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The GOP, the Dems, the Tea Party and Afghanistan

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| October 31, 2010

| [Christopher A. Preble](#)^[2]

A number of [recent](#)^[3] [stories](#)^[4] have noted the relative lack of attention paid during the mid-term election campaigns to the war in Afghanistan. Many commentators find this lamentable. [Michael Gerson goes one better](#)^[5], arguing that most Americans are so worthless and weak that we should be glad that no one cares about the war. Better that we go about our business and mindlessly support the troops in the field. They know what is best for us. Shut up and sing. Pay. Etc.

I doubt that most Republican candidates are as disdainful of the American people (i.e. voters) as Gerson, but it is pretty obvious why they don't want to call attention to the war: it is one area where the public disagrees with them. Asked which party they trust most to do a better job handling the war in Afghanistan, respondents in a recent [Newsweek poll](#)^[6] gave the edge to Democrats over Republicans by a margin of 43 to 32 (though the 11 percent who said "neither" can't be comforting for leaders in either party) (Question no. 8, full results, [here, pdf](#)^[7]). Most -- [though not all](#)^[8] -- Congressional Republicans oppose the president's stated plan to begin withdrawing troops next summer. A plurality of the public at large thinks that that isn't fast enough.

How, if at all, does the tea party factor in here? A [few](#)^[9] [of](#)^[10] [us](#)^[11] here at *TNI* have commented about the foreign policy views of the tea party candidates, and a common theme is that we don't know what they are. At least I don't. The many men and women running with tea party support agree on some obvious things -- especially that taxes are too high and the government is too big -- but they share no common foreign policy vision.

Those lucky enough to get elected to Congress will each have to choose. If a new member reflects the wishes of their constituents, he or she can be expected to push the Congress and the White House in the direction of withdrawal. But one constant in recent U.S. foreign policy is Washington's general disregard for public preferences. It is therefore

equally likely that the new members will follow the lead of the inside-the-Beltway elites who have staked their reputation, and the country's future, on nation-building in Central Asia.

Part of me, however, thinks that those core tea party values will eventually register. It is hard for me to believe that people who think that the government spends too much money here in the United States are going to be comfortable with spending over \$100 billion every year in a country with a GDP of roughly \$14 billion. And it seems unlikely that members of a movement that generally doubts the U.S. government's capacity to fix this country will suddenly gain confidence in its ability to fix Afghanistan.

One can hope.

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