

A NARROW SPECTRUM

The GOP Candidates and Foreign Policy

Charles Lane

To understand the race for the Republican presidential nomination—and the role that foreign policy issues have played in it so far—it helps to recall the lay of the political land as it appeared in the first half of 2009; that is, the point at which any potential contenders for 2012 had to start planning a run.

The GOP was in retreat politically, its brand damaged by public dissatisfaction with the Bush presidency. The dissatisfaction could be directly traced to Bush's perceived blunders in foreign affairs, whether it was overreaching in Iraq, adopting "enhanced interrogations" and other policies that alienated allies, or simply not presenting a sufficiently admirable presidential persona on the world stage. In Barack Obama, by contrast, the Democrats seemed to have found a standard-bearer whose charisma and youth made him an even likelier bet for reelection than incumbent presidents usually are—and whose strongest selling points included his capacity to "rebrand" the US in the world as a dynamic, open, "smart" society. Meanwhile, the Tea Party was in its infancy, and looked more like a source of internal division for Republicans than a source of possible electoral strength.

And so the smart thing to do, if you were a Republican Party heavy-weight, would not be to start running for president. This was undoubtedly

Charles Lane is an editorial writer for the *Washington Post*.

part of the calculation that led former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman to sign up for the Obama administration as ambassador to China in early 2009. At that time, he calculated that the best place for a Republican presidential wannabe was inside the Obama tent—and far away from US politics. The major exceptions were Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts governor, who really never stopped running after losing to John McCain in 2008, and had no better options, and Tim Pawlenty, the able young governor of Minnesota, whose second term was set to end in 2010, and for whom 2016 was simply too far in the future.

Consequently, when it turned out that Obama was not the unbeatable political force that he seemed at his inauguration, and when election results in 2009 and 2010 showed that the Tea Party's energy could be harnessed to produce GOP victories—in short, when it turned out that the 2012 GOP nomination would be worth having after all—not many leading Republicans were well prepared or well positioned to take advantage of it.

Yes, big names like Governor Mitch Daniels of Indiana, Representative Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, and Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey considered making late runs. But with the exception of Texas Governor Rick Perry, whose large in-state donor list made his late entry feasible, and Huntsman, who could count on a personal fortune to fund his run, none of these party luminaries took the plunge. Perry's early debate gaffes and Huntsman's inability to make GOP voters forget his previous service to Obama have left them far behind in the polls, perilously close to joining Pawlenty, whose campaign imploded early, on the sidelines.

Result: the Republican field on the eve of the Iowa caucuses consists of Romney, plus a group of men and one woman who are either unlikely to get the nomination, or unlikely to beat Obama if they do.

What, then, can we conclude about the state of Republican Party foreign policy, based on the debate among these characters? The big picture is that it is far from clear that the Republicans in 2012 will enjoy their customary edge over the Democrats as the party of national security. In the past, whether the issue was standing up to Communism or, after the Cold War, battling terrorism, voters tended to trust the more muscular GOP. This time, maybe not.

There are four reasons for this, the first of which is simply the diminished saliency of foreign and defense policy as political issues. The US economy is mired in a deep and prolonged crisis, the most palpable manifestation of which is stubbornly high unemployment. The crisis has many

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international components—from the perennial concerns about China’s alleged depredations in international markets to Europe’s new woes. But voters think of jobs as mainly a domestic concern. And jobs trump all other issues.

The second problem for the GOP is that several of the candidates are so poorly suited by personality and experience to

play the role of potential commander in chief. Tea Party favorite Michele Bachmann is a House backbencher; businessman Herman Cain, until he suspended his campaign, seemed unprepared to deal with any issue that could not be answered with the mantra “nine-nine-nine”; Ron Paul is a doctrinaire libertarian who has openly suggested that the US itself is to blame for the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. His response to every foreign policy question is: stay out. It’s not even clear he thinks the US should have a foreign policy.

Even among the more plausible contenders—Romney, Huntsman, Perry, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, and former Senator Rick Santorum—there is only one, former ambassador Huntsman, with substantial personal experience in foreign or national security affairs. Gingrich, to be sure, often voted on and opined about such matters, both in the House and after his retirement in disgrace in 1999. (As a member of Bush’s Defense Policy Board, one of several such bodies on which he served, he urged intervention against Saddam Hussein.) But that’s a

far cry from actually having responsibility for policy. Something similar could be said for Santorum. As for Perry, he did spend some time in the military as a cargo pilot, but other than that has rarely ventured beyond his native Texas and has seemed unsteady and uncertain discussing international issues in the campaign.

And then there is the fact that, to the extent national security is on the voters' minds, the issues—let alone the solutions—are about as murky as they have ever been in US history. The defining anti-Soviet line of the Cold War is, of course, long gone. But even the fresher conflict between the US and al-Qaeda is no longer the day-to-day concern that it once was. Partly, this is due to the lack of another major attack on American soil; partly, it reflects the fact that the war against terror that took US troops into Iraq and Afghanistan has turned into a long, inconclusive slog, the byzantine nature of which is epitomized by the incessant wrangling between Washington and its duplicitous, nuclear-armed “ally,” Pakistan. As Romney acknowledged in a major address on foreign policy in October, “we still face grave threats, but they come not from one country, or one group, or one ideology. The world is unfortunately not so defined.”

Finally, though Republicans are loath to admit it, the public is not that unhappy with the Obama record on foreign policy, and far happier than it is with his performance on the economy. In a November CBS News/National Journal survey, forty-five percent of respondents approved of Obama's foreign policy performance, eleven points better than his rating on the economy. On the specific subject of terrorism, about sixty-three percent approve of the president's performance—not surprising, considering that US troops killed Osama bin Laden and US drone strikes killed many other Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders on Obama's watch. Meanwhile, the president has abandoned his least popular positions on terrorism, such as shutting down the prison at Guantánamo Bay and trying high-level terrorists in New York City's federal court.

Republicans can and do say Obama's plans to pull out of Iraq and Afghanistan are premature, but, among a war-weary electorate, they are popular: fifty-three percent say the US should not be involved in Afghanistan.

Amidst this transitional landscape, the Republicans (again, with the exception of libertarian Paul) have groped for a doctrine. What's

the best way for a Republican to approach foreign policy and national security at a time when the public is not particularly engaged with the topic, the challenges facing the country are less stark than at any time in

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recent memory, and the incumbent president’s record, while hardly perfect, cannot quite be labeled a disaster?

For the most part, the Republicans have sought to differentiate themselves attitudinally from Obama—to turn his effort to court Europe and the Muslim world into a disadvantage. Instead of bowing and apologizing, the Republicans say, they

will pursue the American national interest robustly, in the confident spirit of Ronald Reagan. American exceptionalism is to be embraced, with no “leading from behind.” It’s no accident that Mitt Romney titled his campaign book *No Apology*, or that he has promised that “the 21st Century will be an American Century.” He insists that defense spending should be increased, not cut.

“My foreign policy’s pretty straightforward,” Romney said at a Republican debate in South Carolina on November 12th. “I would be guided by an overwhelming conviction that this century must be an American century where America has the strongest values, the strongest economy, and the strongest military. An American century means the century where America leads the free world and the free world leads the entire world. We have a president right now who thinks America’s just another nation. America is an exceptional nation.”

These and similar words from other candidates represent an effort to recapture the strong-on-defense GOP magic. Yet there are variations on this theme; the candidates are not all equally unapologetic. At one end of the spectrum, you have candidates like Perry and Bachmann embracing the use of waterboarding against suspected terrorists, the very tactic that

probably did the most to damage the US image abroad during the Bush years. At the other, you have Jon Huntsman rejecting torture and calling for a dramatic de-escalation of the US commitment to Afghanistan and a reorientation of policy toward economics and Asia.

Huntsman has sounded almost like George McGovern at times, protesting that the US “core is weak” due to its economic woes, and that the country must curtail its overseas commitments accordingly. “I don’t want to be nation building in Afghanistan when this nation so desperately needs to be built,” Huntsman has said, in a line that could have been taken from one of Obama’s own speeches. When Romney calls for labeling China a “currency manipulator,” Huntsman accuses him of risking a trade war.

What none of the Republican candidates quite does is fully embrace the Bush administration “freedom agenda,” with its risky push for greater democracy in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Given Bush’s political flameout, this is surely no accident. Michele Bachmann denounced Obama’s move into Libya as a military adventure not in the US interest, despite the chance it created to remove an anti-American dictator. Several Republicans are notably ambivalent about the Arab Spring, questioning Obama’s alleged haste to dump an old ally like Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. Gingrich has gone so far as to say that “the degree to which the Arab Spring may become an anti-Christian spring is something which bothers me a great deal.”

The “neoconservative” movement has no obvious candidate in this race, unless it is Rick Santorum, who has called for “victory” in Afghanistan, and responded to Paul’s mutterings about 9/11 at one debate by reminding the libertarian that “we were attacked . . . because we have a civilization that is antithetical to the civilization of the jihadists. And they want to kill us because of who we are and what we stand for.” But Santorum has little chance of winning.

Instead of Bush redux, the Republicans are articulating a kind of narrowed-down version whose central concern is not so much expanding democracy across the Middle East as protecting its one outpost—Israel. At times, the campaign has almost seemed like a contest to see who can be the most unequivocally pro-Israel. This reflects the importance in the GOP primaries (especially the Iowa caucuses) of evangelical Christians, who staunchly support the Jewish state. But it is also one area in which Obama, by criticizing the policies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, may have made himself vulnerable more broadly, even among his own Democratic base, of which Jews are a key component.

Furthermore, the fate of Israel is closely connected to an area in which Obama's foreign policy has arguably fallen farthest short of its initial promise: Iran and its pursuit of nuclear weapons. The president came into office pledging to scrap the Bush administration's confrontational approach to the theocratic state. Instead of military threats, he would offer Tehran negotiations and greater legitimacy. Obama declined to embrace the democratic "Green" uprising in 2009, lest it upset this strategy. Yet Tehran has not budged; and so Obama has pursued sanctions (Bush's strategy) instead, without great tangible results. The International Atomic Energy Agency reported in November that the regime was probably pursuing a weapon.

The Republican candidates have all seized the opening, accusing the president of turning his back on a traditional ally, Israel, in its moment of existential peril. If their statements at the debates can be believed, several of them favor covert action and unilateral sanctions against Iran, to be followed pretty promptly by a military strike if all else fails. "We should be working with Israel right now," Santorum said on November 12th, "to do what they did in Syria, what they did in Iraq, which is take out that nuclear capability before the next explosion we hear in Iran is a nuclear one and then the world changes."

Of course, merely to recite the story of Obama's evolution on Iran—as well as Gitmo and other issues—is to recall that whatever candidates say about foreign policy during a campaign is subject to change, based on new realities at home and abroad. George W. Bush memorably pledged a "humble" foreign policy. Indeed, the Obama candidacy initially had much more to do with foreign policy than any other issue; he was to be the anti-Iraq War alternative to Hillary Clinton within the Democratic field. Yet the unforeseen financial meltdown of September 2008 turned the election into a vote about the nation's economic future and his subsequent presidency into a struggle to pass a health-care bill and rekindle job creation.

Similarly, the Republican candidates are not emphasizing foreign affairs now. Their campaigns are all about the economy. Yet some sudden crisis abroad—the detonation of an Iranian bomb; the fall of Kabul; chaos in the streets of Europe—could easily change all that. Take what the Republicans say now seriously, yes; but remember, too, that it is at most an uncertain guide to what they will eventually do when and if any of them gets elected. ❧

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