Opinion
NCR Voices



Vivek Ramaswamy speaks at the 2023 Turning Point Action Conference in West Palm Beach, Florida, July 15. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Has anyone ever seen Ayn Rand and Vivek Ramaswamy in the same room at the same time? Of course not. Rand died in 1982, three years before the young entrepreneur turned presidential candidate was born. As Catholics, we do not believe in reincarnation, but Ramaswamy certainly seems like he is an offspring or an heir of the stylish, doctrinaire libertarian writer who championed libertarian ideas and brought them into the mainstream of American culture through her novels.

Ramaswamy has risen in the polls relative to the other candidates, but is still in single digits according to the RealClearPolitics average of polls. The GOP nomination remains Donald Trump's to lose, and with codefendants of his already starting to turn on him, he might well lose.

Then the race is wide open and, so far, Ramaswamy has been the candidate who most clearly channels Trumpian themes and might benefit most from the collapse of the former president's campaign.

Ramaswamy espouses the "America First" foreign policy that has characterized American fascism for a century or more. Trump did, too, treating long-trusted allies as business associates he thought lucky to collaborate with him, making sure that they paid their "fair share" (and that the media reported he was the one who got them to do it), or as props in his perpetual need to stroke his ego. Remember him pushing Prime Minister Dusko Markovic of Montenegro aside like Markovic was a bit actor in a play starring Trump?

If Trump was egocentric and coarse, Ramaswamy's foreign policy is decidedly utilitarian and amateurish. He is willing to abandon Ukraine to Russia in exchange for Russia disengaging with China, in hopes he can stop paying to help defend Taiwan from the threat in Beijing. Huh?

He never really explains how he will get Russia to make such a move, but he suggests his last name will allow him to recruit India into a stronger alliance. He suggests the Taiwanese people should adopt the Second Amendment and learn how to protect themselves, because once America achieves semiconductor independence from China, the people of Taiwan will be on their own.

This counts as "rational self-interest," he says, the only ethical compass for libertarians.

In the first GOP debate, former Gov. Nikki Haley challenged Ramaswamy on foreign policy. She rightly accused him of "choosing a murderer [Vladimir Putin] over a pro-American country."

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She said a U.S. president needs to have "moral clarity," they "need to know the difference between right and wrong." Call me silly, but making a moral argument in a party dominated by Trump seems like a stretch.

Ramaswamy's libertarianism is a form of moral idiocy to be sure. A more effective, and equally valid, criticism of his foreign policy views is that he talks about the war in Ukraine or the threat to Taiwan as if these were video games. He lacks gravitas. Ramaswamy is a dilettante hiding behind the tough-sounding language of the America Firsters, a little boy in an adult world.

Libertarians think of themselves as confronting brave new worlds without any sentimental blinders, but they are the most sentimental of all, ideologues who cling to their fables at all costs, incapable of recognizing the moral rhythms that make the human heart beat with something noble.

On the domestic front, Ramaswamy advocates the Horatio Alger mythology that all you need to succeed in America is a little gumption and hard work. In fact, Ramaswamy claims to embody that myth, although his success in business had more to do with his undeniable ability to promote himself than what we normally consider hard work.

He self-identifies as a "scientist" who made his fortune in the biotech industry, developing life-saving medicines. In fact, as The New York Times explained, Ramaswamy's business career is "the story of a financier more than a scientist, and a prospector who went bargain hunting, hyped his vision, drew investment and then cashed out in two huge payouts — totaling more than $200 million — before his 35th birthday."

It takes smarts to do that, assuredly, but the idea that his time in Big Pharma is a 21st-century version of Clara Barton doesn't pass the smell test.

Ramaswamy's economic policy prescriptions are a strange combination of laissez-faire libertarianism with America First industrial policy, with some acute denialism about climate change thrown in.

Watch this interview with Larry Kudlow, where Ramaswamy's first focus is unlimited energy pursuits: "drill, frack, burn coal, embrace nuclear energy."

He then takes a whack at welfare payments, proposes reforming the Federal Reserve, and cutting government regulations. He supports a flat tax, one of the most regressive policies imaginable.

And he links these demonstrably failed policies with his commitment to a creepy understanding of national identity. It is a ghoulish goulash of economic ideas.

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Ramaswamy seems not to realize how frequently his glib talking points sound like a speech delivered from the balcony at the Palazzo de Venezia circa 1933. Many people think libertarianism is the antithesis of totalitarianism. After all, all they talk about is individual liberty. But as Alan Wolfe pointed out some years back in an essay in Commonweal:

> Libertarianism, however, is not just a set of policy prescriptions, but an ideology. It is, moreover, a *total* ideology, one that addresses every aspect of how people live. There is a libertarian way of riding a bicycle, of taking your medicine, finding a spouse, giving blood, and even calling a cab (can you say, “Uber?”). Where liberalism raises questions, libertarians seek answers, and always find the right ones. Their philosophy is an antidote to the doubt, inconsistency, and vagueness that has always been built into liberalism. Libertarians come in different forms, and can argue vehemently

> over concepts and applications. Yet there nonetheless does exist a general libertarian outlook on life — and it is very different from the liberal one.

I was fortunate enough to work with Wolfe organizing a conference at Boston College on this very topic. Writers doing profiles of Ramaswamy would do well to consult the talks and panels at that event.

It is not only liberalism that is at odds with libertarianism. Catholic social thought is the antithesis of libertarianism. This won't keep some right-wing Catholics from making apologies for Ramaswamy, but it does mean those apologies will be ridiculous.

Ramaswamy may or may not be worse than Trump. How many people who watched the first debate last month had the sensation that Ramaswamy was at least a proto-fascist, very scary, but could never win, only to recall having the same feeling watching Trump debate in 2015?

Just because Ramaswamy's ideas are bonkers and he approaches complex policy conundrums as if they are a kids' game doesn't mean he won't find some breeze for his sails.

His problem is that he mimics a man who doesn't like sharing the limelight, so the more Ramaswamy rises in the polls, the more Trump is likely to take him down. That would seem a just resolution of Ramaswamy's emergence as a noxious political star.