

# Mother Jones

## Marco Rubio Wants to Make Neocons Cool Again

Meet the Bush-era the hawks who have shaped the presidential hopeful's foreign policy views.

By [Pema Levy](#)

May 13, 2015

All-but-announced presidential candidate Jeb Bush caused a stir recently when he [cited his brother](#), former President George W. Bush, as a top policy adviser on the Middle East. But it's fellow Floridian Sen. Marco Rubio who has made a Bush-era neoconservative foreign policy a centerpiece of his bid for the Republican presidential nomination.

On Wednesday afternoon, Rubio will give his first major foreign policy speech as a presidential candidate at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, where he [will champion](#) a neoconservative vision of the United States' role in the world.

"They're all hawkish," Christopher Preble of the libertarian Cato Institute [told McClatchy recently](#), referring to the field of GOP presidential contenders. "Just not to the extent he is."

From his perch on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rubio has embraced an interventionist foreign policy, spoken out against budget cuts for the military, and emerged recently as [President Obama's chief adversary](#) on normalizing relations with Cuba. Speaking at a conservative gathering in South Carolina last weekend, Rubio articulated a simplistic approach to fighting terrorists, quoting a line from the Liam Neeson action flick *Taken*: "We will look for you, we will find you, and we will kill you."

It's not surprising that Rubio might out-Bush Jeb Bush when it comes to foreign policy. Last year, the conservative *National Review* [reported](#) that Rubio was a popular presidential prospect among the Bush administration's neoconservative alumni. Meet some of the hawks and former Bush administration officials shaping Rubio's foreign policy views.

Jamie Fly

Fly, who [joined](#) Rubio's Senate staff in January 2013 as a foreign and national security affairs adviser, held a series of posts in the Bush administration, including jobs with the National Security Council and in the office of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. When Bush left office, Fly was tapped to lead the Foreign Policy Initiative, an organization founded by William

Kristol in 2009 to advocate for muscular foreign policy positions and [serve as an incubator](#) of young neocon talent.

His most [notable foreign policy treatise](#) is a 2012 paper, co-authored with neoconservative scholar Gary Schmitt, that advocates for a US attack on Iran—not just a few airstrikes to impede Iran's nuclear program, but a major assault that would also "destabilize the regime":

a limited military strike would only be a temporary fix... If the United States seriously considers military action, it would be better to plan an operation that not only strikes the nuclear program but aims to destabilize the regime, potentially resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis once and for all.

Elliott Abrams

When this hardline neocon joined President George W. Bush's foreign policy team in 2001, it marked a triumphant comeback for Abrams, who was a major player in the Iran-contra affair, the secret operation to sell arms to Iran and funnel the money to anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua. After serving as a national security adviser to Bush for eight years, during which time he helped develop the administration's policies on the Middle East, Abrams is now a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

As a Reagan administration official, Abrams was a key architect of the US interventions in Latin America in the 1980s, [repeatedly denying](#) the massacres perpetrated by US-supported armies had taken place. After being caught in the Iran-contra scandal, he plead guilty to two misdemeanor counts of lying to Congress. President George H.W. Bush later pardoned him and several other Reagan administration officials ensnared in the scandal just before leaving office in 1992.

Abrams doesn't shy away from controversy. In 2013, he made headlines for [saying](#) then-Defense Secretary nominee Chuck Hagel "seems to have some kind of problem with Jews"—a comment harshly in sync with the Republican [criticism that Hagel](#) was insufficiently pro-Israel.

Rubio [first turned to Abrams](#) in 2010, during his Senate run. "We got on the phone, and he said, 'Let's do it this way: Let me tell you what I think about the Middle East, and then you tell me what I've left out that's important and what I've got wrong,'" Abrams told *National Review*. "I was really impressed...I don't think there are very many state politicians who could have, off the cuff, done a six-or-seven minute riff on the Middle East."

Eric Edelman

A former ambassador to Finland and Turkey and, more important, a Dick Cheney protégé, Edelman served on former vice president's foreign policy team, where he was an [influential hawk](#) in the lead up to the Iraq war. In 2005, newly appointed Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice chose not to pick Edelman as one of her top deputies against the wishes of Cheney and the GOP's neocon wing. Later that year, Bush would [use his recess appointment power](#) to install Edelman at the Defense Department. In 2007, Edelman, then an undersecretary of defense, got into a feud with then-Sen. Hillary Clinton. Clinton had sent a letter to Defense Secretary Robert Gates asking about a withdrawal plan from Iraq. Edelman [responded](#) by blasting Clinton for aiding the enemy by even asking about pulling out troops: "Premature and public discussion of

the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq reinforces enemy propaganda that the United States will abandon its allies in Iraq, much as we are perceived to have done in Vietnam, Lebanon and Somalia."

Last month, *Reuters* reported that Edelman "regularly briefs" Rubio. "It's mostly about defense, but I've talked to him about the authorization of military force. I've talked to him about the campaign against ISIS, about Russia and Ukraine. There's not a shortage of issues right now," [Edelman said](#). (Edelman isn't the only member of Cheney's inner circle who is close to Rubio. A former domestic policy aide to Cheney, Cesar Conda, served as Rubio's chief of staff in the Senate and is now a part-time adviser.)

Robert Kagan

A prominent neoconservative author and former Reagan administration official, Kagan was a champion of the war in Iraq and an adviser to both John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign and Mitt Romney's in 2012. Rubio [has cited](#) Kagan's book, *The World America Made*—in which Kagan argues that the US is not in decline despite any talk to the contrary—as a major influence on his foreign policy views. (Obama [also applauded](#) some of Kagan's arguments in the book). According to *National Review*, Rubio regularly consulted with Kagan during his first few years in the Senate.

Rubio isn't the only candidate dipping into the neoconservative pool for advisers. Jeb Bush's foreign policy brain trust [looks a lot like his brother's](#). And Ted Cruz has a [Rumsfeld protégé](#) on his team.

When he announced his candidacy, Rubio [repeatedly called for](#) a "new American Century." That tag line seemed borrowed from the Project for the New American Century, the neoconservative think tank co-founded by Kagan and Kristol in 1997. Its original members included future Bush administration officials, such as Cheney, Rumsfeld, [Paul Wolfowitz](#), and Elliott Abrams. Rubio is campaigning as a visionary and new generational leader, yet his foreign policy ideas—and his key national security advisers—are Bush-era throwbacks.