



Will the US Suffer a Foreign Policy Crisis if Trump Wins?

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September 26, 2016

Donald Trump's bid for US presidency and current position in the opinion polls is a crisis, not only for the Republican party, but also of the broader bi-partisan foreign policy establishment's instinctive interventionist mindset and their military definition of reality. Yet, for all his appeals to the most bigoted sections of American society, Trump's foreign policy message speaks a 21st century truth: the US's position in the world has changed, its wars are dragging on, the blowback is lethal, there are too many problems at home and the popular appetite for global 'leadership' waning. But it appears from Trump's military spending plans that he is already planning to betray his supporters.

Americans love winners, but the post 9/11 years have not appeared to most Americans, or the rest of the world, to have been an untrammelled success for military power. But the US's foreign policy establishment begs to differ and wants an even more robust projection of military power.

To them, Trump is the 'enemy within' – allied with US foe Vladimir Putin, questioning NATO (set up to counter the 'red threat'), threatening the alliance with Japan and South Korea, and bringing the US into disrepute through his stated commitment to torture terror suspects and kill their families.

The neoconservative architects of the Iraq war and the war on terror are backing Hillary Clinton for the White House and she is courting them with promises of US leadership from the front, not from behind, presenting herself as the warrior queen: more like 'iron lady' Margaret Thatcher than the allegedly dovish president Barack Obama.

The right's support for Clinton's hawkish foreign policy and contempt for Trump's apparent 'isolationism' has been building for some time – with open letters from 'respectable foreign policy conservatives', mostly hard-core architects of military aggression against Iraq in 2003, extraordinary rendition (kidnapping) and torture, targeted assassination (drone strikes) and ever higher military spending to underscore America's lethal advantage over all others.

There have even been rumblings that the CIA and military leaders might refuse to follow orders from commander-in-chief Trump. Robert Kagan, a neoconservative commentator and founder of the militarist and pro-regime-change in Iraq think tank Project for the New American Century, doubts that Trump would find anyone with experience to serve in the most senior positions of intelligence or the Pentagon.

Trump's crime violates Clinton's law, the reflex position of the US's foreign policy establishment – and every president, including Obama – since Japan's aerial attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941. The attitude of the establishment – the men behind the scenes who decide who's in or out, trustworthy and loyal, or beyond the pale, “one of us” – was summed up long ago by journalist Godfrey Hodgson in the aftermath of the disastrous war on Vietnam: outright rejection of ‘isolationism’, which in practice meant any viewpoint that questioned or rejected American primacy in world politics; total embrace of ‘internationalism’, an open world trading system that permitted the US and its western allies to recover from the destruction of second world war through restoring colonial trade and investment links; an aspiration to the moral leadership of the world via institutional and military means; and a self-definition as centrist to moderate against “yahoos of left and right”.

The establishment is rooted in Wall Street law firms and banks, the upper echelons of the federal executive (White House, CIA, Pentagon, leading senators), elite universities like Harvard and Princeton, and think tanks like the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations. They are largely unelected, yet constitute the majority of senior appointees in Republican and Democratic administrations. They are the elitist red thread of continuity in a political system they believe, gives far too much power to the great unwashed and dangerous classes who should obey their betters, or else accept re-education, a curious interpretation of the notion of the ‘consent of the governed’ upon which democracy is assumed to rest.

It is reported that Kagan and other neoconservatives cheered Clinton's appointment to secretary of state in 2008 and are now fund-raising on her behalf because she plans to be a lot tougher with Russia in Ukraine – provide even more arms to Ukrainian nationalists, including the extreme-right wing elements; more weapons and other military assistance to overthrow the Assad regime in Syria, including arming fundamental Islamists and ride rough-shod over popular opposition to further American military adventurism and so on.

Clinton would dust off the Libyan template used to overthrow Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, her allies told a neocon gathering of “foreign policy professionals for Hillary”, without a hint of irony. The disorder and insecurity of Libya after Gaddafi's ousting is re-framed as a great success. Like the colonial powers of old, Clinton seems ready to redraw the national boundaries of the Middle East.

At a recent fundraiser, it is reported that Kagan rolled his eyes when told that Obama refused arms to Ukrainian fighters for fear of escalating the confrontation with Russia to nuclear levels. Trump, it transpires, is too unstable to entrust with nukes, but Clinton's more measured approach to nuclear annihilation is acceptable.

According to the Cato Institute, 37% of Americans are generally opposed to the use of military force to resolve global problems, while just under a quarter practically always favour armed intervention. Around 40% are undecided; they are the battleground for hearts and minds, the people who need to be convinced through “education” to allow the commander-in-chief to act with the “consent of the governed”.

But Trump’s message is just the tip of the iceberg. The problem (of all those people opposed to war as the first resort) is a lot more widespread – Bernie Sanders’s political base was far more anti-interventionist (‘isolationist’ in foreign policy establishment speak) than their candidate. “It’s not just Donald Trump,” Kagan said. “I think you can find in both parties a very strong sense that we don’t need to be out there anymore.”

“[President] Hillary Clinton... is going to immediately be confronting a country that is not where she is,” he said. “She is a believer in this world order. But a great section of the country is not and this is going to require persuasion and education.”

Kagan did not mention what the rest of the world might think and the education they’re likely to need. Maybe he’s thinking of what President Lyndon Johnson said about such educational efforts: “if you grab ‘em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow.” That attitude led to the tragedy of Vietnam and the killing fields of Cambodia.

Presumably, Kagan wants to provide the sort of education delivered by the [George] Bush administration and its allies – like UK premier Tony Blair – which tailored intelligence on non-existent weapons of mass destruction to justify military aggression against Iraq – leading to massive numbers of deaths and social, economic and political breakdown, paving the way for the emergence of ISIS, the Middle east’s equivalent of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge – after a media blitz of gigantic proportions.

When Trump attacks the ‘establishment’ for ‘rigging the system’ against the interests of ordinary people, he strikes a chord with both historical fact and the opinions of millions of Americans. He may have no intention, or ability, or even desire, to deliver anything better than what currently rules US foreign policy and its globalised military system; his military spending plans derive from the Heritage Foundation’s hawkish approach. But his appeal and message, along with that of the millions behind Sanders, is signalling major popular discontent and threatening the end of business as usual for the foreign policy elite, whoever wins the White House.