

Rethinking Republican Foreign Policy

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, JUN 8 2009

The 2008 election was not a fluke. The days of Republican advantage on foreign and security affairs are over. The Democrats have learned to talk tougher on defense matters and to appoint Republicans and moderate Democrats to the senior posts. The Democrats now treat military preparedness, including Ronald Reagan's missile defense, like the Republicans treat Social Security —with the self-preserving respect accorded electrified third rails. The party sought congressional candidates with military records. President Obama chose to retain Robert Gates as his Secretary of Defense. Retired four star generals have been given prominent jobs in the Obama administration. Hillary Clinton who called Obama naive on foreign policy is now Obama's Secretary of State.

Republican positions on US foreign policy seemingly had little to do with the party's decisive 2008 electoral defeat. Although John McCain persistently sought to bring it up, foreign policy was pushed off the campaign agenda by both the emerging success in Iraq, which took away the public's concern about the soldier and dollar cost of that conflict, and the emerging economic crisis, which held the public's attention as the nation's most important financial institutions began to wobble and then topple. The reduction in American casualties in Iraq during the year preceding the election may have confirmed John McCain's wisdom in seeking the surge, but it also made the Republican ownership of security issues largely irrelevant. The Georgia that Russia attacked during the summer of 2008 did not have Atlanta as its capital and as such was not much on our minds. Osama bin Laden, perhaps no longer among the living, kept quiet and thus politically neutral as he had not during the 2004 election.

Foreign policy has been a Republican dominated topic since the Vietnam War and the party's winning card in national elections. Although Lyndon Johnson presided over the escalation of that war, the Democrat party had quickly abandoned the cause as casualties and operational frustrations mounted. The tolerance of most leading Democrats toward the student Left anti-war protests as they grew in size and disruption turned many blue collar voters against the party. The persistent softness of the party's presidential nominees on Cold War issues gave election after election to Republicans until that war ended. Jimmy Carter's brief interlude was possible only because of Richard Nixon's personal transgressions. America was not safe for Democrat presidents until the Berlin Wall was down and the Soviet Union was history.

It was Bill Clinton's transgressions that put George W. Bush into the White House though barely, not Republican foreign policies. But after the 9/11 attacks everything seemed right again, America was threatened and Republicans were in charge. Security concerns and recall of John Kerry's anti-war heroics gave George W. Bush the second term denied his father. Only the 1960s Democrats wanted to relive the good old days with Kerry. The Iraq War's evolution from glorious victory to counter-insurgent slog was not fully evident in 2004, but threat of a global Jihad was.

Getting the war in Iraq turned around took much longer than the Bush administration expected. The incredibly difficult two years that followed George W. Bush's reelection destroyed domestic support for the war and Republican control of Congress. It was not until the late summer of 2007 that the combination of the Anbar Awakening, the Sunni community's desperate search for relief from the murderous Shia militia onslaught in Baghdad, and the deployment of additional American and Iraqi forces began to produce significant reductions in violence and coalition casualties. By then even the truth about progress in Iraq was being discounted by a public accustomed to perpetually rosy assessments of Iraq's stabilization.

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A quiet Iraq and a less visible even if slowly unraveling Afghanistan allowed the 2008 election to be fought largely on other grounds. The Bush administration's success came too late to give Republicans passing marks for competence, but early enough to allow fears of the economy's fate, always a Democrat vote gainer, to become the main issue. Barack Obama's promise to end the war no matter what did not seem to matter much in a campaign that could not keep attention focused on foreign policy. John McCain's candor about his lack of economic expertise hurt much more than Obama's obvious unfamiliarity with foreign and security policy issues.

More important, the Republican stance on foreign policy is essentially indistinguishable from that of the Democrats and wrong for America. Both parties are interventionist, seeking to manage global security through a combination of meddling diplomacy and threats of military action. They both believe in soft power and hard power, but mostly in American management of all power. The Democrats may sound more multi-lateral and humanitarian focused and the Republicans a bit more unilateral and military focused, but it is a difference that is mostly stylistic. Both assume that every problem requires American involvement. They both assume that the Arab-Israeli problem needs American management, but so does the India-Pakistan's dispute over Kashmir, pirates off the coast of Africa, the status of Taiwan, North Korea's nuclear program, and Georgia's problems with Russia. All of this is left over from Cold War thinking and all of it is wrong for the post-Cold War world.

With the demise of the Soviet Union America became quite safe, and Republicans would be wise to acknowledge this basic truth. Republicans can not win elections by continuing to promote non-existent foreign threats and by continuing to encourage our entanglement in other people's conflicts. To reclaim power they need to craft an up to date domestic policy while claiming credit for advocating an up to date foreign policy that features America's return home.

And just as it is important to acknowledge the security that the collapse of the Soviet Union has given us, it is important to avoid accepting an oft repeated false lesson of the Second World War. Americans then were rightly reluctant to enter that war because victory required the invasion and defeat of Germany and nothing less. Getting into the war early would not have made the task easier. It took years for our forces to prepare and years for German forces to be worn down. Do the math. Germany lost 3,000,000 soldiers on the Eastern Front and 300,000 on the Western Front. As for Japan, our use of the atomic bomb saved us from what was likely to have been a very long and very costly invasion of the Japanese home islands. Preparedness is good; quick to the fight is not.

America pursued a strategy of containment during the Cold War which led to the global deployment of US forces and attempts to counter every Soviet probe. We feared Soviet hegemony over Europe and Asia. The major European powers and Japan were devastated by the Second World War, and stood vulnerable to communist aggression and subversion without our protection. The US military stood between our friends and the Red Army and guarded all flanks.

By failing to dismantle the security structures build for the Cold War, we still are forward deployed and overly involved in managing security far from our shores. American forces still garrison in Germany. Nearly six decades after the Korean War started, American forces still guard South Korea. Our fleet still patrols off the China coast. We still protect Japan and Germany from their pasts. But the world has changed. The Soviet Union no longer exists. Europe and Asia are prosperous. South Korea has twice the population and twenty-five times the gross domestic product of North Korea. The European Union is as wealthy as the United States and has more than a hundred million more people. Why are we still guarding these countries and from whom?

America is a very secure nation. We are protected by two big oceans and live next to two non-threatening neighbors. We have the world's most powerful military, its largest economy, and its most dynamic culture. We spend about as much on defense as does the rest of the world combined. Only India and China have larger populations, and unlike the populations of nearly all other industrialized countries, ours continues to grow. And our culture with its emphasis on individual freedom and materialism triumphs globally, easily eroding all resistance ranging from academia elitism to traditional religion.

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There is a terrorist threat, but it is an easy to exaggerate one. We have been attacked by Islamic terrorists, but can not be conquered by them. Bin Laden and the rest of al Qaeda are being hunted. There can be no sanctuary of our enemies. We have in fact received cooperation in the search for al Qaeda from nearly every functioning government in the world and have had clear success in killing or capturing these terrorists. Our stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are not over yet, but there has been some progress in both countries. The danger is expecting or promising too much for these very fragmented societies. One must admit that continuing vigilance is required to prevent nuclear weapons from being acquired by terrorists, but the record to date, one must also admit, is absolutely perfect.

Restraint should be our new grand strategy. We are powerful, but have no need to manage global security and waste our resources and geographic advantage in doing so. Most security concerns are regional in nature, connected to us only by the creative rhetoric of our security establishment and those who want us to do their work. Our friends, closer to nearly all of these security problems than we, happily free ride on our eagerness to patrol the globe. Although rich, they consciously under-invest in their militaries, allowing us to carry the collective burden. Their claims about their inability to acquire more forces and better equipment rings hollow. Unless we do less, they will not do more.

America should come home, very soon from Europe and Asia and only a bit more slowly from Iraq and Afghanistan, but home nevertheless. We have natural strategic depth offered by our geography and it is time to reclaim it. There is no need to stand between our friends and their neighbors. Our friends face no great threats that would endanger us unless we act as their protectors. On the contrary, our security is weakened by our inclination to rush to sound of the guns which allows others to assume that we are responsible for solving their conflicts with their neighbors or ending their civil wars. Our rewards for this constant meddling are unfulfillable expectations, new enemies, and misspent resources.

There will likely be times when we wish to intervene abroad to alleviate suffering from natural or man-made disasters, but these interventions will gain more international acceptance and greater participation from others if they are not assumed to be automatic. Restraint in our eagerness to be involved will win us more friends, not less. Because we are inherently powerful, people will want us on their side. They will be solicitous of our interests in the hope of our favor as they rarely are today. And they will understand that our goodwill may require that they heed our calls for assistance when they are made.

Restraint is not a euphemism for isolationism although it will be labeled as such by those who wish to trash it. America should stay involved in the world, trading with others and offering our people the opportunity to learn from the international exchange of ideas. All we need avoid is the belief that we must manage global security and that every crisis among nations is our own. The oceans do protect us, but they do not eliminate the advantages of global commerce or the existence of all dangers. We should have a big military, but just not a busy one.

The adjustments others make to our resignation as the world's policeman are likely to be very beneficial. NATO is a Cold War anachronism. When we quit NATO as we should, Europe at last will grow a spine. European nations will recall how to develop effective forces for their own protection and mechanisms for their coordination. They will also be a lot less inclined than they are now to support local adventurism on the border of Russia. And when we withdraw from our forward bases in Asia, Japan is likely to have to confront its often downplayed aggression before and during the Second World War which its now more powerful neighbors have not forgotten. With that war and the Cold War long over, it is time for a regional reconciliation.

Oil will flow, pirates will be chased, and Israel will be defended even if we are home. Our claim to being indispensable is wrong and self-deluding. We are better off in a world of adults. If we allow others to assume responsibilities which are rightly their own, they will learn to be more responsible. Best we will not be tied down across the globe trying to be in charge of everything. Our imagined global security requirements are the excuse for too much inaction at home and too much action abroad.

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Republicans need to lead us home. It is not in America's interest to carry the global security burden. And it is not in the Republicans' interest to keep America worried about imagined foreign threats while avoiding its domestic problems. It was Republicans who helped shape the forward deployments of the Cold War, building the containment strategy that ultimately did in the Soviet Union, and it should be Republicans who help return our forces to our shores. We are the too willing victims of our allies' free riding on our security investments. It was in our interest to protect them from an expansionary Soviet Union. It is now in our interest to get them to pay fully for their own security.

Americans want a fresh start domestically and internationally. They are suspicious of allies who claim to be unable to provide serious forces for serious fights, but who are always quick to criticize every initiative we take in those fights. Americans are feed-up with the ungratefulness of those whom we supposedly are liberating from oppressors and know instinctively that democratization that we keep promising to provide them can not be given as a gift. They are tired of the continuing ineptitude and corruption of United Nation agencies. And they want relief from the barrage of demands that it is somehow America's obligation to solve the unsolvable problems of Israel, Kashmir, Taiwan, Haiti, the Balkans, the Congo, Somalia, and Sudan.

Republicans have made cutting taxes the core of their domestic policy in the face of obvious and serious problems in urban education, persistent poverty, and decaying infrastructure. Every time peace seems possible, the voters bring in the Democrats. Republicans can not continue to fend of concern about domestic issues by scaring up foreign threats. We are secure.

Fascism is dead. Communism is dead. Colonialism is dead. Islam is in turmoil beset as it is by many internal conflicts and the march of materialism. Geography protects us even in an age of missiles and international trade. Our friends are safe and, if motivated, fully capable of taking care of themselves. Our leadership is unneeded and unwelcomed. It is time to tell the American people that they can safely turn inward. They will be grateful to those who speak the truth.

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