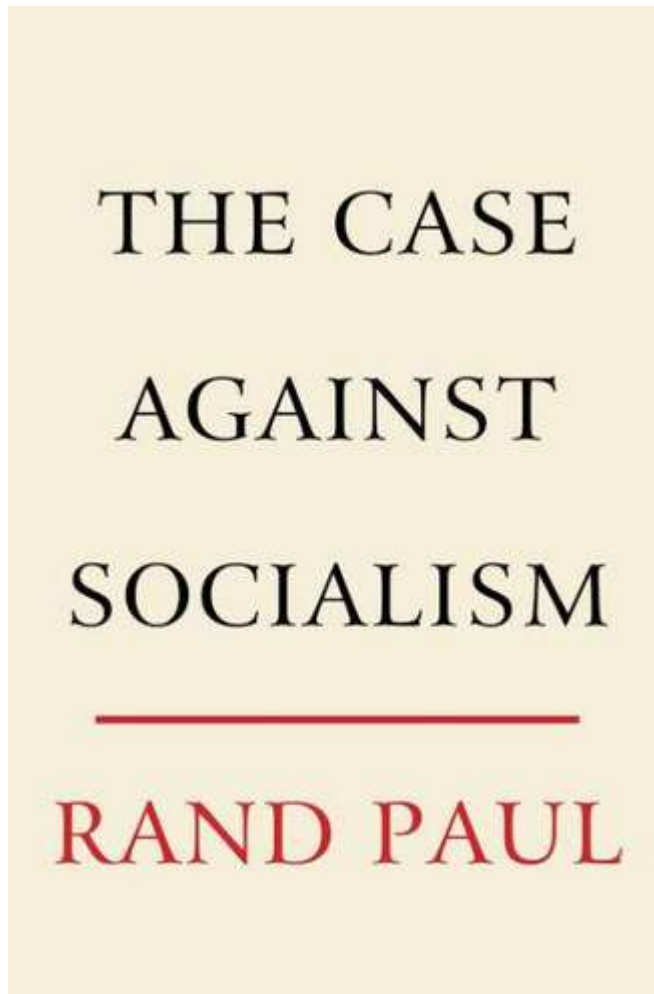


A Complex Debate: Paul's well-informed thesis moves dialogue forward

Posted: Sunday, December 22, 2019

"The Case Against Socialism" by Rand Paul. New York: Broadside Books (an imprint of HarperCollins), 2019, 368 pages, \$28.99 (hardcover).



“What is it about socialism that casts such a spell that people refuse to acknowledge history?” Rand Paul asks near the beginning of “The Case Against Socialism,” his treatise on the underpublicized dangers of an economic system – and its inherent political overtures – that seems to have captured the imagination of an increasing number of younger Americans. “Time and time again socialism leads to the impoverishment of nations.”

“Perhaps it is the allure of equality or fairness,” he continues. “Surveys in America alarmingly show about half of today’s youth have a favorable opinion of socialism. A Gallup poll found that 45 percent of young American adults (age 18-29) have a positive view of capitalism, while 51 percent of this same group see socialism positively. These surveys link approval of socialism to a corresponding desire among young Americans to live in a ‘fair’ world.”

So begins Paul’s comprehensive foray into one of the most enthusiastic, divisive and deceptively complex debates occupying our collective social and cultural psyche. I have always believed that keeping an open mind is

essential to distilling a mature and realistic perspective on virtually any relevant issue, and this is certainly the case with “The Case Against Socialism.” Although I did not find myself agreeing with every point Paul makes as he meticulously develops his controversial yet well-informed thesis, I was nonetheless impressed with the eloquence and strength of his prose. Agree or disagree with him, it is obvious that the author is intimately familiar with his subject matter.

Consider the following from “The Poor Are Better Off Under Capitalism,” the eighth chapter and one that I found to be particularly instructive with respect to Paul’s central argument: “When policy is directed toward eliminating income inequality, the unintended consequence is to lessen the incentives that drive the wealth creation that has lifted millions of people out of poverty over the past few centuries,” Paul explains. “The socialists argue that they’ll leave just enough merit pay to incentivize the entrepreneurs. No harm, no foul. Perhaps, but I’m guessing that no one really knows how much incentive must remain to encourage the great breakthroughs of history. Shouldn’t we at

least be worried that if enough ‘income inequality’ is destroyed, perhaps the next Steve Jobs chooses to devote his time to surfing instead of entrepreneurship?”

Looking around at many of my contemporaries, I can’t help but feel that Paul has, in the very least, raised a concern that deserves serious data-driven consideration.

“The Case Against Socialism” is extensively researched, with 28 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, 39 relatively succinct chapters and an afterword that comprises the main text. Structurally, the book is arranged in six major sections: Part I (Because Eating Your Pets Is Overrated – Socialism Creates Poverty), consisting of the first eight chapters; Part II (Capitalism Makes Scandinavia Great), which is comprised of chapters nine through 18; Part III (A Boot Stomping on the Human Face Forever – Socialism and Authoritarianism), chapters 19 through 24; Part IV (Socialism Doesn’t Create Equality), which is made up of chapters 25 through 30; Part V (Where Are These Angels? The Philosophy of Socialism), chapters 31 through 33; and Part VI (Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste: Socialism and Alarmism), the final six chapters.

Paul is one of the two Republican U.S. senators from Kentucky; he was originally elected in 2010. Trained as an ophthalmologist, he has practiced in Bowling Green since 1993. (Full disclosure: He wrote me a prescription for glasses back in the 1990s). His previous books include “The Tea Party Goes to Washington,” “Government Bullies: How Everyday Americans are Being Harassed, Abused, and Imprisoned by the Feds,” “Taking a Stand: Moving Beyond Partisan Politics to Unite America” and “Our Presidents and Their Prayers: Proclamations of Faith by America’s Leaders,” co-authored with James Randall Robison.

Paul is at his best when pondering the human dimension that inevitably permeates any authentic discussion of the pros and cons of a system – political, economic or sociocultural – ostensibly designed to provide maximum benefits with minimal distractions. Ultimately, governmental efficacy is directly related to the personal characteristics of those chosen to implement the various programs and services that evolve from the underlying philosophical ideals.

“From the very beginning, one criticism of socialism has been its utopian nature,” Paul observes in “Socialism Expects Selfless Rulers and Citizens,” the 31st chapter and one I found particularly cogent given the author’s stated purpose for writing the book. “Even Marx criticized the voluntary socialist communes in America as utopian.”

“Because humankind is not selfless (and even if it were, no two people would ever agree on what the utopian ideal would be), the standards for a utopia are naïve,” he continues. “The leaders would have to be superhuman to overcome natural self-interest and find agreement on what exactly the ideal striven for by all would be. Indeed, utopias require leaders willing to wield absolute power to conquer man’s true nature, to take and redistribute his property. Consequently, utopias select not for perfectly selfless leaders but for the opposite – people who are capable, willing and unrestrained in their use of force to achieve utopian ends.”

In the final analysis, I enjoyed “The Case Against Socialism.” I agreed passionately with parts of it; I disagreed vehemently with other parts. But I do feel Paul was successful in moving the dialogue forward on the contentious challenges we are facing as a nation. He goes beyond the sound bites, the memes and the superficial monologues that tend to pass for discourse these days and sets the bar just a little higher for those who want to meaningfully take part in the national conversation. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.