

[Looking On the Bright Side \(Sort Of\)](#)

Daniel Larison January 25th, 2011

Our analysis reached three conclusions:

There is no “isolationist” wing of the GOP. Of the Republicans’ 47 senators and 242 representatives, only 5 percent (15 members) expressed support for cutting defense spending. Adding those in the “ambiguously for” category makes it 13 percent. Forty-one percent are against cutting defense spending; with those ambiguously against, it’s 60 percent.

Only 10 Republicans, or 4 percent, are against the war in Afghanistan, and none are senators. Including the skeptical members, 10 percent are somewhat antiwar. Eighty percent support the war.

The tea party is not mellowing Republican militarism. If it were, freshman Republicans, who mostly proclaim allegiance to the movement, should be more dovish than the rest. That’s not the case. Five of the 101 Republican freshmen and 10 of the 184 who aren’t newcomers support cutting defense spending. That’s about 5 percent of each group.

No new Republican opposes the war in Afghanistan outright. Including skeptics, 9 percent of freshmen and 11 percent of the rest are against the war.

Fewer new Republicans have defined positions on these issues. Veteran Republicans are more likely to be in the clearly “against cuts” and “for the war” categories; freshmen are more likely to be ambiguous or have no position. This ambiguity is a silver lining for advocates of military restraint: Many tea-party Republicans were elected without saying much about foreign policy and may yet emerge as non-interventionists. ~[Benjamin Friedman](#)

Via [Conor](#)

Instead of repeating earlier arguments that support Friedman’s findings, I will try to find something more encouraging in all of this than Friedman’s rather thin silver lining*. First of all, it could be that Friedman is looking at the wrong things. I agree that positions on military spending and Afghanistan are usually “a good proxy for general foreign-policy views,” but this is potentially misleading.

Measuring someone’s non-interventionist leanings based on support for or opposition to the war in Afghanistan is potentially quite confusing. Even among some of the reliable non-interventionists in the House, opposing the war in Afghanistan was not always an obvious or necessary position to take. During the Bush years, there was essentially no reliable Republican opposition to the war in Afghanistan, as opposed to a small core of Iraq war opponents in the House. Rep. Walter Jones is a good example of a House

Republican moving from a hawkish supporter of both Afghanistan and Iraq to an [opponent of both](#). Indeed, making opposition to the war in Afghanistan into a meaningful indicator of a conservative's overall foreign policy views is a fairly recent and somewhat arbitrary move. Assuming that support for the war in Afghanistan *is* inconsistent with generally non-interventionist views, it is still possible that statements of support for the war in Afghanistan do not tell us nearly as much about someone's foreign policy inclinations as one might initially think.

It is possible that some "skeptics" and opponents of the war in Afghanistan are not actually in favor of reduced military spending or a smaller warfare state, but have come to object to the war because it is useful to position themselves against a signature part of administration foreign policy, because they dislike "nation-building" but have no problem with starting wars, and because they believe that the rules of engagement are too restricting and "politically correct." It may be that generally more hawkish members have been quicker to join the small number of consistent non-interventionists in questioning the war in Afghanistan for entirely different reasons, and it is possible that potentially more dovish members nonetheless support the war in Afghanistan. It is also possible that members, especially new members who did not discuss these issues much during the campaign, have staked out positions in favor of high military spending to guard against the inevitable charge that they are "weak" on defense in the event that they are critical of U.S. policies and wars overseas.

According to Friedman, "[f]orty-one percent are against cutting defense spending; with those ambiguously against, it's 60 percent." Those numbers are lower than I would have expected. That still leaves a significant bloc of Republicans in Congress that might be willing to consider cutting military spending. If anything, these findings show that definite support for high levels of military spending is not overwhelming, which creates the possibility that a substantial number of Republicans will be willing to question the need for current spending levels and to oppose spending increases in the future. It may be that there is a significant room for improvement as fiscal hawks and non-interventionists combine at least to hold the line on military spending and possibly start questioning an expansive U.S. role in the world.

*I call it a thin silver lining because it is highly unlikely that freshmen without well-defined views on these subjects are going to opt for the position shared by 5-10% of their colleagues rather than the one held by 80-90%. Unless they represent districts where military spending is unimportant and antiwar sentiment is strong, or unless they are already convinced by non-interventionist and realist arguments, their lack of well-defined views will make them easily influenced by members who hold the prevailing view. In any case, this argument from members' silence is not much to go on.

Update: Friedman [follows up](#) on his op-ed at The National Interest's blog.