

But that's far short of what was necessary. At minimum, our leaders should declare that American lives are untouchable and that our freedom of speech is inviolable, and demonstrate a willingness, in action, to retaliate with force. (When questioned about the embassy crisis in the vice-presidential debate, Ryan was handed an opportunity to speak forcefully in defense of freedom of speech and the sanctity of the rights of Americans. He dodged it.)

Consider, finally, our defense budget.²⁵ Clouding the debate over defense spending is the fact that our present foreign policy leads us to engage in a mess of contradictions: legitimate, self-defensive operations; illegitimate humanitarian, "nation building" efforts (along with all the

support costs for long-term bases); and the occasional disbursal of [bribes](#)²⁶ to our enemies. First, strip out the global-welfare category. Next, consider whether we would need every single one of our permanent overseas bases—if our foreign policy demonstrated in word and deed our willingness, when necessary, to crush enemies. Arguably, we could make do with fewer—and realize considerable savings. To safeguard the freedom of Americans, a powerful, well-equipped and technologically advanced military—one that is peerless, efficient, and formidable—is essential. Yet there's reason to think, under a principled, self-interested approach, we'd have the strong military we need, at a lesser cost.

What's distinctive to an approach informed by Rand's ideas is that it hinges on a rethinking of the moral values that should inform foreign policy. At its core is the idea that the [individual](#)²⁷ has a right to his life, that he's morally entitled to live it in line with his rational [judgment](#),²⁸ and that his freedom to act on his judgment must be safeguarded from aggressors. And, crucially, he bears no duty selflessly to serve others—whether they are next door or overseas. This animating premise enjoins a firm, long-range policy of assertive national defense and strictly rules out [altruistic](#)²⁹ missions à la Bush.

Clearly, Paul Ryan does not share Rand's foreign policy. But is there nevertheless a discernible influence?

Reading Ryan's most substantive [speech](#)³⁰ on foreign policy, delivered at the Hamilton Society in 2011, you can certainly hear the reverberation of Ayn Rand's ideas. "[I]f you believe these rights are universal human rights, then that clearly forms the basis of your views on foreign policy," he said, partially echoing the Randian conviction that regimes are moral to the degree that

they respect individual rights. For Ryan, as for Rand, championing [rights](#) leads "you to reject moral relativism. It causes you to recoil at the idea of persistent moral indifference toward any nation that stifles and denies liberty." Though as already noted, Ryan did not speak forcefully in defense of free speech in the aftermath of the Libyan attacks. But at least there is, in line with Rand, a thoughtful promotion of [free trade](#). In his Hamilton Society speech, for instance, he argued in favor of an "expanding community of nations that shares our economic values as well as our political values" in order to "ensure a more prosperous world."

If these similarities between the two are meaningful, Ryan nevertheless seems to fundamentally part ways with Rand. In particular, he speaks of the need to "renew our commitment to the idea that America is the greatest force for human freedom the world has ever seen," and sees in the Arab Spring the "long-repressed populations give voice to the fundamental desire for liberty." (The ethnic-sectarian [bloodbath](#) that ensued in Iraq was proof, if any were needed, that political freedom and peace are not an innate yearning of mankind.³¹) Further, Ryan claims that it is "always in the interest of the United States to promote these principles in other nations." Like President George W. Bush, whose wars he supported, Ryan appears to subscribe to the quasi-religious view that [freedom](#) is written into the soul of mankind, and that it is somehow the moral duty of America, the freest and wealthiest of nations, to go forth and wage wars to unchain the world's oppressed. In all this, he could not be less aligned with Rand.

Rand certainly believed that the United States benefits from a freer world. Thus, she held, America should speak up for dissidents everywhere who seek greater freedom. But Rand would only ever consider deploying

the military where the rights of Americans hang in the balance—when, in other words, it becomes an issue of self-defense. This critical distinction may well be lost on Ryan, if the media's parsing of his neoconservative leanings has been fair.

Perhaps, in these waning days of the campaign season, Ryan will consider rereading Rand's work, and sharing it with his running mate. Anyone seeking to inject more rational and more distinctively American ideas into our nation's chaotic foreign policy ought to seriously consider Ayn Rand's refreshingly clear-eyed perspective.

Elan Journo is a fellow and director of policy research at the Ayn Rand Institute. His book, [Winning the Unwinnable War: America's Self-Crippled Response to Islamic Totalitarianism](#), analyzes post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy from the perspective of Rand's philosophy.

Notes

* A shorter version of this article appeared in *Foreign Policy* magazine online (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/08/28/galt_goes_global) on August 28, 2012.

¹ The quote from Ryan appears in Ryan Lizza, "How Paul Ryan Captured the G.O.P.," *The New Yorker*, 6 August 2012,

http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2012/08/06/120806fa_fact_lizza#ixzz24IX7Q8jX (accessed 25 September 2012).

² Don Watkins, "Ryan, Rand, and Rights," *The Daily Caller*, 17 August 2012,

<http://dailycaller.com/2012/08/17/ryan-rand-and-rights/> (accessed 25 September 2012).

³ Onkar Ghate, "Ayn Rand's Appeal," *Fox News*, 21 August 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/08/21/ayn-rand-appeal/> (accessed 25 September 2012).

⁴ Don Watkins, "Why Paul Ryan is no Ayn Rand on Social Security," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 21 August 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2012/0821/Why-Paul-Ryan-is-no-Ayn-Rand-on-Social-Security> (accessed 25 September 2012).

⁵ Michelle Goldberg, "Paul Ryan's Extreme Abortion Views," *The Daily Beast*, 11 August 2012, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/08/11/paul-ryan-s-extreme-abortion-views.html> (accessed 25 September 2012).

⁶ Ayn Rand, "The Nature of Government," *The Virtue of Selfishness*, (New York: Signet, 1964) http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=arc_ayn_rand_the_nature_of_government.

⁷ Ayn Rand, "Man's Rights," *Capitalism: the Unknown Ideal* (New York: Signet, 1986) http://www.aynrand.org/site/PageServer?pagename=arc_ayn_rand_man_rights.

⁸ "Capitalism," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, <http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/capitalism.html>

⁹ "Abortion," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, <http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/abortion.html>

¹⁰ "Free Speech," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/free_speech.html

¹¹ Ayn Rand, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, (New York, NY: Signet, 1967) pp. 224.

¹² "Pacifism," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, <http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/pacifism.html>

¹³ Elan Journo, *Winning the Unwinnable War: America's Self-Crippled Response to Islamic Totalitarianism*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B003UERGVI>

¹⁴ "Foreign Policy," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/foreign_policy.html#order_2

¹⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, *Iran's Proxy War Against America*, The Claremont Institute, 2007. (https://www.claremont.org/repository/docLib/20071127_ProxyWarAgainstAmerica.pdf)

¹⁶ Daniel Pipes, "Iran's Link to Al-Qaeda: the 9/11 Commission's Evidence," *Middle East Forum*, Fall 2004, <http://www.meforum.org/670/irans-link-to-al-qaeda-the-9-11-commissions> (accessed 25 September 2012).

¹⁷ Michael R. Gordon and Andrew W. Lehren, "Leaked Reports Detail Iran's Aid for Iraqi Militias," *New York Times*, 22 October 2010 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html> (accessed 28 September 2012); Sanjeev Miglani, "General McChrystal says Afghan insurgents trained in Iran," *Reuters*, 30 May 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/05/30/us-afghanistan-iran-idUSTRE64T0U920100530> (accessed 28 September 2012).

¹⁸ David Feith, "Obama's Iran Loopholes," *The Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304211804577502912009234948.html> (accessed 25 September 2012).

¹⁹ See: <http://winningtheunwinnablewar.com/>

²⁰ Josh Rogin, "US Struggles with Iran for Influence in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, 23 March 2012, http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/23/us_struggles_with_iran_for_influence_in_iraq (accessed 25 September 2012).

²¹ Yasir Ghazi, "Wave of Attacks Kill Dozens in Iraq," *The New York Times*, 16 August 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/17/world/middleeast/at-least-39-killed-in-wave-of-attacks-in-iraq.html?_r=1 (accessed 25 September 2012).

²² Christopher Bartolotta and Jordan McGillis, "A Conversation with Yaron Brook and Elan Journo," *Whitehead Journal of Diplomacy*, Winter/Spring 2012, <http://blogs.shu.edu/diplomacy/2012/04/a-conversation-with-yaron-brook-and-elan-journo/> (accessed 25 September 2012).

²³ Nick Meo, "US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi in historic first," *The Telegraph*, 14 July 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9400749/US-Secretary-of-State-Hillary-Clinton-meets-Egypt-Muslim-Brotherhood-president-Mohammed-Morsi-in-historic-first.html> (accessed 25 September 2012).

²⁴ Elan Journo, "Our self-crippled foreign policy encouraged deadly embassy attack," *FoxNews.com*, 28 September 2012, <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/09/28/our-self-crippled-policy-encouraged-deadly-embassy-attacks/> (accessed 28 September 2012).

²⁵ <http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2011/12/defence-spending>

²⁶ Amit R. Paley, "Iraqis Joining Insurgency Less for Cause than Cash," *The Washington Post*, 20 November 2007, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/11/19/AR2007111902022.html> (accessed 25 September 2012).

²⁷ "Individualism," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, <http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/individualism.html>

²⁸ "Independence," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, <http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/independence.html>

²⁹ "Altruism," *Ayn Rand Lexicon*, <http://aynrandlexicon.com/lexicon/altruism.html>

³⁰ House of Representatives Committee on the Budget <http://budget.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=244386>

³¹ Richard A. Oppel Jr., "Number of Unidentified Bodies Found in Baghdad Rose Sharply in May," *The New York Times*, 2 June 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/02/world/middleeast/02iraq.html> (accessed 25 September 2012).