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Here Are 5 Ways to Fix Republican Foreign Policy

From involving economic conservatives to introducing evangelicals to just war theory, this is how it starts.

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Imagine for a moment that Rand Paul was elected president of the United States in two years. Let's further stipulate that he wanted to pursue a cautious, less interventionist, and more peaceful foreign policy.

Who would be his secretary of state? Who would be Paul's secretary of defense, for that matter? Who would staff his national security team?

It's a salient question even if Paul never gets to the White House. It's easy to see who his foreign-policy allies might be within the Republican Party if a Democrat like Hillary Clinton is elected and then governs as Hillary the hawk.

But who might side with Paul or other more restrained Republicans if the country is governed by a President Christie, Rubio, Ryan or even another Bush? If a GOP commander-in-chief wants to wage another Iraq-like war, how many Republicans would try to stop him? Probably more than the seven who voted against George W. Bush on the Iraq authorization of force, depending on the circumstances, but perhaps not many more.

The Republicans with the experience to advise the next GOP president on foreign affairs largely hold the same views as the people who advised Bush and would have been comfortable serving John McCain. The conservative think tanks, with few exceptions, from which further talent could be drawn, remain dominated by national-security thinkers who are neoconservatives and other hawks.

When the first George Bush was president, there were heated debates between neoconservatives and realists. By the time his son took office, people like Condoleezza Rice were considered the realists. Even then, there were a few voices for restraint. The most influential belonged to Colin

Powell, whose ill-fated presentation on weapons of mass destruction wound up doing more to sell the Iraq War than many of the hawks' arguments.

Personnel is policy, according to the Washington lingo. So are political coalitions. There things look a little bit better. The liberty movement is filled with grassroots conservatives and libertarians, mostly Republicans, who view Iraq as a colossal blunder. They have elected a few Republicans besides Paul and have influence on more than a few more.

But they would still be a rump within today's Republican Party and it's unclear how many of them are prepared for the task of actually governing, as opposed to campaigning. Groups like Campaign for Liberty and Young Americans for Liberty, which sprung out of Ron Paul's presidential campaigns, are nevertheless a start.

The point of these questions and observations isn't to suggest that reforming Republican foreign policy is hopeless. It is merely to note that these are the realities conservatives who want such reform need to consider.

A few suggestions, though the list is far from exhaustive.

1. Enlist fiscal and economic conservatives who work on domestic policy. *Wall Street Journal* editorial page editor Paul Gigot once referred to the libertarian Cato Institute's defense and foreign policy staff—"derisively but not entirely inaccurately," Cato's Justin Logan admitted—as "four of five people in a phone booth."

But the number of conservatives and right-leaning libertarians who toil on issues like the federal budget or regulation are quite a bit larger. Many wonks were already quietly skeptical of neoconservative foreign policy before Dubya's administration was over, but deferred to them nonetheless. Perhaps they are not the best candidates for jobs with the National Security Council, but their voices need to be heard in the intraconservative foreign policy debate.

National security is too important to leave to the national security conservatives.

Grassroots economic conservative groups have already found themselves on the opposite side of hawks in competitive Republican primaries like Justin Amash's this year and Rand Paul's in 2010. FreedomWorks opposed a proposed war in Syria and employs a number of activists who favor a less interventionist foreign policy.

Grover Norquist is one big name who has recently become more vocal in these fights, like Paul Weyrich did late in life, even criticizing the Romney-Ryan ticket on foreign policy and defense spending. The small-government right also has ties to benefactors ranging from the Koch brothers to Peter Thiel who could compete with hawkish megadonors like Sheldon Adelson.

2. Reach out to what's left of the centrist Republican national security establishment. There is a reason the campaign against Chuck Hagel was so fierce and Jon Huntsman's inability or unwillingness to appeal to conservatives was so disappointing. With Republicans like James

Baker and Brent Scowcroft aging out of government service, it's possible that the conservative foreign-policy establishment could become a realist-free zone.

These Republicans aren't perfect. We've already discussed Powell's pivotal wobbliness on the Iraq War. He also has a track record of being more willing to work with the likes of McCain than Republicans as fiscally and socially conservative as Rand Paul. Huntsman, in addition to campaigning like a parody of a liberal Republican in 2012, seems hawkish on Iran. Robert Gates isn't Robert Taft.

But this is a reputable group of Republicans who are crucial to any political coalition for foreign-policy reform who have the added advantage of being qualified for major national-security jobs. Moreover, it is important to keep this from being exclusively a debate between neoconservatives and hardcore noninterventionists, but rather neoconservatives versus everyone else.

3. Identify and cultivate rising foreign policy scholars with a different perspective on our recent wars. Many conservatives who came of age after the Iraq invasion rather than during the Cold War are more open to retrenchment and restraint than their predecessors. At least some of them have engaged in serious academic study of the Middle East and other global hot spots. Conservative politicians who want to change the GOP's foreign policy should add finding and hiring these people to a list of priorities that already includes writing op-eds and otherwise engaging in debates about foreign policy. Diversifying the set of people who give Republicans foreign-policy advice is a prerequisite for lasting shifts in conservative thinking.

This is also an important reason to elect more Republicans who want to have these debates. Many conservatives who are interested in international affairs will avoid foreign-policy work altogether if they think their choices are limited to serving Democrats or neoconservatives. The existence of Republican politicians who are less hawkish gives these young people reasons to continue their academic and professional pursuits.

4. Identify contradictions in conservative foreign policy thinking. Many conservatives, from the grassroots to national security experts, oppose nation-building. They are fine with military action to prevent foreigners from attacking or killing Americans, but less enthusiastic about interventions aimed at keeping foreigners from killing each other.

It should by now be obvious that both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars eventually became the kinds of conflicts most conservatives say they don't support. So inevitably would future wars being advocated by the same people. That is a good reason for conservatives to oppose Wilsonian wars mislabeled as Jacksonian self-defense. This should especially be easy in conflicts where there are factions hostile to American interests on all sides, such as Syria and the current conditions in Iraq.

5. Make the case for a different foreign policy to large Republican voting blocs. The most obvious, if difficult, of these groups would be the Christian right. But just war theory is an approach to moralizing foreign policy with a long Christian pedigree that is compatible with a strong national defense but actually limits the resort to arms. Evangelicals should be introduced and conservative Catholics reacquainted with its teachings.

Conservative Christians are already becoming educated about the extent to which recent military interventions have made refugees or worse of Christian communities in the Middle East. Would conservative Christians have been as likely to support the Iraq War if they knew that it would leave many Iraqi Christians worse off?

Conservatives who dissent from the reflexively hawkish status quo are presently at a disadvantage. The time to start thinking of ways to turn things to our advantage is now.