

The Republican nomination
Whose side are you on, Jon Huntsman?

BEFORE it was clear whether Rick Perry would stay in the race or drop out, Erick Erickson, a conservative talking head for CNN and managing editor of Redstate.com, said, "If Rick Perry leaves the Republican race, there will not be a candidate in the field who authentically represents smaller government."

But what about Ron Paul?

For conventionally right-wing party stalwarts like Mr Erickson, Ron Paul doesn't count as real Republican, because of his principled anti-war stance. Of course, that makes him a more authentic representative of smaller government, war being the health of the state and all, but that's beside the point. The conservative tribe professes faith in smaller government, and it is membership in the tribe that determines the authenticity of one's devotion to the tribe's catechism. Ron Paul isn't really a member of the tribe, so he cannot "authentically represent smaller government". He may represent smaller government in fact, but not in the right way. As votes from the Iowa caucuses were being tallied, Mr Erickson saw fit to relate to his readers a rumour that "the Occupiers showed up for Ron Paul". You get the idea.

And what about Jon Huntsman? According to the Cato Institute's "Fiscal Report Card on America's Governors" in 2008, the last year Messrs Perry and Huntsman were graded together, they received identical scores, tying for fifth place. Pretty good, huh? Since Cato's report card "grades the governors on their fiscal performance from a limited-government perspective", one wonders why Mr Perry but not Mr Huntsman is considered an authentic champion of smaller government. Indeed, Mr Huntsman's classically-conservative wariness of foreign entanglements in general, and his case for ending the conflict in Afghanistan in particular, contrast dramatically with Mr Perry's eagerness to revive the American occupation of Iraq, and suggest a rather more principled commitment to smaller government. Again, it all comes down to standing in the conservative tribe.

Long ago, Mr Erickson said he won't support Jon Huntsman ever because...well, here:

While serving as the United States Ambassador to China, our greatest strategic adversary, Jon Huntsman began plotting to run against the President of the United States. This calls into question his loyalty not just to the President of the United States, but also his loyalty to his country over his own naked ambition. Whatever you think of this, it has nothing whatsoever to do with Mr Huntsman's commitment to smaller government, does it?

In the comments to a follow-up post Mr Erickson explains himself further:

Loyalty is a primary issue for me and there need be no further evidence that he is disloyal. It's not a big issue in this day and age when we turn everything into partisan issues, but I guess I'm a bitter clinger to the way things used to be.

According to Jonathan Haidt, a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, in-group loyalty plays a much larger role in the moral judgments of conservatives than those of liberals. I don't mean to question Mr Erickson's judgment about Mr Huntsman's loyalty so much as point to it as a fairly representative expression of the conservative id operating precisely as Mr Haidt's studies describe.

Now, I doubt many conservatives think Mr Huntsman was disloyal to America, as Mr Erickson charges. But I do think he is widely seen as a man of questionable loyalty. If you're like me, Mr Huntsman's willingness to set aside partisanship and serve in a Democratic administration, in spite of his high political aspirations, argues in favour of his loyalty to the country. But if you're like me you're not a conservative, and you don't really care that much about loyalty. Rock-ribbed conservatives I think see it like this: By agreeing to serve as ambassador to China under Barack Obama, Mr Huntsman picked a side, and it wasn't the side of the conservative tribe. And then he flaked on the Obama administration in order to run for president as a Republican. This is how I read Mr Erickson's denunciation of Mr Huntsman: "Are you crazy, Huntsman? You want back in? Now? No. Forget about it. You're dead to us."

This leaves Mr Erickson, and millions of like-minded conservatives, in the odd position of preferring even Newt Gingrich, a man who has been disloyal to more than one wife. Indeed, a latter-day Dostoyevsky would be hard-pressed to imagine a nakeder embodiment of ambition than Newt Gingrich. Still, he's an honoured elder of the tribe. Meanwhile, an experienced fiscal-conservative governor with an outstanding grasp of foreign affairs who would stand an outstanding chance of defeating Barack Obama in the general election languishes in the polls.

In other words, good work Mr President.