

## Total hawk, total tosh

By: Will Wilkinson- August 14, 2013

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MARC THIESSEN, a conservative columnist for the *Washington Post*, laments the rising prominence of Republican congressmen with qualms about war-making, nation-building and the unconstitutional security state. In particular Mr Thiessen worries that certain Republican members of Congress, such as Rand Paul, a senator from Kentucky, and Justin Amash, a congressman from Michigan, are stealing thunder from other would-be conservative leaders with their vigilance about cutting spending, but are "squishy" on foreign policy. Mr Thiessen calls for more conservative politicians keen to slash food stamps *and* go to war. "The problem is", according to Mr Thiessen, "the conservative base is a lot more focused on the national debt than national security—so when the two factions clash, they often side with the people they sent to Washington to clean up the fiscal mess."

Actually, this is the opposite of a problem. Panic about national security after 9/11 has done far more damage to America than 9/11 itself. The eclipse of terror-panic by real economic concerns and the rising popularity of conservative leaders smart enough to see the difference between safety and mindless cheerleading for war and surveillance can only be welcomed as a sign of healing and health for the GOP, and for America as a whole. However, according to Mr Thiessen, even the mildest scepticism about an open-ended "war on terror" that plunders the treasury, guts the constitution, and drains the arteries of young soldiers and foreigners, amounts to "isolationism", and we can't have that.

As an alternative to the dangers of "isolation", Mr Thiessen gets behind Mike Pompeo, a Republican congressman from Kansas, who

*is an Army veteran and a West Point and Harvard Law graduate, who points out that under the Constitution "the only exclusively federal task is national security. Period. Full stop." Pompeo supports eliminating entire federal agencies. He also supports NSA surveillance, Guantanamo Bay, drone strikes against Americans who fight for al-Qaeda — and robust U.S. leadership in the world. He says the GOP needs more of what he calls "total hawks" — full-spectrum conservatives who want to attack both al-Qaeda and the national debt.*

This is an astonishing passage. Mr Thiessen applauds Mr Pompeo for supporting NSA surveillance. Period. Full stop. That NSA surveillance may systematically violate Americans' constitutional rights is, one infers, a worry for "squishes"—for limp-wristed poindexters without the cunning and spine to stymie burglars by burning down the house. Moreover, Mr Thiessen wishes to congratulate Mr Pompeo for supporting Guantanamo Bay, and why not? Who among us would begrudge the existence of a scenic bay on the Cuban coast? Yet I think Mr Thiessen means to say that an official policy of studied indifference over the innocence or guilt of those held captive, and quite possibly tortured, at Guantanamo amounts to "robust US leadership" rather than a record of craven inhumanity that endangers Americans by supplying grounds for

righteous enmity. The assassination of American citizens without due process at the behest of an unchecked executive invoking martial law? Let the eagle soar!

I honestly don't know if Mr Pompeo is really such a consistent champion of the state at its most monstrously lawless, but Mr Thiessen seems to think he is, and loves him for it. "Republicans need to recruit and elect more 'total hawks'", Mr Thiessen asserts. But *why?* Military hawkishness is fundamentally and obviously at odds with fiscal hawkishness. Unless one intends to maintain current levels of military spending through massive cuts in Social Security and Medicare, the "total hawk" is a total fantasy. Perhaps more importantly, Mr Thiessen's maximally-truculent brand of interventionism is fading in popularity, even on the right. Perhaps that's why he is anxious to smear the GOP's relatively pacific, relatively civil-libertarian up-and-comers as "isolationists". Responding to a different neocon's attempt to brand Rand Paul an "isolationist", Justin Logan, a foreign-policy scholar at the Cato Institute, gets to the heart of the matter:

*[T]he people trying to create anxiety about isolationism favor an interventionist military policy that has fallen out of favor with the public. After the twin disasters of Iraq and now Afghanistan, they are pawing the ground for more wars in Syria and Iran. Accordingly, they are trying to claim "internationalism" for themselves, so that they can look prudent and modest — in comparison with the ideology that failed to recognize the threat from Adolf Hitler.*

*And that's what's really going on here — using rhetoric to remove any sensible alternative to America's expansive grand strategy. But in fact Paul & Co. do represent a moderate third way that breaks with the failed bipartisan policies of the recent past. Paul's views are also better in line with public opinion and America's thinning pocketbook. Cutting military spending and aid to the Egyptian junta isn't isolationism — it's common sense.*

In 2000, George W. Bush won the GOP nomination campaigning against the brand of "nation-building" liberal internationalism that Al Gore inherited from Bill Clinton, and that Barack Obama later inherited from George W. Bush. In times of relative peace, a moderate foreign policy that takes civil liberties seriously is popular with conservatives, unless they've allowed war-mongers to work them into a lather. Mr Thiessen is concerned that the lather is finally losing its froth, and that fiscal hawks, no longer rattled by a 12-year-old atrocity, will begin to look askance at the crushing expense of the imperium. Hence the gambit of the "total hawk", a mythical figure meant to promote the lunatic idea that spending trillions of dollars is as good as saving it as long as it goes to espionage and war. One can only hope that the likes of Messrs Thiessen and Pompeo really are becoming as desperate as this sounds.