

THE HUFFINGTON POST

The GOP on Foreign Policy: Rhetoric v. Reality

By: Malou Innocent – March 14, 2013

As thousands of young true believers gather this weekend for the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the Republican Party and the broader conservative movement continue to operate on a fundamental contradiction. Despite their rhetoric, many supporters of limited-government still embrace unchecked government power in one respect: war. A movement that opposes the leviathan state at home but empowers the government to centrally plan the world muddles its message and compromises its principles.

For many compelling reasons, conservatives and Republicans distrust the "nanny state." They argue that government intrusions and wealth redistribution programs harm the free market, curtail individual freedoms, and concentrate power in the hands of incompetent bureaucrats. Government, they often claim, cannot do anything right. They often invoke President Ronald Reagan's aphorism: "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."

Conservatives and their major political party of choice, the GOP, recognize the limitations of the government's ability to manage health care or educate America's children. But that skepticism of centralized power and state-led social engineering apparently do not apply beyond America's borders.

It was telling when Tea Party champion and Florida Senator Marco Rubio said last April, "I always start by reminding people that what happens all over the world is our business." For years, President George W. Bush boasted of using U.S. taxpayer dollars to build schools, roads, and hospitals -- in Iraq.

Conservatives and Republicans generally argue that the federal government's primary constitutional function is national defense, and that America's security and prosperity is linked to stability abroad. Few see the contradiction between their grandiose global ambitions and their principled opposition to the welfare state. Nation-building in the name of the "war on terror," itself a counterproductive tool against terrorism, entails what conservatives deride: nationalist collectivism, curtailed due-process rights, and huge, open-ended fiscal commitments supported by government borrowing.

Economic historian Robert Higgs has long argued that the biggest increases in the scope of government power have historically been during times of war. Militarism has brought with it new federal bureaus, the nationalization of private industries, price and wage controls, and, most importantly for conservative proponents of limited constitutional government, the erosion of civil liberties and the suppression of dissent and free speech. As early 20th century progressive writer Randolph Bourne famously warned, "War is the health of the state."

In their support for expansive government power abroad, one wonders if many conservatives have become desensitized to the allure of government power at home. Republican congresses of the last decade have racked up an extensive record of anti-free market policies: protectionist tariffs, corporate subsidies, increased regulations, and entitlement expansions (most notably, Medicare Part D). They scream that America is speeding toward financial insolvency, but ignore their own reckless driving for much of the trip. Republicans decry the meddling under President Obama, but in the Bush years willingly surrendered to the executive branch on the most pressing matters shaping our government: issues of war and peace.

To its peril, the party of Lincoln has shunned America's Founding Fathers. In its global crusade against tyranny, it has ignored the early generation of American statesmen who warned of the corrupting influence of standing armies and war. Far from being peaceniks or isolationists, they understood that trying to manage the world would entangle America in its rivalries; in due course, the unfettered authority that government claims in times of war would corrode our limited constitutional government and concentrate power in the executive.

Since the atrocities of 9/11 -- and following more than a decade of intractable foreign entanglements -- many Americans wish to reduce military spending and troop commitments abroad. Instead, the most prominent voices of the Republican-conservative nexus have called for increasing military spending, intervening in Libya, arming rebels in Syria, nation-building in Afghanistan, and undermining Iran in Iraq. For a political party already wildly out of step with many Americans -- especially young people -- on the economy and social issues, its unceasing militarism will continue to put it at odds with a growing portion of the electorate.

For a coherent and winning formula, the broader conservative movement must understand that its inclination for war is an inclination for more government. Worse, the establishment Republican pro-war stance reads as a tacit endorsement of statism and the federal government's competence. Until limited government proponents rectify the incompatibilities at the heart of their ideology, the drums of war will march them into obscurity.