



Why the Rand Paul-Rick Perry feud over Iraq is good for U.S. policy

By: Gene Healy
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“Thou shalt not speak ill of any fellow Republican--that's the “11th Commandment” coined by California's GOP chairman in 1965 and popularized by President Ronald Reagan.

It's been suspended for the duration, judging by Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul and Texas Gov. Rick Perry's ongoing dust-up over the future of the GOP's foreign policy--even while the two combined for an impressive 19 invocations of Saint Ronnie in three dueling op-eds.

In a recent Wall Street Journal oped, Paul argued that “America Shouldn't Choose Sides in Iraq's Civil War.” On Saturday, Perry entered the lists with a Washington Post piece titled “Why Rand Paul Is Wrong on Iraq” (print edition). In his Politico surrebuttal yesterday, Paul took a swipe at Perry's trendy new glasses, which apparently “haven't ... allowed him to see [the world] any more clearly.” Zing!

The 11th Commandment was a silly idea to begin with: A little Red-on-Red internecine strife can be good fun, and the issues here are important. In Perry's case, though, it's a shame he couldn't come up with better arguments.

Perry begins his broadside against Paul by allowing that “I can understand the emotions behind isolationism”—because God knows nobody has any rational objections to pouring more American blood and treasure down the Middle Eastern sandpit.

We can't afford to “ignore what's happening in Iraq,” Perry argues, because the Sunni radicals of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria now controlling parts of eastern Syria and western Iraq represent a “profound threat” to the United States. Airstrikes have to be on the table, he argues, charging that Paul's policy is to do “next to nothing.”

Actually, in his WSJ oped, Paul refused to “completely rule out airstrikes,” but argued, “there are many questions that need to be addressed first.” Perry's objection, it seems, is to asking questions before the letting the drones and Tomahawks fly. “He's a cowboy,” former McCain 2008 staffer Michael Goldfarb commented in 2011: “You have to assume he'd shoot first and ask questions later -- which would be nice after four years of a leading from behind, too-little-too-late foreign policy.”

But if you're sort of timid soul who likes to aim before pulling the trigger, it's probably worth asking, is ISIS a "profound threat" to U.S. national security? We need to remain alert to the possibility, but ISIS seems to have its hands full at the moment. "Creating and sustaining an Islamic state and fighting apostates are the priorities," writes Georgetown's Daniel Byman, not attacks on the West.

"This new conflict is essentially Muslim on Muslim" echoes Sir Richard Dearlove, former chief of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, and shouldn't be viewed through the lenses of 9/11.

In that light, contra Paul, we're not "choosing sides" in a regional civil war: We're choosing every side. Our current policy looks like a pincer movement against our own interests: Let's back the "moderates" fighting Syria's Bashar Assad, who's fighting ISIS. And let's fight ISIS by aiding the Nouri al-Maliki government in Iraq, which is also getting help from Iran. But don't let's empower Iran. Perry has no fundamental objection to this strategic muddle of a policy; he just thinks airstrikes might provide extra moral clarity.

We already know Perry can't remember which Cabinet departments he wants to eliminate; maybe he also forgets which countries we might need to bomb. In his 2010 book *Fed Up!*, the governor warned that Iran was "utterly unpredictable" and represents "an imminent threat." You'd think he'd want to pause for reflection when Paul asks, "Do we want to, in effect, become Iran's air force?"

But Perry's fed up with all these complications.

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