

Rand Plan [PDF](#)

Will the Tea Parties turn antiwar?

BY [W. JAMES ANTLE III](#)



Here's a thought experiment: imagine a candidate saying that if we want to balance the federal budget, we need to cut warfare as well as welfare. Throw in some talk about the military-industrial complex. Then try to picture that candidate gaining the support of Sarah Palin, James Dobson, and Sen. Jim DeMint's Senate Conservatives Fund—en route to winning a closed Republican primary in a Southern state by a landslide margin. With this impressive victory, the candidate becomes the face of the grassroots conservative activists who make up the Tea Party movement.

No experiment is necessary, actually. This describes Rand Paul, the Republican nominee for U.S. Senate in Kentucky. “[W]e have huge budgetary problems and the Republicans often say, ‘Oh it’s just that welfare queen, if she’d go back to work we’d balance the budget,’” Paul observed during the campaign. “Well, the truth of the matter is, if you look at the numbers, there’s not enough money just in welfare to cut to balance the budget. You have to look at the entire budget, and approximately 40 percent of that budget is military.”

In the not too distant past, Republicans might have written off a candidate who talked this way. Doesn't he know we're at war? Let him print those bumper stickers about schools being well funded and the military needing to hold bake sales as he runs in the Democratic primary. Hoping to stoke these sentiments, a who's who of hawks ranging from Dick Cheney to Rudy Giuliani did their best to make Paul seem like the second coming of George McGovern.

Kentucky conservatives stuck by Paul as the neoconservatives gunning for him shot blanks. But since winning the primary, he has started facing friendly fire. Admirers of his father, Texas congressman and 2008 GOP presidential candidate Ron Paul, have criticized the son for being insufficiently antiwar. To reassure Republicans that he wasn't the crypto-pacifist the neocons imagined him to be, the younger Paul was less forceful in making certain arguments and abandoned a few of his father's positions altogether.

But what Rand Paul has done is make the one antiwar argument with potential to resonate with more conventional conservatives: “Part of the reason we are bankrupt as a country is that we are fighting so many foreign wars and have so many military bases around the world.” Unlike the Right's past tax revolts, the Tea Party is animated by opposition to the exorbitant level of federal spending and indebtedness. With their rejection of Republican bailouts and “compassionate conservatism,” they have turned away from the neoconservatives' social-democratic roots. By applying their frugality to foreign policy, they could make a clean break from neoconservatism.

Although the Tea Party has an identifiable antiwar wing—one poll found that the elder Paul was the group’s second-most admired politician, after Sarah Palin—by and large the Tea Partiers’ instinctive patriotism makes them a tough audience for criticism of U.S. intervention. To them, the relevant question is whose side are you on? They know they are on America’s.

But there is a limit to their willingness to spend American blood and treasure, especially as the nation teeters at the brink of insolvency. Many of them are tired of paying for the defense of Europeans they regard as fairweather friends and freeloaders, propping up foreign welfare states that serve as the model for everything they oppose at home. Neither do they want their tax dollars spent indefinitely in Middle Eastern countries whose populations don’t greet us as liberators and whose governments look more like the *sharia* states we claim to oppose than the democracies we are supposed to be creating.

Focusing on cost also has another benefit: it gives budget hawks a standing in defense debates alongside foreign-policy hawks. In homage to Adam Smith, the mainstream conservative movement practices the division of labor: economic conservatives focus on fiscal policy, social conservatives on moral and cultural issues, national-security conservatives on foreign policy. For the most part, everybody else goes along with the positions the experts in their respective fields take.

The conservative movement’s national-security hands overwhelmingly hold neoconservative assumptions rather than realist or noninterventionist ones. Very few of them opposed the Iraq War, and if they did, they probably wondered why we weren’t pursuing regime change in Iran and Syria instead. But there was a great deal of quiet skepticism among fiscal conservatives. Jack Kemp and former House Majority Leader Dick Army hesitated to join the march to Baghdad. Army now says he regrets his pro-war vote.

It makes sense that conservatives who spend their time arguing that bureaucrats are incompetent to run the healthcare system in our own country would be dubious of plans to have bureaucrats create democracies abroad. But these conservatives’ foreign-policy opinions are seldom solicited and rarely offered. When California Congressmen Dana Rohrabacher and Tom McClintock—speaking to a friendly audience at the Cato Institute and a sympathetic moderator in Grover Norquist—said most of their fellow Republicans knew Iraq had been a mistake, they were referring to their brand of limited-government Republican.

The 1990s were the last time Republicans cared about balanced budgets and talked about shrinking government. Not coincidentally, this was the nadir of neoconservative influence over the party. Then House Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich pronounced himself a “cheap hawk” who was willing to apply his scalpel to the defense budget. By the end of the decade, Republicans were opposing Bill Clinton’s foreign adventurism more vociferously than the Democrats ever opposed George W. Bush’s. And even Bush—an avowed critic of the budget-balancing and “Leave Us Alone” fiscal conservatism of the ’90s GOP—had to run on a “humble foreign policy” that eschewed nation-building.

The pressure to treat the military like other parts of the budget is going to build as fiscal conservatives try to contend with mounting deficits and massive unfunded liabilities while avoiding tax increases. For decades, the expansion of entitlements was partly funded by a relative decline in defense spending. In 1970, defense accounted for 42 percent of the budget,

while the big entitlements—Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid—stood at 20 percent. By 2008, those figures were almost exactly reversed, albeit with the wars conveniently pushed off-budget. The welfare-warfare state is now growing in tandem.

As a matter of simple arithmetic, we will not be able to fight the neoconservatives' wars with the supply-siders' tax rates—and a bankrupt country cannot defend itself. That's where Rand Paul comes in. "If I had my druthers and I was in charge of the budget," he told the Bluegrass Institute for Public Policy Solutions, "the budget might well be 80 percent national defense. But the number would still be much smaller than what we currently spend on the military."

There are some genuine policy differences between Ron and Rand Paul. The father favors civilian trials for terrorism suspects; in some cases the son does not. Ron would exit Afghanistan and close Guantanamo Bay sooner, Rand later. But Rand Paul's positions on the initial invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq are identical to his father's votes. So are the general principles that inform their foreign-policy views. Their main differences are tactical: the elder Paul directly challenges Republican foreign-policy premises; the younger Paul accepts those assumptions as a given and tries to move Republicans toward a less interventionist position within that framework.

Rand Paul's approach is gaining him the mainstream conservative hearing that eluded his father. RedState.com's Erick Erickson was a supporter during the primary. *National Review's* Jim Geraghty said "the younger Paul sounds like a cautious and wary skeptic, not a forthright isolationist." Even Bill Kristol conceded, "there's a lot of distance between Rand Paul's agenda, which isn't exactly mine, and the caricature of nativism or isolationism."

To some purists, that is cause for concern. But perhaps what they take to be wobbliness about war with Iran is actually an argument for restraint articulated in a way Bill O'Reilly's viewers can understand. In his time, Robert Taft may have been the most influential voice for noninterventionist conservatism, but he wasn't the most consistent. Today, there are millions of ordinary Americans who will be turned off by academic discourses on blowback but might be persuaded by the argument that Hamid Karzai and Nouri al-Maliki are the new welfare queens.

Once they have entertained these arguments, they may prove receptive to others. Conservatives have long accepted that welfare can hurt the poor, affirmative action can harm minorities, bilingual education can be injurious to immigrants, and economic stimulus can damage the economy. Why is it "blaming America" to point out that a national-security policy makes our country less safe?

For now, it may be most politically savvy simply to count the costs. "One of the enumerated powers is defense," Paul points out. "So I believe that the defense of our country may be the primary enumerated power. Does that mean I believe in a blank check for the military? No. Does that mean I believe we have to have troops in 130 countries and 750 bases? No."

The Tea Party movement is a promising place to look for conservatives who want a strong national defense without bankrupting America. Those already on the antiwar Right should

want to reach them, not repel them.

W. James Antle III is associate editor of *The American Spectator*.