



Rand Paul vs Marco Rubio

By: Kevin Glass
August 1, 2014

On March 6, 2013, Sen. Rand Paul (R- KY) rose to take the floor and speak on the subject of President Obama's nomination of John Brennan for CIA director. Brennan was the architect of Obama's drone program, which the White House had been using to assassinate terrorists overseas.

Over the course of the next 13 hours, Paul made his objections widely known. From his discomfort with the broad unilateral authority that Obama claimed, to the controversy surrounding targeted killings of American citizens overseas, to the scary potential that military-style drones might be brought to American shores.

Paul's skepticism when it comes to expansive foreign policy is and was well-known. But his half-day filibuster, the second-longest in history, vaulted him into the national conversation and sparked interest across party lines. What was also surprising was the cadre of senators who joined in, and one in particular: Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL).

Rubio and Paul have offered divergent views of American foreign policy ever since they were both elected to the Senate in 2010. Their disagreements are cordial and their offices maintain a good working relationship. But there is nonetheless an ideological battle occurring, not only on Capitol Hill, but throughout the Republican Party and across the country.

A new crop of Republicans have comprehensive ideas for how security policy should evolve in the 21st century, and while they by and large are conducting these debates jovially, they are nonetheless fighting for nothing less than the soul of the Republican Party.

In 2001, in the wake of the worst terrorist attack on American soil in the nation's history, the United States made some monumental changes in how we conducted international affairs.

After 13 years, two formal wars, multiple tertiary conflicts, and two presidents, Americans' attitudes about national and international security have changed. There is a cold war brewing in the Republican Party over the utility of our security measures and how conservatives should approach the future.

President Bush chose to implement broad security powers in the U.S. and to aggressively pursue terrorists and state-sponsored terrorism abroad. The Republican Party had few dissidents from

these policies in the Bush years, but Obama's conduct of the War on Terror has caused more people to doubt the effectiveness of our post-9/11 security measures.

Opposition to the Iraq War has hovered above 50 percent since early in Bush's second term and Republican support for the war has steadily fallen. Obama has made winding down the war in Afghanistan a priority as support for our military force there has fallen. Some of the domestic intelligence operations undertaken by Bush and Obama have also come under fire from both Republicans and Democrats.

We're a long way from 2007, when former-New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani put his mark on his bid for president by stamping out the anti-interventionist rhetoric of former- Rep. Ron Paul (R-TX). With the shift in partisan control of the White House, more Republicans have become skeptical of broad security powers emanating from the White House. The anti-Washington sentiment that motivated 2010's midterm electoral victories sent a new wave of Republicans to the Senate who have begun shaping the GOP's future security vision. People like Rubio, Paul, along with Sens. Kelly Ayotte (R-NH), Mike Lee (R-UT), and Ted Cruz (R-TX) have taken an active role in our security policy.

The only catch is that they're not always pulling in the same direction.

For decades Republicans had dominated Democrats on foreign policy. And Bush's decisive action in the wake of 9/11 only increased that dominance. Even after the American public turned against the war in Iraq, Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) still enjoyed a small lead over Obama on foreign policy issues as he headed for defeat in November.

But Americans initially trusted Obama on foreign affairs, especially after Navy SEALs managed to kill Osama bin Laden in 2011. Since then, however, Obama has lost that edge.

The outbreak of violence throughout the Arab world that culminated in the terrorist attack on the Benghazi consulate shattered Obama's illusion of competence. He's trended steadily downward and polling has shown him consistently underwater on foreign policy ever since.

Rubio, who has seen first-hand the damage that illiberal regimes can do to families, has been one of Obama's harshest critics. In a major foreign policy speech at the American Enterprise Institute, Rubio called Obama's Syria strategy a "debacle" and went on to say that Obama's bungling has left us with "a divided Syria, with a pro-Iran dictator in control of part of the country, and radical jihadists in control of much of the rest." He condemned the president's belief in "kind words" when it comes to diplomacy and the administration's overall lack of a consistent foreign policy strategy.

Only seven Republicans voted against the Authorization for Use Of Military Force Against Iraq in 2002. Rep. Paul was the highest-profile of these, and went on to run for president in 2008 on an uncompromising, principled libertarian platform that stridently rejected aggressive foreign interventions.

Rep. Paul is retired now, but his son, Rand, is a sitting senator from Kentucky and serves on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. While sometimes lazily lumped together, Sen. Paul has endeavored to differentiate himself from his outspoken father, but there are certain issues that have certainly emphasized the similarities.

Sen. Paul was the only senator of either party to vote against a resolution affirming an American commitment to keep nuclear capabilities out of Iran's hands. His proposal to strip Egypt of foreign aid attracted only 13 votes. And harkening back to those anti-Iraq War Republicans, he teamed with Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) to introduce a resolution repealing the Iraq AUMF.

This has caused some proponents of a broader use of American power to push back against him. Without naming him specifically, McCain condemned "isolationist" colleagues who "will endanger America." Rep. Peter King (R-NY) went further, comparing Paul to Hitler's appeasers in the 1930s and proclaiming his philosophy "disastrous."

Whereas Rep. Paul characterized the 9/11 attacks as a form of "blowback" for U.S. foreign policy abroad, Sen. Paul has said that Western civilization is indeed locked in an existential struggle with radical Islam. He harkens back to Ronald Reagan, calling himself a "realist" who rejects the false dichotomy of neoconservatism and isolationism, and characterizes both his and Reagan's policy as "robust but restrained." At a foreign policy speech at the Heritage Foundation, he rejected isolationism and said that military intervention is a legitimate foreign policy tool, albeit one that should be used very, very sparingly.

Even as Paul endeavors to differentiate himself from his father, he also grows weary of having to answer those kinds of questions. "It doesn't make for great Thanksgiving conversation," he told the Washington Post, "if I'm always either separating myself from my father or commending my father."

Paul and Rubio are not the only relative newcomers who are playing a role in foreign policy. The aforementioned Cruz and Lee have both put their mark on this debate, as has Rep. Justin Amash (R-MI). Elected in the 2010 tea party wave, Amash might be Rep. Paul's closest ideological heir in the House of Representatives.

The intra-party debate is a little more complicated than a one-dimensional spectrum between an aggressive security policy and a skeptical one. None of the participants in the debate break down cleanly along these lines; each Republican is different, with their own motivations and beliefs. These debates are happening in three dimensions, but there are a few pejorative terms thrown around by commentators too lazy to actually get into nuance.

Neoconservatism. Isolationism. These are the names that each side uses to caricature the other. They're easy. They immediately bring up stereotypes in the public mind. And they're unfair.

Neoconservatism originated as a wholesale philosophy of government that included both foreign and domestic policy, but in the Bush years, Democrats used the term to describe an aggressive, interventionist foreign policy that fell out of favor with the American public. They twisted it

from ideology to slur, as MSNBC liberals like Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow relentlessly used the descriptor to the point that it had no meaning at all. Very few people actually think of Irving Kristol, the founder of intellectual neoconservatism, when they hear the term.

On the other extreme, it's unclear if isolationism has been used in a non-pejorative way in the modern political era at all. With the ascendance of the United States to global superpower in the 20th century, very few politicians have advocated America's removal from international affairs. More likely, advocates of aggressive American involvement tar any skeptics with the isolationist label.

"Democrats would love for the Republican candidate to be the 'fringe' candidate. The 'dangerous' candidate," says James Carafano, vice president of national security and foreign policy at the Heritage Foundation. "It could be 'dangerous-isolationist' or 'dangerous neocon.' Democrats just want to say they're the prudent alternative."

There are real differences that have been teased out by leading Republicans when it comes to decisions about national security. Obama's time in the White House has been turbulent for the United States and has deservedly come under fire. The issues that have divided Republicans are important, and ones in which GOP legislators will work to right the ship after a disastrous Obama term.

"Having a clear and concise policy goes to the point that in the last five years, national security policies have stirred confusion," says Catherine Frazier, spokeswoman for Cruz. "Whether you're looking at Egypt, Syria, or the 'reset' with Russia, there has been no clarity as to where the United States stands on the world stage. ... The single greatest threat we face is a nuclear-armed Iran."

Paul and Rubio came to a head on one issue in particular that's illustrative of their differences: Georgia's NATO membership. In 2011, Rubio pushed for a bipartisan piece of legislation that would have backed a plan for Obama to encourage NATO to strengthen ties with the former Soviet republic in order to spread Western influence throughout central Asia. It was an effort supported by Bush and was seen as Western support for a country bordering Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Paul was firmly opposed. Western involvement in Georgia would have constituted an implicit backing of the ex-Soviet state in the face of any military aggression from Russia. And Russia has had an ongoing involvement in the northern Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Paul was able to build a coalition to defeat the measure, and the two offices are still mostly mum on any conflict over the issue. But the disagreement highlights the difference in approach.

Foreign aid to controversial regimes has also been a hot topic on Capitol Hill, and it's the area that Paul has focused most of his foreign policy critiques. The Middle East and North Africa are hotbeds for terrorism, jihadism, and other extremist elements, and Paul warns about getting into bed with any factions we might not necessarily trust.

In Libya, for example, Paul opposed the decision to aid anti- Ghadafi forces in 2011. “Libyan President Moammar Gadhafi is every bit the madman Ronald Reagan once said he was,” Paul said, “but are the rebels adherents to Jeffersonian democracy or bin Laden’s radical jihad?”

The foreign aid question is one that Paul has raised time and again. On Libya, Egypt, and Syria, Paul has questioned America’s commitment to questionable forces. Foreign aid in general is incredibly unpopular, and Paul has pointed out that we’re not always sure of its utility.

“Foreign aid is an issue that Sen. Paul has raised in the past that we know is extremely unpopular with the American people,” says Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. “I think people will ask the question of if it’s truly in America’s interests to give aid to countries who are not our allies, who are not our friends, and who do things that conflict with our values or interests.”

On the other side, Rubio has taken a more adventurous approach to protecting America’s interests, applauding Obama’s decision to intervene in Libya, but arguing it didn’t go far enough. Rubio thought regime change should have always been the explicit U.S. goal in Libya. “This resolution should also state that removing Moammar Qadhafi from power is in our national interest and therefore should authorize the President to accomplish this goal,” Rubio wrote at the time.

“There’s a distinction between Paul and Rubio on the issues they’ve chosen to focus on,” Heritage’s Carafano says. “Paul has spent a lot more time focusing on some of the privacy and civil liberties issues, whereas if you listen to Senator Rubio he’s focused a lot more on the geopolitical issues. It’s more a question of focus.”

Few elections are actually won or lost on foreign policy. The 2008 Democratic primary was an anomaly, as it was fought almost entirely on the question of the justification for the war in Iraq. It’s unlikely that future GOP battles will rest solely on these questions, but there’s one issue that’s sure to be pressing for candidates in the future: Afghanistan.

Presidential contenders and those vying for the ideological future of the GOP more generally will have to contend with the plans that Obama has for Afghanistan. Obama has explicitly desired a drawdown of troops for a long time, but difficulties that have arisen after U.S. troops have left Iraq may make that a more potent topic.

“Afghanistan will be an issue in 2015 and 2016,” Preble says, “so at some point every person trying to win the Republican nomination is going to have to take a stand. ... It will come down to endorsing or rejecting the withdrawal plan laid down by President Obama. We will draw down troops to 9,800; the question is will we draw down to zero or close to zero.”

These issues matter now, and they will continue to matter into the future. A 2016 Republican standard-bearer will need to articulate a clear and concise foreign and security policy, and leading Republicans will articulate differing visions about some of the most important issues. And while Republicans are much more united on these issues than the media likes to portray them to be, there will be fissures that voters will need to navigate.

The wake of the Bush years and a wave of legislators more skeptical of government power has put the Republican Party at a crossroads. Obama's disastrous foreign policy has re-established the GOP advantage on the issue and there are different visions on how to exploit that. The 2016 election may not hinge on foreign policy issues alone, but the Republicans vying for the nomination have an incredible opportunity to set the direction of the United States.