

# Prospect

## Neocons vs. Non-Interventionists: Let the Games Begin!

*The GOP foreign-policy establishment begins drawing ideological lines in the sand.*

By: Matthew Duss- August 9, 2013

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The intraparty fight among Republicans over foreign policy escalated further this week when former House Speaker and presidential candidate Newt Gingrich said that it was time to take stock of failed U.S. military interventions over the past decade, and acknowledge key anti-interventionist critics as important voices within the party.

Gingrich told the *Washington Times* in an interview he still considers himself a neoconservative, but said that “at some point, even if you are a neoconservative, you need to take a deep breath to ask if our strategies in the Middle East have succeeded.” Questioning the approach of exporting democracy through the barrel of a gun, Gingrich went on, “I think it would be healthy to go back and war-game what alternative strategies would have been better, and I like Ted Cruz and Rand Paul because they are talking about this.”

Gingrich’s comments are less interesting because of his reconsideration of the Iraq war—by my count, this marks the third time he’s changed his mind about it, and in any case, a majority of Americans long ago concluded that the war wasn’t worth the cost—and more because of what they say about the rising challenge to neoconservatives’ dominance of GOP foreign policymaking by hardline noninterventionists like Rand Paul. Gingrich may be an opportunist, but he’s a shrewd one.

Another sign that the center of gravity in GOP foreign policy is shifting came when Texas senator Ted Cruz, who many suspect is preparing for a presidential run, used an interview in *Time* to try and establish a middle ground. “Right now there is a divide, say, between the views of John McCain on the one hand and the views of Rand Paul on the other,” Cruz said. “I like and respect both men, and I would say that my views are somewhere in the middle.”

As I wrote here in the *Prospect* back in May, one of the surest signs that a fight was on within the GOP’s foreign-policy ranks was the fact that the American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—the neoconservative mother ship—had launched the new American Internationalism Project. In the words of its two chairs, former Senators John Kyl and Joe Lieberman, the project was established to push back against “neo-isolationist policies—demands for retreat from the world clothed in the language of fiscal prudence and disinterested realism”—an unmistakable shot at Senator Paul.

“When did minding our own business become a dangerous idea?”

Justin Logan, the director of foreign-policy studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, thinks the “isolationist” charge is inaccurate and misleading. “When did minding our own business become a dangerous idea?” Logan wrote in *Politico*. “When you start hearing about the scary isolationists who might cause a replay of World War II, remember three things: Isolationists don’t exist in modern America; the term is a slur, not a descriptor; and the people using the term are usually trying to hide their own ideology and delegitimize their opponents.”

Interestingly, Logan’s view that the “isolationist” label is inaccurate has some support from another non-libertarian conservative, *National Review*’s Jonah Goldberg. “Isolationist,” Goldberg wrote the previous day in the *Los Angeles Times*, “is the term a host of commentators on the left and right are using to describe [Rand] Paul and his ideas. Even the inestimable Charles Krauthammer sees in Paul the ‘return of the most venerable strain of conservative foreign policy—isolationism.’” Goldberg acknowledged that “the GOP is going to have a big foreign policy debate—and it should (as should the Democrats). I’m just not sure bandying around the I-word will improve or illuminate that debate very much.”

Note here that Goldberg is a fellow at ... the American Enterprise Institute (as was Gingrich until he ran for president in 2011). So not only is this now an intraparty argument, it’s also apparently an intra-AEI argument.

“Part of what’s going on here reflects different thinking about whom the GOP base is,” says Heather Hurlburt, executive director of the progressive National Security Network. “Muscular Republican internationalism drew in generations of hyphenated Americans, who found in the confluence of democracy talk and frequent military interventions a way to engage with the Old World while feeling confident in the superiority of the new. But if the party now settles on a strategy of raising turnout among voters who no longer identify as hyphenated, and indeed are defined by cultural anxieties, concern for the fate of Belfast and Bosnia, let alone Bangladesh or Syria, is at best a distraction.”

While Gingrich’s comments tell us which way he thinks the wind is blowing, Hurlburt says it’s best not to read too deeply into them. “Gingrich renouncing some of his previous beliefs suggests he thinks there is political juice to be squeezed here,” she says. “But that isn’t the same as believing Paul’s more extreme views—no U.N., no humanitarian aid—will come to be defining GOP positions.”

While it’s a good thing that the neoconservative dominance of GOP foreign policymaking is under threat, progressives probably shouldn’t imagine that they have a true ally in Paul. While he may be good on issues like domestic surveillance and drones, it’s difficult to square his vision of a severely downsized foreign policy with the progressive view of engaged U.S. leadership that seeks to strengthen a rules-based international order. And while there’s some chance that the GOP could come out of this with a reasonably sane approach to foreign policy, we probably shouldn’t hold our breath. At the very least, though, it’s going to be fun to watch.