



The Battle For the GOP's Foreign Policy Soul

Sean Hannity and Bret Stephens can duke it out all they want over nativism or neoconservatism in foreign policy, but their world will soon be over.

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When I saw that Fox News's Sean Hannity and the *Wall Street Journal's* Bret Stephens were engaged in a nasty public spat over Donald Trump, it reminded me of what Henry Kissinger allegedly said of the contestants in the Iran-Iraq war: "It's a pity they can't both lose." In the Hannity-Stephens war, they both might.

Hannity and Stephens reflect two of the foreign policy paths Republicans could take in Trump's wake. But there is at least one other approach, one that rejects both Trump and Hannity's nativism and xenophobia, and Stephens' enthusiasm for having the U.S. military fight lots of foreign wars. If the GOP seems poised to go down that third path, expect Hannity and Stephens to put aside their differences and team up to stop it.

What Everyone Is Talking About

Trump's foreign policy views, which he expanded upon during his remarks in Youngstown, Ohio, last week, revolve chiefly around fear of, and hostility toward, immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants. This has been a centerpiece of his campaign from day one. Trump is also publicly disdainful of foreign trade, even as he has benefited from it both in his business and personal life.

Lastly, Trump is skeptical of some foreign wars, though he seems mostly a skeptic of the *ways* these wars have been fought under George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Although he claims to have opposed the Iraq war, for example, he mostly regrets that Bush and Obama didn't plan to leave U.S. soldiers in Iraq to take Iraq's oil. (*How we would have done that is a bit murky.*)

Stephens finds Trump's isolationism maddening, and profoundly inconsistent with Republican Party doctrine. Whereas Trump was, at best, a tepid opponent of *some* of the United States' wars

over the past 15 years, Stephens has supported all of them, plus a few that the U.S. military didn't fight. But he and other Never Trumpers seem to think it will all pass—or that it should, if only GOP leaders reject Trumpism and embrace the interventionism of the Bush years.

The fullest expression of this mindset came from the Hoover Institution's Russell Wald, who blasted Trump for his “undisciplined foreign policy thinking,” and fretted that his “positions have so disfranchised the Republican national security community” that it might lead to “a permanent exodus of many of these professionals.” To prevent that from happening, Wald urges House Speaker Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell to “privately [convene] the Never Trump foreign policy establishment before November to assure them their voice is needed, . . . and [that] they will still have a home with Republicans irrespective of November's outcome.”

Among the specific foreign policy positions Wald's “traditional” Republican Party would espouse include opposing the nuclear deal with Iran and arming the Ukrainian opposition against Russia, in addition to free trade. Whether support for an open-ended war in Iraq will be a litmus test for this group remains to be seen, but it should be noted that many Never Trumpers were early advocates for that war, and an even larger number believe it was a mistake for the U.S. military to have left Iraq once we were there. As noted above, Trump also ascribes to the myth that the surge rescued Iraq from chaos, which would appear to contradict his professed opposition to nation-building.

Here's a Third Way

A third path for U.S. foreign policy would embrace global engagement in the form of trade and immigration, expect that the United States would remain the world's leading country by virtue of its wealth and vibrant culture, and maintain a strong military for defense. But this alternative approach would use the U.S. military sparingly, favoring the prudence and restraint that characterized U.S. foreign policy for most of the nation's history.

Having learned from our bitter experiences in Iraq and Libya, it would reject the types of regime-change wars that Stephens (and Hannity, in an earlier day) advocates. It would support diplomacy that advances America's interests, including through multilateral agreements that prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. It would not pick fights with major powers over matters that are of vital interest to them but tangential interest to the United States (at best). It would also not countenance counterterrorism measures that include torture, deliberate killing of innocent civilians, and immigration bans “extreme vetting.”

This is the general approach espoused by the two former Republican governors running for president, Gary Johnson and William Weld. The Libertarian Party ticket, the only third party likely to appear on the ballot in all 50 states, is almost certain to surpass the LP's vote totals in any prior presidential election. This isn't merely a function of the historically high unpopularity of the two major-party candidates, but also because Johnson and Weld's fiscally conservative,

socially tolerant views track with a sizable share of the electorate. Their skepticism of foreign wars, as juxtaposed against Clinton's hawkish track record and Trump's intemperate rhetoric and dictatorial tendencies, has likely further boosted their prospects.

The U.S. military is the most capable in the world, by a wide margin. But that doesn't mean that it can or should fight every fight, in every corner of the world. U.S. policymakers must choose, and must signal to other countries around the world the instances in which the United States is likely to remain on the sidelines. Only then will other countries take more responsibility for defending themselves and their interests.

Four years hence, a more mainstream politician than Trump could embrace a less interventionist foreign policy than we've followed for the past few decades. Such a figure could emerge from within either of the two major parties, but restraint would seem to fit more neatly within the GOP. A party that is generally dubious of the U.S. government's ability to do good works here at home should be similarly skeptical of that same government's ability to do good abroad.

The Times They Are A-Changin'

If Trump loses in November, which the betting markets and more sophisticated analyses are predicting with increasing frequency, how the party adapts will depend entirely upon who controls the narrative. Trump fans will blame the party leadership for failing to support the candidate. And the Never Trumpers. And the media. And, possibly, the candidate himself. But they won't question the views he espoused.

Never Trumpers, meanwhile, will blame Trump, claiming that their preferred candidate, e.g. Marco Rubio or Jeb Bush, would have won decisively over a candidate as vulnerable as Hillary Clinton. Some among them might also point to mainline Christian church-goers' less-than-enthusiastic embrace of Trump. A more reliable social conservative who also espoused traditionally hawkish positions on Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, the story will go, would have won easily.

But the decline of white Christian churches may explain why once-reliable vote-getting strategies (e.g. "God, guns, and gays") no longer work so well. Meanwhile, the hawks' claim that a more thoroughly hawkish standard-bearer would have prevailed in November will bump up against the awkward truth that Trump hasn't come off sounding like a '60s-era peacenik, what with his loose talk of using nuclear weapons and his apparent enthusiasm for waging war to take other countries' oil.

What might have been true in 2016 will be less true in 2020. The most reliably interventionist constituency in America is being slowly replaced in the electorate by those least likely to sport hawkish views. The formative historical events in the lives of the Greatest Generation were World War II and the early Cold War. For the Baby Boomers, there is Vietnam. For the millennials, there is Iraq.

Four years hence, the electorate will be less religious, less white (and therefore less open to Trump's nativism), and more millennial (and thus skeptical of the Never Trumpers' enthusiasm for fighting foreign wars). That would seem to provide an opening for a third way on foreign policy, one that pleases neither Sean Hannity nor Bret Stephens.

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