

# The American Conservative

## Where Is the Foreign Policy Debate in 2016?

The Charles Koch Institute brings a much needed discussion to New Hampshire

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On the Democratic side, an avowed democratic socialist is leading in the New Hampshire polls, suddenly posing a serious challenge to Hillary Clinton's coronation. For the GOP, candidates range from pro-immigration free-traders to build-a-wall and close-the-borders advocates. The Republicans may all be avowed free marketeers—though international trade remains a division point—but between leading candidates of both parties a wide range of views on immigration, the degree of desirable federal intervention in health care and the economy in general, and taxation are being discussed forcefully if not always brilliantly.

On the other hand, no one from Ted Cruz to Bernie Sanders seems eager to debate fundamental questions about American foreign policy. On that they all basically agree: the United States saved the world in the 1940s and must continue to lead it, seemingly in perpetuity. The consensus is deeply bipartisan. Occasionally a matter like the Iraq War seems to threaten the bipartisan consensus, but the breaches close quickly. Everyone insists on “American leadership”—and sees the world as kind of planetary system revolving around a Washington based sun.

The planet-sun analogy was one of many thrown out in a very smart forum held last week in Manchester, New Hampshire, sponsored by the [Charles Koch Institute](#). Charles Koch is best known in politics for aggressive financial support of various conservative and libertarian causes. His institute's foreign-policy forum left me thinking the most durable part of his legacy might be in expanding the realm of permissible debate about America's role in the world as the 21st century advances.

Right now, as William Ruger, a vice president of the Koch Institute, described it, foreign policy in Washington is a battle within the 48-yard lines. Everyone takes the necessity of American primacy as a given, and those outside the consensus receive nicknames like the one John McCain sometimes bestows: “wacko bird.” You don't necessarily lose your job if you're a wacko bird, but you become someone whose opinions don't really count.

In addition to Ruger, a former political scientist, the panel consisted of Andrew Bacevich and Stephen Kinzer, both widely published foreign-affairs authors, and Chris Preble, a scholar who heads foreign-policy shop at the Cato Institute. Television host John Stoessel moderated, deploying a devil's advocate persona.

I go to many forums in Washington, and while most are informative very few really crackle. This one did. That can be explained by the truly enormous gap between what the panelists said—reasonable if provocative arguments made by learned, highly successful, and temperamentally conservative people—and what passes for “serious” foreign policy discussion inside the Beltway.

Some examples:

\*The common perception underlying the “indispensable nation” consensus is that we saved the world by defeating Nazi Germany. But of course the Soviet Union did far more to defeat Germany.

\*Benghazi is alluded to repeatedly by Republicans seeking to attack Hillary Clinton's record. But none of them ever note that the Libyan intervention against Gaddafi which preceded it did serious damage to the cause of nuclear non-proliferation and dramatically destabilized the region; the Republicans never go beyond the fact that American diplomats were killed.

\*Saddam was the most brutal dictator in the world. If you were an Iraqi who seemed to threaten him politically, you would likely disappear. But in his Iraq, if you kept your mouth shut you could lead a normal life, provide for your family, send your kids to school, go to mosque or church of your choice. No one there now can do any of that. (Kinzer)

\*For someone born in 1991, when our Soviet rival dissolved itself, has seen America engaged in a major war every year but three.

\*We are formally committed to the defense of 68 countries in the world.

\*The United States has reorganized Afghan's government to collapse the traditional somewhat viable decentralized system and elect a parliament manned by the rich, the corrupt, the violent.

\*At the Naval War College, top officers are in an “orgasmic state” over the prospect of a new generation of weapons to threaten China, which is working on one aircraft carrier, while we have a dozen.

\*We have no solution to the problems of the Middle East, its crises are beyond our capacity to fix. ISIS poses a very minor threat to the U.S. The best thing we can do to counter radical Islam is to be the best society we can be—and demonstrate by our example there is no conflict between faith and modernity. (Bacevich)

\*Iran is now very secular, a country with more atheists there than anywhere else in Islamic world.

\*America (seemingly without reflecting about it, and certainly not debating it) opened the barn door to cyberwarfare, when, in conjunction with Israel, it used offensive cyber weapons (Stuxnet) against Iran. (Bacevich)

About 120 people attended. People who attend a Koch event on national security are probably a fairly conservative bunch, and it takes a lot to move someone from their basic premises. One man, a former military intelligence officer, asked a detailed question about China's new "military assertiveness"—a threat now taken as axiomatic inside the Beltway. I believe it was Ruger who replied that 1) he believed in the "stopping power of water" (the Pacific is pretty large); 2) China would have great difficulty invading Taiwan; 3) China probably has more at stake in freedom of the seas than any other country; and finally (jokingly) he wouldn't worry too much about China's man-made military islands, because of global warming and rising seas. In other words, really a minimal military threat to America. (Whether China is an economic threat to American manufacturing is another issue, not relevant to this forum.)

None of this makes it on to the Washington discussion table. Ever. Instead it is assumed, without much discussion, that it is—that it must be—America's role to obsess about the military power of a country which spends roughly 20 percent of what we do on the military.

It is beginning to percolate, around in the country, if not in Washington, that the United States has not actually won a war in a very long time, despite fighting many of them. And some social force or combination of them is causing the American dream to feel remote for a growing share of the population. There is now a real market for fundamental questioning of America's strategic doctrines, far moreso than in the 1990s—and a growing potential audience for putting less militarism, more soft power (none of the panelists were "isolationists") on the table. The Koch Institute is planning to bring more of these panels around the country, and they will probably make some waves. There are other possible steps to take—academic programs, think tanks, media initiatives. Arraigned against any rethinking is the massive Beltway blob: interlocking media; financial and industrial interests; the "military-industrial complex," so named by Dwight Eisenhower; defense contractors spread across every state; powerful congressional lobbies for foreign countries eager for the United States to spend treasure and sometimes blood defending them. But it is a debate that America dearly needs, and the Koch Institute's seeming readiness to engage it in a serious way is more than welcome: it may be critically important, and not only for American conservatives.