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A Lesson From Scott Walker's Political Collapse: Playing Neocon Warrior Is No Path To Presidency

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There may be no sadder political spectacle than a Republican governor running for president. He knows nothing about foreign policy. But he recognizes that Neocons dominate the GOP and expect the nominee to advocate perpetual war. So he plays faux warrior, insisting that he is more likely than his competitors to wreak death and destruction around the globe. Then his presidential campaign collapses.

So it was with Rick Perry. Now it is with Scott Walker, who yesterday abandoned his presidential bid.

The Wisconsin governor won some significant domestic political victories. In contrast, his foreign policy credentials were nonexistent. He tried to compensate by claiming to be tougher and meaner than any other Republican presidential candidate. That meant threatening to sacrifice the lives of folks who wear the uniform he never donned.

It obviously didn't win him many votes. In the last poll he rated only an asterisk.

Walker spoke often on international issues, even delivering a formal address at the Citadel. He assumed that to prosper "we need a safe and stable world." Which is simple nonsense. When has the earth been "safe and stable"? During the many European wars of the 18th century? The Napoleonic wars? The multiple conflicts during the rise of Germany? The Balkan wars and decline of the Ottoman Empire? World War I? The rise of the Bolsheviks? The Great Depression and triumph of fascism? World War II? The creation of the People's Republic of China? Multiple conflicts during the Cold War? The messy break-up of the Soviet Union?

Naturally, Walker lauded Ronald Reagan, who governed when the world was neither safe nor stable but during which America prospered. Today Walker and other hawks take Reagan as their patron saint, yet Neocons denounced President Reagan as an appeaser for dealing with the Soviet Union's Mikhail Gorbachev and withdrawing from Lebanon's civil war. Reagan deployed the military in only three limited actions, and never to engage in social engineering. Reagan was

appalled by the possibility of war, which impelled him to advocate missile defense and negotiate with Moscow.

Walker contended that “America is not safer” than seven years ago. True, but mainly because of the dangerous military interventions he and other Republican candidates reflexively supported. Iraq remains the gift that keeps on giving. Only because of George W. Bush’s foolish invasion did the Islamic State develop, arising in opposition to the U.S. occupation and sectarian, Shia-dominated regime in Baghdad. The Bush administration failed to press reconciliation in Iraq and negotiate a status of forces agreement for a permanent U.S. garrison, for which GOP candidates perversely blame President Obama. Yet a continuing occupation would only have turned U.S. forces into targets of extremists on all sides.

Barack Obama shares the blame for chaos in the Middle East—for mimicking the GOP’s militarist policies. His maladroit interventions impeded a political settlement in Syria and opened Libya to the Islamic State. Even Walker acknowledged that “Today, Libya is officially a terrorist safe haven.” Moreover, President Obama’s attack on ISIS placed Americans in the lead role fighting yet another sectarian conflict while the major protagonists, Turkey and the Gulf States, mostly sit on the sidelines.

Walker talks in clichés: “The world needs to know that there is no better friend and no worse enemy than the United States of America.” Great rhetoric, but who should the U.S. befriend and confront? “We just need to lead again,” he declared. That strategy didn’t work for his campaign. More important, the U.S. did lead in Iraq, with disastrous results: thousands of dead Americans, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis, and millions of displaced people; religious minorities murdered and dispersed, Iranians with enhanced influence, and Islamic State killers on the loose. Thank you, George W. Bush! Positive leadership requires a willingness to say no.

On the Islamic State Walker declared: “I’d rather take the fight to them than wait for them to bring the fight to us.” He added, “it’s not a matter of when they attempt an attack on American soil, or not if I should say, it’s when.” Alas, Walker confused ISIS with al-Qaeda. The latter attacked the U.S. The former wanted to create a state, which gave ISIS reason not to attack America—until the U.S. joined the Mideast’s latest sectarian war. It would have been better for Washington to let those attacked do the fighting.

Indeed, the more Walker explained his positions the scarier his views became. He wanted to embed U.S. advisers with Iraqi and other combat forces fighting the Islamic State. Further, he demanded an “aggressive strategy anywhere around the world,” as if wandering off to war in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Iraq (again), and Syria and dropping drones on Pakistan and Yemen wasn’t “aggressive” enough. Moreover, he added: “we have to be prepared to put boots on the ground if that’s what it takes.” Invading Syria was not his “immediate plan,” but he said he “wouldn’t rule anything out.” This was a prescription for permanent war.

Walker argued that “we are at war with radical Islamic terrorism” and “these radical groups will continue to grow if we do not destroy them.” Actually, they are most likely to grow if the U.S. creates more enemies. Nothing justifies terrorism, but the more Washington intervenes abroad—the more drones launched, bombs dropped, countries invaded, nations occupied, people killed—the more enemies America makes. While the U.S. must capture or kill those who mean

Americans ill, Washington must stop creating new and more enemies. How would Americans react if another nation was constantly intervening in their affairs? Not well.

Walker wanted the U.S. to jump into the Syrian quagmire: train more “moderate” guerrillas, establish a no-fly zone, and create “a broader, U.S.-led regional coalition, with real buy-in and iron-clad guarantees from our allies that they will help us shoulder the burden.” The first has been a bust. The second would trigger much deeper American military involvement. The third is a joke. As long as Washington is willing to do the work, its allies will do little more than mouth platitudes. Like the Europeans, Japanese, and South Koreans, America’s Arab friends are only too willing to fight to the last American.

On Israel Walker attempted to out-pander the other Republicans, who were attempting the same. In fact, supporting Israel no matter how much it oppresses Palestinians, sending billions annually to Israel from America’s essentially empty Treasury, and promising Israel “compensation” for forging an agreement that makes Iran *less likely* to develop nuclear weapons with which to threaten Israel would seem to be more than enough for Washington to do. Yet Walker insisted that “There should be absolutely no daylight between our two countries,” despite obvious differences in interest and policy. Israel routinely adopts positions inconsistent with America’s interests, such as seizing Palestinian lands to expand settlements, thereby making a peace settlement ever harder to reach.

Walker claimed, “Iran is not a place we should be doing business with.” Just like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, two U.S. allies. And the Central Asian states, dictatorships almost all. Also Pakistan, a jihadist-infected and military-dominated nuclear state. As well as Russia, China, Vietnam, and a host of other authoritarian nations which have killed Americans in the past or might do so in the future.

Is it in America’s interest to reduce tensions with a hostile power in the Middle East? Is it in America’s interest to open a dialogue over security issues affecting the region? Is it in America’s interest to dissuade that power from building nuclear weapons? Surely the answers are yes. In which case Iran is a place with which Washington should do business.

Walker worried that Tehran would “expand its destructive influence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon,” but what kind of an empire is this? Iraq is in sectarian chaos, courtesy George W. Bush and the GOP. Syria no longer exists as a nation and Iran’s influence barely reaches Damascus’ suburbs. Yemen is another fractured state, in which U.S.-ally Saudi Arabia turned a tribal civil war into a sectarian conflict. Iran enjoys strong influence in Lebanon, but that tragic land is largely irrelevant to American security. As for Hamas and Hezbollah, Israel is more than capable of confronting them, if necessary. Walker pledged to “roll back Iran’s influence in the region.” Riyadh alone spent \$80 billion on its military last year. Saudi Arabia should manage that roll back.

The governor promised to tear up President Obama’s nuclear agreement on his first day in office. Then, he said, he would apply “crippling economic sanctions and convince our allies to do the same.” How? America’s friends would be less than pleased with Washington leaving them high and dry. Nor is there any reason to believe that Tehran would yield to American pressure, having responded to every previous U.S. rebuff by expanding its nuclear activities.

Walker also pledged to continue treating American defense policy as welfare. He echoed other GOP contenders in arguing that “we need to stand with our friends” since “our allies are among our greatest source of strength.” Which ones? The South Koreans could defend themselves but don’t. The Europeans could defend themselves but don’t. The Japanese could defend themselves but don’t. The Gulf States could defend themselves but don’t. Yet these many alliances constantly threaten to drag the U.S. into other nations’ conflicts.

In announcing his candidacy he asserted: “We need to stop the aggression of Russia into sovereign nations.” Why “we”? Why not Europe? With a GDP and population bigger than those of America and much larger than those of Russia, the Europeans should handle their own security. America should not bail them out.

Worse, Walker blames all of this—“redrawing the map of Europe with loaded guns” and “dismembering Ukraine, trying to destroy NATO, and threatening to use nuclear weapons”—on President Obama having tried “to appease Vladimir Putin with a ‘reset’ button.” Indeed, said Walker, Putin is “in the Crimean Peninsula right now” because he only found “mush” instead of steel from the U.S. Yet not everything is a threat to America. Russia’s actions in Ukraine are about Ukraine, a border state viewed as vital by Moscow. Putin perceived as threatening the expansion of NATO up to Russia’s borders, Europe’s push for a dominant economic role in Kiev, and allied support for a street revolution overthrowing an egregiously corrupt but nevertheless democratically elected president friendly to Russia. Flip the situation around and imagine Russia acting in Mexico as the West did in Ukraine. A President Walker would not be pleased.

Nor was there any way for Washington to stop Putin short of war. And no American president, at least no sane one, would consider war to prevent Russia from retaking Crimea a half century after it was transferred within the Soviet Union from Russia to Ukraine. Moscow views the issue as vital. It is barely a marginal interest, if that, to the U.S.

Walker’s departure from the presidential race is particularly ironic coming on the eve of the state visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which Walker said should be cancelled. He said: “we need to stop China’s cyber attacks, stop their territorial expansion into international waters and speak out about their abysmal human rights record.” Cyber attacks do require some U.S. response, though Washington is thought to have engaged in its own cyber assaults against adversaries. And the U.S. does criticize Beijing on human rights, far more than other appalling U.S. allies, such as Saudi Arabia.

Walker nevertheless blamed the lack of talk on human rights for the Chinese “aggressively expanding their territory, building islands for military bases in the South China Sea.” Actually, Beijing is acting out of perceived national interest, as did the young American republic which faced down Great Britain in one territorial dispute and went to war with Mexico in another. U.S. criticism would have little impact on what Beijing thinks or does, while it would be foolish for Washington to threaten war over another nation’s territorial claims. America’s allies should take the lead to “stop” China’s “territorial expansion.”

Walker was fundamentally mistaken when he insisted that “We need to have the capacity to protect our national security interests—here and abroad—and those of our allies.” Actually, the

U.S. should add allies only when doing so advances its national security interests. “We” should not treat allies like Facebook Friends, collecting a variety of international welfare queens, whiny spendthrifts, and hapless beggars.

Putting friendly states on a defense dole discourages their own efforts. Walker argued “Once we show them we’re committed to rolling back the power and influence of Iran, it will encourage our allies to join in our efforts against ISIS.” To the contrary, the more the U.S. commits, the less its allies do. What else explains minimal defense spending by European states, even those bordered by Russia, of which they claim to be frightened?

What’s worse, for all of his impassioned criticism of Iran for its human rights violations, he ignored the even greater misdeeds by “the Sunni Arab states” which he celebrated as allies. “America must always be a bright and steady beacon of hope for freedom.” But Saudi Arabia is a totalitarian state. Would President Walker have mentioned the lack of political and religious liberty there? Would he have applied the same standard to Washington’s friends?

Of course, Walker wanted to spend more on the military, even though very little of the Pentagon’s effort actually goes for America’s defense. The bulk is devoted to defending wealthy allies, rebuilding failed societies, propping up dictatorial allies, engaging in foreign social engineering, and undertaking other similarly dubious tasks. The more the U.S. spends on the defense of others, the less Europe, Gulf States, Japan, and South Korea devote to their own security.

He promised the Citadel cadets: “If elected president I will send you into battle when, and only when, our national security is at risk.” But why does it matter so much to the U.S. which government controls Ukraine’s Donbass, which nation owns Scarborough Reef in the South China Sea, who gains in the tussle between authoritarian Iran and totalitarian Saudi Arabia, what backward, impoverished North Korea does amid multiple major powers in Northeast Asia, and which faction of Sunnis fight which faction of Shiites in Iraq? Being a superpower means America has interests everywhere, but few of them are vital or even important. Being a leader means distinguishing between critical and minimal interests.

Walker spoke of the horrors of ISIS rule. Terrible the Islamic State is, but that does not justify U.S. intervention. Indeed, there is a long list of nations which endured far more awful, murderous, and destructive conflicts, often without much response from America: Burundi, Congo, Liberia, Rwanda, and Sudan. Joining every other nation’s war in such cases is a policy for an empire, not a republic, and is inconsistent with a limited government devoted to protecting the lives and liberties of its people.

Indeed, Walker assured the Citadel cadets that “you will not sign up to be nation builders or diplomatic pawns,” but that is what the U.S. spent 13 years doing in Afghanistan and a half dozen years in Iraq, conflicts which he apparently supported. It’s what Washington did for years in the Balkans and (more briefly) in Haiti and Somalia. It’s what some Neoconservatives complain was not done in Libya and, even more incredibly, in Lebanon decades ago.

“America will not be intimidated,” Walker insisted. But that’s not the issue. Avoiding involvement in so many unnecessary wars is the issue. He claimed: “we can no longer afford to

be passive spectators while the world descends into chaos.” But there is little the U.S. can do to create order out of chaos. Far more often Washington inadvertently delivers disaster. It would be far better to stay out of foreign imbroglios instead.

Other candidates likely soon will follow Walker out of the presidential race. Posing as uber-hawks is likely to work no better for them than for Scott Walker. On foreign policy he sacrificed both his principles and intelligence in a desperate bid to win political points from GOP Neoconservatives. But after returning to Madison, Wisconsin, Scott Walker can go back to protecting people from overbearing and rapacious public employee unions.

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