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Choices or Echoes?

by Doug Bandow

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After spending eight years implementing spendthrift domestic policies and destabilizing foreign policies, the Republican Party finds itself on the outside looking in. GOP leaders are seeking to refashion their domestic agenda. But they have yet to acknowledge the need for an international overhaul as well.

Defeat is hard. In the last two elections Republicans have lost the presidency, control of the House and even a filibuster-capable minority in the Senate. It is an electoral catastrophe greater than the 1994 Democratic congressional defeat. One has to go back before Ronald Reagan's election to find the GOP in such dire shape.

A number of Republican notables recently began a "listening tour." At least they seem to recognize the need to transform their fiscal and domestic policies. On foreign policy Republicans appear to be stuck on stupid, as the saying goes.

Instead of recognizing that the Bush years resulted in a catastrophic reduction in American security and influence, the GOP appears to have convinced itself that the way back to power is to be the party of war and torture. The Republicans' plight is reflected by the emergence of former-Vice President Dick Cheney, one of the chief architects of the Iraq debacle, as a party spokesman.

It is not only Cheney—wrong about every aspect of the Iraq conflict—who appeals to a fantasy world recognizable by none other than a Bush partisan. There is former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a self-styled Churchill hoping to be recalled from political exile.

Gingrich has been promoting the politics of fear. Because of administration actions, he claimed, "the United States is running greater risks of getting attacked than we were under President Bush." The administration's policies reflect "a dangerous fantasy that runs an enormous risk," he continued.

Indeed, Gingrich declared at the AIPAC conference in May: "The threats we are faced with are far more catastrophic than any of our leaders are willing to talk about, and the challenges of unlocking those catastrophes are much harder than any of our leaders have been prepared to talk about." Washington needs to "fix" Pakistan. Iran must not only be denied nuclear weapons, but prevented from funding Hamas and Hezbollah. We must be liberated from the use of Saudi oil. Preventive war is necessary against Iran and North Korea.

"We are on the edge of catastrophic problems," he said, citing two novels about nuclear terrorism he had read. Thus, opined Gingrich: "we need to draw a sharp line that says if you have an evil regime, and you engage in evil things, we are not going to let you fire off weapons which could have catastrophic results—period."

On a recent episode of *Meet the Press*, Gingrich was equally apocalyptic:

Let me just say, I think people should be afraid. I think the lesson of 1993—the first time they bombed the World Trade Center—was: Fear is probably appropriate. I think the lesson of Khobar Towers—where American service men were killed in Saudi Arabia—was: Fear is probably appropriate. I think the lesson of the two embassy

bombings in East Africa was: Fear is probably appropriate. I think the lessons of the Cole being bombed in Yemen was: Fear is probably appropriate.

Moreover, Gingrich argued, President Barack Obama provides a “vivid demonstration of weakness in foreign policy.” Other GOP figures, including past and potential future presidential candidate Mitt Romney, have similarly accused the administration of being “weak.”

Republicans also have vociferously complained about “cuts” in military spending—that is, a slower rate of increase. Writes William Kristol: We are

skimping on defense spending over the next several years, to the point where such spending will be, by 2016, at its lowest percentage of GDP since before World War II. Is the world really the safest it has been since the 1930s?

All told, contended Gingrich: “The threats around the world are real, they are imminent, and they require use as a nation to have a serious adult conversation about reality.”

Yes, let’s do so. That’s certainly not what the Republican Party is offering these days.

First, the percentage of GDP spent on the military is meaningless. The U.S. economy has grown dramatically over the years—today it is more than five times as large, in real terms and despite the recession, than in 1946. In that year total national-defense outlays, which remained high as the country demobilized after World War II, accounted for 77.3 percent of total federal expenditures and 19.2 percent of GDP. Today military spending consumes “only” 17.3 percent of the budget and 4.8 percent of GDP, yet the actual budget adjusted for inflation is more than one-third larger.

America is now spending 10 percent more, in real terms, on the military than it did on average during the cold war, when the United States faced a hegemonic antagonist. America currently accounts for roughly half of all military spending on earth. That wasn’t the case during the 1930s. Or during the cold war. America’s international dominance has never been greater. Second, the prospect of an Iranian or North Korean nuclear weapon pales compared to the one-time prospect of a conventional or nuclear war with the Soviet Union. For some four decades the United States confronted the possibility of continent-wide combat in Europe. Fighting could have extended around the world, engulfing China, the Koreas, Japan, Taiwan and more. And any conflict could have escalated into nuclear war—full-blown, massive, catastrophic.

Third, deterrence has a proven record of keeping the peace. Preventive war was proposed against both China and the Soviet Union. U.S. policy makers wisely resisted the temptation, even when America had an overwhelming military advantage. In contrast, one small preventive operation, against Iraq, has wrecked another nation, ensnared America’s military and destroyed Washington’s reputation.

Fourth, intervention will become more, not less expensive. Indeed, patrolling the globe ensures more terrorism. Gingrich cites the Cole: it was bombed while visiting Yemen on a political mission. The U.S. forces at the Khobar Towers were part of a military deployment in Saudi Arabia. The bombing of the Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon—which Gingrich does not mention but others, including former-Vice President Cheney, have pointed to—was prompted by a similar intervention in that country’s vicious, multisided civil war.

Finally, a militarized national-security state inevitably changes the character of the American Republic—the enormous financial waste of buying unnecessary weapons in a weakened economy; strengthening and expanding the most politicized of American industries; emphasizing secrecy and surveillance and degrading constitutional liberties. There is a serious foreign-policy debate to be had. The Obama administration is no less interventionist than its predecessor—on many issues the difference is more style than substance. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continue; all of America’s alliances remain; the military continues to expand.

Republicans should offer, in Barry Goldwater's inimitable phrase, "a choice, not an echo." That would be the "humble" foreign policy that candidate George W. Bush talked about in 2000, a foreign policy more appropriate for a republic. Instead, GOP leaders apparently hope to rebuild their party by inflating threats, ignoring costs and disregarding interests. It is a prescription for failure—for the GOP and, more importantly, the nation. If the Republican Party won't do any better, it deserves to be in the minority for a very long time.

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