

Introduction

CONSERVATIVE TRADITIONS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

WHERE IS THE REPUBLICAN PARTY headed politically and ideologically? Should it become more strictly conservative or less so? These questions have interested observers and animated conservatives in particular since the Republican electoral defeats of 2006 and 2008. Heated debates continue as to how far the Republican Party should adjust and adapt, in terms of either style or substance, to recover national political success. Reformers such as David Brooks and David Frum urge Republicans to modernize, strike a new tone, and directly address middle-class economic anxieties.¹ Rock-ribbed conservatives respond by saying that the basic principles of limited government embodied in the American founding need no updating.² Yet amid these conflicting recommendations, surprisingly little popular attention is paid to foreign policy. Where will issues of diplomacy and national security fit into a new Republican appeal?

One way to help answer that question is to start with a better grasp of the true history of Republican foreign policy alternatives. This should come naturally to conservatives, who point out that only by understanding our own past can we move forward to good effect. In 2002, responding to the terrorist attacks of the previous autumn, the administration of President George W. Bush embraced a new national security strategy based on concepts of regime change, rogue state rollback, counterproliferation, preventive warfare, and assertive democratization, a strategy that became known as the Bush doctrine and that led directly to the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq. As of 2009–10, there were essentially three leading interpretations, whether explicit or implicit, of the Bush

doctrine's place in the history of American conservatism and the Republican Party. The first interpretation is that the story of right-wing foreign policy approaches in postwar America is one of radically aggressive, militaristic, and unilateralist ideas, thankfully ignored by moderate presidents such as Dwight Eisenhower but fully embraced by George W. Bush, to the combined detriment of the United States, the international community, and the Republican Party itself.³ Call this the "radical right" thesis. The second interpretation is that a small group of neoconservatives took control of the Bush administration and drove it to war against Iraq, in contradiction to traditional Republican internationalism.⁴ Call this the "neoconservative hijacking" thesis. The third interpretation is that both the Bush doctrine and the Iraq War were soundly conceived, despite certain failures of implementation, and need not be revisited or reexamined as bases for a new conservative foreign policy approach, especially since Iraq did no lasting damage to Republicans politically.⁵ Call this the "tactical errors" thesis. All three of these arguments are made by sincere and intelligent people, but the more one looks at each interpretation, the less satisfying any of them are. The tactical errors thesis underestimates the seriousness of George W. Bush's early mistakes in Iraq. The neoconservative hijacking thesis overstates the policy impact of public intellectuals, as well as the philosophical break between Bush and earlier Republicans. The radical right thesis is correct in noticing some of the fundamental continuities in conservative foreign policy approaches since World War II, but exaggerates their deleterious effects.

The following pages tell a different story. First, I argue that despite apparent oscillations between internationalism and isolationism, there has in fact been one overarching constant in conservative and Republican foreign policies for several decades now, namely, a hawkish and intense American nationalism. By this I mean that since at least the 1950s, Republicans and conservatives have generally been comfortable with the use of force by the United States in world affairs, committed to building strong national defenses, determined to maintain a free hand for the United States internationally, and relatively unyielding toward potential foreign adversaries. The typical conservative Republican foreign policy approach for over half a century has been, in a word, hard-line—a long-term trend with considerable domestic political as well as international

significance, especially since a majority of liberal Democrats began to abandon hard-line foreign policy views following America's war in Vietnam. Second, I demonstrate that certain particular conservative and Republican foreign policy tendencies have still been possible within the above framework, and that contrary to popular arguments centering on the importance of public intellectuals or economic interests, the crucial factor in shaping these specific foreign policy tendencies has been presidential leadership. Presidents have acted as focal points for their party, and Republican presidents have been given remarkable leeway to redefine not only conservative foreign policies but what it means to be a conservative in the United States.

These two observations, taken together, delineate both the past and the future of the Republican Party on American foreign policy. Republicans will continue to be relatively hard-line on international and military issues, as the party of a hawkish American nationalism, but the particular policy choices they make and the tendencies they reveal once back in control of the White House will depend heavily on presidential leadership. Among other things, this means that the recent obsession with "neoconservatives" is mistaken. Neoconservative ideas have been important over the past few years, but foreign policy is made by presidents, not intellectuals, and the Bush doctrine had deep roots in Republican and American foreign policy perspectives long before the word neoconservative was invented. Conservative foreign policy views and traditions are too strongly ingrained in the United States to fade away now, regardless of past furor over the neoconservatives and Iraq. The crucial consideration, therefore, is not so much the influence of neoconservative ideas but whether Republican presidents in practice have shown the prudence, pragmatism, and care to implement hawkish foreign policies skillfully and successfully. As I suggest in subsequent chapters, most Republican presidents since 1945 have done just that; in mismanaging the initial occupation of Iraq, George W. Bush was the great exception. Conservatives therefore have a history of foreign policy success to which they can turn, if they are willing to recall the examples set by previous Republican presidents.

This book tells the story of the relationship among presidential leadership, party politics, conservative ideas, and U.S. foreign policy since

World War II. As such, it can be seen as part of a current trend in scholarly political and intellectual histories that takes American conservatism seriously.⁶ This is the first such work to focus on the long-term evolution of Republican foreign policy approaches. The book itself is written from a conservative point of view, although, as the reader will discover, one that emphasizes the traditional conservative virtues of prudence, balance, and tenacity. When it seems to me that conservatives or Republicans have gone wrong on specific foreign policy issues, I say so. One observation, however, that I hope readers will take to heart is that conservative foreign policy positions grow from authentic convictions regarding the nature of international politics. American conservatives generally view themselves as watchdogs of their country's security. As much as this self-image infuriates liberal critics, it is genuinely held, and flows from an intense love of country. Observers who assume that conservative foreign policy stands are simply the result of narrow economic interest or partisan calculation really say more about themselves than they do about conservatives.



Conservatives and Republicans in the United States are not entirely synonymous. Still, the Republican or “Grand Old Party” (GOP) has tended to be the more conservative of the two major American political parties on economic issues, certainly since the 1930s, and arguably since the election of 1896. Beginning in the 1960s, partisan disagreement over economic issues was gradually supplemented—although not displaced—by a new and further division between Democrats and Republicans along social and cultural lines.⁷ The new social or cultural dimension of partisan disagreement was manifest in a wide range of issues, such as civil rights, criminal justice, and the implementation of traditional moral norms. Voter preferences on these matters often cut across existing alignments on economics: some voters, for example, supported increased government spending while maintaining a conservative stance on social issues. This led to an influx of social conservatives to the Republican Party and a corresponding outflow of social liberals from the GOP to the Democratic Party. As a result, today the Democratic Party is clearly the more liberal of the two major parties on social as well as economic

issues, just as the Republican Party is clearly the more conservative on both dimensions. The interesting question for our purposes, then, is what exactly it means to be a conservative in the United States when it comes to foreign policy.

The traditional conservative attitude toward transformational and perfectionist political visions, whether in the domestic or the international arena, is one of skepticism. Traditional or classical conservatives like Edmund Burke point to the unintended consequences of well-intentioned political reforms and tend to be anti-utopian in their basic outlook. Yet there are central elements of the American experience that are not exactly conservative in the traditional sense. The United States was born out of a revolution based at least partly on classical liberal ideas. The leaders of that revolution held that a certain amount of progress was possible in human affairs. They believed, and indeed American citizens of all parties have commonly believed, that the United States has a special role to play in promoting popular self-government internationally—a belief that forms part of a cluster of ideas known as American exceptionalism. The prior, domestic component to this belief in democracy promotion overseas is a strong attachment to individual freedom, rule of law, enterprise, love of country, and republican self-government inside the United States as central to American national identity.⁸ The founders of the United States, however pragmatic in promoting their nation's interests, certainly believed in American exceptionalism and took it for granted that the United States represented a new form of government that would have broad implications for the cause of popular self-rule worldwide. They trusted that the spread of democratic (or as they would say, republican) governments, trading with one another peacefully, would lead to the creation of a more friendly, just, and pacific international system. This is not a classically conservative but a classically liberal belief, and it has been hard-wired into the American mind-set from the very beginning.

All attempts to formulate a distinctly conservative U.S. foreign policy alternative thus face an inherent tension. Any foreign policy approach that completely rejects classical conservative insights can hardly be called conservative; any foreign policy approach that completely rejects classical liberal assumptions cannot be called American. The problem is

not insoluble, but it would be wrong to suggest that American conservatives have hit on only one lasting solution. In fact, if we look beyond the overarching continuities since the 1950s, there have been a variety of specific conservative foreign policy traditions or tendencies within the United States.

For the sake of simplicity, conservative U.S. foreign policy alternatives past and present can be categorized into four broad tendencies or schools of thought: realists, hawks, nationalists, and anti-interventionists. Conservative realists emphasize a balance of power, the careful coordination of force and diplomacy, and the international rather than domestic behavior of other states. Conservative hawks emphasize the need for accumulating military power and argue for armed intervention overseas, whether on pragmatic or idealistic grounds. Conservative nationalists emphasize the preservation of national sovereignty and an unyielding approach to foreign adversaries. Conservative anti-interventionists emphasize the avoidance or dismantling of strategic commitments overseas. Since each of these four categories is a pure type, few practical politicians fall neatly into only one school of thought, but even real-world conservative foreign policy leaders and advocates usually reveal a tendency toward certain archetypes over others. The overarching prevalence of a hawkish American nationalism in Republican foreign policy since the 1950s has not prevented fine-tuned adjustments, variations, and corrections between tendencies: more or less interventionist, more or less realistic, and so on. The question then becomes, why does one particular tendency win out over another at a given point in time?

A central argument and finding of this book is that the answer to that question is to be found in the possibilities of presidential leadership. Both popular and academic interpretations of U.S. foreign policy tend to fixate on external forces pushing presidents toward certain decisions over others. Economic interests, international pressures, domestic political concerns, and public intellectuals are variously said to determine presidential behavior on foreign policy matters. All of these factors are important, and considerably more will be said about them in the following chapters. But it is worth remembering that foreign policy is not made in exactly the same way as domestic policy in the United States. In

comparison with domestic policy, presidents are given a greater degree of latitude by their own party, the American public, and Congress to make foreign policy decisions. That degree of latitude means that their particular beliefs, personalities, and choices make a real difference when it comes to precise foreign policy outcomes. This is not to suggest that presidents are all-powerful on foreign affairs; far from it. But even after economic, political, ideological, and international pressures are all taken into account, the triumph of one foreign policy tendency over another is crucially shaped by the president's own choices. If they are sufficiently skilled, determined, and fortunate, presidents can even reshape political constraints and use international issues to help cement and expand their party's domestic coalition. In sum, to a remarkable extent, when one party controls the White House, that party's foreign policy is what the president says it is. Consider the following examples, each the subject of a separate chapter in this book:

- Dwight Eisenhower sought to contain the Soviet Union and its allies without bankrupting the United States. He won over the bulk of Republicans to a stance of cold war internationalism while balancing that stance with diplomatic sensitivity and a keen desire for peace.
- Richard Nixon initiated multiple innovations in American diplomacy, reorienting it toward a primary emphasis on geopolitics and great power relations. In an era of collapsed foreign policy consensus, he tried to build a new center-right majority by reaching out to national security hawks and conservatives across party lines.
- Ronald Reagan pursued a bold strategy of aggressive anticommunism and indirect rollback, with the goal of weakening the USSR and reducing cold war tensions on U.S. terms. At home, he consolidated a winning coalition of Sun Belt conservatives, foreign policy hawks, evangelicals, and traditional Republicans, and by refusing to overreach either domestically or internationally, he left this coalition the most dynamic force in American politics.
- George H. W. Bush followed a temperamentally conservative foreign policy approach that emphasized caution, stability, and prudence. He locked in international changes of lasting benefit to the

United States in relation to Germany, Eastern Europe, the collapsing Soviet Union, Latin America, arms control, democracy promotion, and international trade.

- George W. Bush embraced “compassionate” or “big government” conservatism at home, and preventive warfare together with attempted democratization in the Middle East. The resulting U.S. occupation of Iraq was conducted with a serious lack of preparation on Bush’s part—an error corrected by him only in the winter of 2006–7.

As is evident from each of these cases, presidents play a central role in determining their party’s specific foreign policy tendencies from year to year. Yet the history of major political parties in the United States also reveals certain broad continuities that transcend short-term changes. The Republicans have been the party of a hawkish American nationalism for several decades now and are unlikely anytime soon to become the more dovish or accommodationist of America’s two major parties on international and military issues. Whatever the internal integrity of their views, strict anti-interventionists such as Representative Ron Paul (R-TX) are therefore probably not going to win many internal debates over Republican foreign policy stands during the next few years. Still, this does not mean that future GOP presidential candidates need replicate exactly the foreign policy approach of George W. Bush. Indeed, if the central findings of this book are correct, then any future Republican president will have considerable leeway to shape the exact content of his or her foreign policies—good reason, as I argue in the conclusion, to learn from the mistakes as well as the successes of the past, and to devise a foreign policy approach that is more realistic, and consequently more rather than less genuinely conservative.

The book ends with a survey of current Republican foreign policy alternatives, together with a recommendation for greater conservative realism in international affairs. Conservatives are still coming to grips with the fact that George W. Bush showed insufficient such realism in planning for the invasion and initial occupation of Iraq. The reason why this matters going forward is that in truth, President Barack Obama is no more of a foreign policy realist than was Bush. Obama made great gains in 2008 by criticizing Republicans on Iraq and by touting the vir-

tues of foreign policy pragmatism. Yet his administration has adopted an international approach that in important respects cannot be described as realistic. Obama and his most enthusiastic supporters appear to view the president as somehow capable of transcending international differences, partly through Obama's very existence and partly through what might be called the transformational power of unilateral diplomatic outreach. The president's assumption seems to be that if only the United States reaches out and makes preliminary concessions to international competitors, they will necessarily reciprocate. True realists make no such assumption. Nor do true foreign policy realists place much weight, as Obama appears to, on the possibility that an American president's personal style, autobiography, and conciliatory language might actually alter other countries' perceptions of their own vital interests. The current president's core foreign policy instincts are therefore not so much realist as accommodationist, informed in turn by an exaggerated sense of what personality can accomplish in world affairs. All the more reason for Republicans and conservatives to develop a cogent critique of Obama's foreign policy approach—not one based on a reflexive defense of every past feature of the Bush doctrine but one based on a greater dose of classical conservative skepticism and tough-mindedness regarding international relations. In other words, Republicans need to reclaim their own history, and then they will be able to reclaim mastery of American foreign policy.