

# POLITICO

## Afghanistan beyond left vs. right

By: [Malou Innocent](#)

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Rep. Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio) plans to use a parliamentary maneuver to force a Wednesday House vote on the removal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Kucinich's resolution directs President Obama to remove troops 30 days from the day it is passed or, depending on whether troops can be removed safely in that time frame, no later than Dec. 31.

The resolution's substance and timing are revealing. For there are growing signs that some on the political right have new reservations about our continued military involvement in Afghanistan.

Consider the measure's three GOP co-sponsors, including Rep. Tim Johnson (Ill.), who last year earned an 80 percent favorable rating from the American Conservative Union.

There is a growing bipartisan realization that our troops are being deployed to prop up a regime Washington doesn't trust, for goals our president can't define. Concern has begun to escalate among lawmakers of both parties that this prolonged military adventure is weakening the country militarily and economically.

During a recent discussion about Afghanistan policy with Kucinich, he stressed Congress' power of the purse and the need to rein in the current expansive definition of executive powers.

But, in private conversations, many leading congressional conservatives sound eerily similar to Kucinich — supposedly the darling of the far left. (These legislators have not yet come out publicly in support of a withdrawal strategy — still a politically tough step for any self-described conservative.)

To politicians of any stripe, the costs on paper of staying in Afghanistan are jarring. The Pentagon is requesting an extra \$33 billion to escalate combat operations, on top of the \$65 billion already authorized for FY 2010. The Pentagon found that each additional 1,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan would cost about \$1 billion a year.

In October, Pentagon officials told the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee that it costs an average of \$400 per gallon of fuel for the aircraft and combat vehicles operating in land-locked Afghanistan.

The U.S. Agency for International Development has spent more than \$7.8 billion on Afghanistan reconstruction since 2001, including building and refurbishing 680 schools and training thousands of civil servants. Walter Pincus, of The Washington Post, reported that the Army Corp of Engineers spent \$4 billion last year on 720 miles of roads to transport troops in and around the war-ravaged country. It will spend another \$4 to \$6 billion this year, for 250 more miles.

To be sure, conservatives and liberals part ways on the ramifications of those exorbitant outlays. Kucinich and others on the left, naturally, argue that these great sums of money are

needed for major spending projects here at home -- pet issues like health care, infrastructure or education.

But conservatives are no longer able to ignore the argument, presented by myself and other libertarians that these large expenditures are economically unsustainable -- whether military or domestic. To a small but growing chorus of war critics on the right, these funds would be better left unspent -- that is, returned to the taxpayers.

War should no longer be a left-right issue. It's a question of scarce resources and limiting the power of government. The immense price tag for war in Afghanistan can no longer be swept under the carpet or dismissed as an issue owned by peaceniks and pacifists.

It's time for conservatives to be philosophically consistent on the nature of limited government and return to their noninterventionist roots. Before a neoconservative strain pervaded today's GOP, the party had a tradition of war criticism -- rooted in the conviction that government uses war as a tool to amass more money and power.

Many conservatives used to deride nation-building as a utopian venture that had little to do with the nation's real interests. That deep suspicion of state power now has given way to an embrace of interventionist policies.

But there is a growing, if nascent, bipartisan consensus on bringing this war to a close.

Through Kucinich's resolution, the left and the right have an opportunity to put aside their differences and work for the safety of our troops. It's time to bring them home.

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