

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Gov. Christie, Bill Kristol and the Future of the GOP

Christopher A. Preble

October 3, 2011

The interest in New Jersey governor Chris Christie as a possible 2012 presidential candidate is understandable. His tough line against state spending, his willingness to take on entrenched interests in the Garden State, and his candor and blunt manner of speaking all appeal to Republicans weary of the current candidates. But while his views on domestic policy are relatively clear, Christie's foreign-policy views aren't. Indeed, governors have little reason to speak out on foreign-policy issues unless they run for president.

Without a track record, however, no one can know how a former governor will perform what is arguably a president's most important job: deciding whether, where and when to deploy U.S. troops abroad. Recall George W. Bush's plea for a humble foreign policy and his senior foreign policy adviser Condoleezza Rice's assertion that the U.S. military should not be in the business of "escorting kids to kindergarten" in foreign lands. This was all forgotten by the time that Bush and Rice exited Washington eight years later. Rice essentially recanted her earlier opposition to nation building, and Bush had presided over a foreign policy that was anything but humble.

With that huge caveat in mind, can we venture a guess about Chris Christie's foreign policy views? Not quite. But this passage from Christie's speech at the Reagan Library hints at a measure of humility and pragmatism that is long overdue:

The United States must...become more discriminating in what we try to accomplish abroad. We certainly cannot force others to adopt our principles through coercion. Local realities count; we cannot have forced makeovers of other societies in our image. We need to limit ourselves overseas to what is in the national interest so that we can rebuild the foundations of American power here at home.

Such sentiments strike most Americans as eminently sensible. Numerous polls show that Americans want to stop fighting other people's wars and building other people's countries. Most believe it is better to husband our power and deploy our military abroad only when vital U.S. security interests are threatened. We should lead by our example, build a society that others wish to emulate, and avoid the temptation to meddle in other people's affairs.

Not so, says William Kristol, *Weekly Standard* editor and Fox News commentator. In a famous essay co-authored with Robert Kagan in 1996 the two made the case for "benevolent global hegemony." Kristol and Kagan especially took issue with those conservatives who:

succumb easily to the charming old metaphor of the United States as a "city on a hill."

[...]

Because...the responsibility for the peace and security of the international order rests so heavily on America's shoulders, a policy of sitting atop a hill and leading by example becomes in practice a policy of cowardice and dishonor.

So why would Kristol be pushing Christie to run for president?

At first glance, it appears that Kristol is willing to look past Christie's foreign-policy views in the interest of finding a candidate best able to defeat President Obama in 2012. Perhaps Kristol believes that he will be in a better position to influence Christie's policies at a later stage. Kristol was notably lukewarm on Governor Bush in 2000 but was nonetheless able to influence President Bush's foreign policy.

But should Republicans listen to Bill Kristol?

Kristol's brand of foreign-policy activism has always looked more like Woodrow Wilson than Ronald Wilson Reagan. Indeed, notwithstanding Kristol's deliberate efforts to wrap his foreign-policy views around Reagan's legacy, Reagan was more skeptical of confrontation with the Soviet Union than the neoconservatives, as Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke expertly demonstrate in their book [\*America Alone\*](#). And conservatives' understandable skepticism of nation building at home has never fit with the neoconservatives' notions of nation building abroad.

Beyond this serious philosophical disagreement, Republicans should recall the terrible effects that the neoconservatives' foreign policies had on Republican candidates in recent elections. Kristol was a leading champion for some of the biggest foreign policy blunders in U.S. history. Those blunders denied George W. Bush a mandate for major domestic-policy reform in 2005, cost the GOP control of the Congress in 2006, and provided an opening that Barack Obama skillfully exploited on the road to the White House in 2008. Those are all reasons enough for Republicans to ignore Kristol's advice.

It is too soon to say whether Chris Christie's few early comments about foreign policy signal a genuine commitment to military restraint, or whether his skepticism toward foreign military adventures will be discarded as quickly and easily as George W. Bush's humility. But there are modestly hopeful signs that Governor Christie hasn't fully bought into the neocons' benevolent global hegemony, and that suggests that he will be open to other points of view.