



Reform Conservatism's Blind Spot: Foreign Policy

The arguments for reforming conservative foreign policy are strong. So why aren't they being made?

By Justin Logan

July 17, 2014

Should conservative foreign policy be reformed? If so, you wouldn't know it by reading Reform Conservatives.

For those poor souls outside the conservative wonkosphere, a brief explanation may be in order. Reform Conservatives, or "reformocons," have been designated a conservative genus by the *New York Times*' chronicler of conservatism, Sam Tanenhaus. (One might quibble with Tanenhaus' credential as a conservative taxonomist, considering he labeled Bill Clinton, David Souter, and Barack Obama "Burkean conservatives," but never mind that.)

Reformocons' founding document arguably was Ross Douthat's and Reihan Salam's *Grand New Party*, a tome that was as much political wake-up call as it was policy manifesto. The book's first page declared that "a bollixed war and a record of domestic mismanagement [had] cost [Republicans] both houses" of Congress, and that as a result, the GOP needed to regroup intellectually and politically.

The book, like the reformocon writing that followed, said nothing about how to reform conservative foreign policy. But any Reform Conservatism worthy of the name ought to have something to say about the matter. The reasons are both political and substantive.

First, the political: the public loathes neoconservative foreign policy and has learned more from its follies than have elites. While many Republicans have a special place in their hearts for Dick Cheney, due in part to his virtuoso ability to aggravate liberals, the substance of Cheney's foreign policy views are deeply unpopular, among Republicans, Democrats, and independents, especially.

The political terrain for neocons is perhaps most favorable on Iran, but even there it isn't very favorable. The most recent poll indicated 61 percent of Americans support a diplomatic resolution of the Iranian nuclear program that would leave it with enrichment capability, compared to 35 percent who support the hawkish alternative of zero enrichment and

sanctioning third-party nations who do business with Tehran. More generally, Americans tend to ask impertinent questions of the foreign policy elite, like why they should pay for the defense of wealthy clients and allies who can defend themselves. On Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, the armed Wilsonianism favored by the entire GOP foreign policy elite is unpopular.

It's true that foreign policy is rarely electorally decisive, but giving neocons control over it is a good way to increase its salience to the public. In the 2006 and 2008 elections, the GOP crippled itself by wallowing in the crater of its foreign policy, as Douthat and Salam noted. So as a political matter, why would a movement that grew out of an electoral car crash turn the keys back over to the driver who steered into the ditch in the first place?

Beyond politics, though, the more important question is that of the national interest. The men and women of the bipartisan foreign policy establishment, of which hawkish conservatives and neocons make up the right half, have shown themselves to be careless stewards of precious American blood and treasure. Ideologically, Robert Kagan has more in common with Anne-Marie Slaughter than he does with the median Republican voter.

Like the GOP writ large, the loudest reformocon voices on foreign policy are the most hawkish. Peter Wehner, hype man for the Iraq War in the White House of Bush the Younger, wanted to bomb Syria but urged a no vote in Congress out of fear that the ensuing war would "help the quasi-isolationist movement in the GOP than anything else."

For his part, Salam made clear that despite the disastrous failure of the neoconservative experiment in Iraq, he was still a neocon and would continue to "insist on moralistic crusades" in part because Henry Kissinger supported the Pakistani state's slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent people in Bangladesh in 1971.

While one can appreciate Wehner's cynicism and Salam's candor, a "Reform Conservative" movement worthy of the name ought to have something to say—some broad consensus—about what's gone wrong with conservative foreign policy. "Nothing" shouldn't be an acceptable answer.

This shortcoming is all the more jarring given that the marketing for Reform Conservatism has focused heavily on the idea that the movement grounds its policy prescriptions in social science, but this is not apparent on foreign policy. Salam mentions a recent article by three international relations scholars that made an intelligent case for existing U.S. grand strategy. (Two colleagues and I replied to that article here.) What he fails to mention is what the authors mention on the first page of their own article: that "most scholars who write on the future of U.S. grand strategy" think that Washington should retrench.

Ross Douthat shrugs that he's not a foreign policy expert, instead pointing hopefully to Elbridge Colby as an example of a non-neocon who may hold promise of crafting a reformocon foreign policy. I like Bridge Colby a lot, and I hope Douthat is right that the GOP will move closer to Colby. But there's reason to think that big chunks of the conservative establishment would like to write him out of polite company. Colby's most prominent work has been on nuclear weapons and Asia, both subjects where Colby has a fairly hawkish bent. But here he is, for example, making the case for containing and deterring a nuclear Iran rather than bombing it. Can Douthat envision an unreformed conservative establishment making room in its tent for those views? Should it?

A big part of the problem here is the conservative donor class. To put it bluntly, the portion of the GOP donor class that cares about foreign policy is wedded to a militaristic foreign policy, particularly in but not limited to the Middle East. Tens of millions of dollars every year are pumped into an alphabet soup of magazines, think tanks, fellowships, lobby groups and other outfits in Washington to ensure that conservative foreign policy stays unreformed. If we conceive of the Right broadly, comparatively dovish voices on the Right consist of Rand Paul, those writing at the *American Conservative*, and the foreign and defense policy staff at the Cato Institute, the latter of which *Wall Street Journal* editorial page editor Paul Gigot once derisively but not entirely inaccurately referred to as “four or five people in a phone booth.” (We have actual offices, for the record.) But until there is some larger countervailing force in the conservative movement, the well-financed and well-entrenched status quo will persist.

The arguments for reforming conservative foreign policy are strong. Voters dislike it, and when they were allowed to test their theories in Iraq, the neocons produced a catastrophe. I’m enough of a realist to see that it’s unrealistic to ask conservatism or the GOP to adopt wholesale the foreign policy views of my colleagues at Cato. But a step in the right direction would be to create some room for moderate voices whose views are grounded in at least a passing familiarity with social science on the subject, and to push away the Liz Cheneys of the world, who have done so much harm to the causes of conservatism and peace without apology or even self-awareness. A movement calling itself Reform Conservatism should see this, quite clearly, as a calling.

Justin Logan (@justintlogan) is director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.