

The Decline of Military Adventurism in the Conservative Big Tent: Why Grassroots Conservatives in the United States Are Embracing a More Cautious Foreign Policy

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Abstract

It is now clear that the American conservative movement can no longer be easily categorized as “hawkish” on foreign policy. This essay examines the different perspectives, ranging from intellectuals and experts to grassroots conservatives and popular political culture, to grasp the widening range of foreign policy preferences that currently make up the conservative movement (or conservative big tent). Second, this essay considers the challenges that these hawks, mainly the neoconservatives, are likely to face due to the realities of generational politics. This essay will therefore provide a useful analysis of the different foreign policy preferences in the American conservative movement in the 21st century.

Keywords

conservatives, neoconservatives, military, realism, non-intervention, isolationism, war, hawks, doves, American Foreign Policy

Introduction

The complexity of conservative foreign policy needs careful examination. As a consequence of the Cold War, American conservatives developed the reputation for being hawkish, yet military adventurism is not, nor ever has been, a prerequisite conservative value in America. Therefore, this essay will explore the different approaches to foreign policy seen within the conservative big tent and examine the likely future of the hawks. Although intellectuals behind the different schools of thought will be discussed, the focus will be on the attitudes of politicians and grassroots conservatives. Some of these intellectuals, particularly the realists, do not necessarily identify as “conservative,” but they must be discussed as they have influenced conservative foreign policy.

Since the time of Reagan, American conservatives have been successful when they have been able to build a “big tent.” This essay need not rehash the already well-researched history of the making of this “conservative big tent” but will focus on the present state of it as it pertains to foreign policy. The “conservative big tent” referred to in this essay, therefore, is the coalition of various foreign policy preferences that have been welcome in the conservative movement from the time of Reagan to the present. The conservative, in any context and any culture, seeks to conserve a set of values and a way of life. For the conservative interventionist, war is not

fought simply for the sake of war. Rather, if there is a perceived threat to conservative values that require military intervention, the conservative will support it out of necessity. It is important, therefore, to understand the debate over this necessity within the conservative movement, to better understand conservative foreign policy in America.

The neoconservatives, the most hawkish in the conservative big tent, have come to dominate conservative foreign policy over the last decade, despite the Cold War being long over. Some in the conservative big tent argue that neoconservatives are not genuine conservatives. Although this essay will not seek to answer that question, this debate will be considered for the purpose of understanding these internal disputes within the conservative movement. Either way, neoconservatives have been a crucial to the conservative movement at least since the Vietnam era, particularly on foreign policy. Although neoconservatives have been incredibly resilient and defied many predictions of their decline, their future prospects within the “conservative big tent” seem

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grim at the moment. Like most social movements in the United States, the grassroots supporters of the conservative movement are absolutely crucial to its direction, and therefore the foreign policy preferences of grassroots conservatives will be carefully examined in this essay, particularly toward neoconservative foreign policy. Given decades of neoconservative peaks and troughs, it would be irresponsible to predict certain doom for the neoconservatives as some libertarians have. However, neoconservatives are at least in a trough since the wind down of the occupation of Iraq, and they do not seem to be able to resonate with grassroots conservatives as effectively as they did a decade ago, though the recent ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) threat could cause grassroots conservatives to remain hawkish.

The Spectrum of Doves and Hawks in the “Conservative Big Tent”

To argue simply that conservatives are either “doves” or “hawks” would create a false dichotomy. It is more accurate to break conservatives into roughly four categories: non-interventionists, cautious realists, hawkish realists, and neo-conservatives. The two opposite ends of the spectrum are idealists in that they approach foreign policy with more normative values, whereas the two realist approaches mainly disagree over some of the consequences of power politics. This spectrum varies with other ideologies and political movements, but the conservative big tent can be effectively categorized into these four groups. Nearly all self-identified conservatives in America fit somewhere into this spectrum. Since the Reagan era, they have become mostly locked in the Republican Party and all in their own way value American interests first. They all value American sovereignty and have little to no interest in the United States being a mutual partner in a larger “global community.” Most grassroots conservatives are probably not familiar even with the four terms mentioned above, much less the intellectuals behind them. However, grassroots conservatives and Republican politicians alike hold such persuasions.

The non-interventionist (often of a libertarian-conservative persuasion) usually contends that enemies of the United States are so because they have been provoked. They contend that Al-Qaeda, for example, attacked on September 11, 2001, in response to the strong U.S. military presence in the Middle East. As Ron Paul so famously said in a 2008 Presidential Debate, “They don’t come here to attack us because we’re rich and we’re free. They attack us because we’re over there” (Ron Paul, 2007, Republican Presidential Debate). These non-interventionists were largely exiled from the conservative big tent during much of the Bush administration, but they have been slowly welcomed back due in part to the Republican electoral defeats of 2006 and 2008. The Tea Party, which has re-mobilized grassroots conservatives, emerged initially as a Ron Paul movement in 2007 but became a major force early into Obama’s presidency with the

backing of conservative opinion leaders and funds. Regardless of what happens to the Tea Party itself, these Paulite-libertarians have grown substantially over the last 5 years, particularly with younger conservatives.

The cautious realists are often on the same side of foreign policy with the non-interventionists, but for very different reasons. Realists will commonly reject the non-interventionist view that other people and other nations will only be a danger to us if we harm them. This would completely ignore the balance of power that is at the core of realist foreign policy. However, a cautious realist will usually avoid direct military intervention, believing that military adventurism is imprudent. Cautious realists certainly support a strong national defense, believing that enemies need not be provoked to wish us harm, but that they will not cause us harm if it is not in their best interest. Unlike the strict non-interventionists, the cautious realists recognize the balance of power in international politics. Nuclear proliferation is certainly compatible with this philosophy, as no two nuclear powers have ever gone to war with each other directly. There have been many proxy wars, such as the infamous Vietnam War, but never a direct war between two nuclear powers. Cautious realists also are more likely than non-interventionists to support military intervention to aid an ally, or to contain a rival great power. Presidents Reagan and Bush Sr. relied on this approach to foreign policy to contain and ultimately defeat the Soviet Union, and to liberate Kuwait and weaken Hussein’s Iraq. Due to Reagan’s popular status in the memory of nearly all American conservatives, there has been significant debate over Reagan’s foreign policy legacy. Given the context of the Cold War, however, and the clear opportunities Reagan had to call for more significant military adventurism, Reagan’s foreign policy was a cautious one. . Pat Buchanan seems to sway between isolationism and this kind of cautious realism. His recent views on ISIS, focused on containment and limited U.S. involvement, fit well into this cautious realist category (Buchanan, 2014). Many war weary grassroots conservatives also fit here as well.

The non-interventionists and cautious realists make up the dovish wing of the conservative big tent. It is made up of libertarians, paleoconservatives, and center-right pragmatists such as Senator Tom Coburn. Although their reasoning differs, they usually prefer non-intervention. The interventionists are likewise divided into an idealist and realist wing.

The hawkish realists share a pragmatic view of the world with their cautious counterparts. Hawkish realists are equally aware of power politics and are constantly concerned with that power balance. However, hawkish realists believe that frequent displays of military prowess are necessary to ensure balance. Although they view frequent military intervention as wise and prudent, they do not believe that the United States can effectively “make the world safe for democracy” through military adventurism. Hawkish realists believe that there are constant threats overseas that must be pacified, for they are likely to attack in time if left to develop freely.

Henry Kissinger easily fits into this “hawkish realist” category. He was a supporter of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and despite a few minor criticisms of some of President George W. Bush’s tactics, he has maintained his position since that time. Although more cautious realists believe that nuclear warheads make war less likely due to the extremely high death toll of destruction of entire cities, Kissinger (2001) is far more concerned:

Nuclear weapons have rendered war between countries possessing them less likely—though this statement is unlikely to remain valid if nuclear weapons continue to proliferate into countries with a different attitude toward human life or unfamiliar with their catastrophic impact. (p. 23)

In contrast, non-interventionists and cautious realists alike believe that even if Iran, for example, develops nuclear warheads, they will not use them as the rest of the world would unite against Iran and dismantle the entire regime. The hawks would rather not take that chance on Iran’s rationality.

Among grassroots conservatives, much of the “Palinite” wing of the Tea Party movement also fits into this hawkish realist school of thought. Few of them, including Sarah Palin, have any interest in “policing the world,” but eagerly support the “war on terror” and maintain a significant U.S. military presence in the world. Much of the Republican Party in Congress can also favor a hawkish realist foreign policy, including Newt Gingrich, Olympia Snowe, Susan Collins, and so on. These are mostly post-Reagan era Republicans who have supported maintaining a strong national defense and U.S. military presence in the world, but typically stop short of believing that the United States can impose indefinitely its own moral principles on the world. However, they are quick to use military force on perceived threats, whereas the cautious realists are more likely to weigh the costs and prefer containment.

Realist foreign policy is always rooted in skepticism of the ability of states to implement any significant normative agenda due to a firm belief that the realities of power politics will always render such efforts futile. Therefore, realists across the spectrum will inevitably reject the possibility of any lasting world peace and consider such efforts to be counterproductive. Hence, in their view, the world will never truly be “safe for democracy.”

Whatever neoconservatives may say of Woodrow Wilson, they seem to share his view that the might of the U.S. military *can* “make the world safe for democracy.” Although neoconservatives share the hawkish realist support for frequent military intervention, they have the far more ambitious goal of maintaining an unrivaled U.S. global hegemony. Some neoconservatives, such as Charles Krauthammer, embrace elements of realism as well. Krauthammer has described himself as a “democratic-realist,” and much of his tone echoes classic realism. His views on the danger of

emerging “weapons states,” for example, are compatible with Henry Kissinger’s concerns mentioned earlier. However, neoconservative efforts to impose an international order, even if unilaterally determined by the might of the United States, are incompatible with centuries of realist thought on foreign policy since the time of Klemens von Metternich. For example, Krauthammer wrote in his famous 1990-1991 essay, that “[o]ur best hope for safety . . . is an American strength and will—the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them” (p. 33). Krauthammer represents a neoconservative goal that is very ambitious and unlikely, but, like the realists, avoids the kind of abstract moral justifications offered by the standard bearers of post-Cold War neoconservatism. Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan have a similar view to Krauthammer that “American hegemony is the only reliable defense against a breakdown of peace and international order” (Kristol & Kagan, p. 22, 1996). However, they also have a clear normative agenda, as follows:

In the 1990s conservatives have built their agenda on two pillars of Reaganism: relimiting government to curtail the most intrusive and counterproductive aspects of the modern welfare state, and reversing the widespread collapse of morals and standards in American society. But it is hard to imagine conservatives achieving a lasting political realignment in this country without the third pillar: a coherent set of foreign policy principles that at least bear some resemblance to those propounded by Reagan. The remoralization of America at home ultimately requires the remoralization of American foreign policy. For both follow from Americans belief that the principles of the Declaration of Independence are not merely the choices of a particular culture but are universal, enduring, self-evident truths. That has been, after all, the main point of the conservatives war against a relativistic multiculturalism. For conservatives to preach the importance of upholding the core elements of the Western tradition at home, but to profess indifference to the fate of American principles abroad, is an inconsistency that cannot help but gnaw at the heart of conservatism. (Kristol & Kagan, p. 30, 1996)

Neoconservatism has long been difficult to reconcile with many conservative core values. Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan made the case for this rather effectively, as seen above. However, the cost of constant military intervention clearly clashes with fiscal conservatism, as the U.S. budget over the last century has never been balanced during a full scale war. The assumption of a universal desire for democracy neoconservatives is difficult to reconcile with the preference for tradition and global diversity held by most conservative intellectuals. Furthermore, military intervention has drastic consequences for the culture of the nation engaged, inevitably expands the size and scope of government, and thus clearly rattles the preference for status quo and gradual, incremental change preferred by more

traditional conservatives, and even neoconservatives on domestic policy. This is to be expected, as neoconservatives did not so much embrace the conservative label initially as they had it thrust upon them. Doves in the “New Deal Coalition” were labeling them “neoconservatives” long before Irving Kristol decided to embrace the label. Conservatives, led by Reagan, welcomed neoconservatives into the then-emerging conservative big tent, primarily due to mutual anti-communism. Neoconservatism should have been a victim of its own success when the Soviet Union collapsed. However, from September 11, 2001, until about 2005, the conservative movement was dominated by neoconservatives and hawkish realists. Max Boot was somewhat critical of realist-conservatives but still seemed to accept them as fellow conservatives. Leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom, for example, Boot noted that these realists “believe that we should remove, or at least disarm, Saddam Hussein, but not occupy Iraq for any substantial period afterward” (Boot, 2002). He was referring in particular to Henry Kissinger’s position. Boot (2002) was particularly dismissive of Pat Buchanan, however, sarcastically referring to “Mr. Buchanan and his five followers.”

Keeping Neoconservatism Alive—The Bush years

Ty Solomon closely examined the psychological effects of the neoconservatives during the 1990s and 2000s. The neoconservatives spent much of the 1990s first clarifying exactly what it meant to be a neoconservative after the fall of the Soviet Union and then on how to present their message in a way that would appeal to grassroots conservatives. These grassroots conservatives usually have a realist view of the world, shifting from borderline isolationism to hawkish realism, depending on the circumstances. William Kristol and Robert Kagan were effective in tying their adventurous foreign policy preferences to traditional values held by both conservative thinkers and the grassroots. Solomon (2013) explains how Kristol and Kagan appealed to human desire for *wholeness* and something *lacking*.

Kristol and Kagan harken back to the days when Reagan, in their view, summoned US spiritual and military might, stared down the Soviet Union, and won the Cold War for the side of freedom, and when Teddy Roosevelt inspired Americans to embrace their global responsibilities . . . The United States is missing *something* that it had in the past. (Solomon, p. 115, 2003)

By appealing to many classic American conservative signifiers such as “American exceptionalism,” “freedom,” and so on, as well as a sense that America was losing something it once had, grassroots conservatives would be convinced to support a far more proactive United States than is intuitive for them.

It is difficult to determine whether this psychological appeal was intentional by neoconservatives. This would

require significant research focused solely on that question. Solomon was careful never to accuse the neoconservatives of purposefully manipulating grassroots conservatives through psychological trickery, and this essay will also avoid such an accusation. Solomon’s analysis of the psychological impact of neoconservative rhetoric is still very helpful in understanding the neoconservative influence on foreign policy within the conservative big tent, and that is why it is referenced here.

Solomon focused the much of the first half of his study on Charles Krauthammer’s essay “The Unipolar Moment.” Although Krauthammer’s essay was respected by academics, the fear of weapons states could at best convince grassroots to take a more hawkish approach to realism. The Kristol/Kagan appeal to American values, however, was one that would resonate, as it tapped into the decades-old sentiment held by many grassroots conservatives that America was losing its values, and that this would result in a diminished nation for future generations of Americans.

By September 10, 2001, neoconservatives had perfected their message, but grassroots conservatives still had little interest in military adventurism. Walter Russell Mead has studied the Tea Party movement and the long tradition of grassroots rightist populism in America. He traces this back to the time of Andrew Jackson, and labels this group of Americans who now make up the conservative grassroots as “Jacksonian.” These Jacksonians, in an ideal world, would prefer an isolationist foreign policy. They love the American way of life and distrust foreigners. If these foreigners are not a threat, they would rather simply avoid contact with them. They have no desire, as the neoconservatives, to bring democracy to the rest of the world. However, “when the United States is attacked, they believe in total war leading to the unconditional surrender of the enemy” (Mead, W. R., 2011). If the Jacksonians, these grassroots conservatives, could be convinced that spreading democracy abroad was correlative with American way of life, particularly security, then they could be convinced to support more broad-based military intervention and perhaps even nation-building, fearing that they could not afford to do otherwise.

The terror attacks of September 11, 2001, rattled the sanity of nearly all Americans, particularly the Jacksonians, or grassroots conservatives. For the neoconservatives, this reaffirmed their belief that global democracy was necessary for security. The Jacksonians, as a result, were more receptive to this ideal. The neoconservatives then sought to spread democracy by force to the Mid-East, with these terror attacks as their justification. The Jacksonians were primarily concerned with punishing the terrorists but rarely objected to the nation-building efforts of the neoconservatives. For the Jacksonian, defeat of the enemy was what mattered, and as long as that condition was met, they were willing to tolerate other policy goals with their allies.

During the period from September 11, 2001, to about 2005, the conservative big tent became increasingly small in terms of ideas. Non-interventionists were exiled, paleoconservatives

like Pat Buchanan found unlikely allies from the left as he became an MSNBC commentator, and realists who opposed the invasion of Iraq were marginalized. Ron Paul, the lone-star non-interventionist in the House Republican Caucus at the time, believed that if the United States pulled out of the Islamic world, groups like Al-Qaeda would have no reason to attack. President Bush, embracing a more neoconservative response to the attacks, argued that “they hate our freedom”; hence, it was a war of ideologies rather than of power politics. Although not all conservatives calling for war necessarily believed in George W. Bush’s idealistic explanation, they did fully support the invasion of Afghanistan, and most fully supported the invasion of Iraq, despite the lack of evidence for Iraq’s involvement with the 9/11 attacks. Bush did attempt to justify the invasion of Iraq by tying them to Al-Qaeda (Hayes, 2003). However, he focused most of his justification on claims that Iraq was violating UN requirements for WMDs, and pointed to Hussein’s poor human rights record. The WMD argument convinced enough of the realists, and the neoconservatives simultaneously harped the human rights argument. Some of the Jacksonians, culturally isolated and reactionary, likely believed that there were ties between Hussein and Al-Qaeda for the simple reason that they are all Islamic and hostile to the United States. Most of them, however, were knowledgeable enough to know that the entire Islamic world as a whole was not to blame for the 9/11 attacks. For the majority of Jacksonians, their support for the war in Iraq rested on the belief that Iraq was a significant threat. As time passed, and no evidence of any usable WMDs was found, the neocon–Jacksonian alliance began to fragment. A growing number of conservative realists in Congress began to question Bush and the decision to invade Iraq, and some of these realists would later embrace the Tea Party movement. From 2006 to the present, we are seeing the costs of neoconservative foreign policy. Due to a growing national debt as a percentage of GDP, and the clear philosophical conflicts between small government rhetoric on domestic policy and an ever expansive, unconstrained foreign policy; neoconservatives are finding it more difficult to resonate with grassroots conservatives.

By 2006, the war in Iraq had become widely unpopular, and American voters punished the GOP by sweeping the Democrats into power. To add insult to injury, the Democrats found a Presidential candidate in 2008 with an Islamic name and an Islamic father. This is clearly not the reason that Democrats nominated Obama, but it certainly agitated some of the remaining Jacksonian hawks. It was clear at this point that a hawkish Bush era Republican platform simply could not win. Despite John McCain’s “maverick” opposition to Bush on many issues, McCain was and is even more hawkish than Bush. This was at least part of the reason that McCain lost in 2008. It is doubtful that Pat Buchanan or Max Boot predicted that libertarianism would open the flaps allowing the doves to flock back into the conservative big tent, but we have seen this happen in recent years with Ron Paul, the Tea

Party movement, and the more pragmatic Rand Paul. Despite recent fears of ISIS, we are not likely to see the calls for nation-building and putting “freedom on the march” from the younger generation of conservatives. The national debt is far too high, the military budget is bloated, and younger conservatives can easily see the correlation between warfare and government growth. Given the costly failures in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, just to name a few; grassroots conservatives, young and old, and likely to limit military intervention to the suppression of immediate threats.

The Tea Party—Are Hawks Welcome Here?

The Republicans knew that if they wanted to win in 2010, they needed to accomplish two goals: cripple Obama’s popularity and convince voters that the GOP is no longer the Bush party. The hawks would spend the next several years focusing on domestic policy, knowing that voters had no taste for war. The first goal was met by overwhelming obstructionism in Congress, despite being outnumbered. Senate Republicans filibustered nearly every bill attempted by the Democrats. This strategy helped to re-mobilize conservative grassroots voters, but elections are not won with the base voters alone. The GOP needed to grow their support.

The time had come for Ron Paul and the non-interventionists to return from exile. Originally, the Tea Party had no more love for Bush and mainstream Republicans than they had for Obama. As they grew in number, public opinion of the Tea Party movement became increasingly polarized. In March 2010, Gallup showed that of those polled throughout the year, 37% had a favorable view of the Tea Party compared with 40% who viewed them unfavorably (“Tea Party Movement,” 2014). They were controversial but had a strong base of support. Some on the left attempted to find common ground with the Tea Party, and President Obama reached out to them more than once seeking solutions to the debt crisis. The Tea Party initially had the popularity they needed but not the financial resources. Fortunately for them, the conservative/libertarian establishment jumped on the opportunity.

As the 2010 mid-term elections came near, funds from wealthy contributors such as the libertarian Koch brothers began to pour into the coffers of different Tea Party groups. Groups such as “Freedom Works” supported the Tea Party movement as well. Pundits of the conservative big tent, such as Rush Limbaugh, who despised Ron Paul, embraced the Tea Party and simply ignored the movement’s Paulite origins. Ron Paul did not create the Tea Party, it simply formed around him. This is difficult to prove, as the movement was spurious and had not yet gained the attention of mainstream media. There is a video on YouTube, however, showing an early Tea Party demonstration in 2007 in support of Ron Paul. In this rare footage, Ron Paul supporters were carrying crates labeled with policies they opposed, to symbolically dump into the river (“Ron Paul Rockford Tea Party,” 2007).

Early in, Paul seemed to have a positive view of the movement but never attempted to lead them. The movement became widely popular following the famous Rick Santelli rant in 2009 and, as a result, created the misconception that this movement actually began with Santelli. For most, including Walter Russell Mead, this was an honest mistake. However, it clearly worked to the advantage of desperate hawks. If these hawks were to be welcomed into the Tea Party, they needed Ron Paul to be as far removed as possible.

The Tea Party groups accepted the large corporate donations, but most of them kept to their libertarian-leaning principles, criticizing corporate welfare just as fiercely as food stamps. Likewise, the massive military industrial complex was perceived to be just as wasteful and bloated as every other function of government and needed to tighten its belt. Amy Kremer, leader of the Tea Party Express, was interviewed on the “Colbert Report” and solidly defended the principles of the Tea Party. She refused to support tax increases under any circumstances and continued to argue for across the board spending cuts. When pinned down, she pointed to a particular spending cut that the military could make, as an alternative to tax increases (Kremer, 2011). However, it is not Kremer’s Tea Party Express or the Tea Party Patriots that were highlighted by the mainstream media. Sarah Palin represents good ratings for mainstream media, and solid ideology for rightist establishment media, mainly FOX. It was therefore in the best interest of most mainstream media sources to highlight Sarah Palin and the “Tea Party Nation,” even though the other Tea Party groups have largely severed ties to this particular group, and Sarah Palin gets mixed reviews from Tea Party advocates.

As the Tea Party movement lacks unity and hierarchy, and much of the developments were at the grassroots level, it is hard to explain exactly how the Palinite hawks grew within the movement. But it is likely that they simply started showing up at Tea Party rallies, first only promoting ideas upon which they agreed, such as tax cuts, spending cuts, and anything anti-Obama. It is clear that as the 2010 mid-terms drew near, an increasingly hawkish voice began to emerge from the Tea Party. Some Tea Party candidates, such as Rand Paul and Mike Lee, continued to reject military adventurism. Others, however, like Allen West and Marco Rubio, used Tea Party rhetoric, speaking of limited government and the dangers of national debt, while likewise promoting a very costly foreign policy of military adventurism. As anti-Obama sentiment held the Tea Party together, most did not even notice that these new Tea Party candidates had more in common with Bush Jr. and Palin than they did with Ron Paul and the early libertarians who started the movement. The 2010 victories were at least a short term victory for hawkish conservatives. However, it was not long before the Tea Party’s popularity declined, and disillusioned libertarians started looking elsewhere. What remains of the Tea Party seems to be focused on returning to their libertarian origins, particu-

larly the Tea Party Express, and they are crossing their fingers for a Rand Paul GOP nomination in 2016.

Neoconservatives Now—Staying Alive

Public opinion polls still show that Republicans are divided on their support for U.S. military commitments overseas. Furthermore, “Tea Party Republicans” are slightly less likely to support reducing military spending than other Republicans and other Americans in general. Still, according to a Pew Research Poll, 55% of “Tea Party Republicans” supported reducing military commitments overseas in 2011 (Pew Research Center for the People, 2011). It is a slim majority, but still a majority. So if the majority is so slim, it may seem hasty to conclude that hawkishness is on an almost irreversible decline.

One must consider this 55% figure more carefully, however. The poll was taken in 2011. By 2011, the Tea Party movement was increasingly made up of older, mostly Caucasian Republicans. The Tea Party was also declining in popularity. The Tea Party was far more popular in 2009-2010 when it was more libertarian leaning and was propelling Rand Paul to the U.S. Senate in an uphill battle against an incumbent Republican. It is difficult to prove cause and effect here, and this essay will not attempt to do so. However, it is undeniable that younger Americans are far less favorable to military intervention than older Americans. Republicans, therefore, have far more to gain in future elections by shifting to a less aggressive foreign policy. As has already been explained in this essay and many other essays before, the hawkishness of the conservative movement was largely a result of the Cold War. Still, with recent fears of emerging ISIS, it is likely that public support for cutting military spending or commitments overseas has at least temporarily declined.

Grassroots conservatives today have little reason to support a neoconservative foreign policy other than lingering attitudes from the Cold War era. As tensions build with Russia over Ukraine and Crimea, neoconservatives such as John McCain remind fellow Republicans that Putin was once a KGB agent. This red herring appeals to a generation that lived in fear of the Soviet Union. To Americans who grew up in the Reagan era or thereafter, it means very little. The 9/11 attacks gave hawks a temporary resurgence, but the terror has faded as can be seen by popular support for withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq. Realists across the spectrum are likely to view future justifications for military intervention with skepticism. Even Henry Kissinger (2014), though a consistent supporter of Operation Iraqi Freedom, has admitted that “the standard set by many supporters and critics of the Iraq effort alike—proved beyond what the American public would support and what Iraqi society could accommodate” (p. 325). Kissinger consistently rejected “nation-building” efforts in Iraq, and it is likely that he and other hawkish realists will in future demand clearer and more limited goals when undertaking future military interventions than will be to the liking of the neoconservatives.

Neoconservatives will need to find a way to appeal to younger generations if they are to endure as the baby boomer generation dies off. Furthermore, with soaring national debt and a weak economic recovery, fiscal realities will also be a major challenge for the neoconservatives to overcome. Krauthammer, in his famous essay “The Unipolar Moment,” argued that a strong military would be sustainable, but blamed tax cuts and growing entitlements for America’s fiscal woes (which were far less severe at that time in 1991). It would be nearly impossible to convince Americans to support tax increases or any significant entitlement cuts, however, making it nearly impossible to avoid the over US\$600 billion a year Defense budget, which is second only to Social Security in its annual cost.

Libertarianism, with its rebellious appeal to conservative youth, is likely to grow. It is, however, limited by its inflexibility on welfare spending and its foreign policy of total non-intervention. Most Americans do not want a full withdrawal of all U.S. troops from all parts of the world when there are clear threats emerging, such as rising China, ISIS, and Russia in the Ukraine. The poll mentioned earlier also shows that despite the 55% support among “Tea Party Republicans” for reduced military commitments overseas, only 18% support cutbacks to military defense spending, indicating a shift toward realism, rather than libertarian non-intervention. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is clearly not as dangerous as was the Soviet Union, but the popular viewpoint according to this poll and many others is that China must be contained. Realists have favored this approach for at least a decade (Walt, 2011). Recently, this has begun to resonate with the grassroots conservatives, due to the CCP’s unscrupulous trade practices and their ally North Korea, which is a menace to South Korea and Japan. Libertarians do not have a solution to this, other than “free trade,” which they hope will foster mutual prosperity followed by peace. A growing number of Americans oppose “free trade,” at least with China, due to likely currency manipulation and reputation for poor quality products. Libertarians will not be able to resonate with grassroots conservatives very effectively on foreign policy issues once these details are debated.

The neoconservatives lately have shown signs that they might attempt a more centrist platform (Heilbrunn, 2009). John McCain has referred to the libertarian-Paulite wing of the GOP as “wacko-birds” for their opposition to many anti-terrorist surveillance programs. Other prominent hawkish Republicans, such as Lisa Murkowski and Kelly Ayotte, have been very critical of the radical Tea Party wing. There is certainly a centrist void present in Congress, and the neocons may have an opportunity to sell their message to disillusioned centrist voters. It is likely that they are considering Jeb Bush. Marco Rubio is also a possibility for them, though he lacks the same “moderate” credentials. Whereas John McCain represents the hawks of the GOP establishment, his former running mate, Sarah Palin, represents the hawks of the grassroots. Although Palin shows no interest in moving

to the center, the establishment hawks may go this route, thereby building a new grassroots base. Many Paulites play into the hawkish migration to the center by denouncing the “moderate” hawks as “RINOs.”

The neoconservatives have certainly made a significant impact on the conservative big tent. They not only survived decades beyond their life expectancy (end of the Cold War), but they also had an incredible impact on U.S. foreign policy during the Bush era. Thinkers of the 1990s predicted a neo-conservative demise with good reason, but the neocons have persisted. Consequently, I am hesitant in this essay to make what might be another failed prediction of neoconservative decline. However, neoconservatives now find it very difficult to convince the rest of the conservative big tent that fiscal responsibility, the American way of life, family values, preference for tradition, and constitutionally limited government are compatible with a one-size-fits-all democratic model for the world and the military industrial complex necessary to maintain American unipolarity. The present and future conservatives are likely to focus on fiscal responsibility and individual freedom. As social liberals inevitably progress on issues such as same-sex marriage, conservatives are shifting their focus from direct opposition to instead the protection of religious freedom (Arana, 2013). This far more modest goal is to ensure that social conservatives do not lose their freedom to maintain their more traditional lifestyles in a socially progressive future. This will require a culturally pluralist outlook that clashes with the neoconservative one-size-fits-all worldview. Limited government at home is ever more difficult to reconcile with unlimited government abroad, and this new generation of conservatives, unclouded by the specter of Soviet communism, can afford philosophical consistency in their efforts to limit the size of government and place greater faith in the innovation of free individuals and voluntary association. If neoconservatives are to have a future beyond the baby boomer generation, they will either need to find a way to appeal to the more libertarian-leaning conservative youth or branch out beyond the conservative big tent.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this essay is to show that American conservative foreign policy is far more complex than commonly depicted by mainstream media or certain irritable pundits. The secondary objective of this essay is to explain how neo-conservatives have not only endured but also thrived after the Cold War. Many did not expect this, even some neoconservatives. During the Bush era, it appeared that neoconservatives were simply the standard bearers of conservative foreign policy, with a tolerated realist minority. However, other perspectives existed even then and have now re-emerged to the point where they must be understood by the GOP “Old Guard” and mainstream political culture. We will still hear the terms *right-winged* or *to the right* commonly used in reference to a hawkish foreign policy for some time

yet, as old habits die hard. However, the conservative tent has become big again, at least for electoral necessity if nothing else.

It is hard to say which, if any, of these groups will dominate conservative foreign policy in America in the near future. However, they are all at a point of influence now where they must be carefully considered when looking at the conservative movement and future GOP nominations. Conservatives and their opponents alike would be well served by understanding the complexities of the conservative big tent. For hawkish conservatives, they must accommodate their tent-mates. For more dovish conservatives, particularly non-interventionists, they must understand that the situation is far more complex than a simple black and white—neoconservative versus “real conservatives” scenario. American “liberals” and Democratic opponents of the conservative big tent should consider that a more dovish conservative could easily blindside a hawkish Democratic candidate if party primary voters and strategists take for granted the assumption that conservatives are inevitably hawkish. Pre-Cold War conservatives were complex and disparate in their foreign policy preferences, and such complexity has now returned to the post Cold War conservative big tent.

The main purpose of this essay is to analyze the diversity of foreign policy within the conservative big tent and provide a model for understanding these different policy preferences. This has been achieved by showing how nearly all conservatives fit into at least one of these four categories: non-interventionist, cautious realist, hawkish realist, and neoconservative. These four categories provide a better understanding of conservative foreign policy preferences among grassroots conservatives, intellectuals, and politicians. The essay has shown, as others have before, that neoconservative dominance of conservative foreign policy has been in decline since about 2006. It was necessary to reassert this, as many still take for granted the perception that conservatives are hawkish. It has also been shown that there are both philosophical and pragmatic reasons for conservatives to reconsider the hawkish foreign policy for which “the right” has become synonymous in the last several decades. It is unlikely that the conservative big tent will retreat into isolationism, as some neoconservatives fear. Although this essay predicts a more cautious foreign policy preference among conservatives going forward, this is a far cry from isolationism. Most conservatives still want to maintain a strong military, aid for U.S. allies, and beneficial trade relations. Neoconservatives certainly can adapt to this environment, and given the short memory span of the younger generation, neoconservatives could find a way, yet again, to return to prominence.

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