

The Dove in the Room

A new breed of anti-war Republican awaits its champion.

By [Jason Zengerle](#) Published Jun 3, 2011



Illustration by Mickey Duzyj

The good news for the GOP, where 2012 is concerned, is that the worsening economic outlook adds potency to attacks on President Obama over stimulus spending and unemployment. At the same time, in the fight over the deficit—a fight it started—its big idea, Congressman Paul Ryan’s plan to privatize Medicare, has become political kryptonite. Republicans need a new way to claim the responsibility mantle. As it happens, one such issue has been bubbling up from the party’s own membership: pragmatic isolationism.

From the House, where 87 Republicans voted for Dennis Kucinich’s resolution to end the military intervention in Libya, to the set of *Morning Joe*, whose titular host fulminates about “unwinnable wars,” conservatives are taming their inner hawks. In March, an Ipsos poll reported that 36 percent of Republicans favored cutting defense spending to bring down the federal deficit, just one percentage point fewer than the share preferring to wring the savings from Medicare and Medicaid. A Gallup survey after Osama bin Laden’s death had Republicans split (47 to 47) on whether the U.S. should withdraw from Afghanistan.

That some in the party of Robert Taft are staking out this ground isn’t so surprising. In a 1976 vice-presidential debate, Bob Dole famously branded the World Wars “Democrat wars”; as a candidate, George W. Bush declared, “I’m not so sure the role of the United States is to go around the world and say, ‘This is the way it’s got to be.’” Considering how Bush’s world-historical flip-flop on that issue turned out, it’s little wonder Republicans are coming around to his original way of thinking.

Even GOP presidential-primary voters generally opposed to isolationist arguments have reason to like them on electability grounds. The reliable Republican tactic of portraying the Democratic presidential candidate as a foreign-policy wimp will be ineffective against Obama, who's kept Gitmo open, doubled down on Afghanistan, and given the order to kill Osama bin Laden. He's no appeaser—but he might be vulnerable to a compelling foreign-policy argument coming from the other direction: Now that bin Laden's gone, why keep our troops overseas? The argument would resonate both within the party and with independents—62 percent of whom, according to Gallup, favor getting out of Afghanistan. What's more, saving the nearly \$6 billion a month the U.S. is spending on the Afghan War would be a way for Republicans to credibly address the budget deficit.

And yet there's no plausible Republican presidential nominee in the current field (i.e., someone not named Ron Paul) inclined to grab this opportunity. Mitt Romney has written a whole book, *No Apology*, attacking Obama as insufficiently hawkish. Tim Pawlenty has struck almost identical notes, telling the libertarians at the Cato Institute, who favor defense cuts, "I'm not for shrinking America's presence in the world." Jon Huntsman has hinted that he might position himself as the GOP's anti-war candidate should he jump in, but given that his tour as ambassador to China made him an instrument of Obama's foreign policy, he's poorly suited to capitalize on that stance.

There's one potential GOP presidential aspirant, however, who may be up to the task. Once an avowed neocon, this prominent Republican recently outlined a new foreign-policy doctrine notable for its sense of restraint: "We should only commit our forces when clear and vital American interests are at stake. Period ... We can't fight every war, we can't undo every injustice in the world." You can practically see the campaign slogan, emblazoned across a bus as it leads reporters on a wild-goose chase: "Come home, America. Vote Palin."