



# Could Tea Party Reshape the Afghanistan Debate?

With Budget Issues the Top Priority, Some Are Calling for Re-examination of Afghan War

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Tea Party activists have remained quiet on the foreign policy front, but with budget cuts under the limelight, the war in Afghanistan could fracture Republicans at a time they're already struggling to come to a consensus on what the budget cuts should entail.

Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour is the latest in the short line of Republicans to suggest that Congress should consider defense budget cuts and rethink the number of troops it has committed in Afghanistan.

"We can save money on defense and if we Republicans don't propose saving money on defense, we'll have no credibility on anything else," Barbour, a potential presidential contender, said on Tuesday, adding that "we need to look at" reducing the number of soldiers in Afghanistan.

While Barbour may be in the minority in the GOP, his comments reflect a perspective increasingly being pushed by deficit hawks. They also come at a time when Republicans are facing increasing pressure from Tea Party and other conservative groups to take bolder steps in addressing the budget.

With candidates and lawmakers up for re-election next year already gearing up for a tough fight, the Tea Party's push on cost-cutting and returning to Constitutional principles could reshape the debate and Republican support of the war in Afghanistan.

"The Constitution stipulates the common defense of the United States, not a common defense of everybody else, and that's different from what Washington's attitude is," said Christopher A. Preble, author and director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. "There's something deeply unconservative about nation-building and that's what we're doing in Afghanistan, or at least that's what we appear to be doing. Barbour pretty much picked up on this."

Tea Party members have, thus far, deliberately steered clear of foreign policy issues and defense spending, but when it comes to the budget, they say everything

should be on the line.

"We don't address foreign policy at all," said Amy Kremer, chairman of the Tea Party Express, one of the country's leading national Tea Party groups. "But when I say every program needs to be on the table, I mean that every program needs to be on the table. Sure, there's duplicate programs, waste and fraud and abuse in every single department. It all needs to be on the table, and it all needs to be looked at."

[Defense Department](#) spending on Afghanistan on average grew from \$3.5 billion to \$5.7 billion in fiscal year 2010, a 63 percent jump. Billions more are being spent on civilian and infrastructure development.

Opposition to the [war in Afghanistan](#) is at a record high. Just 31 percent now say the war in [Afghanistan](#) has been worth fighting, a new low, 64 percent call it not worth fighting, and 49 percent feel that way "strongly," according to an [ABC News/Washington Post poll](#) released Tuesday.

A national survey of conservatives performed for the [Afghanistan Study Group](#) in January, 2010, found that 67 percent of Tea Party supporters were worried the costs would make it more difficult for the United States to reduce its deficit, and 64 percent of them



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supported reducing U.S. troop levels. A [USA Today/Gallup poll](#) conducted a year later found similar results, with 61 percent of Republicans supporting a speedy withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The numbers -- though discredited by proponents of military engagement -- haven't been ignored.

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., has openly expressed skepticism about U.S. military priorities. On Thursday, eight House Republicans voted with Democrats on a failed bill that calls for the complete removal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan by no later than December 31.

Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, blasted the Obama administration for its handling of the Afghanistan war, saying the U.S. policy currently is more about being "politically correct" than defending troops.

"We must use our forces around the world when there is a direct threat on the United States of America," said Chaffetz, who himself has spoken in favor of the Tea Party on numerous occasions. "That is not confined to the boundaries of Afghanistan."

Preble, a longtime supporter of pulling out troops and funding from Afghanistan, says there is a disconnect when it comes to Washington insiders and those outside the Beltway, both on the right and the left. But, he said, the issue is likely to crop up in some form in 2012, even if foreign policy isn't the defining issue.

"The Tea Party values outsiders... they don't have a strong opinion about foreign policy, but they don't hold it against somebody because they don't agree with what the Washington consensus is," he said. "So at a minimum it would seem to be a wash and probably slightly more so in the direction of Tea Party having the effect of pulling the Republican candidates perhaps more in the direction of restraint."

The Afghanistan issue is just one part of the ongoing debate over budget cuts. Tea Party members want to see more action from conservatives on tackling entitlements and the hefty budget deficit.

Many have expressed strong disapproval of the continuing resolutions that have kept the government afloat thus far, saying these piecemeal solutions don't address the deficit issue.

"Somebody needs to man up and make the tough decisions that need to be made," Kremer said. "I didn't expect them to come in and change it overnight but they just continue to kick the can down the road and everybody's losing patience."



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