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From Central Asia - Ted Rall

## EURASIA INSIGHT

### AFGHANISTAN: HERE COME THE NEO-COPPERHEADS? 3/19/10

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First, there were the neo-conservatives who manufactured a pretense to launch an invasion of Iraq, plunging American forces into a quagmire. Now, there is a small number of neo-copperheads, who, apparently motivated by partisan political sentiment, seem to be making a sudden policy u-turn on Afghanistan, souring on continuing involvement in that war-torn nation just as the American war effort there may be turning a corner.

Republicans, nearly without exception, supported the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq initiated by former president George W. Bush. But there have been signs of late that conservative support for a robust American troop presence in Afghanistan may be starting to fade now that a Democratic administration is in charge, and Democrats stand ready to reap the possible rewards of a successful American surge. [\[For background see the Eurasia Insight archive\].](#)

■ George Will, a prominent conservative writer, may have launched the trend when he announced last summer that he had changed his mind on Afghanistan, calling for forces to be "substantially reduced" and opposing President Barack Obama's increase in troops there. "Genius, said de Gaulle, recalling Bismarck's decision to halt German forces short of Paris in 1870, sometimes consists of knowing when to stop," Will wrote.

Another prominent conservative, Tony Blankley, said he has come to oppose the war in Afghanistan because he doesn't trust Obama: "I come to Afghanistan on a distinctive basis: I look at who our commander in chief is, and I do not have confidence in his intention to pursue success. So, although I generally believe in engagement ... and I believe we have interests there, I don't believe the resources are going to be applied."

The original Copperheads were Northern Democrats during the American Civil War who vociferously opposed Republican President Abraham Lincoln's military response to the Southern rebellion. Copperheads advocated for an unconditional peace settlement with the Confederacy that would have preserved the institution of slavery.

Blankley was a featured speaker at a March 18 conference, "Escalate or Withdraw? Conservatives and the War in Afghanistan," hosted by the Cato Institute in Washington, DC. Several of the speakers at the event argued that conservative principles of limited government were in conflict with the ambitious nation-building effort that Washington has embarked on in Afghanistan. This limited-government approach did not seem to apply to Republicans when Bush occupied the White House, and appeared to be in the thrall of neo-conservatives proffering a half-baked vision of an unstoppable global democratization movement.

"I don't understand how you can both hold the position that you can't manage one country, but you can manage the whole world. It's incomprehensible," Donald Devine, the editor of a conservative online publication, said at the Cato Institute event.

"I think the conservative movement and the GOP lost a huge opportunity when President Obama decided to double down on the Afghanistan war and send more troops over there," said Edward Crane, president of the Cato Institute. "Neither the Bush administration or the Obama administration has been able to articulate an end game for Afghanistan; I just don't understand what this war is about. And it's a shame, because there has to be a party of limited government."

Another speaker at the Cato event, Rep. John Duncan a Republican from Tennessee, quoted conservative writer Jonah Goldberg: "The insight that involvement abroad fuels the expansion of government was central to the conservative and libertarian movements."

Duncan at the same time admitted that had a Democratic president been in office instead of George W. Bush, Republicans would have opposed the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Eighty percent or more of Republicans in the House very much opposed the foreign policy of President Clinton in the former Yugoslavia, and I'm convinced that 80 percent of Republicans in the House would have opposed the war in Iraq if it had been done by a President Gore," he said.

Other speakers cited differing motives for opposing the war in Afghanistan. Rep. Tom McClintock, a Republican from California, said he didn't think the war was being fought with enough force.

■ For now, the Republican backlash against the war effort in Afghanistan appears to be small. Will, when he announced his change of heart, faced a great deal of criticism from fellow conservatives. Ordinary Republicans still tend to support the war: according to a November opinion poll by ABC News and the Washington Post: While 66 percent of Democrats said the war was not worth fighting, 60 percent of Republicans said it was.

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