



Common Sense Society Elevates Debate on Capitol Hill

by **Jarrett Stepman** ([more by this author](#))

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The [Common Sense Society](#) (CSS) is bringing intelligent and respectful debate about United States values in foreign policy back to the forefront in Washington D.C., and the conservative movement. In the CSS's first stand-alone event, non-interventionism in U.S. foreign policy was discussed at length and in-depth.

The CSS brought in a panel of highly respected thinkers and leaders, running the full length of the political spectrum on the right, from traditional conservatives, to neoconservatives, to libertarians. It included Sen. Lindsey Graham (R.-S.C.), who was unable to stay for the question and answer session but defended his ideas and policies beforehand.

“This is really the country at its best when you are talking to them in this manner,” said Graham.

What differentiates CSS events from the standard events, debates and Q&A sessions typically seen on cable news shows or other panels, is that it allows audience members to do more than ask questions, it encourages them to discuss their views at length. It also delves deep into not only the critical issues of the day, but the entire history of U.S. foreign policy.

By going more in depth and bringing in historical evidence and beliefs, the debate itself is elevated. For conservatives and Americans on the Right, it must always be asked, “What are we conserving?”

This is not a forum for 30 second sound bites, a common criticism of the Republican presidential primary debates, which often devolve into a series of gotcha questions, elbow throwing and one-upmanship. The CSS operates more in the style that former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich has advocated on the presidential campaign trail, more like a Lincoln-Douglas style debate.

Marion Smith, a senior fellow at The Heritage Foundation, founder of the CSS and moderator of the event, said in his opening remarks that he wanted the audience to “turn questions into speeches.”

The crux of the arguments made at the debate were exactly how much America has historically used intervention in the past, how effective it has been and to what extent the U.S. can currently afford it.

Sen. Graham, who mentioned that his home state of South Carolina has perhaps the greatest connection to the military, clearly advocated that intervention is not only practical, but essential. He said of U.S. foreign policy, “Killing terrorists is part of the mosaic.”

“Our enemy is an idea. We are fighting an idea, not a place,” said Graham.

The libertarian voice on the panel clearly disagreed with Graham’s belief that Americans need to be involved in multiple ground wars. Ben Friedman of the Cato Institute said that the problems facing U.S. foreign policy are “bi-partisan” and that more “military restraint” needs to be the ethos of policy makers.

When the debate moved to the audience a diverse set of opinions were expounded upon by members of the military and conservatives from a deeply diverse set of positions, from interventionist nation-building to near complete isolationism. However, the debate and obvious friction between the groups never got out of hand.

The arguments covered U.S. foreign policy in the early days of the republic to twentieth century confrontations in World War I, World War II and the Cold War. The statements by conservative writers and thinkers of the past, like William F. Buckley and Russell Kirk, were frequently expressed and used against ideological opponents.

The Common Sense Society plans to continue the debates, which raise the bar for debates on the right and is devoted to bringing in high-level speakers.

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