



Think Again: The Republican Party

The future of the GOP -- after the debacle.

BY DANIELLE PLETKA - JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2013

"The Romney Campaign Couldn't Get Its Act Together on Foreign Policy."

True. To the extent that Americans remember anything about foreign policy from the 2012 campaign, it may be the third presidential debate, in which Republican challenger Mitt Romney -- who, on domestic issues, presented a sharp contrast with President Barack Obama -- suddenly morphed into his opponent's doppelgänger. Obama resisted the notion of a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities or arming the Syrian rebels, and Romney showed doubt too. Obama talked tough on China, and so did Romney. Obama framed putting America's fiscal house in order as a national security imperative; ditto Romney. In fact, Romney explicitly said some half-dozen times that he supported the president's policies. As Daily Show host Jon Stewart exclaimed the next day, "What the hell was that!?" What the hell, indeed.

It's a question the Republican Party needs to answer, and urgently, if it is going to reclaim its traditional place as the United States' leading voice on national security. To do so, however, the GOP will first have to settle dissension within its own ranks and recognize that the path back from its 2012 election drubbing lies in embracing the boldness and moral authority that has made it so successful in the past.

Ironically, the ideological battles within the campaign so often reported were far from real. Yes, Romney surrounded himself with everyone from neocons to realists, Bush retreads to fresh faces, but national security never rose to a level of importance that merited a serious fight. And the conventional wisdom that insider bickering produced Romney's muddled foreign-policy narrative is just tripe.

The real trouble was lack of interest and vision. Since the early Cold War, the Republican Party has been the bedrock of U.S. defense and vice versa. Yet none of the key players within the campaign -- other than the candidate himself -- was actually interested in national security. Sure, Romney had an impressive roster of foreign-policy advisors, but most were relegated to useless conference calls. The belief that the election would be won on the economy and the economy alone resulted in painful, often incoherent, attempts to take advantage of Obama's national security shortcomings.

Over the course of the long campaign, Romney at one point said that he wanted all troops out of Afghanistan, but later insisted that he would defer to commanders in the field. He asserted (in what we can only assume was a silly slip of the tongue) that Russia was America's "No. 1 geopolitical foe." He routinely harped on Chinese currency manipulation, when in fact the major threat Beijing poses is military. He quickly criticized the president's handling of the Sept. 11 killings of U.S. officials in Benghazi, Libya, only to inexplicably drop the subject entirely.

Instead of articulating a clear foreign-policy doctrine, the campaign relied on clichés ("I will not apologize for America") to hint that, somehow, Romney would lead more capably than Obama and the Democrats. This failure to define a vision suggested to voters that the Republican Party, for decades reliably dominant on national security, no longer knew how best to protect Americans at home and advance their values and interests abroad. Voters told exit pollsters by a significant margin that the Democrats were stronger. The fact that, presented with a target as fat as the Obama administration's foreign policy, Republicans not only lost the election but lost the confidence of the American people on the party's once-defining issue is a travesty.

But now the election -- and Romney's brief tenure as GOP mascot -- is over. The good news, for those looking for signs that an assertive Republican foreign policy wasn't buried along with his candidacy, is that the apathy of the 2012 campaign is unlikely to persist. Within days of the election, Sen. John McCain and many of his colleagues on Capitol Hill resumed their attacks on the administration's response to the Benghazi killings. At the same time, the ideological divisions buried during the campaign have already resurfaced and must be dealt with. Realists who opposed the Iraq war will have to confront neoconservatives who think that American power can still accomplish a lot -- in Syria and elsewhere. Tea Party stalwarts will clash with hawks and interventionists over defense spending and the need for robust engagement in places like Afghanistan. McCain has said that the debate "between the isolationists and those who believe we have a role to play in the world ... will rage between now and the next elections."

I say: Let it rage on. Competition over ideas is nothing new for Republicans. In the 1970s, the neoconservatives clashed with Kissingerian realpolitik. The outcome of that fight was not fragmentation, but rather Ronald Reagan's presidency, which still serves as the right's guiding star and strategic vision for America's role in the world. Reagan not only looked back to the country's founding principles of individual freedom, but he also invoked the fight against an oppressor to secure American liberties. That model, as well as a willingness to promote American ideals globally, has been at the heart of the GOP for decades. Now is not the time for the party to toss its moral compass onto the ash heap of history.

"The Republicans and Democrats Are the Same on Foreign Policy."

Not deep down. The first step toward recovery is admitting you have a problem. And Republicans have a problem. Ask the average American voter what the difference was between Obama and Romney on national security, and he's likely to struggle for answers. After all, who wants Iran to have a nuclear weapon? Who thinks China's massive investment in its military is a good thing? Who is really going to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem? Answer: no one.

During the campaign, perhaps the area of greatest difference was defense spending. Romney wanted to spend 4 percent of GDP on defense -- an estimated \$2 trillion more than Obama would over the next 10 years. But that difference was as much about American power writ large as it was

about dollars. Without a commitment to restoring America's defense capabilities, Romney's insistence that he would be a more credible interlocutor with the country's adversaries would have been little more than posturing. Indeed, during the Cold War, it was Republicans who were by and large more committed to providing ample resources for the U.S. military, ensuring it was equipped with a decisive strategic advantage and facing adversaries with sufficient deterrent to maintain the peace. Romney's knock on Obama's credibility is rooted in the widespread assumption (in the United States, throughout the Middle East, and most particularly in Iran) that Obama will not launch a military strike to halt Tehran's nuclear program. It is a rare fool who fears a paper tiger. Real ones get more respect.

But there's a deeper difference here as well. Republicans are more willing to upset the global status quo. Not always, to be sure. President Dwight Eisenhower stood by with only murmurs of protest as the people of Hungary were trampled in 1956; President George H.W. Bush did the same decades later after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. But Reagan stirred the pot and worked with like-minded allies to oust communist dictators. Republicans today, I have little doubt, will be more supportive in the event of an Israeli military strike on Iran, more willing to heed the counsel of military commanders in Afghanistan about the timeline for victory and withdrawal, and less willing to show flexibility in the face of Russia's slide back to authoritarianism.

In the simplest terms, values are what divide us from them and them from us. There are those who believe that American values form a moral imperative for U.S. power in the world – that because U.S. democracy is among the world's most durable and just, the United States has an obligation (not merely the occasional inclination) to help others attain the benefits of a free society. That is what Republicans have stood for abroad and the distinction they must now again draw with their Democratic counterparts.

There are plenty, many on the left, who oppose the idea of American moral leadership. This is not because they are unpatriotic, self-hating commies (to coin a phrase). Rather, it is because they believe in neither the uniqueness of the American experience nor the superiority of the American system. As Obama so memorably limned, "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." Obama and those who agree with him just don't think America is so great, so without fault, that it should claim the right, much less the duty, to mold the world in its image.

Some Republicans might also agree – think Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma or Sen. Mike Lee of Utah. But to move beyond last year's debacle, the Republican Party must convince the dissenters in its ranks – and of course the American people – that this is an enduring truth. It must forge a new Republican foreign policy recommitted to the idea that where the United States is able to identify a strategic and moral imperative – as in the fight against the Soviet Union or the battle against Islamic extremism – it is in America's interests to use its power to help shape a safer world.

"Republicans Have to Kill the Bush-Cheney Legacy to Move Forward."

Really? The past need not be prologue, but it shouldn't be forbidden territory either.

One of the Democrats' favorite criticisms of Romney was that his foreign policy represented a return to the days of President George W. Bush and his emissary to the Dark Side, Dick Cheney. When Romney insisted he would do more to bring American leadership to the battle for Syria and be a more credible interlocutor on Iran, Obama told 60 Minutes that "if Governor Romney is suggesting that we should start another war, he should say so," knowing full well he was tapping into the anti-Bush "endless war" meme. Indeed, Vice President Joe Biden didn't hesitate to reach even further back, accusing Romney of a "Cold War mindset."

Regardless of whether the charge was true (it was not), Democrats clearly thought that linking Romney to the past was an effective strategy. Just as clearly, the Romney campaign and the Republican Party as a whole agreed. Romney did not use Bush or Cheney as surrogates on the campaign trail, and neither spoke at -- or even attended -- the Republican National Convention in Tampa, Florida. Indeed, many members of Congress elected in the anti-Obama wave of 2010 would just as soon forget the Bush years, and green-eyeshade types in the party consider greater defense spending and global leadership as luxuries of an earlier era.

But letting Obama off scot-free for allowing anti-Bush derangement to color his policymaking was a mistake. Romney was so afraid of being labeled a warmonger that he failed to articulate how the United States might affect the conflict in Syria; he was so fearful of being tarred with the Cheney brush that he never mentioned that Osama bin Laden was found as a result of intelligence gleaned in part from Bush-era interrogations. In truth, there are ample lessons to be found in both the Bush administration and the Cold War years.

Reagan's military buildup was an object lesson in the power of deterrence -- in many ways the threat that tipped the Soviet Union over the edge. The Soviets' desperate and failed attempts at military parity forced Moscow toward the reforms that ended the Evil Empire. Reagan's use of proxies during the Cold War remains an example of how to leverage shared ideas against a common enemy. Bush's first-term commitment to democratic transformation sowed the first seeds of change in the Middle East and began a process that arguably ended in the Arab Spring.

Republicans need to find new leaders who can apply those lessons to the problems we face today and carry them into the future. They don't need to trot out Bush or mention Reagan in every foreign-policy speech, but they do need to recognize that the same principles that animated past Republican presidents will reanimate the party. Spending less may be a vital element of responsible governance, but it's not a moral purpose and it's no vision for America in the world.

"Americans Just Want to Come Home."

Nope. One of the most substantial roadblocks to revitalizing Republican liberal internationalism is the financial and physical fatigue that naturally flows from a decade of war and a corrosive recession. We're tired; we've done too much; we've spent too much in blood and treasure; it's someone else's turn; let's rebuild here at home. Every candidate said it, I have said it, and the American people say it too. Support among independents for an active foreign policy has declined by 15 percentage points in the past decade, according to a poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, and a recent Pew Research Center study found that most Americans think the United States should share global leadership with others.

Of course, Obama tried to take advantage of such attitudes. That is where his repeated emphasis on "nation-building here at home" came from. Obama made it clear that education, infrastructure, and manufacturing had to be the priorities going forward. Thus foreign policy was cleverly transformed into a domestic issue: For the United States to be strong abroad, he argued, Americans had to put their own house in order first.

Yet weariness remains one of the great shibboleths of U.S. foreign policy. In reality, Americans continue to support, usually with significant majorities, overseas military operations, at least at their outset. Support for Obama's 2011 decision to intervene in Libya was thinner, but still 10 percentage points above opposition. Even after more than 11 years of conflict, poll after poll finds that Americans support the notion of a U.S. strike to prevent Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon. A February 2012 poll had supporters beating opponents by 18 percentage points.

And it's not just Iran. Obama may want to focus on nation-building at home, but the slow-motion train wreck of the European Union, the fading of democracy in Russia, the war in Syria, the rise of China, North Korean weapons proliferation, the spread of al Qaeda, the continued strength of Chavismo in South America, the war in Afghanistan, and the failure of Pakistan still constitute major security threats.

Republicans understand that those problems aren't going to go away on their own, and so do most Americans.

But it's up to the Republican Party -- and particularly its leadership -- to articulate how it would do better than Obama, how a robust American presence can make a difference in the Middle East, how victory should be the goal in Afghanistan, and how U.S. leadership in the Pacific can constrain Chinese predations. Republicans need to explain how much can be done consistent with America's dearest principles but without the use of force, without threats, without protectionism, and without breaking the bank. They need to work to bring along the many even within the party who doubt the imperative of success against al Qaeda, who doubt the value of friendly governments, and for whom each penny spent on a new fighter for the Air Force or aircraft carrier for the Navy is a penny wasted. You cannot hope to persuade the country if you cannot persuade your own party.

"America Can No Longer Afford to Be the World's Policeman."

It's a choice. The other objection, of course, is that the last decade of war has drained not only Americans' emotional reserves but their country's treasury, giving America little choice but to retrench. Recognizing the "limits of our power" has been one of the resurgent themes of the post-Bush years. But where has it left the country? Leading from behind -- an absurd notion that itself must be left behind. After all, neither France, whose presidents have led on both Libya and Syria, nor the U.N. Security Council can solve the thorny problems we now face. As Reagan put it, "Leadership is a great burden. We grow weary of it at times.... But if we are not to shoulder the burdens of leadership in the free world, then who will?"

The truth is the United States spends remarkably little on defense. The Pentagon's budget now represents about 4 percent of GDP, close to the lowest proportion in modern history. It is eminently affordable. Yet the country is on track to cut more than \$1 trillion in military spending over the next decade. The lion's share of spending is not on operations or weapons systems, as

some believe; nearly 50 percent of spending goes to veterans' benefits and uniformed and civilian personnel. So what can be cut? A better question is: What would America like to stop doing?

If the country chooses to subcontract the Pacific to China, it can begin to slash the Navy. If it decides that neither lift nor air power is key to fighting in Afghanistan or farther-flung reaches of the globe, then who needs the Air Force? And if, as then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggested, the United States never fights another land war in Asia, then why have much of an Army?

Americans have benefited tremendously from their involvement abroad. The United States has produced a broader peace at a decreasing cost to the country. Think of it this way: In the first 50 years of the 20th century, more than half a million Americans died in two world wars. In the second 50 years, the number was 95,000 because of the Korean War and the Vietnam War. And after Vietnam? Not even 1,000. In the two wars of the 21st century, Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans have lost just over 6,500 service members. Continental war in Europe is today almost inconceivable. Eastern Europe is free. Trade has skyrocketed because of, among other things, peace on the high seas -- largely due to the U.S. Navy.

The United States has a powerhouse economy and military might second to none for the moment. Both are at risk because of untrammelled debt and entitlement spending -- not defense expenditures. The country can choose to usher out the era of American power, but it will be a choice. And it will be a choice that is not easily undone. There will simply not be enough money to rebuild the military if it's allowed to decay.

Republicans are still deciding where they stand on the question. Among those who understand budgets, few believe military expenditures are contributing to America's economic woes. But far too many don't understand and haven't troubled themselves to do so. Are there savings around the margins? Of course. Senator Coburn is right when he says the Army doesn't need its own brand of beef jerky. But sustained and serious savings can only come from genuine cuts to the muscle of U.S. military might. Honest libertarians like those at the Cato Institute admit freely that they wish to cut defense in order to constrain U.S. foreign policy. Others hide behind the budget to cover their isolationist impulse. But the vast mass simply doesn't know. It's time for the Republican Party to remind the country what it gets for the money it spends and what it will mean for the country when it stops.

"Democrats Are as Screwed Up as Republicans."

Yes. Republicans aren't the only ones who have some soul-searching to do in the coming years. The growing chasm between classical liberal internationalists and ardent realpolitikniks affects both parties these days.

The Arab Spring brought into high definition the difference between those who believed the overthrow of the Middle East's sclerotic dictators was a hopeful sign for the evolution of a region almost untouched by reform, and those who saw the devil we don't know as a far greater menace than the stability with which we have grown comfortable. A nasty spat erupted within the Democratic administration over the Libya intervention in which "harpies" -- coincidentally, three senior female Obama officials -- were accused of dragging a reluctant president into an unnecessary war in which America had few interests. Obama found allies on the right, and plenty of opponents on the left. The opposite is true as well.

Now, the question of what to do about the war in Syria has divided those who think the humanitarian and strategic imperatives for greater U.S. involvement are clear from those who believe Syria is a maelstrom that will suck the United States into an Iraq-like war. Senior scholars from the centrist Brookings Institution find themselves agreeing with my colleagues at the conservative American Enterprise Institute that America must do more to overthrow dictator Bashar al-Assad; the libertarian Cato Institute has climbed under the ideological covers with the liberal Center for American Progress to oppose greater U.S. involvement.

Ditto the battle over the Muslim Brotherhood's coming to power in Egypt and the question of U.S. support for "moderate" Islamist governments there and elsewhere. Is Obama facilitating the rise of Islamist extremists, an al Qaeda-lite, that will result in a new era of hostility toward Americans, Christians, Jews, and moderate Muslims? Or is he patiently waiting through the inevitable rocky transition that all countries make from dictatorship to democracy? Suffice it to say, those who see the former rather than the latter are not all to be found in the Republican Party. Far from it.

It is less heralded than the GOP's struggles, but a battle is going on for the soul of the Democratic Party as well. It's unclear whether the future will be driven by the party's internationalist wing or by the protectionism and America-first instincts of labor unions and groups like Code Pink. Yes, Republicans need to get their act together. But so do Democrats.

"The GOP Is Leaderless on Foreign Policy."

Yes, but... So Romney failed to win the presidency and the GOP has no obvious foreign-policy leader. There's still an opportunity to articulate strategy for America's place in the world in the absence of clear ideas from the White House. Indeed, Republican stewardship of foreign policy was a hallmark of Bill Clinton's years, when the country had a Democratic president seemingly content to allow the Taliban's rise in Afghanistan, slaughter in the Balkans, genocide in Africa, terrorism against the United States in Africa and the Middle East, and clear steps toward a nuclear program in Iran. Back then, Congress led where the White House would not, articulating policy on issues like NATO enlargement. Can it happen again? What should Republican priorities be?

Let's start with American leadership. It is sheer malpractice to subcontract foreign policy to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as the United States did in Libya, allowing those countries to choose whom to arm and whom to marginalize among various Libyan groups. The same is now happening in Syria. If America cannot arm the rebels, having waited so long that their ranks are now riddled with terrorists, it can surely identify who the terrorists are and work to marginalize them. It can set benchmarks for aid to Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen to ensure that it's supporting only those who are committed to free people and free markets. It can yet again force the president to tighten the embargo on Iran, as Congress has done multiple times.

The United States can provide its allies in Asia with the aid and military support they need to face challenges from China, while agreeing that everyone has a shared interest in Chinese prosperity. It can revive its lagging partnership with India and incentivize further economic reforms in New Delhi, recommitting to a long-term economic and strategic relationship. It can push the president to rationalize his strategy in Afghanistan and better explain his decisions about how many troops should remain and when the rest should leave. America can double down on Russia's neighbors, supporting genuine democracy in Georgia and providing a clearer path to integration with the West to Eastern and Central European countries that still fear Russian domination and

manipulation. The United States can help allies like Taiwan and Israel defend themselves with aid, intelligence, and arms if need be.

Congress alone is capable of pushing each of these priorities. It will fail in some cases and succeed in others. But for the Republican leadership in the House and the powerful Senate GOP minority, now is a chance to reinvest in genuine American leadership that meets challenges before they become threats, asserts priorities with allies before they despair of America's leadership, and most importantly, reverses the catastrophic cuts to defense before the United States becomes a country that cannot adequately defend itself or deter enemies.

That is the right path forward not only for the country and for the world, but for the Republican Party. If the GOP is to stand for something more than lower taxes and smaller government, it must return to the moral vision of a world in which the United States helps others achieve the freedoms it holds so dear. There are some without a compass for whom America's moral purpose and strategic direction are a matter of continual course correction. But if there's no vision America stands for, then there's nothing worth fighting for. America can indeed nation-build at home -- and abandon the world it has shaped and led. It's up to Republicans to make sure that doesn't happen. Let's get to work.