

Realist Roots

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The Republican Party would do well to reclaim its realist roots and cast a skeptical eye at counter-insurgency and nation-building operations. But if they wish to hang the Afghan albatross around President Obama's neck, they must first ask themselves how their own president, who supposedly staffed his administration with seasoned "realists" and vowed during his first presidential campaign not to engage in nation-building, wound up leveraging American and NATO lives, money and prestige on just such an endeavor.

~[Greg Scoblete](#)

Greg makes a pretty good case that Republicans ought to turn against nation-building schemes. They have no strong postwar tradition of supporting such things, and they don't seem to be particularly good when they try to administer them. Many Republicans did attack nation-building in the 1990s, and it has become customary to marvel at the sudden conversion of most Republicans to the cause of nation-building when Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq. The change in Republican attitudes was striking, but it confirmed that the complaints against Clinton's nation-building exercises were not exactly what they appeared to be. The main objection that Republicans had to nation-building was not that it was always impossible. Many of the same people who scoffed at nation-building in the Balkans were among the first to argue in 2002-03 that "we" had "done it before" after WWII. Most skeptics of nation-building on the right back then did not say that the United States should not attempt to remake other nations after our image. They were offended by using the military for "social engineering" because the military was not trained for it and because it was a distraction from the "real" threats that loomed on the horizon (by which they meant China, Iran, Russia, Iraq, etc.).

The most significant flaw in Republican foreign policy thinking over the last twenty years has been this obsession with those so-called "real" threats. The greatest foreign policy error Republicans made in the last generation was their almost universal support for invading Iraq. Most did not support it because they actually expected regional political transformation to result from the establishment of a "beacon" of democracy in the Near East, and most did not support it because they believed that constructing a functioning Iraqi state was possible or desirable. Some of the most vocal and ardent supporters of the invasion made these arguments, but these were not the arguments that swayed most Republicans. Most Republicans backed the invasion because they believed the incredible notion that Iraq's government at the time represented an intolerable national security threat that had to be eliminated, and many of them also believed the even more incredible notion that Hussein was sheltering members of Al Qaeda, and they believed this because "the President in wartime" had told them so. It was this hysterical exaggeration of a foreign threat and the accordingly excessive reaction that made the worst foreign policy blunder of the last 30 years possible, and it was that automatic deference to executive power that stifled so much of the vital skepticism that conservatives are supposed to value so highly. In the wake of all this, some prominent Republicans and conservatives have started making some unexpected criticisms of U.S. foreign policy, and the main mistake they have identified is...nation-building! As I have tried to argue before, hostility to nation-building is a pretty shaky foundation on which to establish a different kind of conservative foreign policy. Opposing nation-building is all very

well and good, and the instinct to oppose it is usually a good one, but unless Republicans sober up and begin assessing foreign threats calmly and reasonably this will simply lead to repeats of the Iraq experience: overly-ambitious missions based on irrational fears and faulty assumptions, and supported with insufficient resources.

Greg calls for the GOP to “reclaim its realist roots,” but as I was [discussing](#) last week the people that [Noah Millman](#) has called militarists continue to dominate the party and the realists appear to be an increasingly marginal faction that is dying off. The division over START ratification is one example that shows the fairly sharp generational split between the older realist national security hands such as Scowcroft and Baker and the younger, rising political leaders in the party. Put simply, there are almost no Republican supporters of a basic treaty governing nuclear arms control under the age of 60. On Iran, it is once again the militarists who seem to be gaining at the expense of realists, especially when so many realists long ago bought into the idea that an Iranian nuclear weapon is “unacceptable” and when such a prominent Republican realist as Richard Haass has succumbed to regime change fever.

If all that reclaiming “realist roots” accomplished was to persuade Republicans to turn against the war in Afghanistan entirely, or to settle for George Will’s preferred recipe for future blowback, what would have really been gained? It isn’t going to make them less hawkish on Iran policy, and it is hardly going to make them more skeptical about using force to solve international disputes. Indeed, rejecting a nation-building role in conflict zones will make the immediate costs and risks of military action lower than they would be otherwise. Far from making them less obsessed with the “threats” from Russia and China, it will allow them to reject the one policy where the cooperation or at least tolerance of both major powers is most obviously valuable, which will give them even greater incentives to stoke tensions with one or both.

In practice, if the GOP “reclaimed its realist roots” I wonder how much would change for the better. Republican realism sounds good by comparison with what we have had for the last decade, but most actual Republican realists, especially those in elected office, did little or nothing to challenge the endless hyping of foreign threats and the frequent recourse to military intervention abroad in the ’90s. Back in 1999, many of the defenders of the war against Yugoslavia were such Republican realists as Chuck Hagel and Richard Lugar. At the time, they supported yet another completely unnecessary war for the sake of the “credibility of NATO” and, of course, regional stability, which resulted in confirming the worst Russian fears about NATO expansion and significantly destabilizing the region with a massive refugee crisis and the spread of ethnic unrest into neighboring Macedonia. How many realists not affiliated with the Cato Institute expressed serious reservations about NATO expansion into Ukraine and Georgia before the August 2008 war? As sympathetic as I am to many realist arguments, and as much as I appreciate the efforts of the most sober realists to try to steer Republican foreign policy thinking in a constructive direction, until Republicans reject confrontational and aggressive foreign policy goals it will not matter very much if they adopt realist means and rhetoric.