

POLITICO

How Biden's Afghanistan Withdrawal Blew Open the GOP's Foreign Policy Rift

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September 8, 2021

In the days following the fall of Kabul and the collapse of the Afghan government, the Biden administration found itself locking arms with a group that's long been radioactive in the Democratic Party: the Kochs.

Rewind a decade, and the billionaire Koch brothers were the *bête noire* of the Obama administration, singled out by the president and his allies — including then-Vice President Joe Biden — as a singularly destructive force in American politics. “What we're worried about is the Koch brothers and their friends bringing in millions and millions of dollars,” Biden said during the 2014 midterms, later declaring that dirty Koch money was chasing “reasonable” Republicans out of politics.

But as chaos enveloped Afghanistan over the past few weeks, foreign policy experts housed at think tanks and organizations funded by the isolationist-leaning Koch network were among the loudest — and loneliest — voices in Washington who applauded the president's withdrawal from the country.

White House chief of staff Ron Klain has liked or retweeted praise from several scholars and activist groups whose organizations receive Koch funding, including an August 16 tweet from Koch Foundation vice president Will Ruger declaring that Biden “is displaying real courage by sticking with a decision that remains prudential given the realities about Afghanistan and the United States.” The president, Ruger added, “is showing the requisite realist spine that America needs at this moment.”

The durability of this strange alliance is unclear. But it has implications for the future of American foreign policy, adding a surprising twist to an internal debate that has consumed the Republican Party since the Bush administration's bungled forays into Iraq and Afghanistan: Now, the credibility of the small but growing isolationist wing of the GOP, which gained ground when former president Donald Trump championed some of its views, is inextricably tied to Biden's ability to manage the fallout in Afghanistan.

At the same time, the Biden administration's obvious blunders have given the GOP as a whole a ripe target, and the party's focus on those mistakes could easily forestall much-needed deep

thinking among Republicans about where the party should stand on foreign policy. Republicans will “try to avoid those tough questions and tell themselves a story that Trump would’ve done it differently, it just would’ve been done better,” says Thomas Wright, a senior fellow in foreign policy at the Brookings Institution, referring to the Afghanistan withdrawal and its aftermath. “The reality is that’s pretty unlikely.”

Speaking on behalf of the Koch Foundation, Ruger told POLITICO Magazine that the Koch network “partners with a diverse set of groups and policymakers from across the political spectrum to advance a better, more prudential American foreign policy. We did this under the past administration and are continuing to do so during the current administration.”

Justin Logan, a scholar at the Koch-founded CATO Institute, says he doesn’t expect a broader alliance to form between the White House and the Koch network, but that he will “applaud [Biden] when he does smart things, like following through on ending America’s longest war in Afghanistan, and oppose him when he does foolish things, like refusing to return to the [Iran nuclear deal] or keeping troops in Syria.” Logan also told the *Washington Examiner* that the Biden White House should consider seeking advice from Republicans who share his views: “My hope is that somebody in the White House is keeping track of who supported the decision and that they use that information to determine who they should talk to on foreign policy in the future.”

Asked about the Koch-Biden alignment on Afghanistan, a White House spokesperson said that “a broad coalition” of Americans support the president’s decision to bring American troops home and “refocus our efforts and resources on emerging terror threats and competitors like China and Russia.”

Statements like Ruger’s or Logan’s represent a success, of sorts, for Democrats, whose demonization of the Koch brothers nearly chased them out of politics. The Kochs’ decision to sit on the sidelines of the 2016 election, my colleague Tim Alberta and I reported at the time, was motivated in part by a desire to burnish their legacy after years of bad press. Although Koch allies vigorously disputed our report, there’s no question the past five years — which included the death of David Koch, the more partisan of the brothers, in 2019 — have seen the Koch network pare down a secretive, right-wing juggernaut focused on national politics and instead shift focus to a softer, more public-facing operation that champions bipartisan causes like criminal justice reform, as well as foreign policy “restraint.”

The Koch empire’s opposition to the war in Afghanistan predates the Biden administration, and it fits with the Koch brothers’ longtime isolationist leanings. Koch Industries CEO Charles Koch has for decades funded libertarian intellectual projects on the right. Although he supported his brother David’s vice-presidential candidacy in 1980, Charles has always been more interested in political philosophy than in politics, and he has spent years doling out financial support to a set of foreign policy experts who call themselves “restrainers.”

The effort began at universities, including Harvard, MIT and Notre Dame, where the Charles Koch Foundation funded programs — like the Notre Dame International Security Center — that play home to advocates for restraint. Over the past decade, the Koch Foundation has turned its

focus to Washington, seeding scholars and programs at think tanks including the Atlantic Council and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Since its founding in 2019, the Quincy Institute, funded by twin grants from Koch and the liberal billionaire George Soros, has become an institutional beachhead for those advocating for winding down American military commitments across the globe. Meanwhile, the Koch-funded group Americans For Prosperity ran an ad campaign in 2019 calling for an end to the war in Afghanistan.

All these initiatives helped to lay the intellectual groundwork for a slate of Republican politicians who have embraced the idea of a smaller American footprint abroad. First came Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.), whose support for slashing foreign aid and opposition to American military commitments enjoyed a brief period of popularity on the right until videos of ISIS militants beheading civilians reached American shores. Then came Trump's muddled foreign policy, characterized at one turn by aggressive rhetoric and policies toward adversaries like Iran and China and at others by dovishness toward the likes of Russia and North Korea. Recall that Trump found political success on the right in declaring that George W. Bush had lied America into an Iraq war that never should have been fought and that it was time to focus on nation-building at home. (Trump nominated Ruge, the Koch deputy, to be ambassador to Afghanistan, though the nomination never got a vote in the Senate.)

There's no question that the restrainers have made inroads on the right with Trump's help. But as a result, the Republican Party at large has become both more confused and more divided on foreign policy. House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy reflected that strategic muddle when he told reporters in late August that there should be no U.S. troops in Afghanistan and then, a moment later, argued that American troops should have held onto the Bagram air force base indefinitely.

It's not clear whether the restrainers' embrace of Biden's Afghanistan policy will help their case in the long term. While the restrainers might be celebrating the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, after 20 years of war, the bungled withdrawal, accompanying American casualties and the return of the Taliban, might ultimately prove to be what the Iraq war was for neoconservatives: an easy cudgel that their ideological adversaries can use in an attempt to discredit. While the majority of Americans supported the U.S. withdrawal, most also rate Biden's handling of the situation critically.

Notably, the Kochs initially found success in part because they focused on issues that once united conservatives, such as economic policy, and avoided the social issues and foreign policy matters on which the donor class is divided. "The Kochs built a juggernaut because much of the donor focus was on economic and limited government issues," says Marc Short, the former chief of staff to Vice President Mike Pence and a onetime Koch official.

The weeks and months ahead, as the Taliban consolidates control in Afghanistan and the United States juggles the fallout from the war, could prove critical for the future direction of Republican foreign policy. For his part, Wright, an internationalist, thinks it will be difficult to maintain much momentum from the restrainers' short-term victory in Afghanistan.

“They got what they wanted on this occasion, but the costs of the strategy are undeniable — it was extremely difficult and came at a very high price,” he says. “The restrainers have been saying for a while that if you pull back, the sky won’t fall in. Now I think there’s a greater awareness that it’s a very difficult strategy to pursue.”