



Some Problems Are Too Important to Leave to the Partisans

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At 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, February 28, 2018 Senators Mike Lee (R-Utah), Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) introduced a bipartisan joint resolution to remove U.S. armed forces from hostilities between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis in Yemen pursuant to the War Powers Resolution. Their bill laid the groundwork for the first-ever successful vote in the Senate to withdraw U.S. armed forces from an unauthorized war, one they believed was unconstitutional.

Earlier on that day Sanders and Lee held a news conference.

“The founding fathers gave the power to declare war to the Congress, the branch most accountable to the people. For far too long, Congress under Democratic and Republican administrations has abdicated its constitutional role in authorizing war,” Sanders began, jabbing his hand to emphasize the point.

“This is not a partisan issue,” Sanders continued. “Support for the Saudi intervention in Yemen began under a Democratic president and has continued under a Republican president. Senator Lee is a conservative Republican, I am a progressive Independent.”

Lee referenced James Madison and the *Federalist* papers, explaining “this legislation is neither liberal nor conservative, neither Democratic nor Republican. This is an American principle, a constitutional principle.”

He acknowledged the elephant in the room: “It’s not every day that Senator Sanders and Senator Murphy and I come together on something but we firmly agree on this, underscoring the fact that this is not a partisan issue.” Indeed, it’s not every day a democratic socialist and free market libertarian walk into a Capitol Hill newser together.

Three months earlier, in November 2017, the House overwhelmingly passed a resolution stating that the use of U.S. military forces in the Yemen conflict was not authorized by Congress. Only 30 members opposed it.

Anyone familiar with the ways of Washington understands nothing happens spontaneously in the swamp. The wheels of government turn slowly and someone is behind the scenes greasing the axle or monkeywrenching the gears.

The Man Who Made It Happen

So an inquiring mind would ask: how did this most unlikely of alliances happen? Who made it happen and why?

Meet the “who”—George D. O’Neill, Jr., a quiet, lanky, reserved man of 69 years, a sculptor, jewelry maker, and pilot, a fifth-generation Rockefeller who manages small family agriculture and construction materials operations. George grew up between Lake Wales, Florida and Oyster Bay, New York—an enclave of the American aristocracy on the North Shore of Long Island. His father was a Harvard man and Wall Street investor who served on corporate boards. His mother, the granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller Jr., was honored for her education philanthropy.

Though a Rockefeller by birth, George is not a “Rockefeller Republican.” He’s a Trump supporter and has been from the beginning—even before. He was a Buchanan Brigade stalwart in Pat’s 1992 campaign. That antiestablishment, populist conservative uprising pitted economic nationalism against globalism and presaged Donald J. Trump’s victory 24 years later.

O’Neill’s lifelong interest in the question of war’s impact has focused specifically on the issue of endless wars from a MAGA perspective: How can America be great when we’re fighting unsustainable wars and not honoring the Constitution? How can we be a great nation when we carelessly waste and damage the lives of our military members, hurt their families, and run around the world wrecking thousand-year-old cultures? Have any of these misguided interventions achieved any of the promised successes? Does anyone benefit besides a small number of business, political, and media elites?

He edited two books on the subject, *Come Home America* and *The Impact of War*, compilations of lectures and other writings, accomplishments he is most proud of. The Rockefeller family has been interested in the impact of war going back to World War I. They provided food, clothing and medical aid for refugees in Europe. The Rockefeller fortune funded research and treatments for diseases the war brought with it—wounds, infections, dysentery and PTSD, then called “shell shock.” The family endowed the League of Nations Library in Geneva and donated Manhattan real estate for the United Nations headquarters in Turtle Bay.

While the family has been famously (or notoriously, depending on one’s point of view) internationalist (see: League of Nations, United Nations, Council on Foreign Relations), O’Neill has an American nationalist and constitutional concern for the millions injured by our wars: “Why do we fight endless wars without congressional approval?” Constitutional concerns are as important as antiwar concerns.

Which brings us back to the question of how he built a bipartisan consensus on ending endless wars.

There has not been much bipartisan cooperation on this or any other issue, to put it mildly, and O’Neill deserves credit for merging the Left and Right. He spent years building relationships across the political spectrum and earning credibility with leftist groups.

O’Neill hosted small dinners of 10-15 people in Washington, D.C. and New York with a diverse flock: Quakers, Code Pink, *The American Conservative*, Koch Industries, *The Nation* and the Cato Institute all breaking bread.

These dinners began in February 2010 with a gathering of people from the conservative, progressive, and libertarian movements along with assorted 1970s-era activist-intellectuals. It proved to him people of disparate points of view could work together on the war issue.

Enter the Committee for a Responsible Foreign Policy

A key turning point was a September 2017 meeting O’Neill had with two people from the Left. One of them was Keane Bhatt, who at that time was working for the Progressive Caucus and drafting the first Yemen war powers resolution. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.) and Mark Pocan (D-Wis.) of the Progressive Caucus needed Republican support for their bill. At dinner that evening they gained co-sponsorship from Republicans Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) and former North Carolina congressman Walter Jones.

The first bipartisan Yemen war powers resolution was soon introduced. After years of discussion, this was the first real action taken to end the forever wars. Soon after that the Progressive Caucus people were introduced to members of Senator Mike Lee’s staff and the Senate bill was underway.

It was in 2017 that O’Neill founded the Committee for a Responsible Foreign Policy, declaring:

Foundational to responsible and thoughtful foreign policy is the need for congressional consent for all acts of war. The committee sponsors monthly lectures and briefings with veterans, military academics, members of Congress and others on topics including the moral and financial impact of endless war, its impact on military families, presidential powers and the Constitution. As a result of these many interactions there is a war powers network in Washington to inform the many different interested organizations of events and writings.

The committee initially got pushback as being anti-military. Quite the opposite: It is defending the men and women of the military who are asked to sacrifice their lives.

“Our leadership has not put together a policy or a strategy that justifies that sacrifice and that’s unforgivable,” Brigadier General Donald Bolduc said at a recent briefing. If Congress isn’t fully committed by giving its consent on the front end, there will be no accountability or backup down the line.

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) joined the briefing on “Reforming Foreign Agent Registration Act laws to end forever wars.” The congressman who represents the district that is home to Pensacola Naval Air Station told the audience “the dominant movement in this town is to sell out to the war lobby.” Gaetz refuses to be part of that dominant movement and called out the fabrication of “threat construction to feed a military-industrial complex in this town.”

Think tanks funded by foreign money (which they are not required to report) do more of the heavy lifting in the “threat construction” project than meets the eye, shaping American policy and public opinion to ensure the “military-industrial complex in this town” is well-fed. Remember that the next time you read an op-ed from a “distinguished fellow” explaining the necessity of American involvement in some conflict or another.

For Once, A Useful Bipartisan Effort

O'Neill's work prepared a path for the Bipartisan War Powers Caucus, a House group whose founding members include Ro Khanna along with Reps. Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), Andy Biggs (R-Ariz.), and Ken Buck (R-Colo.). The group is committed to "reaffirming Congress's constitutional responsibility on matters of war and peace."

Jon Stoltz, an Iraq War veteran and chairman of the liberal VoteVets PAC and his counterpart at the conservative Concerned Veterans of America saluted the bipartisan caucus. "When two groups, or ideologies, that are so opposed to each other end up joining forces, it makes a big impact," Stoltz said, adding, "the most impactful bipartisan work for the country isn't coming from the middle, it's coming from the wings of the parties."

The war in Yemen proved to be a tipping point. Washington awoke one day to discover American forces were assisting the Saudis with intelligence, target selection, and aerial refueling.

Yemen revealed how easily the United States can get involved in a conflict without approval from anyone outside the White House. Where was the oversight? Was there any? Modern tech-centric, remote-control warfare makes it easy to finagle around the edges of the Constitution and contravene the clear intent of the American Founders.

Liberals and progressives were concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Conservatives wanted to know what the United States was contributing to the conflict, how we got there and whether our presence was ever authorized by Congress.

The Committee for a Responsible Foreign Policy held its first public event in March 2018—a photo exhibit in the Russell Senate Office Building called "The Impact of War," featuring outsized three by five foot images of the Yemen war. Senators Lee and Sanders spoke about the Yemen war powers resolution they recently introduced, the first time a War Powers Resolution had been introduced in the U.S. Senate.

Defend the Guard

The Committee for a Responsible Foreign Policy sees another front in the battle to restore Constitutional government and end endless wars: the states.

The National Guard ostensibly is under the command of state governors, and that's the hook. Traditionally the National Guard has assisted in local disaster relief. But 30,000 National Guard troops from across America are deployed outside of the continental United States. The Pentagon is using many if not most of them to wage war overseas.

When those troops signed up to protect our nation from invasion, quell insurrection, and enforce the laws of the land they were not told they would be separated from their families for months at a time and exposed to physical and mental damage. Some have served five tours in Iraq. The Mississippi National Guard was in Iraq when Katrina hit.

National and grassroots veterans' groups are pushing "Defend the Guard" legislation at the state house level. It would allow governors to veto overseas deployments of the National Guard unless there has been a congressional declaration of war. Advocates are as diverse as Veterans for Trump and the West Virginia ACLU.

Defend the Guard bills have already been introduced in nine states—Georgia, Hawaii, Iowa, Michigan, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Activists are seeking out sponsors in 20 more states.

Sgt. Dan McKnight is a U.S. Marine Corps Reserves and active duty Army veteran who served 18 months in Afghanistan with the Idaho Army National Guard. He heads BringOurTroopsHome.US and, when he's not hiking the backcountry of the Sawtooth Wilderness, he's lobbying to defend the Guard.

Senator Jim Risch (R-Idaho), chairman of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, signed a pledge sponsored by BringOurTroopsHome.US, promising that he will “insist that Congress exercise the Constitutional authority granted solely to the legislative branch to declare war” as provided by Article 1, Section 8, Clause II of the U.S. Constitution.

McKnight sent a letter to President Trump asking him to order all National Guard troops deployed overseas to return home to assist state and local governments' response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Idaho House of Representatives cited the pandemic when it adopted a resolution urging Congress formally to declare war before taking Idaho National Guard troops away from the state. The West Virginia House of Delegates adopted a similar resolution.

The pandemic is the latest but hardly the only example of unprecedented challenges our nation faces. In this unfamiliar landscape, the old maps pointing left and right are worse than useless. They lead us into a defile from which there is no escape.

But we need not go that way. The map is not the territory.

Bringing our troops home from foreign military adventures, ending our dependence on China for essential goods, building 21st century infrastructure, protecting the rights and liberties of Americans from corporate-government-media power grabs—these are opportunities to find common ground, and that ground is not necessarily in the middle.

O'Neill and his unlikely collaborators on the War Powers Resolution votes show how the extremes of both parties can unite and break the grip of the dead and corrupt hand of the Washington establishment.

That lesson is more important than ever.