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## Tea Party, Obama Could Make for Strange Bedfellows on Afghanistan War

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The dozens of Tea Party-backed candidates who swept into office Tuesday on pledges to



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fight "Obamacare" and take a buzzsaw to the president's budget could also end up lending the White House some support on a key issue -- Afghanistan.

Though foreign policy was assiduously avoided on the campaign trail by Tea Party candidates, who much preferred talking about the national debt, the subject of the Afghanistan war may be one of the first controversies they have to confront after being sworn in. President Obama will hold a strategy review in December, setting the stage for the proposed troop withdrawal, tentatively starting in July.

And if the president ends up looking for backup in the face of a military campaign to push for a longer timetable, some say he should not discount the Tea Party as a possible ally.

"The challenge for conservatives is that nation-building isn't conservative," said Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute. For the libertarians in the Tea Party, he said, many will be skeptical of the prolonged engagement in Afghanistan. As the newcomers start "from scratch" in building their positions on the war, unburdened by a history of supporting U.S. involvement, he suggested a fracture could emerge in the GOP ranks.

"There are not a lot of them who got elected on that platform," he said. "It will be hard to kind of enforce a party discipline around the argument, 'We have to stay in Afghanistan.'"

Few Tea Party candidates staked out a definitive position on Afghanistan, a war that was overshadowed this election year by domestic debates over spending and the economy. But when pressed for details, some betrayed an unease with the nine-year war, in which the U.S. government continues to struggle to prop up the government in Kabul and stabilize the country.

Rand Paul, who won his race for Senate in Kentucky, criticized the "monolithic" Republican position on the war during an interview over the summer with the National Review -- while at the same time calling foreign policy a "complete non-issue" for him.

"How long is long enough? It's too simplistic to say there is never a time to come home, or that it's unpatriotic to debate. There are reasonable people, conservatives like me, who believe that defense is the primary role of the federal government but do not believe that you can make Afghanistan into a nation. It never has been one," he said.

Paul has also been openly critical of military spending. While he said in a videotaped statement on his campaign site that he would have voted to support the Afghanistan war, he would not say the same about the Iraq war, which he said "inflamed an entire region," and he posed a question that might apply to the debate ahead: "In the end, you have to ask yourself -- do you kill more terrorists than you create?"

Paul's father, Texas Republican Rep. Ron Paul, is an opponent of the Afghanistan war and a lonely GOP member of the Out of Afghanistan Caucus chaired by Democratic Michigan Rep. John Conyers.

The elder Paul had a message to Tea Partiers, some of whom see him as a leader in the movement, in an August magazine column. "As many frustrated Americans who have joined the Tea Party realize, we cannot stand against big government at home while supporting it abroad," he wrote.

Other Tea Party candidates have walked a fine on Afghanistan. Senator-elect Mike Lee in Utah said on his website that the mission in Afghanistan is to take out "military targets" and that U.S. troops should be brought home "as soon as possible" after the objectives are reached.

Allen West, an Iraq war veteran with Tea Party support, offers tougher rhetoric. West, who won a House seat in Florida, listed national security as one of his top priorities in an interview Wednesday.

"We have to make sure that we keep the people safe and we saw what happened with these bombs that came over from Yemen. We're seeing some bad trends in Afghanistan and Iraq. So we've got to be focused right now," West told Fox News.

But Preble said concerns over the cost and mission of the war in Afghanistan will probably begin to gnaw at many in the incoming class of congressional Tea Partiers.

"We know they care about 'Obamacare.' We know they care about taxes. ... They care about the deficit," he said. "Some will care a lot about maintaining or increasing the U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan ... but that's a pretty small number."

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