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Support for Nation-Building Fades in GOP

By **Scott Conroy** - June 21, 2011



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As the Republican Party grapples with a broadening schism over the role of the U.S. military in the world, several of the GOP presidential contenders appear to be veering further away from the neo-conservative, nation-building wing of the party -- a trend that could deepen as more candidates enter the race.

At last week's debate in New Hampshire, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney best exemplified the extent to which party orthodoxy has evolved from the interventionist foreign policy notions that predominated in Bush's post-9/11 presidency: The front-runner for the 2012 GOP nomination called for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from **Afghanistan** "as soon as possible" and said of the current state of the nearly decade-long war there, "Our troops shouldn't go off and try to fight a war of independence for another nation."

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Romney's comments drew sharp condemnation over the weekend from two of the most prominent and vocal GOP advocates of an interventionist foreign policy -- Arizona Sen. John McCain and South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham. But there is ample reason to believe that town-hall attendees and rally-goers in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina will, over the next few months, hear stump speeches on foreign policy that sound less like George W. Bush's democracy-promoting second inaugural and more like the George W. Bush of 2000 that opposed nation-building and called for a "humble" application of U.S. military power.

"If you believe that politics is a marketplace of ideas, there was an under-served market of people wanting to get out of Afghanistan and not enough people selling that," Chris Preble, the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, told RCP. "When

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you ask the American people, 'Do you want to be the world's policeman?' they say no. Rank-and-file Republicans hate nation-building."

Though Preble's views have to be considered with the understanding that he is a leading noninterventionist thinker, a growing pool of data appears to back up his conclusion that the Republican base has indeed shifted substantially on foreign policy from where it initially stood in the post-9/11 world.

According to a Pew survey released last month, the percentage of conservative Republicans who said that the U.S. "should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home" increased from 36 percent in 2004 to 55 percent in 2011.

And in a Gallup poll released last month, an equivalent number of Republicans who said that the U.S. still has work to do in Afghanistan (47 percent) said that the mission there has now been fulfilled and that the U.S. should bring its troops home.

But even as President Obama prepares to announce an updated plan for the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, it is the NATO-led military operation in **Libya** that is taking an increasingly prominent role in the GOP debate. Minnesota Rep. Michele Bachmann, who last week announced that she filed papers to run for president, has been particularly emphatic in leading this charge.

At last Monday's candidate debate, Bachmann said of the situation in Libya: "We were not attacked. We were not threatened with attack. There was no vital national interest." The Minnesota congresswoman amplified on this sentiment in her speech over the weekend at the Republican Leadership Conference in New Orleans.

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Scott Conroy is a national political reporter for RealClearPolitics. He can be reached at sconroy@realclearpolitics.com.

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