



22 JUNE 2011

New Republicans swap their neo-cons for doves

CHRIS BERG



Perhaps one of the most striking attributes of the current Republican field is their dovishness.

Last week's forum for presidential candidates made clear scepticism about foreign interventionism isn't limited to the libertarians Ron Paul and Gary Johnson.

On Afghanistan, frontrunner Mitt Romney said, "I also think we've learned that our troops shouldn't go off and try and fight a war of independence for another nation". On the Middle East, Newt Gingrich opined that, "we need to think fundamentally about reassessing our entire strategy in the region".

Michele Bachmann cited the US defence secretary's view that America had no vital national interest in Libya, and Jon Huntsman – not at the forum, but now a candidate – also said that boots on foreign soil was not a necessary part of America's national security.

Mitt Romney has backed away from his position somewhat, presumably under the theory that a frontrunner must not hold unambiguous views.

And some of this newfound shyness in foreign policy is, obviously, based more on who is in the White House than the merits of military action. Partisans will be partisans.

But the shyness is not limited to Libya and Afghanistan, two conflicts which Barack Obama now owns. A forum at the Cato Institute last year revealed that the overwhelming majority of Republicans in Congress ("everyone") now think invading Iraq in 2003 was a mistake. You cannot chalk that up to simple hostility about a Democrat president.

So on Sunday John McCain attacked what he saw as the "isolation strand" of the Republican Party which had taken centre stage at the forum.

It's not fair to call this new attitude 'isolationism', but if it was, it'd be an isolationism driven by bitter experience rather than principle.

Nevertheless, isolationism is a cheap slight thrown at the Republicans who want simply to raise the minimum threshold for military intervention. After all, the biggest right-wing critics of America's recent wars have been libertarians. And their support for expanding free trade and immigration is hardly 'isolationist'.



It's a peculiar mindset that characterises opposition to invading foreign countries as a complete withdrawal from the world – as if there was no middle ground between bombing nations on the one hand, and cancelling trade and diplomatic relations with everybody on the other.

The absurdity of this view is even more obvious when you consider that one of those who has been most tarnished with the 'isolationist' label is Jon Huntsman – who also happens to be a former ambassador to China. Not a homebody.

So as *Washington Examiner* columnist Timothy Carney wrote last week: "what can 'isolationism' mean here other than 'opposition to war against Muslim nations'?"

At the very least, neo-conservatism – which has held sway over Republican thinking for the last decade in both its crude and intellectual forms – no longer has a clear champion.

Neo-conservatives reasonably argued that morality does not stop at the border. The United States could not pretend to be neutral on questions of tyranny and democracy even if favouring the former met a specific American geopolitical interest.

Nevertheless, nearly a decade of military involvement in Afghanistan and almost as long in Iraq has exposed the very real limits of neo-conservative thinking. One may be able to imagine a grand role for the United States exporting liberal democracy across the globe, but that role will hit the wall once the uncomfortable reality of protracted conflict is realised.

Many commentators have attributed the Republicans' foreign policy shift as simply a response to the cost of war; implying that military adventurism is still desirable, but a luxury for when the economy is doing well.

Nevertheless the new Republican dovishness suits the times in other ways too.

More than two years after the global financial crisis began, the competence and capacity of government action is under serious examination.

The program of bailouts and stimulus has been a dreary failure. The federal debt is crippling the recovery. America seems to be contemplating an era of decline, driven by a moribund economy and an ineffective government.

No surprise that anti-government sentiment has splashed over into foreign policy thinking. The Tea Party flirted with opposition to defence spending – an area of government which was supposed to be off-limits. In June 2011, the Tea Party may be in decline, but its scepticism about all government activity has penetrated the Republican mainstream. 56 per cent of registered Republicans now support reducing overseas military commitments, according to a Pew survey this year.

Across the political spectrum, support for the proposition that the United States should "mind its own business" has never been higher, and appears to be on a long term trend further upwards.

Yes, George W Bush came into office rejecting nation building. The new crop of Republicans urging modesty in international affairs could backflip just as spectacularly in office.

But the political environment in 2000 is vastly different to the political environment today. Ten years of continuous war has shaped Republican attitudes to conflict.

The Republican candidates are finally matching their desire for modesty in government with a desire for modesty in foreign affairs. Next time a president – of left or right – pushes for a new war, it would do them well to remember why.

Chris Berg is a Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs. Follow him at

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COMMENTS (34)

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smithe :

22 Jun 2011 5:35:02pm

After all that hard work stitching-up fake intelligence and pushing for war the Repugs suddenly get weak-kneed?

What hapened to staying the course? What happened to remaking the world?

They failed, that's what.

After a decade of wasted lives and treasure, the penny has finally dropped that they've achieved nothing.

Does this drive them to introspection? Does this lead them to question just why and how they screwed the pooch? Does this make them ask why it is that they allowed themselves to be led so easily into disaster by a bunch of crackpot triumphalist cretins? Does this motivate them to call those same cretins to account?

No Siree, not a bit of it.

They just about-face, wheel-out John Galt and start spinning a new brand of snake-oil: Small Government.

That's Small Government, Repug Style.

And that means lots of missiles, planes and aircraft carriers, but cuts to taxes, education, health, pensions, services, infrastructure and environmental expenditure and just about everything else.

It's enough to make you weep.

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GraemeF :

22 Jun 2011 4:29:00pm

Neo-conservatism has been replaced by 'whatever is opposite to the Democrats' which is very similar to the tactics of the opposition in Australia.

Whatever it takes is the only policy that the right wingers hold today while in opposition but once they get power they will be back to war mongering and demonising the poor, the disposed and the workers. Look at the Liberal politicians who are currently feigning concern for the welfare of refugees. Bloody hypocrits.

Don't forget we are still suffering because of the excesses of greedy bankers (all right wingers) who created the GFC because right wing politicians removed too many constraints.

- **tokoloshe :**

22 Jun 2011 3:18:45pm

"Next time a president – of left or right – pushes for a new war, it would do them well to remember why."

Maybe it is because of 'think' tanks like the IPA that always push for bigger military to keep the war machine sustainable??

eg. <http://www.abc.net.au/unleashed/97684.html>

- **Breach of peace :**

22 Jun 2011 2:15:48pm

What rot! The Fascist Republican Party that is not a republican party for a republic at all has been most obvious for the blind ever since 9/11 and well before that as well.

When you have the likes of Newt Gingrich and those like-minded who either belong to the evil and wicked Council on Foreign Relations, Tri-lateral Commission, Club of Rome and all those affiliated member corporations like like ABC News, Alcoa, American Express, AIG, Bank of America, Bloomberg, Boeing, BP, Chevron, Citigroup, Coca Cola, De Beers, Deutsche Bank, ExxonMobil, FedEx, Ford Motor, General Electric, GlaxoSmithKline, Google, Goldman Sachs, Haliburton, Heinz, Hess, IBM JP Morgan Chase, Kohlberg Kravis, Lehman Brothers, Lockheed Martin, McGraw-Hill, McKinsey, Merck, Merrill Lynch, Motorola, Nasdaq, News Corp, (Rupert Murdoch) Nike, Pepsi, Pfizer, Shell Oil, Sony Corporation of America, Tata Group, Time Warner, Total S.A, Toyota Motor North America, UBS, United Technologies, United States Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Trust Corporation, Verizon, Visa and many other transnational corporations and many members who are in the CIA who foster the ideology of keeping the military industrial complex protected and to promote 'resource wars' have agreed to the principles of the CFR's "Project for the New American Century' to create war for 100 years and to subjugate ALL nations, supposedly making ridiculous statements of fundamentally reassessing their strategy in the region'.

The US has a standing army of 716 military bases in 130 countries. They continually create wars and then continue to occupy the country they invaded so they are still 'occupiers'. The ideology is in real existence regardless of their lies or soft talk or soft diplomacy. The occupiers real intention is god... gas-oil-drugs and to control the 'other' resources like the \$1-2 trillion dollars of minerals in Afghanistan in the countries of occupation. the military is the bullyboy for the fascist US transnational corporations to impede, restrict or stop competition from other countries or corporations. That is why the US installs

and assists with military dictatorships worldwide. Google 'Standing Army' and figure it out for yourselves. To say that the US are 'isolationist is laughable to say the least!

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Politically Incorrect :

22 Jun 2011 2:12:27pm

"But the political environment in 2000 is vastly different to the political environment today. Ten years of continuous war has shaped Republican attitudes to conflict."

I would say its partly Clinton found a good balance for regulation with enough deregulation in the economy for it to flourish and managed to pay off the Regan/Bush Sr debt.

The Republicans inheareded a strong nation with a good reputation and squandered it (kind of like what Labor is doing right now).

Of course they didnt think they were wrong but payed lip service to it during the McCain/Obama election. Since then Obama has not really changed Government from Bush's era and the Republicans see their own actions from the outside looking in.

Now attention has been more focused on a runaway debt clock and big government the people sympathise with a Ron Paul alot more now.

Despite that I think the neo cons have enough power to keep Ron Paul away from the GOP nomination.

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ME :

22 Jun 2011 1:30:20pm

There's a bit of fast foot shuffling in this otherwise reasonable article. On the one hand, it acknowledges that there is an uncomfortable economic reality of protracted conflict and notes that this might have influenced the Republicans' foreign policy shift. Too right. But on the other, it fails to take this observation to its next logical step, which is to run it smack bang into the face of the IPA's favourite bit of dogma that they who tax least govern best. There was never a case for having it both ways. Too low rates of tax lead to weird distortions, such as governments resorting to borrowing the money they can't raise through taxation, or disguising government spending through tax expenditure measures. And the list of dodgy deals goes on. But eventually the economic rules are always going to catch up, no matter how attractive the short term looks. In the US case, the result is the unsustainable economic and financial morass it now finds itself in. The answer is not one of smaller government and cutting government expenditure because all that will do is further reduce the competence and capacity of governments to take action. What's needed is a more serious, gutsy and honest rethinking of taxation levels. I don't see how the current failed tax exhortations of the IPA are relevant to this debate.

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blax5 :

22 Jun 2011 1:28:06pm

Is this the change we can believe in?

Of course not, once they are in, they are subjected to the same forces that steer all Presidents. The only thing that will cause change is the one coming from within coupled with lack of money.

Is there a defence expert in this forum? Where will the next generation of drones be field tested if they leave Afghanistan? Maybe the Washington correspondent can ask the company who makes them or the candidates?

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pk :

22 Jun 2011 12:46:43pm

Yes I would also take this as political opportunism. A decade is plenty of time to change your views and attack Obama for military intervention, even if it stinks of hypocrisy.

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amphibious :

22 Jun 2011 11:42:57am

Every time the hue & cry about "isolationism" is raised, usually by the Sturm & Drang Repugs in the bi-annual electioneering, I fervently wish "If ONLY it were so!".

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Peter Anson :

22 Jun 2011 11:28:56am

"The new crop of Republicans urging modesty in international affairs could backflip just as spectacularly in office."

Says it all doesn't it? Hardly worth writing the article really. The US is a war machine and I cant see any change happening in my lifetime.

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Zaf :

22 Jun 2011 11:25:04am

[Next time a president – of left or right – pushes for a new war, it would do them well to remember why.]

Lawks, man! Everybody knows that the US engages in protracted low level conflicts for the contracting they yield. It's called the socialisation of loss (taxpayer dollars pay for the war, citizen soldiers die) and

the privatisation of profit.

Halliburton never came out of a war it didn't turn a profit on. Ponder it.

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TrevorN :

22 Jun 2011 11:21:08am

The GOP was responsible for starting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it was their policies (or lack of them) that caused the GFC. For them to stand back now and blame the Democrats for the financial and political mess the USA is in simply stinks of cheap political opportunism, and anyone who supports this sort of nonsense has absolutely no credibility whatsoever.

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Steve :

22 Jun 2011 11:19:36am

Wow, that was... relatively coherent. Well done Chris.

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will_r :

22 Jun 2011 11:03:30am

'Dove republicans.' Right.

I seem to recall GWB proclaiming 'compassionate conservatism', just before he slashed taxes for the rich, ensured local jobs fled offshore to china... and sent young reservists off to die for oil companies, when all they really wanted was a subsidised college education.

These 'dove republicans' are just the limp, cuddly mouthpieces of vile plutocrats. I'd honestly prefer Sarah Palin, who actually believes her crazy ideas are good for the country.

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Barbarians and Mass Murderers :

22 Jun 2011 10:57:12am

We ought ask what would Iraq or al Qaeda do or even the old USSR if they had the power of the USA. The Iraq led to horrific civilian casualties especially in sectarian violence but less much less than the Rwandan genocide and if Europe and the UN would have flooded the land with a few million security troops a massive surge and for years the carnage would be much less. Nazi Germany was occupied by five million troops at the end of WW2 including millions of Stalinist Communist often brutal occupiers.

- **You are mixed up :**

22 Jun 2011 10:40:15am

Actually, if you knew anything at all about American politics and American history, you'd know that the Republicans have long been the more isolationist, non-interventionist party when it comes to foreign affairs.

It was the Taft Republicans and others in the GOP who, for example, were most outspoken in their opposition to the interventionist, internationalist policies of Wilson, FD Roosevelt, Truman and other Democrats.

It was Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, for example, who thwarted the interventionist policies of the UK, France and Israel in Egypt in 1956.

But Democrats like Kennedy, Johnson, McNamara and others who took the USA into Indochina.

It was Truman, Marshall, Stevenson and Acheson who busied themselves in building NATO and propping up Europe and remobilising American military might after World War Two.

It was the much reviled Joe McCarthy and his supporters who most outspokenly opposed all that.

It was Nixon who went to China and who got the troops out of Vietnam.

It was Carter who got his nose bloodied in Iran.

Really. You need to check your facts.

- **Malcolm :**

22 Jun 2011 1:58:44pm

Absolutely correct and something I was going to post myself. Traditionally Republican policy has always been if not isolationist at the very least wary of foreign involvement. It has been the Democrats who were the exporters of US national aspirations.

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the yank :

22 Jun 2011 2:32:20pm

Republicans isolationist? Since when? Certainly not over the last 60 years. It was Eisenhower that got them into the Bay of Pigs and Viet Nam. Nixon that opened up ties with China. Reagan that started little wars all over the place, especially South America and Africa. Bush Sr. that invaded Iraq the first time and I hope I don't have to tell you about his son? Read more and read wider views.

■

Jump for joy :

22 Jun 2011 2:59:53pm

I think its in The West Wing somewhere where they say, Republicans want a huge military but don't want to send it anywhere, but Democrats want to cut military spending but send the army everywhere at once

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Nomadesque :

22 Jun 2011 10:31:50am

Politicians attempt to tap into popular public sentiment in the lead up to an election with no intention of carrying through their rhetoric.

News at 10.

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Alan :

22 Jun 2011 10:21:01am

Intellectual and neocon is an oxymoron.

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Jack :

22 Jun 2011 10:12:38am

What has happened to the sanctity of human life in the once christian regions of this world, why no focus on the shift from 10% civilian casualties in World War I to 90% civilian casualties in Iraq.

Who can have anything but deep on-going hatred for the Bush's, Blair's, Howard's and their political lackeys who twisted what was happening in the world around them to inflict such death, destruction

and pain on hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians for what was clearly Bush's, Blair's and Howard's and their political masters' own benefit.

And so the commentators dismiss the destroyed lives of others by ignoring the issues in their analyses, presumably with the aim of wiping the death and injury of the innocent from the debate and from others' minds.

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Budovski :

22 Jun 2011 10:06:36am

No surprise they are sheepish about war. They started 2 worthless wars that killed and maimed thousands of their own people so a handful of US companies could get some oil extraction contracts. When the people rightly started to reject the wars, the Republicans, knowing they would never win an election by supporting these ongoing fruitless wars, had to pretend to change tact. When they are next elected, the Republicans will get involved in another war. It's in the nature of their brand and its is part of how they do business.

Part of changing tact or 're-branding' involved inventing the 'Tea Party'.

A populist fabrication designed to pretend to invoke the spirit of the founding fathers whilst surreptitiously pushing an ultra free market ideology based on the principles of Milton Friedman (your messiah). Tea Party followers generally have no idea what they are supporting and the Republicans do a good job of keeping them in the dark.

There are only a handful of actual doves in congress and the senate. They span the false political divide

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R.Ambrose Raven :

22 Jun 2011 9:26:49am

You should be very happy, Chris. This represents the pinnacle of success for your and the IPA's policies.

In the waging of a war of aggression against Iraq, war criminals and mass murderers George Bush, Tony Blair, and John Howard did not merely commit crimes against peace. They thus also bankrupted the US economy, triggered Peak Oil, lengthened the occupation of Afghanistan, and triggered the global financial crisis. Many ordinary people will attempt to dismiss the suffering of the victims of such crimes, but they can't so easily dismiss the consequent domestic disasters brought on by the bellicose warmongering of those buffoons.

Well done, Chris. Enjoy.

Violence and terror (and of course torture) are as much the everyday tools of our ruling classes as they are of any (much much smaller) "terrorist" groups. From the Stern Gang to the Opium War to Leopold I's Belgian Congo to SAVAK to Augusto Pinochet to the Latin American death squads to the Black and Tans to the Vietnam War and the imperial conquest of Iraq, violence in direct or surrogate forms is

always one of Imperial America's preferred options in dealing with Second or Third World issues.

Yet far from being condemned for their criminal stupidity, gross military failings, and bankrupting the United States by their follies, bunglers such as Rudd, Gillard, Blair, and the other sycophants fawning on Obama's (nearly bankrupt) Imperial America are actually being humoured! A war criminal and mass murderer who dismissed Iraqi civilian dead as 'collateral damage' received a servile apology from an ABC show host for having a shoe thrown in his direction!

But, such is the bloodlust and arrogance of such buffoons and their attack hyenas that every opportunity for criminality, stupidity, or wanton slaughter continues to be used to demonstrate the impunity with which they can practice their gratuitous viciousness. For such demagogues, ordinary people were and are dirt beneath their feet.

Can we expect fewer articles from the IPA's Ted Lapkin calling for more wars of aggression? I wouldn't bet on it - violence is a very addictive drug, especially at a safe distance.

Incidentally, are the Zionists still forging Australian passports? Still waiting for an answer.

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Harry :

22 Jun 2011 12:42:14pm

It was actually Leopold II.

■

R. Ambrose Raven :

22 Jun 2011 5:29:42pm

Quite right. Acknowledged and noted. I fear that I'll need to trot out the IPA's little mates for a while yet.

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cb :

22 Jun 2011 8:36:38am

Thank goodness the US have finally moving towards "minding their own business". Or is this just a gimick for the coming election.

■

John Comnenus :

22 Jun 2011 1:06:32pm

It is because they are cold stone broke! They weren't sent broke by foreign policy. They

were bankrupted by the growth of entitlements, unfunded government pension liabilities and health care for the aged. Strategic decline is an absolute function of more debt and deficit coupled with lower economic growth and wealth.

The current Republicans are pragmatists who know the first order of business is to balance the budget and run down the debt. Everything else is secondary. This is why the Republican contender will almost certainly be a Tea Party approved and run the key radical message that the US must live within its means. That will by necessity extend to Defence.

We will see how lower US involvement in the world plays out for world peace. My guess is that uber libertarians and free marketeers, like Chris Berg, will be very very disappointed by the impact that a diminished US will have on trade, economic freedom and world economic growth.

■

GraemeF :

22 Jun 2011 4:39:56pm

Rubbish. They are being sent broke by two wars and a greedy Wall Street sucking enormous amounts of money out of the working economy and enormous tax breaks for the ultra wealthy.
Typical mindless right winger to blame the sick and the pensioners.

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Western Red :

22 Jun 2011 8:21:27am

Some grand new vision or simply reflecting what the GOP base have always believed ?

US politics is focus group and poll driven. People are tired of their children dying, their wounded sons and daughters being abandoned by their country, and a massive debt.

And sure, Government failure ? In response to ? Oh, yeah, massive private sector failure.

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Roger of Scoresby :

22 Jun 2011 8:17:18am

The Republicans have turned into cheese-eating surrender monkeys.

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David :

22 Jun 2011 7:47:00am

None of the wars have been about "exporting democracy". What the Neocons wanted was "resource security".

These candidates might have their ideals, but they'll find once (/if) they get into office they have to deal with reality. Obama experienced the same thing.

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Baron de Charlus :

22 Jun 2011 7:36:51am

Bush was a dove. Obama was a dove. Republican hopefuls are doves. They all want, however, to run an empire and run an empire is what they did do, do and will do, perhaps more cheaply than in the past, but empire not economics is what drives American power.

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the yank :

22 Jun 2011 7:32:58am

I'd like to know where these Republicans were when Bush got the USA into two wars?
Looks to me like they are looking at the present polling more then anything else.



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