



Rand Paul Gives War a Chance

The libertarian senator is famously skeptical of foreign wars. So why are his advisers suddenly comparing him to the coldest of Cold Warriors?

By Olivia Nuzzi
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When it comes to international affairs, Rand Paul is the new Ronald Reagan.

At least, that's what the junior Kentucky senator's foreign policy advisers would have you believe.

Throughout Paul's short political career, he has tried to position himself as someone less inclined to wage war or intervene in other countries than the Obama or Bush White Houses. He claimed the U.S. created a "jihadist wonderland" by over-involving itself in the affairs of the Middle East, and opposed the idea of toppling the dictators in Syria and Libya. In the days after Russia's invasion of Crimea, Paul advised that America should resist those who want to "tweak Russia all the time." And for the crisis in Iraq, he has blamed the Bush administration—namely Dick Cheney, whose ties to Halliburton, Paul suggested in 2009, were driving U.S. foreign policy.

Those positions made it look, to many, like Paul's worldview mirrored most closely that of his father, the famously doctrinaire libertarian Ron Paul. And maybe that was true, once upon a time. But these days, Paul is publicly entertaining the idea of bombing Iraq, while his advisers have touted him as the second coming of Cold Warriors like Dwight Eisenhower (who authorized coups in Guatemala and in Iran), George H.W. Bush (the Gulf War's Commander-in-Chief), and Ronald Reagan (the president who presided over Iran-Contra, El Salvador, Lebanon, Grenada, and the Mujahideen insurgency in Afghanistan as part of his multi-pronged offensive against the Soviet "Evil Empire").

If these don't sound like the role models of an isolationist libertarian, you are paying attention. As the Republican convention nears, Paul is moving closer to a perceived conservative middle-ground on foreign policy. It is a recasting that is deeply at odds with how Paul is perceived by his enemies and by many of his supporters. But to hear his advisers tell it, he barely changed at all.

“To begin, I guess you could say what he’s not: he’s not a neoconservative, a unilateralist on the one hand; and he’s not what some people call a liberal interventionist on the other,” Richard Burt, a former ambassador to Germany and State Department adviser to Ronald Reagan, who acts as an unofficial foreign policy adviser to Paul, told me. “I would put him in the mold of a traditional, Republican internationalist—more along the lines of a kind of Dwight Eisenhower, to some extent, Ronald Reagan, and maybe George H.W. Bush, in the sense that he, I think, he certainly is not an isolationist.”

Burt is part of an informal, unpaid foreign policy team who regularly briefs Paul on international issues. In addition to Burt, the group includes Rob Givens, a retired U.S. Air Force brigadier general from Kentucky, and Elise Jordan, Condoleezza Rice’s one-time speechwriter, and Lorne Craner, a former John McCain staffer and the head of the International Republican Institute. Hardly a collection of pacifists.

“I would say that he is quite a realist, in that he does have a very high bar for military intervention as, I think, Reagan and Bush did. I would also cite Eisenhower,” Craner said.

But Paul has not always appeared confident as he followed in these presidents’ footsteps.

Take Iraq. When Paul arrived to his home state of Kentucky on Monday, four days had passed since Obama became the fourth consecutive U.S. president to initiate military action in Iraq. During that time, the senator, widely considered the early frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination, had remained confoundingly silent. When he finally spoke—first in Campbellsville, where he said he has “mixed feelings about” re-engagement but he is not “completely opposed to helping with arms or maybe even bombing,” and then in Louisville, where he informed he has an “open mind” about what course of action the U.S. should take—he fell victim to needling from the left wing, for what was interpreted as a flip on his supposed anti-interventionist ideals, and from the right wing, for what some saw as a misguided attempt at hawkishness from someone with an inherently isolationist worldview.

Those interpretations of Paul’s position have earned him staunch enemies in more mainstream Republican interventionists (and to an extent, it seems Paul’s enemies have exploited that interpretation for their own benefit). Texas Governor Rick Perry—widely considered a likely future primary challenger for Paul—has called Paul’s “isolationist” leanings “curiously blind”; former Vice President Dick Cheney publicly chided him by saying, “Rand Paul, with all due respect, is basically an isolationist. He doesn’t believe we ought to be involved in that part of the world.”

“With all due respect” because “isolationist,” Cheney knows, is a deeply politically damaging insult.

Paul’s camp, of course, rejects the term wholeheartedly. They’re even careful to tiptoe around the term “anti-interventionist”: “I think even that is going a little far,” Craner told me. “The term has connotations of a category that he does not fall into.”

Still, Paul's history and record have made his "isolationist" reputation hard to shake, and it threatens to toxify the air surrounding his all-but-certain presidential campaign.

As I outlined last month, Paul's political career was launched, in no small part, with the strength of his father's supporters who took him at his word that their views were "very, very similar." The elder Paul has also balked at the I-word, but nonetheless, was frequently branded with it throughout his decades-long political career in Congress and as a presidential candidate. He memorably called to end all foreign wars and shut down all foreign military bases. He has blamed U.S. foreign policy for a myriad of global issues—from the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 in Ukraine to the September 11 terror attacks. On the anniversary of the latter, in 2013, he wrote on Facebook: "We're supposed to believe that the perpetrators of 9/11 hated us for our freedom and goodness. In fact, the crime was blowback for decades of U.S. intervention in the Middle East."

Burt told me that the elder Paul contributes to the misconceptions about Rand: "It's the obvious point, It's the elephant in the room—that he's his father's son. I think there's a tendency to believe that his approach to foreign policy is similar to his father's—and, to a limited degree, I think it is."

Ben Friedman, a research fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, offered: "People are just kind of assuming that he starts off with the same views as his father, so every time he says something that's more in line with the conventional wisdom, he's betraying those views—and I think that's not really fair."

It was during one of his father's presidential campaigns, in 2007, that the younger Paul addressed supporters in Virginia, telling them, "Our national security is not threatened by Iran having one nuclear weapon."

Two years later, when he was a candidate for Senate, the comment was seized upon by his primary opponent, Trey Grayson, who (not that it helped much) secured the support of the establishment GOP—like Cheney. At the time, Grayson told the *Louisville Courier-Journal*: "He's much more of an isolationist on a whole host of issues...Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Patriot Act...I'm much more of a peace-through-strength kind of Republican." (It should be noted that libertarians think the notion that someone could be a degree of isolationist is like being half-pregnant.)

Asked about Paul's view of the previous administration, Craner explained: "I think the issue he has there is the Iraq War and how we got into it. He's never criticized Cheney to me, and I've spent quite a bit of time with him. I think he's spent some time with Bush 43 and is quite fond of him, but I think the big issue for him is 'How did we get into Iraq?' and we need to be a lot more careful in the future."

Since entering the Senate, Paul has staked out a number of positions that have emboldened critics who are eager to dismiss him as an isolationist.

Memorably, Paul conducted a 13-hour filibuster in 2013 on the nomination of Obama's CIA director, John Brennan, to protest drones strikes of Americans in the U.S. Paul's filibuster resulted in the administration clarifying that drones would not be used on American citizens on American soil. Paul angered some of his supporters when he came out to say something very different: "If someone comes out of a liquor store with a weapon and fifty dollars in cash, I don't care if a drone kills him or a policeman kills him." Paul has since clarified that he would not, in fact, support drone use in normal criminal situations.

In 2011, Paul proposed ending all foreign aid as a means of helping to close the budget deficit (foreign aid, by the way, accounts for less than 2 percent of the budget)—including foreign aid to Israel, which caused some trouble for him on the not-yet-campaign trail in Iowa last week, when he claimed he had "never" suggested such a thing. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine Reagan or Bush making a proposal like that.

When Paul suggested cutting aid to Pakistan last month, he used as reasoning the "persecution" of Christians—a theme that often arises when he talks foreign policy.

A senior aide of his explained that weighing what impact intervention would have on Christians would be a major factor in decision-making: "There's a lot you can point to [that suggests] we have made the situation remarkably worse for Christians over the last 10 years... Right after we went into Iraq, hundreds of thousands of Christians fled the country with fear of religious persecution." In part because of this, Paul is "not going to be looking to jump around the globe."

Paul fervently opposed involvement in Syria, and he was against intervening in Libya (which he referred to as "Hillary's war" while in Iowa last week)—even as dictators there slaughtered thousands. These are positions that, at least at first glance, don't seem to fall in line with the notion that the senator is anything like the internationalist commanders-in-chief his advisers like to cite.

But, "there are different forms of intervention," as Burt notes. "I was thinking today, for example, I remember during the Reagan administration, when in response to a Libyan terrorist attack in Berlin... Ronald Reagan launched an airstrike against Tripoli in Libya. That was one, discreet military action. [But] that's vastly different than the sustained bombing campaign that the Obama administration undertook with the European allies that led to Qaddafi's downfall a year ago."

Paul said he would have voted against using force in Syria, and claimed Obama was unconstitutionally waging attacks. He openly worried that by arming rebels, the U.S. was "funding the allies of Al Qaeda" who, he charged, were persecuting Christians. Speaking at the Values Voters Summit in 2013, Paul told the audience that in Syria, American tax dollars were being used to prop up the war on Christianity.

Paul also explicitly called for the preservation of the Assad regime, which has at times been an ally of the country's Christians. Paul warned that "if we were to get rid of Assad,

it would be a jihadist wonderland in Syria. It's not a jihadist wonderland in Iraq, precisely because we got over-involved, not because we had too little involvement, but too much involvement."

But when he spoke on Monday about the airstrikes in Iraq, Paul said, "ISIS is big and powerful because we protected them in Syria." If there is any evidence to support that claim, Paul's camp would not say. They did not respond to multiple requests for clarification.

Meanwhile, it is easy to argue that laying off of Assad—Paul's position as of last month—is, in effect, a form of protection for ISIS. Assad's forces have repeatedly declined to shell ISIS positions in Syria; and ISIS sells its captured oil to the regime in Damascus. Many American politicians—from Hillary Clinton to John McCain—have called for the arming of the so-called "moderate rebels" of the Free Syrian Army, who fight both Assad and ISIS simultaneously. Paul is in the other camp.

Again and again, Paul and his foreign policy advisers have been consistent in saying that he would support using military force when necessary—like in the case of the war in Afghanistan. They've tried to portray him as an old-school statesman, supportive of a muscular, if limited, American role in the world. But all too often, Paul's words seem to undo all the positioning work.

With a certain boastfulness, and as if to fill in the gaps of his publicly known worldview, his advisers all noted—separately—that Paul is a student of George Kennan's philosophy. Kennan was the legendary Cold War strategist who authored the doctrine of containment. That doctrine committed the United States to military alliances like NATO and aimed to stop the spread of communism. And perhaps a bit ironically, considering the attempt to cast Paul as a skeptical interventionist, at times the containment doctrine meant engaging in proxy wars with the Soviet Union and relied heavily on the intelligence agencies like the NSA that Paul has taken aim at as a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.

In a 2013 speech at the Heritage Foundation, Paul said: "No one believes that Kennan was an isolationist, but Kennan did advise that non-interference in the internal affairs of another country was, after all, a long-standing principle of American diplomacy." The bar for what warrants intervention set by Kennan, Paul suggested, was "a sufficiently powerful national interest," and possessing "the means to conduct such an intervention successfully and can afford the cost." (Craner noted that the senator has not only read Kennan's two-volume memoir, but also the scholarly biography of Kennan by John Lewis Gaddis.)

Because Paul has made clear that his bar for intervening is set very high, I was curious about what, specifically, that meant. Why be open to intervening in Iraq, but not in Syria? Asked about this, his advisers said American action had to depend the level of interest the U.S. has, and if there can be a clearly defined objective. As a senior aide put it, Paul "doesn't want to be everywhere all the time."

“American interests have to be directly threatened, and part of that is in the interest of an ally...all of our reactions should be defensive in nature,” Givens added. (Critics of Paul’s suggest that only intervening when America faces a direct threat would be ignoring the root of the issue, and the reality that international conflicts tend to impact one another.)

Specifically, Burt offered, “He clearly opposed the invasion of Iraq, and he, I think, questioned the military action in Libya, but, I think, in the case currently in Iraq, he sees this as limited, to some extent humanitarian, but also to the extent that it supports the Kurds who we have shared interest with, I think he sees this as a discreet, limited used of effective American power.”

Paul’s advisers paint the picture of a would-be candidate who understands he has a lot to learn, and that he needs to learn it quickly. About a month ago, Burt told me, the team brought in experts on Iran and nuclear issues, so that they could discuss prospects for reaching an agreement; more recently, a group collected to talk about China’s economy and its conflicts with Japan and other countries in Southeast Asia. “He’s getting up to speed on foreign policy,” Burt explained.

Givens, who told me he first met with Paul around February and discussed the situation in Iraq with him a few weeks ago, recalled: “When we first started talking [about] the airstrikes in Iraq, there were a lot of questions about, ‘OK, what can we do with airstrikes? How would they work? What’s a threat to our aircraft?’ You know, ‘What can we accomplish? What can the pilot see?’ Those types of very specific questions.”

Asked if the briefings seemed like practice, Givens said, laughing, “We’re never playing the game of ‘OK, you’re the president! What would you do?’ Or anything along those lines.”

But then, Givens gave a bit of a different answer. “Is part of this, perhaps, a preparation for a White House run? Clearly, it’s got to be,” he said. And maybe Givens isn’t the only one changing course.