

# The Washington Times

## GOP's libertarian wing sees opportunity to push for less intervention

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The debate over whether the U.S. should launch airstrikes against Syria is testing the willingness of rank-and-file Republicans to get involved in another military conflict and giving the party's libertarian wing a chance to push the party toward adopting a less interventionist approach to foreign policy.

Sen. Rand Paul and other GOP lawmakers in both chambers have challenged the Obama administration's call for an attack against Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime — putting them at odds with House GOP leaders and some of the leading Republicans voices on foreign affairs issues in the Senate, who have lined up behind the president.

"I think there is a reasonable argument that the world may be less stable because of this and that it may not deter any chemical weapons attack," Mr. Paul, Kentucky Republican, said Tuesday during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing. "I haven't had one person come up to me and say they are for this war. Not one person."

Rep. Justin Amash, Michigan Republican, delivered a similar message during a town hall tour across his district, saying via Twitter that his constituents are sending him a clear message: "Do not get us into a war in Syria."

"I can't recall an issue this lopsided," Mr. Amash said.

Congress last authorized the use of military force in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that led to almost 3,000 deaths on American soil and generated strong public support for military action in Afghanistan and then Iraq.

Indeed, no Republicans opposed the 2001 resolution authorizing President George W. Bush to use force against "those responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks" — paving the way for military operations in Afghanistan. A single Republican in the Senate and just a half-dozen

Republicans in the House voted against the Bush administration and the authorization of the use of force in Iraq in 2002. Democrats also strongly supported both resolutions.

Since then, public support for the wars has plummeted, and Republicans have shouldered most of the political blame.

Along the way, Democrats won the Senate in the 2006 election and two years later Barack Obama won the White House, after touting his early opposition to the Iraq War.

"The party has paid a price politically for going in one direction, while the public is going in the opposite direction," said Christopher A. Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian-leaning think tank.

Polls now show that most Americans oppose missile strikes against Syria and that most Republicans, as well as Democrats and independents, oppose the idea.

"It's not just libertarian GOP who are skeptical," said KT McFarland, who served as deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs under President Reagan. "I suspect a majority of GOP members who are Iraq and Afghan vets want to know what the objectives are."

In announcing their support for a military strike, House Republican leaders acknowledged Tuesday that they face "an uphill battle to pass a resolution."

The Obama administration started talking of military action after the Assad regime was accused of carrying out a chemical weapons attack against its own citizens in the suburbs of Damascus. But Mr. Obama has struggled to build international support for military action and now wants Congress to support a plan that he says will not put troops on the ground in Syria.

Sens. John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, both Republicans, support a military response and have warned that there would be dire consequences for the country if lawmakers did not approve some sort of military action.

William A. Galston of the Brookings Institution said Republicans are wrestling over the future of the party in the same way that they did more than six decades ago when supporters of isolationist Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio clashed with supporters of retired Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower over foreign policy before the 1952 presidential election won by Eisenhower.

"Rand Paul's brand of libertarianism is reminiscent of Taft, and the debate over Syria offers him a golden opportunity to articulate his governing philosophy before a national audience," Mr. Galston wrote Tuesday.

Nick Gillespie, editor in chief of Reason.com, the largest libertarian news website, said the debate gives the libertarian wing of the party a chance to question the foreign policy that started under Mr. Bush and continued under Mr. Obama.

"The intra-GOP rift over Syria showcases the growing power of the libertarian wing of the Republican Party and its ability to tap deeply into public opinion in a way that neither mainstream Democrats or hawkish Republicans can," Mr. Gillespie said, complimenting Mr. Paul and Mr. Amash for their opposition to intervention. "The libertarian wing of the Republican Party will come out of this stronger and more in touch with the vox populi."