

The Strange Politics of 2016 US Foreign Policy

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAY 3 2015

The 2016 US presidential campaign is underway even though the election is more than a year and a half way. Nearly two dozen Republicans are in, or are seemingly ready to announce that they are in, the race for their party's nomination for president. The Democratic side is essentially Hillary Clinton and no one else. The parties are far apart on domestic policy with Democrats seeking to expand the welfare state while Republicans wanting to restrict it. Democrats tend to favor tax increases while Republicans never do. Democrats favor a path to citizenship for America's millions of illegal immigrants while Republicans mostly oppose the idea. But in foreign policy there is strange harmony, with nearly all viable candidates, and then some, lining up for a more meddling, aggressive foreign policy than that being conducted by the slowing fading Obama administration.

Republicans generally portray President Barack Obama as pursuing a weak and retreating foreign policy. Obama's failure to continue America's military presence in Iraq is said to have allowed ISIS to form. His vanishing red line in Syria they say showed great weakness. Afghanistan is certain to fall because Obama announced the end of US combat operations prematurely, thus encouraging the Taliban to hang on. Iran is about to get the bomb because Obama is supposedly not tough enough in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Putin bullies Ukraine because Obama, they say, does not stand up to him. And America's position in Asia is eroding because Obama is in their view too easy on China.

Republican candidates want foreign policy to be a major issue in the presidential campaign as Republicans are thought to have a foreign policy advantage among voters. The party won five of the six presidential elections after the war in Vietnam became a salient issue and while the Cold War raged. The party is less advantaged in domestic politics. George H.W. Bush lost reelection, despite presiding over the peaceful end of the Cold War and achieving a quick victory in the Gulf War, because his opponent, Bill Clinton, cleverly argued "it's the economy stupid" to shift attention away from foreign policy when taking on Bush in 1992. Barack Obama, a foreign policy novice, won office in 2008 due to the deepening recession, and not because of promises to fight harder in Afghanistan while winding up US involvement in Iraq. Republicans may not believe the economy is fully recovered or that America is doing well at home, but they would prefer foreign policy to be at the center of the current presidential campaign because they believe it to be their party's electoral strength, the legacy of George W. Bush notwithstanding.

Strangely, hardly any of the Republican candidates have foreign policy experience. They are mostly young with only brief time in public life as governors or junior members of the Senate. Among them only John Bolton, who was US Ambassador to the United Nations, and Lindsey Graham, the longtime senator from South Carolina, has stature in the foreign policy community, but neither has much of chance of winning the Republican nomination for president. This all is unusual as often the Republican candidate has substantial governmental or military experience (e.g. Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, George H. W. Bush, and John McCain) or a long time on the national scene (e.g. Ronald Reagan and Bob Dole). The current leaders among the Republicans include Scott Walker, a second term governor of Wisconsin, Ted Cruz, the first term senator from Texas, Marco Rubio, also a first term Senator, in his case from Florida, Rand Paul, a first term senator from Kentucky, and Jeb Bush, the son and brother of presidents, but himself only a former two term governor of Florida who has been out of office since 2007. To be sure, all have passports and have traveled abroad in official delegations or privately. But they and nearly all of the others running for the Republican nomination are without military service and foreign policy experience, a remarkable circumstance.

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In contrast, Hillary Clinton has lots of relevant experience. She was, of course, First Lady, the wife of the president, for eight years, the US senator from New York for eight years, and the US Secretary of State for four years. No matter what one thinks of her foreign policy accomplishments, to the extent there are any, it is obvious that she knows the US government's internal processes for generating foreign policy and its relationship with other nations and international organizations. When it comes to foreign policy, Hillary Clinton has been there and done that.

The interesting point though is despite the inexperience of the Republicans, and despite Hillary Clinton's long resume, all the main candidates for the 2016 presidential election are likely to end up with essentially the same right of Barack Obama activist, if not George W. Bush's full up interventionist, foreign policy. Barack Obama entered office saying that there was a good war to fight, the one in Afghanistan, and that he would get the US out of Iraq, a war he opposed. He ends his days as president with a foot back in Iraq and the other still in Afghanistan, but with an obvious reluctance to engage US forces anywhere. Some of the reluctance is surely recognition of the futility of trying to shape the governance of distant lands; witness Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, the Ukraine, and Syria. The rest may be his judgment of the willingness of Americans to put soldiers in harm's way after so many years of war. But no matter how wise, this is not the acceptable, standard American "leader of the free world" presidential candidate line that both the Republican herd and Hillary Clinton seem to believe that they must take.

For the Republicans there is no other place else to go. As foreign policy innocents, they seek cover in the endorsement of the Republican foreign policy elite which remains committed to the active management of global security though not to the Neocon extensions of occupation and conversion to democracy sought under George W. Bush. Moreover, there is so much dislike of Barack Obama among the Republican electorate that any policy that is identified with him, even one that was in keeping with Republican desires like extending the stay of US forces in Afghanistan, is viewed with suspicion. Going to Obama's right is necessary for Republican candidates, including Rand Paul whose Libertarian beliefs had earlier led him to praise Obama's restraint in foreign policy.

Like Barack Obama, however, Rand Paul still maintains that the Iraq invasion was a mistake. Hillary Clinton may have that view now, but she voted for it when she was in the Senate. On that issue and others in her run up to the 2008 campaign for the Democratic Party nomination for president, the one that she lost to Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton staked out rather hawkish positions. She tried to be clear that she not part of the anti-war wing that had dominated the Democratic Party since the Vietnam War days. As she conveyed in one of her campaign advertisements, she was tough enough for the phone calls reporting crisis situations that presidents get in the middle of the night. Maybe not quite a Margaret Thatcher, but almost.

There is no doubt that with the benefit of hindsight Hillary Clinton will distant herself from many of the positions that she took in her time as senator, in the 2008 campaign, and during her years as Secretary of State. She will likely argue that George W. Bush misled the nation as well as her about the need for the Iraq invasion. The Reset with Russia could well be not her idea after all. And Benghazi could have been handled better she might concede. But in the end she will feel the pressure of being potentially the first woman president, and that will drive her to keep a hawkish foreign policy stance. Yes, she was involved in the decision to get Osama bin Laden, and yes, she could order such a raid as president. She will be in favor of a strong military and being tough on terrorism. You will not see much difference between Hillary Clinton's foreign policy positions and that of any of the leading Republican candidates. The center of American establishment foreign policy is to the right of Barack Obama post bin Laden and to the left, but not by much, of George W. Bush. It is for more American meddling, but with the claim of caution and good judgment. That is where you will likely find Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush, Scot Walker, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz, and a dozen other very ambitious American politicians in 2016.

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