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Taking a Look at New 'Antiwar' Republicans

Posted By [Kelley B. Vlahos](#) On July 26, 2010 @ 11:00 pm In [Uncategorized](#) | [7 Comments](#)

Nine Republican members of the House sided with Democrats in July to start bringing troops home from Afghanistan. Though one can still count on two hands the number of congressional Republicans who publicly oppose the war, this latest development is not insignificant.

Only [five Republicans](#) had the guts to cast a similar vote three and a half months ago.

Coupled with recent statements by [GOP chief Michael Steele](#) and [Ann Coulter](#) – and now World Net Daily's [Joseph Farah](#) – criticizing the Afghanistan war policy, it's clear something is happening. Antiwar.com recently interviewed Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, [who just broke ranks with the GOP](#) to vote against funding the war in Afghanistan. His decision was not easy, nor a particularly popular one with the party machine. But to be frank, like Steele and Coulter, he is no Rep. Ron Paul, R-TX, the most consistent anti-interventionist conservative in congress today. For Chaffetz and others, withdrawing from Afghanistan has more to do with the way Obama is running the war and the perceived hopelessness of the situation than an existential critique about global meddling and the greater war on terror.

For these new members of the war opposition, big budgets and nation building are unsustainable now. They complain the nation is "war weary."

But don't discount their support for a potential strike against the Iranian regime, or counter-terrorist operations in Yemen or Somalia – that's another story.

"I'm about as hawkish as they come," Chaffetz assured me in our interview, pointing out that "Iran is a bigger threat" than the Taliban or even Al Qaeda in Afghanistan.

"The Ron Paul non-interventionism is not catching on among the people, but the people Jason Chaffetz will certainly be very grateful not be stuck in this quagmire," offered Rep. Dana Rohrabacher, R-Calif., who was one of the Republicans voting for withdrawal on July 1 and has been an [outspoken critic](#) of the war policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Therein lies the challenge. Whether it be [Code Pink](#) or [Campaign for Liberty](#), conservative non-interventionists or the new wave of war-weary Republicans – they all share a desire for ending the current war – they just don't agree on future ones. But if they want to force the hands of Congress and the White House on Afghanistan, it would seem they must make common cause, at least temporarily.

Is it a bridge too far?

Jason Chaffetz is probably as right-wing as they come. He [converted to Mormonism](#) and became a member of LDS (Church of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) while playing football for Brigham Young University. Soon after, he converted to Republicanism, too (his father was once married to Kitty Dukakis, and 18-year-old Jason worked on Mike Dukakis's 1988 presidential campaign in Utah). Chaffetz won his House seat in 2008 by running to the *right* of uber-conservative Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, beating the six-term incumbent in a primary by 20 points.

Since then, he's voted as any rock-ribbed Republican would. He's been particularly hot on fiscal issues (he insists he's [sleeping on a cot](#) in his office, to save money) but made even bigger headlines when he [proposed legislation](#) in January to thwart the District of Columbia's new gay marriage law.

Late last year, however, Chaffetz said he [believed it was time to bring the troops home from Afghanistan](#), and in July, [cast votes in support of two amendments](#) – one that would have limited all war funding to the withdrawal of troops, and another requiring President Obama to produce a detailed plan for withdrawal by April 2011.

"I don't believe 100,000 troops on the ground is going to make the situation better," Chaffetz, 43, told Antiwar.com last week. "The hesitancy from a lot of Republicans is they don't want to be seen as cut and run, or soft on the defense issue. But I think it's a very solid conservative viewpoint."

His viewpoint: that if there is really [only 50 to 100 al Qaeda left in Afghanistan](#), then "we've had great success ...let's scale back and bring [the troops] home." In addition to the fiscal toll it's taking on the U.S. taxpayer, "I am also opposed to nation building. I don't believe we can put soldiers on every street corner and have them be that nation's police officers."

But Chaffetz also blames Obama for pursuing what he says is an unfocused mission and for instituting stricter "rules of engagement" on the battlefield that have handicapped American troops and prevented them from "going big" in Afghanistan (though the so-called "population centric" rules were first conceived by Gen. David Petraeus and executed in Afghanistan by Gen. Stanley McChrystal).

"The United States military forces are capable of achieving anything and everything. But I really believe that if you are going to do what the military does best you should be able to use every available asset you have. Go big or go home." Meanwhile, "I just don't see the President defining success or demonstrating what victory looks like, instead he is showing hesitancy about what it takes to win. That's not a formula for success."

His position is certainly a mixed bag, but not unusual for Republicans now emerging as new critics against the war, like Steele and Coulter, who Chaffetz invokes during our interview. On one hand, he believes the Taliban is no longer a "clear and present danger" to the United States, nor a significant threat to the central government. On the other hand, if Obama had been effective and let the military "go big," we could have won it all.

Though he now joins company on Capitol Hill with Rep. Paul and [Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C.](#), an anti-interventionist war skeptic Chaffetz is not. Like conservative [George Will](#) – and Democratic Vice President Joe Biden – he believes there will be some sort of residual force left behind in Afghanistan, "in terms of intelligence and maybe drones, and keeping some bases there." For Chaffetz, the long arm of the U. S military is better focused elsewhere.

"The threat of terrorism is not confined to the borders of Afghanistan. Terrorism is a worldwide threat ... Iran is a bigger threat (than Afghanistan)," he said.

"When they come out with actionable intelligence, and you have a problem, then take care of it. If you have a problem with Iran, take care of it. Our forces are going to have to be increasingly mobile, and fighting these long term nation-building operations – I just don't think it is the proper role of our military."

While he does not agree with Paul on war, he said he has "very, very similar" views with Republican colleagues who have bucked the party line on Afghanistan in the last year. Those lawmakers – staunch conservatives all – include Rep. John Duncan, R-TN, [who said in March](#) "there is nothing conservative about the war in Afghanistan, in fact it goes against every traditional conservative position that I've ever known." He also joins Rep. Tim Johnson, R-III.,

Rep. Dave Campbell and Rep. Rohrabacher, who [told an audience at the Cato Institute in March](#) that invading Iraq was “a horrible mistake.”

Chaffetz concurs. “Based on the intelligence on Iraq at the time, I probably would have voted for it. Now that we know what we know now, we should have never gone. [Saddam Hussein] was not a clear and present threat to the United States or the world’s future.”

Rohrabacher’s claim that “pacifism, isolationism or non-intervention as a philosophy is not taking hold,” could be quite true. We know the vast majority of Republicans would never admit to identifying with the first two, and though there has been a building libertarian influence on the Tea Party movement, it has so far not translated into a noticeable conversion of its disciples into the kind of non-interventionist conservatism found here at Antiwar.com, or places like *The American Conservative* magazine (*TAC*).

Nevertheless, Tea Party favorites like [Rand Paul](#), son of Ron Paul, who is running for U.S. Senate as a Republican in Kentucky, are harnessing the above-mentioned gripes – overspending and nation-building being the biggest – to question our continued involvement in Afghanistan. And it just may be working.

Jim Antle III, writing for *TAC* in its August issue, [says this](#):

“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.”

TAC managing editor Daniel McCarthy, who also works with the Campaign for Liberty, says this forces Republicans like Chaffetz to perform a careful balancing act:

“Their base expects them to affect a John Wayne swagger, so even when they take a ‘dovish’ position on a pointless conflict like the one in Afghanistan, they like to offset it with hawkish cawing about other wars we should be fighting. (In Iran, in Chaffetz’s case.) How much of that is rhetorical cover and how much they really believe is hard to say – and maybe it doesn’t matter.”

But criticizing a Democrat’s war while advocating others would not be an unusual path for Republicans, anyway, said McCarthy:

“It’s easy to forget, but the 1990s congressional Republicans who didn’t embrace [President] Clinton’s interventions [in eastern Europe] were not non-interventionists, either,” he said. “Many of them loved to rattle their sabers at China; some of them were even then fixated on Iraq and Iran. For that matter, the non-interventionist Right of the Robert A. Taft era was not really so non-interventionist.”

To that end, he would agree, that while Republicans like Chaffetz and Rohrabacher cannot be counted on to oppose future military action in places like Iran (which McCarthy is convinced the Democratically-controlled White House and Congress won’t support anyway), they might help us “enough so that they vote against persisting in our Afghan folly.”

But conservative writer Daniel Larison [warns](#) against getting too excited about such reconverted Republican “realists”:

"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.... In practice, if the GOP 'reclaimed its realist roots' I wonder how much would change for the better."

No matter how the conflict between the Rand Pauls and the Ron Pauls plays out, let's face it, the real menace with the squeeze on the GOP and the larger foreign policy establishment is *neoconservatism*, a virtual [Kraken](#) that appears even more virulent than in 2003 when it propelled us into an ill-fated invasion and regime change in Iraq.

"[Neoconservatives] are not really conservatives at all, but they are supported by very large companies and individuals who benefit from the profession of war, and the billions of spending it requires," noted Rep. Duncan in [a March floor speech](#).

A good point, but the neoconservatives, much like radio jock (and *Washington Times* columnist) [Jeff Kuhner](#), who engaged constitutional conservative [Bruce Fein](#) in an foreign policy debate sponsored by the Campaign for Liberty last week, traffic in emotional exploitation, the kind that will lead us right past the rational debates over nation-building and preemptive war and right into another hell-hole in Iran.

"The issue, to me, is do we confront a legitimate threat... do we face a legitimate threat from radical Islam? I think we do," said Kuhner. He gets so worked up about the radicals' hate and desire for global domination that his eyes bulge and tiny dry spittle starts to form at the corner of his mouth. He talks about things like assassinating Iranian President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) (whose "mission is to destroy the United States") and the coming invasion of Islamofascist warriors over the open U.S. border with Mexico, claiming there have been "thousands of prayer rugs and Korans" found strewn along the border. "The issue is then, do we fight them there or do we fight them over here?"

A typically effective pitch for Main Street. But the uneasiness, turning into anger and then a shout of "liar!" at one point from the previously staid audience at the Campaign for Liberty event, indicates that the Kuhners and their rhetoric have long reached a saturation point, at least with this non-interventionist, libertarian crowd. Whether they can convince their friends in the Tea Party and the growing number of war-weary Republicans like Chaffetz to tune it out for good, is another question, and the real test of any fragile "alliance" between the two conservative groups.

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