



Rand Paul To Neocons: ‘Sharpen Your Knives’ For The GOP Foreign Policy Fight

By Ben Armbruster

April 23, 2014

Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY) lashed out at neoconservatives on Tuesday for criticizing his efforts to inject a brand of libertarianism into Republican Party foreign policy dogma, telling them that he won’t back down from the internal opposition.

“The knives are out for conservatives who dare question unlimited involvement in foreign wars,” Paul wrote in [a National Review piece](#):

Foreign policy, the interventionist critics claim, has no place for nuance or realism. You are either for us or against us. No middle ground is acceptable. The Wilsonian ideologues must have democracy worldwide now and damn all obstacles to that utopia. I say sharpen your knives, because the battle once begun will not end easily.

The remainder of Paul’s column provided numerous examples of how famous conservatives from William F. Buckley Jr. — founder of the National Review — to Ronald Reagan either espoused some virtues of libertarianism in their foreign policy or denounced neoconservatism.

But the Kentucky Republican’s diatribe against the GOP’s neocon wing is the latest in an [ongoing internal battle](#) that has many Republicans and conservatives digging in, on both sides.

The fight was rekindled earlier this month when Mother Jones [reported](#) that back in 2009, when he was running for the U.S. Senate, Paul didn’t have kind words for neocon icon Dick Cheney, suggesting he may have wanted to invade Iraq for Halliburton’s financial benefit.

The neocons [didn’t like that](#). The Wall Street Journal’s Bret Stephens — last seen [throwing around](#) the “anti-Semite” card at Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel — lashed out, calling Paul’s suggestion “bark-at-the-moon lunacy.” Stephens charged that the GOP would essentially deserve “another humbling landslide defeat” should Paul be the Republican nominee for president in 2016.

Days later — after a reporter [asked him](#) about a resolution he voted against in 2012 that ruled out any containment policy should Iran acquire nukes — Paul was forced to explain his position and went on the defensive in a [Washington Post op-ed](#).

“I am unequivocally not for containing Iran,” he wrote. “I am also not for announcing that the United States should never contain Iran. That was the choice I was given a few months ago and is the scenario being misunderstood by some in the news.”

In a backhanded come-back at his neocon critics, Paul said that while it’s “dumb” to say you would accept and therefore contain a potential nuclear armed Iran, it’s also “equally dumb, dangerous and foolhardy to announce in advance how we would react to any nation that obtains nuclear weapons.”

The op-ed sent some neocon [news outlets](#) into [oppo-research overdrive](#), finding an incriminating statement from Paul in 2007 in which he said that Iran isn’t the threat that some make it out to be (a point that President Obama [touched on](#) when he was running for president around the same time).

So now Rand Paul is fighting back with his National Review piece, using comments from some of America’s most prominent and well-respected conservatives to back him up. Even Buckley believed, Paul wrote, that the Iraq War was a mistake and “was not a ‘conservative’ approach to foreign policy.”

[Justin Logan](#), the Cato Institute’s director of foreign policy studies, told ThinkProgress in an email that Senator Paul is taking a strategic approach. “If you take partisanship out of the equation, which it mostly is now that Bush is out of office, it’s easier to see that the Iraq War was about as conservative as the Tennessee Valley Authority,” he said. “Lots of conservatives [know this deep down](#), but haven’t fully squared up to it.”

Logan added that it’s sensible for Paul to note that popular conservatives like Reagan and Buckley shared his views. But as far as the Republican foreign policy civil war goes, the fact that those with the neocon worldview have spent more time and money developing a “deep bench” of analysts and potential staffers means that it doesn’t appear much will change.

“The problem is governing. Senator Paul has, to my knowledge, no dedicated professional foreign policy staff, to say nothing of a bench that could staff a prospective Paul administration,” Logan said. “Personnel are policy, and until there is a deep bench of people to staff out the foreign policy arm of such an administration, I don’t think there can be much change in GOP foreign policy.”

But in the meantime, the GOP foreign policy civil war will carry on. Paul [criticized](#) his fellow Republicans for their bellicose rhetoric during the Russia-Ukraine crisis and it looks like he’ll continue to be a [thorn in the party’s side](#) on the issue of Iran’s nuclear program.