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Opinion – Ukraine and the Republican Party's Drift from the 'Honor Code' of Jacksonian Diplomacy

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THOMAS J. COBB, MAY 7 2023

Even if peace is somehow negotiated before the 2024 presidential election, it is certain that the Russia-Ukraine War will still be invoked by a Democratic campaign seeking to charge the GOP (the Republican Party) with being diplomatically irresponsible. This is because prominent Republicans in the Biden era have made anti-Ukraine sentiment a commonplace GOP stance, comparable to anti-lockdown agitation and rallying against Donald Trump's indictment. For a greater understanding of why Ukraine will form a dividing line in 2024, it is worth exploring recent partisan divisions and how potential presidential contenders like Ron DeSantis illustrate the GOP's divergence from a Jacksonian 'honor code' embraced by earlier Republican figures.

Currently, multiple Republican representatives maintain positions on NATO expansion and Russian irredentism that are divorced from the worldview of pre-Trump Republican presidents. In an indication of how much the GOP has changed ideologically, they are also divorced from pre-Trump Republican populist icons. The isolationism of Lauren Boebert, who opposed US taxpayer aid to Ukraine at the beginning of this year, is dramatically removed from the diplomatic stances of 2008 era Sarah Palin, a figure commonly seen as a harbinger of Trump's unvarnished politics. Shortly following the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008, Palin advocated that Georgia and Russia should be admitted to NATO, a position diametrically opposed to the isolationism evidenced today. The reality that MAGA standard bearers Matt Gaetz and Marjorie Taylor Greene, along with sixteen other Republicans, voted against a resolution that supported Sweden and Finland's efforts to join NATO in 2022 show that the kind of firebrand populism previously attributed to Palin has transmuted into something far more isolationist in the Biden era.

In a reversal of previous Reaganite traditions, the GOP today contains a minority of members who have ended their party's reputation for support of the NATO alliance and its expansion to states fearing Russian encroachment. In April 2022, 63 Republican House members and 0 Democratic House members voted against a non-binding resolution affirming support for NATO as an alliance founded on democratic principles. This partisan divide, along with the one glimpsed in the previous House vote on the NATO admission of Finland and Sweden, was different from the split displayed during a 1998 Senate vote on approval for expansion of NATO membership in Eastern Europe. The necessary two thirds majority required for ratification passed thanks to a plurality of Republicans, who backed the measure by 45 to the Democrats' 35, resulting in a lopsided 80-19 victory for approval. In the Biden era, it would be unthinkable for Republican affirmative votes to outweigh Democratic ones on any issue relating to NATO expansion or support.

Notably, members of 'the Squad', a group of four progressive House Democrats traditionally hostile to US military commitments, have been willing to aid Ukraine unlike the far-right of the GOP; the voting records of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Ayanna Pressley all show affirmative votes for the "Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022" and the "Continuing Appropriations and Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act 2023". The support of the left flank of the Democratic Party on those votes left anti-Ukraine sentiment a cause of the GOP in the House of Representatives, as only Republicans voted against the two bills. Strikingly, GOP votes against Ukraine aid amassed from a meagre 10 Republican votes for the "Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022" (voted on in the spring of 2022) to 201 for the "Continuing Appropriations and Ukraine Supplemental Appropriations Act 2023" (voted on in the autumn of 2022).

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Although the caveat should be made that Ukraine aid was combined with a \$1.66 trillion dollar government funding bill in the latter act and thus combined with separate areas of domestic policy liable to be opposed by Republicans, opposition to Ukraine aid has proved prominent within the GOP voter base since the passage of that bill; a March 2023 poll provided by The Economist and YouGov showed that Republican voters significantly lagged behind Democrat ones in favouring financial and military aid to Ukraine. Only 38% of Republicans endorsed financial aid to Ukraine in contrast to 73% of Democrats, whilst assistance in the form of tanks and long-range missiles both had 19% gaps in partisan approval.

Such polling demonstrates the Republican Party's divergence from a previously stereotypical conviction in the importance of military alliances and reverence for martial valour. In a 2020 article for *American Studies in Scandinavia*, I examined how Trump's isolationist reorientation of the GOP was overinterpreted as stemming from what the International Relations historian Walter Mead originally defined in a 1999 The National Interest article as the 'Jacksonian'. What Mead outlined as "the Jacksonian tradition" encompassed a pugnacity and nationalism along with a strong affinity for the military, bravery in combat and the fulfilling of military commitments to other states, shibboleths not always highlighted by the campaign stances and attitudes of Trump. The same asymmetry between conservatism and the Jacksonian is detectable in the firebrand Republicans who have carried most antipathy towards Western support for Ukraine.

Mead's understanding of the Jacksonian (a term derived from Andrew Jackson, the populist veteran president who occupied the Oval Office from 1829 to 1837), stressed a "political force that under certain circumstances demands war, supports the use of force and urges political leaders to stop wasting time with negotiations". Whereas earlier generations of hawkish Republicans supported US military commitments to South Vietnam and South Korea and the cause of victory at all costs, the hard right of the Biden era have declined to support an outright defeat of Russia. Senator JD Vance's stance that the United States should seek a peaceful resolution to the conflict (a position voiced in January 2023) is contrary to the Jacksonian distrust of negotiation, embodied in the "politicians who advocated negotiations with the Soviet enemy" and who were "labeled appeasers".

I would further argue that the scepticism towards Ukraine aid purveyed by House Republicans such as Texas's Chip Roy constitutes a deviation from what Mead described as the Jacksonian 'honor code'. In his 1999 article, Mead outlined a conviction that "once the United States extends a security guarantee or makes a promise, we are required to honor that promise come what may"; today, representatives like Marjorie Taylor Greene complain of American support to Zelensky and wish that the US would betray previous commitments to supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine and obligations enshrined as early as the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. If one element of the 'Jacksonian' entails the continued honoring of military commitments to allies, the hard right of the GOP have worked hard to make Mead's label less applicable to their brand of politics.

One noticeable symptom of the GOP's drift from the Jacksonian is an increased disdain for the national military establishment, a trend which has accelerated during Biden's presidency. Mead noted in 1999 that Jacksonians viewed military expenditure as "one of the best things governments can do" and the Defense Department as providing "a service to the middle class." In the Biden era, potential GOP presidential contenders like Florida governor Ron DeSantis lambast the federal military establishment and propose a new civilian military force operational in the Sunshine State. Accusations of wokeness have been levelled at the Pentagon by Republican House representatives such as Florida's Michael Waltz, who has critiqued the teaching of critical race theory at service academies. The Republicans who lambasted a progressive military establishment have also critiqued the volume of Ukraine aid given by the United States and the US's general involvement in the conflict; Florida's Waltz has bemoaned the burden sharing of the US compared to European allies while the more famous DeSantis dismissed Ukraine support as not "vital" earlier this year.

The anti-Ukraine aid positions of Trump and DeSantis, the two Republicans most dominant in polling for the 2024 Republican nomination, almost certainly mean that the 2024 election will accentuate party polarisation on Ukraine. A contest between Biden and either Trump or DeSantis will additionally involve an inversion of the campaign mudslinging employed throughout the Cold War era; in 1984, Reagan warned that his Democratic opponent would sell out the cause of freedom abroad, an accusation more likely to be wielded at Republicans vis-a-vis Ukraine today.

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Given the divided nature of contemporary US politics, there is no amount of moral authority Biden could gain on Ukraine to equal the 49-state landslide Reagan achieved in 1984.

If a Biden platform based on continued support for NATO and a free Ukraine proves victorious, however, the president could claim to have harnessed the honor code integral to the Jacksonian and pre-Trump Republican presidents. Such a realignment would further challenge those who ascribe the Jacksonian paradigm to the post-Trump GOP and who contradict the reality that the hard right's reaction to Ukraine's invasion precludes a natural relationship between the military solidarity of Mead's idea and contemporary Republicanism.

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