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Mitt Romney's Neocon War Cabinet

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It's safe to say that foreign policy was not the strong suit of this year's contenders for the GOP presidential nomination. Rick Perry labeled the Turkish government "Islamic terrorists." Newt Gingrich referred to Palestinians as "invented" people. Herman Cain called Uzbekistan "Ubeki-beki-beki-beki-stan-stan" and memorably blanked when asked what he thought of NATO's incursion into Libya. Michele Bachmann pledged to close the US embassy in Iran, which hasn't existed since 1980. Rick Santorum gave a major foreign policy speech at a Jelly Belly factory in California.

Yet though the candidates and their views were often hard to take seriously, their statements on foreign policy reflected a more disturbing trend in the GOP. Despite facing a war-weary public, the candidates—with the exception of Ron Paul, an antiwar libertarian, and Jon Huntsman, a moderate internationalist—positioned themselves as unapologetic war hawks. That included Mitt Romney, marginally more polished than his rivals but hardly an expert. Given Romney's well-established penchant for flip-flopping and opportunism, it's difficult to know what he really believes on any issue, including foreign affairs (the campaign did not respond to a request for comment). But a comprehensive review of his statements during the primary and his choice of advisers suggests a return to the hawkish, unilateral interventionism of the George W. Bush administration should he win the White House in November.

Romney is loath to mention Bush on the campaign trail, for obvious reasons, but today they sound like ideological soul mates on foreign policy. Listening to Romney, you'd never know that Bush left office bogged down by two unpopular wars that cost America dearly in blood and treasure. Of Romney's forty identified foreign policy advisers, more than 70 percent worked for Bush. Many hail from the neoconservative wing of the party, were enthusiastic backers of the Iraq War and are proponents of a US or Israeli attack on Iran. Christopher Preble, a foreign policy expert at the Cato Institute, says, "Romney's likely to be in the mold of George W. Bush when it comes to foreign policy if he were elected." On some key issues, like Iran, Romney and his team are to the right of Bush. Romney's embrace of the neoconservative cause—even if done cynically to woo the right—could turn into a policy nightmare if he becomes president.

If we take the candidate at his word, a Romney presidency would move toward war against Iran; closely align Washington with the Israeli right; leave troops in Afghanistan at least until 2014 and refuse to negotiate with the Taliban; reset the Obama administration's "reset" with Russia; and pursue a Reagan-like military buildup at home. The *Washington Monthly* dubbed Romney's foreign policy vision the "more enemies, fewer friends" doctrine, which is chillingly reminiscent of the world Obama inherited from Bush.

In March the Rev. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention told the Romney campaign it could win over "recalcitrant conservatives," reported the *Washington Post*, by "previewing a few Cabinet selections: Santorum as attorney general, Gingrich as ambassador to the United Nations and John Bolton as secretary of state." That suggestion, which might seem ludicrous, not to mention terrifying, is more plausible than one might think.

In December Gingrich pledged at a forum sponsored by the Republican Jewish Coalition that he would appoint Bolton to run Foggy Bottom. But the mustachioed *über*-hawk, who was a controversial under secretary of state for arms control and UN ambassador in the Bush administration, endorsed Romney instead. Bolton has since campaigned energetically for him, serving as a key surrogate on national security issues. "Many conservatives hope that [will] include accepting a senior national security post in a Romney administration," wrote Jennifer Rubin, a neoconservative blogger for the *Post*.

Few advisers personify the pugnacity of Romney's foreign policy team better than Bolton. He has been a steadfast opponent of international organizations and treaties and seems never to have met a war he didn't like. Shortly before the invasion of Iraq, he told Israeli officials that Syria, Iran and North Korea would be the next US targets. Over the past few years Bolton has been an outspoken proponent of an Israeli attack on Iran. "Mitt Romney will restore our military, repair relations with our closest allies and ensure that no adversary—including Iran—ever questions American resolve," Bolton said when endorsing Romney. "John's wisdom, clarity and courage are qualities that should typify our foreign policy," Romney responded.

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Romney knew little about foreign policy when he ran for president in 2008. An internal dossier of John McCain's presidential campaign said at the time that "Romney's foreign affairs resume is extremely thin, leading to credibility problems." After being branded as too liberal by conservative GOP activists four years ago, Romney aligned himself with Bolton and other neocons in 2012 to protect his right flank. Today there's little daylight between the candidate and his most militant advisers. "When you read the op-eds and listen to the speeches, it sounds like Romney's listening to the John Bolton types more than anyone else," says Brian Katulis, a senior fellow for national security at the Center for American Progress. (The Romney campaign's openly gay foreign policy spokesman, Richard Grenell, who had been an indefatigable defender of Bolton as the latter's PR flack in the Bush years, was forced to resign after harsh attacks by anti-gay conservatives.)

Bolton is one of eight Romney advisers who signed letters drafted by the Project for a New American Century, an influential neoconservative advocacy group founded in the 1990s, urging the Clinton and Bush administrations to attack Iraq. PNAC founding member Paula Dobriansky, leading advocate of Bush's ill-fated "freedom agenda" as an official in the State Department, recently joined the Romney campaign full time. Another PNAC founder, Eliot Cohen, counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from 2007 to 2009, wrote the foreword to the Romney campaign's foreign policy white paper, which was titled, perhaps not coincidentally, "An American Century." Cohen was a tutor to Bush administration neocons. Following 9/11, he dubbed the war on terror "World War IV," arguing that Iraq, being an "obvious candidate, having not only helped Al Qaeda, but...developed weapons of mass destruction," should be its center. In 2009 Cohen urged the Obama administration to "actively seek the overthrow" of Iran's government.

The Romney campaign released the white paper and its initial roster of foreign policy advisers in October, to coincide with a major address at The Citadel. The cornerstone of Romney's speech was a gauzy defense of American exceptionalism, a theme the candidate adopted from another PNAC founder and Romney adviser, Robert Kagan. The speech and white paper were long on distortions—claiming that Obama believed "there is nothing unique about the United States" and "issued apologies for America" abroad—and short on policy proposals. The few substantive ideas were costly and bellicose: increasing the number of warships the Navy builds per year from nine to fifteen (five more than the service requested in its 2012 budget), boosting the size of the military by 100,000 troops, placing a missile defense system in Europe and stationing two aircraft carriers near Iran. "What he articulated in the Citadel speech was one of the most inchoate, disorganized, cliché-filled foreign policy speeches that any serious candidate has ever given," says Steve Clemons, a senior fellow at the New America Foundation.

Romney's team is notable for including Bush aides tarnished by the Iraq fiasco: Robert Joseph, the National Security Council official who inserted the infamous "sixteen words" in Bush's 2003 State of the Union message claiming that Iraq had tried to buy enriched uranium from Niger; Dan Senor, former spokesman for the hapless Coalition Provisional Authority under Paul Bremer in Iraq; and Eric Edelman, a top official at the Pentagon under Bush. "I can't name a single Romney foreign policy adviser who believes the Iraq War was a mistake," says Cato's Preble. "Two-thirds of the American people do believe the Iraq War was a mistake. So he has willingly chosen to align himself with that one-third of the population right out of the gate."

Shortly after McCain's 2008 defeat, Kagan, Edelman, Senor and *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol launched the Foreign Policy Initiative, a neocon successor to PNAC. FPI's mission has been to keep the Bush doctrine alive in the Obama era—supporting a troop increase in Afghanistan and opposing a 2014 withdrawal; advocating a 20,000-troop residual force in Iraq; backing a military strike and/or regime change in Iran; promoting military intervention in Syria; urging a more confrontational posture toward Russia; and opposing cuts in military spending. Three of FPI's four board members are advising Romney.

Edelman, having worked for Dick Cheney in both Bush administrations, is Romney's link to Cheneyworld. (Edelman suggested to Cheney's chief of staff, Scooter Libby, the idea of leaking the identity of CIA agent Valerie Plame to undermine former ambassador Joe Wilson for his *New York Times* op-ed detailing the Bush administration's falsified Iraq-Niger connection.) As ambassador to Turkey in 2003, Edelman failed to persuade Ankara to support the Iraq War. Turkish columnist Ibrahim Karagul called him "probably the least-liked and trusted American ambassador in Turkish history." Edelman later moved to the Defense Department, where in 2007 he became infamous for scolding Hillary Clinton when she asked how the Pentagon was planning its withdrawal from Iraq. He's one of nearly a dozen of Romney advisers who have urged that the United States consider an attack Iran.

Senor is best known for his disastrous stint in Iraq under Bremer, when the United States disbanded the Iraqi Army and tried to privatize the economy. In his book on Iraq, Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the *Washington Post* wrote of Senor, "His efforts to spin failures into successes sometimes reached the point of absurdity." Senor is particularly close to the Israeli right, co-writing the 2009 book *Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle*, which reads like an extended investment brochure. He now serves as a conduit between Romney and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "Mitt-Bibi will be the new Reagan-Thatcher," Senor tweeted after the *New York Times* ran a story about the close friendship of the two men, which dates to the late 1970s.

A mixture of domestic politics (trying to make Obama appear weak and courting conservative elements of the Jewish vote) and neocon ideology has led Romney to call for everything short of war on Iran. "Either the ayatollahs will get the message, or they will learn some very painful lessons about the meaning of American resolve," he wrote in a March 5 *Washington Post* op-ed.

Romney has been similarly hawkish on military spending, another neocon priority. His plan to spend a minimum of 4 percent of GDP on the Pentagon would increase its budget by more than \$200 billion in 2016, a 38 percent hike over Obama's budget, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. "Romney's proposal to embark on a second straight decade of escalating military spending would be the first time in American history that war preparation and defense spending had increased as a share of overall economic activity for such an extended period," wrote Merrill Goozner in the *Fiscal Times*. "When coupled with the 20 percent cut in taxes he promises, it would require shrinking domestic spending to levels not seen since the Great Depression—before programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid began." Such cuts, Goozner noted, "would likely throw the U.S. economy back into recession."

Since the 2010 election, military spending has been a topic of great debate on the right. Fiscal conservatives like Grover Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform and the Cato Institute have urged Congress to consider serious Pentagon cuts. "Department of Defense spending, in particular, has been provided protected status that has isolated it from serious scrutiny and allowed the Pentagon to waste billions in taxpayer money," twenty-three conservative leaders, led by Norquist, wrote to Congressional Republicans in

November 2010. “Simply advocating more ships, more troops and more weapons isn’t a viable path forward,” Huntsman echoed during the primary campaign. That view met a furious pushback from the Defending Defense coalition, a joint project of FPI, the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and the Heritage Foundation, which mirrored Romney’s plan to increase military spending drastically. “When the Soviet Union disappeared, a lot of people on the right failed to notice,” Norquist said on Capitol Hill last year [see Robert Dreyfuss, “GOP Fires at the Pentagon,” February 14, 2011].

Romney hasn’t said what he’d do with a bigger military or how he’d pay for it. But it’s safe to assume the money will go toward preserving or enlarging the national security state. Romney’s counterterrorism adviser since 2007 has been former CIA operative Cofer Black, another controversial figure from the Bush era. The *Daily Beast* calls Black “Romney’s trusted envoy to the dark side” and “the campaign’s in-house intelligence officer.” In 2007 Romney sourced Black in refusing to classify waterboarding as torture (and also said he wanted to “double Guantánamo”). As head of the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center following 9/11, Black supervised the agency’s “extraordinary rendition” program, which illegally transported alleged terrorists to secret detention centers abroad, where they were tortured. “After 9/11 the gloves come off,” Black infamously testified before Congress. He joined the private security firm Blackwater in 2005, specializing in intelligence gathering for governments and business. More recently, the *Daily Beast* reported, Romney has relied on Black for security assessments of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt and Iran, including Iran’s nuclear program.

The hardliners on Romney’s team have sidelined moderates like Mitchell Reiss, the candidate’s principal foreign policy adviser in 2008 and former director of policy planning at the State Department under Colin Powell. In December Romney disavowed Reiss’s call to negotiate with the Taliban, pledging to defeat the insurgency militarily (which few foreign policy experts believe is realistic) and criticizing the Obama administration’s plan to begin withdrawing troops next year. Romney also sided with the likes of Senor over Reiss by backing the Bush surge in Iraq and Obama’s escalation in Afghanistan. This black-and-white worldview is dangerously myopic, obsessed with military power and evil foes while ignoring complex challenges like Europe’s economic crisis and the Arab Spring. Romney and his chief advisers “see the world through a cold war prism that is totally out of touch with the realities of the twenty-first century,” Vice President Joe Biden said recently in a major foreign policy speech.

Romney’s case for election rests on his credentials as a competent businessman who can restructure the economy and government. Yet his choice of foreign policy advisers undercuts that sales pitch by elevating radical ideologues who want to spend profligately on unnecessary weapons and wars. If Romney wants to run a fiscally prudent and well-managed country, his GOP model should be Eisenhower, not Bush. But someone like Ike would never make it through a Republican primary today.

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This year's GOP primary was supposed to showcase a long-simmering party debate on foreign policy. "The hawkish consensus on national security that has dominated Republican foreign policy for the last decade is giving way to a more nuanced view," the *Times* reported last June. What was left of the moderate wing of the party was particularly excited about the campaign of Huntsman, Obama's former ambassador to China, who opposed the war in Afghanistan and advocated "a more judicious approach toward foreign entanglements." Huntsman advisers included realist Republicans like former George H.W. Bush national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, former Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and Council on Foreign Relations chair Richard Haass.

Yet Huntsman withered under blistering attacks from the neocons and other GOP standard-bearers, including Senators John McCain and Lindsay Graham. "I don't think you saw a whole lot of appetite in the party for his views on foreign policy," said Jamie Fly, executive director of the Foreign Policy Initiative. And Ron Paul's isolationist views didn't help him in the primaries, either. Indeed, Romney veered right in response to Bachmann, Cain, Gingrich, Perry and Santorum rather than left to appeal to Huntsman or Paul voters.

After the twin disasters of Iraq and Afghanistan, you'd think Republicans would be more skeptical of interventionism and the neocons more humbled. Yet the party's major neoconservative institutions, like FPI, AEI and Heritage, have pushed aggressively for US intervention in Libya, Iran and Syria. "How do you get out of this state of interminable war?" asks Lawrence Wilkerson, former chief of staff to Powell. "My party has not a clue. In fact, they want to deepen it, widen it and go further, on Chinese and Japanese dollars." Wilkerson says he was "astonished by how much the neocons seem to still have influence," and that he was "scared to death" about the prospect that people like McCain and Graham would have sway over foreign policy. I asked Cato's Preble why the neocons haven't lost more clout in GOP circles after the failures of the Bush years. "They've crafted this narrative around the surge, claiming Iraq was, in fact, a success," Preble says. "They've ridden that ever since."

Today there's a striking disconnect between the neocon establishment in Washington and the beliefs of GOP voters. Fifty-two percent of Republicans believe the war in Afghanistan is not worth fighting, an all-time high. Seventy-one percent of self-identified conservative voters are worried about the war's costs, and 57 percent agree that "the United States can dramatically lower the number of troops in Afghanistan without putting America at risk." "Where is this grassroots movement for open-ended US interventionism abroad?" asks Preble. "It doesn't exist. In fact, public sentiment is in the opposite direction." Yet only two GOP senators, Mike Lee and Rand Paul, voted in March to support an expedited timeline for withdrawal from Afghanistan. The likes of McCain and Graham, who advocate a longer US commitment there and elsewhere, continue to speak for the party establishment. (Another top Romney foreign policy adviser, Richard Williamson, who served as Bush's special envoy to Sudan, advised the McCain campaign in 2008.)

With the party base focused on other issues—only 1 percent of Republicans named Afghanistan as their top issue in the latest *Washington Post*/ABC News poll—the neocons have filled the vacuum. “There are more neoconservative think tanks than there are neoconservatives,” jokes Preble, whose boss at Cato, Ed Crane, calls them “a head without a body.” They have clearly overwhelmed the libertarians and realists. “The neoconservatives, I’ll concede, have a very good ground game,” says Preble. “They have a network of institutions in Washington that are very effective and vocal. They have a friendly audience in many of the editorial pages of the major newspapers and magazines. That gives them a significant leg up in terms of making these arguments.”

Elder statesmen from the George H.W. Bush administration like Powell and Scowcroft are much closer to Obama than to Romney. “The foreign policy experts who represent old-school, small-c conservatism and internationalism have been pushed out of the party,” says Heather Hurlbert, executive director of the center-left National Security Network. “Who in the Republican Party still listens to Brent Scowcroft?” Wilkerson says the likes of Powell and Scowcroft are “very worried about their ability to restore moderation and sobriety to the party’s foreign and domestic policies.” In 2012 Obama is running as Bush 41 and Romney as Bush 43.

Romney would like to make the 2012 election a replay of 1980, when Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter. Romney has attacked Obama’s “breathtaking weakness” and called him “America’s most feckless president since Carter.” Yet so far, Romney hasn’t been able to make this argument stick. Obama has been more hawkish than many liberals and conservatives would like to admit, and his main foreign policy triumph—the killing of Osama bin Laden—is easy to communicate. As a result, Obama has a seventeen-point advantage over Romney on foreign affairs and a seven-point advantage on terrorism. The public is also more supportive of Obama’s overall foreign policy worldview. A Pew poll last year found that Americans prefer peace through diplomacy over peace through military strength by 58 percent to 31 percent. A similar percentage believes the United States should compromise in order to work with allies rather than go it alone.

Some top Republicans are worried about Romney’s belligerent statements. “In foreign affairs the Republican candidates staked out dangerous ground,” conservative columnist Peggy Noonan wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* after the primaries unofficially ended. “They are allowing the GOP to be painted as the war party. They are ceding all non-war ground to the president, who can come forward as the sober, constrained, non-bellucose contender. Do they want that? Are they under the impression America is hungry for another war? Really? After the past 11 years?” Recent surveys of swing voters in Ohio and Florida by Third Way and Greenberg Quinlan Rosner confirm her fears. “Republicans strike many of these swing voters as too extreme; too aggressive; too quick to take dangerous actions without all the facts; and ‘too quick on the trigger,’” they reported.

Romney has already committed a string of foreign policy gaffes on the campaign trail. He was chided by House Speaker John Boehner for criticizing Obama while the president was abroad and widely panned for calling Russia “our No. 1 geopolitical foe” and

demanding that Obama release the transcripts of his conversations with foreign leaders. Peter Feaver, an adviser to Bush at the National Security Council, urged Romney to “walk back from reckless campaign promises.”

Yet Romney inexplicably continues to get the benefit of the doubt from leading pundits. A *Times* news article recently praised his “impressive bench of foreign policy advisers,” and *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof called them “credible, respected figures.” Aaron David Miller of the Woodrow Wilson Center similarly discounted Romney’s hawkish positions. “He’s articulating policies he wouldn’t follow,” Miller said. “Barring an extraordinary event like September 11, Romney will be much more moderate, much less reckless than George W. Bush.”

How can we be so sure? After the Bush administration, it’s best not to take anything for granted. Yes, Romney might not yet be a reliable neoconservative. The neocons, after all, have firm beliefs about the necessity of military interventionism, which they’re willing to defend even when unpopular. Romney, on the other hand, simply opposes whatever policy Obama pursues. Neoconservatism, for him, is an ideology of convenience. “I don’t think he has any North Star on foreign policy right now, other than whatever Obama is for, he’s on the other side of it,” says Clemons.

That said, Romney’s malleability is an advantage for his neocon advisers, giving them an opportunity to shape his worldview, as they did with Bush after 9/11. Four years after Bush left office in disgrace, Romney is their best shot to get back in power. If that happens, they’re likely to pursue the same aggressive policies they advocated under Bush. “I don’t think there’s been a deep rethink,” says Clemons. “I don’t think the neoconservatives feel chastened at all. As a movement, the true neoconservatives never, ever give up. They will be back.”