

Paul Krugman - New York Times Blog

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Don't Mention the Flimflam

Ed Kilgore points us to a Politico piece on Paul Ryan's apparently declining profile, and has fun mocking the writing. Indeed, the piece is written as if it were a teen magazine discussing Justin Bieber.

But that's actually not what struck me most; instead, it was the way Jonathan Martin manages to write a whole, quite long post about Ryan's rise and apparent fall without mentioning the corresponding rise and fall of his reputation as a serious policy wonk. Even if you yourself don't care about policy, surely this has to be a large part of the story?

After all, Ryan's appeal was based on a very special kind of act: he was playing the Serious, Honest Conservative who was totally faithful to right-wing ideology but at the same time could run numbers with the best of them, and draw praise from mainstream commentators for his Seriousness and Honesty. Because he was Serious and Honest, you know — everyone said so (or at least everyone except you-know-who, and when has he ever been right about anything?).

But none of it was true; Ryan's budgets were flimflam through and through, consisting of huge tax cuts for the wealthy that outweighed even his savage cuts in aid to the needy, so that all the claims of fiscal responsibility rested on giant magic asterisks on both revenue and spending. And although it took a couple of years for this reality to break through the conventional wisdom, at this point pretty much all the people who praised Serious Honest Paul have now conceded, in effect if not in so many words, that he's a phony after all. They'll never admit that they were wrong — hardly anyone ever does — but SHP can no longer play his accustomed role of serving the base while basking in the approbation of the VSPs.

And given all that, what use is he? What does he bring to the party, or make that the Party?

Now, Martin puts it all in terms of salesmanship, in terms of not generating enough buzz, in terms of catching cooties from Mitt Romney. I won't say that these are irrelevant, but I do think they're relatively minor. Basically, Ryan had an act that played well with Beltway insiders for a little while, but eventually went first stale, then rancid. He was 2011's man, and that was then.