

The Star-Ledger

McCain and Graham: Two wacko birds caught out on a limb

By: Paul Mulshine – March 21, 2013

The 10-year anniversary of the Iraq War has brought us a lot of postmortems. But no one summed it up better than Sen. Lindsey Graham during an appearance last week at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference.

"I've never seen our friends more afraid or our enemies more emboldened," the South Carolina senator said.

He certainly got that right. Ten years of American intervention has made a complete mess of the Mideast. That's obvious to any thinking person. Unfortunately, Graham does not fit into that category. He meant that as an argument for even more intervention. As of Tuesday, he'd found his target: Syria. After what was reported as a chemical weapons attack in the civil war there, Graham was eager to invade.

"Absolutely, you've got to get on the ground," he said in an interview after issuing a statement calling for President Obama to begin air strikes on the Syrian government and arm the Syrian opposition.

Also signing the statement was Arizona Sen. John McCain, the same John McCain who recently referred to some of his Republican colleagues as "wacko birds" for questioning the power of the president to use lethal drones inside America's borders.

When it comes to wackos, this outburst shows Graham and McCain to be birds of a feather. For one thing, at the moment they made that statement it was unclear whether that chemical weapons attack was initiated by the government or by the very guerrillas they're seeking to aid — or even whether it occurred at all.

Never mind. Any reason to invade is a good reason.

"Under what circumstances would Lindsey Graham oppose sending U.S. troops into a conflict?" asked Christopher Preble when I called him yesterday. "I can't think of any."

Preble is a former naval officer who is a defense expert with the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington. He appeared on a panel at CPAC on military spending with three neoconservatives who were all critical of recent cuts in the defense budget.

Those three spoke first and received only a tepid response from the conservative crowd as they called for ever-more warfare in ever-more spots around the globe. Batting cleanup, Preble hit a home run when he argued that the other three were in favor not of defense but of "nation-building."

"There's a lot of opposition to nation-building," said Preble.

There certainly was at CPAC. In prior years, speakers could always get applause by proposing some invasion somewhere. No more. The straw poll for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination was won by the guy who inspired McCain's "wacko bird" comment, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul.

Paul made it clear that he wants the United States to stay out of military adventures overseas, a view caricatured by the neocons as "isolationist." Not at all, said Preble. "What the public wants is not isolationism, but simply not being responsible for the whole world at one time," he said.

That certainly seems to have been the verdict in last year's presidential campaign. Foreign policy was not Mitt Romney's friend. His call for arming the Syrian rebels went nowhere.

As for Graham and McCain, they have a hard time even figuring out who those rebels are. The side they want us to arm includes both al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood. "It's a horrible situation," said Preble. "But do I believe we should have 150,000 people on the ground to broker a civil war?"

He doesn't. Nor should Obama. Should the Assad regime fall, the neocons would turn on him just as they did after the fall of the Egyptian and Libyan regimes. At first, the neocons credited the uprisings to the "Arab Spring" inspired by Bush's Iraq adventure.

But when the new regimes turned out to be friendly to the radicals who put them in power, the neocons promptly blamed Obama for helping to topple the very dictators they'd been railing against.

Now McCain and Graham want to repeat the exercise. But the party they're trying to lead isn't following, said Preble.

"Somebody asked me if John McCain is becoming even more unhinged. Has he gotten even more out of the mainstream?" he said. "No, the mainstream has changed. The pendulum has swung away from him."

It won't be swinging back anytime soon — at least not if the Republicans ever expect to win another national election.