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## Syria's odd political bedfellows

By Michael Taube

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Liberals and libertarians link in opposition to air strikes

The American people are waiting to see whether Russia's plan to make Syria relinquish its chemical weapons stockpile prevents President Obama from launching an air strike. Alas, the ramifications of this military skirmish-to-be (or not-to-be) may have caused the first steps toward a political realignment that could hurt the Republican Party.

In a Sept. 4 Politico article, Anna Palmer described how "libertarian conservatives, who are redefining the Republican Party's vision of foreign policy" were "joined by liberal doves" in opposing the Syrian air strike. While this is an "informal alliance," Ms. Palmer pointed out that "conservatives and liberals in the House joined forces on a bill to curb the National Security Agency's sweeping surveillance programs."

On the surface, this may sound like a manufactured news story by the left-wing media. I'm afraid it isn't.

Conservatives and libertarians used to see eye-to-eye on most political and economic issues. Since the 2003 Iraq War, there has been a growing divide between these two groups over fiscal conservatism as well as war and terrorism — so much so that some libertarians even began to explore the possibility of establishing links to the political left.

The Cato Institute's Brink Lindsey wrote a controversial piece for the December 2006 issue of The New Republic titled "Liberalartarians." He thought the "conservative movement — and, with it, the GOP" was "in disarray" because the "'fusionist alliance' between traditionalists and libertarians appears, at long last, to be falling apart."

Conservatives had shifted from defending "traditional values from the intrusion of big government" to promoting "traditional values through the intrusion of big government." Some of the areas he identified included "runaway federal spending at a clip unmatched since Lyndon

Johnson; the creation of a massive new prescription-drug entitlement with hardly any thought as to how to pay for it ... extremist assertions of executive power under cover of fighting terrorism; and, to top it all off, an atrociously bungled war in Iraq."

Hence, Mr. Lindsey felt a "refashioned liberalism that incorporated key libertarian concerns and insights could make possible a truly progressive politics once again." This coalition wouldn't be progressive "in the sense of hewing to a particular set of pre-existing left-wing commitments, but rather in the sense of attuning itself to the objective dynamics of U.S. social development."

Hold on. If libertarians are on the right of the political spectrum, why would they want to work with liberals and aid in the growth of progressive politics?

Well, it's not quite that simple.

Similar to other political philosophies, there is a right-left split in libertarianism. They tend to side more with conservatives on politics and economics, and with liberals on social issues. These positions work hand-in-hand with many of their core ideological beliefs, including minimal government intervention, economic liberty, and individual rights and freedoms.

That's why I've always disagreed with the claim of some political observers such as Mr. Lindsey that Republicans are a product of "conservative fusionism." I happen to be a fusionist, or a devoted follower of National Review senior editor Frank S. Meyer's unsuccessful attempt to find common ground between conservatism and libertarianism. (I lean more on the conservative side.) Fusionism played a significant role in Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign and Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential victory. Unfortunately, it failed because these two ideological groups weren't able to form a cohesive working relationship.

Here's where the problem starts to occur.

The Republicans are a conservative political party with libertarian leanings. While conservatives and libertarians are closer in philosophy, liberals and libertarians could potentially work together. Hence, a liberal-libertarian effort on volatile issues such as the Syrian air strike could potentially create a stronger and more permanent political alliance.

It's therefore incumbent on GOP conservatives to ensure this political realignment never occurs. They must continue to emphasize fiscal-conservative principles (lower taxes, smaller government, economic freedom, financial prudence) and workable social-conservative values (upholding religious freedom, opposing judicial activism, backing states' rights on homosexual marriage and abortion). When it comes to hot-button issues such as Syria, they must sit down with libertarians and find a compromise position. They also need to keep a check on fiery political rhetoric that could further split the two groups.

Certainly, many right-libertarians will remain with the GOP. Losing a significant portion of them, since they're much larger in number and more influential than left-libertarians, would be a huge disaster. It would surely take the Republicans generations to repair the political damage. That's a luxury they simply don't have.

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