



GOP Peaceniks?

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Last December, when President Obama launched his second escalation of the Afghan war, he did so with the unflinching support of the Republicans, the right, and neoconservatives. But a small group of conservatives, libertarians and assorted contrarians on the right has opposed the war, and yesterday I journeyed to the **Cato Institute** to find out whether that nucleus of anti-war opposition is significant or not. The answer: maybe, but probably not.

The Cato conference was entitled "**Escalate or Withdraw? Conservatives and the War in Afghanistan,**" and it brought together several ultra conservative members of Congress: Tom McClintock (R-CA); Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA); and John J. Duncan, Jr. (R-TN), for a panel hosted by Grover Norquist, the right-wing activist and president of Americans for Tax Reform. Other speakers included Joe Scarborough, the MSNBC host and a former member of Congress elected as part of the 1994 Republican Contract with America revolution that Norquist and Newt Gingrich organized, and other conservatives, including Cato staffers.

Perhaps the most important participant was Norquist. As leader of ATR, Norquist is a fierce crusader for cutting taxes and eliminating government programs and regulations. Nine years ago, when I wrote a **profile of Norquist** for *The Nation*, he told me: "My goal is to cut government in half in twenty-five years, to get it down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub." Since then, of course, the government has grown bigger, not smaller, and a big part of that growth has been the Pentagon, mostly the Bush administration's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Part of what motivates Norquist today is that the Bush-era wars did two things that small-government crusaders are unhappy about: they enlarged the federal government and, by mobilizing voters against politicians who supported the wars, they contributed to crushing national defeats for the GOP in 2006 and 2008.

In an interview on the sidelines of the conference, Norquist told me that for the most part he "hasn't weighed in" on Iraq and Afghanistan, preferring instead to concentrate his activities on taxes and related issues. "I try not to have an opinion about everything," he told me. At the same time, his appearance at a conference whose very purpose was to raise questions and doubts about the war effort in Afghanistan, Norquist was making an important statement, and one that might resonate among broader elements of the "center-right" coalition that he leads. "It's important to have this conversation on the right," he says.

According to Norquist, it's difficult for Republican members of Congress to speak out against the war, because the adventure was initiated by President Bush. But, he suggests, there is a kind of silent majority of Republicans in Congress who'd come out against the war if the right political opportunity emerged. Indeed, during the panel discussion with McClintock, Duncan, and Rohrabacher, Norquist asked the three members of Congress how many of their colleagues in the House shared their dissident views on Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama's escalation, and the nation-building project underway. And all three said that Republican opposition is high. McClintock said that "virtually everyone agrees that going into Afghanistan the way we did was a mistake" and that more than half of the Republican caucus has strong misgivings about the war. On Iraq, Rohrabacher made the surprising assertion that "almost all" of the GOP members of the House think that it was a mistake to invade Iraq. And Duncan, who cited his experience in facing a Republican primary challenger who criticized Duncan's antiwar views, said that the vast majority of Republican voters in his conservative Tennessee district agree with him. His opponent, he said, won 12 percent of the primary vote.


In the interview, Norquist cited their statements as evidence that the Republican party is mostly unenthusiastic about the wars. "All three of them [McClintock, Duncan and Rohrabacher] came down strong, close to saying that practically everybody" in the Republican caucus agrees that the Iraq-Afghanistan efforts are misguided. The problem is, he said, most of the Republicans believe that the Republican voter base won't tolerate anything other than lock-step support for the war. Why? "Because Bush identified the Republicans with Iraq and Afghanistan."

Republicans, Norquist says, have other priorities. "On taxes, where if a Republican says, 'I want to raise taxes,' or on guns, where if a Republican says, 'I want to take away your guns,' the base would say, 'We're outta here.' But if Bush had said, 'We're not going to invade Iraq,' he wouldn't have gotten three harshly worded letters." He argues that there was no real public support for the war in Iraq before it was launched.

Today, many conservatives, especially traditionalists, are uncomfortable with nation-building in Afghanistan. They are strict constitutionalists, who believe that wars need to be declared by Congress, not launched by executive fiat. And many of them are concerned over the fiscal implications of defense spending. They strongly criticize neoconservatives, who they believe dragged the GOP down by convincing Bush to go war. Duncan, in his Cato talk, called the neocons "the most radical" element in US politics. McClintock criticized Obama for trying to win hearts and minds in Afghanistan, noting that the military's job is apply overwhelming force to win wars and then get out. And Rohrabacher said that more troops for Afghanistan is not the answer, that the United States ought to let the Afghans fight it out, perhaps supporting allies such as the Northern Alliance or other anti-Taliban veterans of the 1980s anti-USSR jihad who are willing to cooperate with the United States.

The three members' views, though, as expressed in the Cato conference, were confusing, and ill-thought-out at best. None presented a coherent view of the conflict, none proposed a true exit strategy, and not one of them mentioned the idea of a political settlement by negotiating a deal with the Taliban. Worse, they didn't address the political problem of how to convince the supposed silent majority among the GOP to speak out.

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