

New Republicans, same old militarism

Tea partyers aren't looking tough on the Pentagon.

By Benjamin H. Friedman

As the 112th Congress gets under way, a key question remains about where tea-party influence will push the Republican caucus on foreign policy - toward a more restrained stance on overseas commitments and Pentagon spending, or in the familiar trajectory of fiscally calamitous military adventures.

Since the tea party took off last year, pundits have predicted that its anti-spending zealots would eventually target the Pentagon. Neoconservatives are clearly nervous about that prospect. Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham have lamented the rise of an "isolationist" wing of their party, and a slew of Wall Street Journal and National Review op-eds have warned tea partyers away from defense spending. Meanwhile, antiwar pundits have heralded every dovish murmur from the right.

But the evidence that the new Republicans will challenge defense spending is slight.

The Cato Institute has scored the positions of House and Senate Republicans on the war in Afghanistan and defense spending, which are a good proxy for general foreign-policy views. We examined members' statements, websites, and votes.

On defense spending, we graded them as for cuts, against cuts, ambiguously for, ambiguously against, or just ambiguous. On Afghanistan, they were categorized as being for continuing the war, against it, skeptical about it, or having no position. ("Against" includes those who favor substantial reductions in forces and ambition; "skeptical" includes those who express fainter doubts.)

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.

Since we began collecting this data in November, the minority of Republicans who are willing to cut defense spending has grown slightly. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor both said recently that defense spending should not be excluded from deficit-reduction efforts. Still, they seem willing only to trim "waste," not to substantially reduce military commitments and cut the force structure and cost. *Nation-building*, however, again seems to have become a dirty word among conservatives - both because the nation-building president is a Democrat, and because recent polling shows two-thirds of conservative voters think we should scale back or end the war in Afghanistan.

The new Republicans would be more ideologically coherent if they came to oppose defense spending and the war. True fiscal conservatives understand that trying to run the world with the U.S. military is neither conservative nor cheap.

Those angered by Wall Street bailouts should look askance at military subsidies for our rich European and Asian allies. And those skeptical about government's ability to reliably deliver mail in Pittsburgh cannot expect it to deliver democracy in Afghanistan.

Benjamin H. Friedman is a research fellow in defense and homeland security studies at the Cato Institute. He can be reached at bfriedman@cato.org.