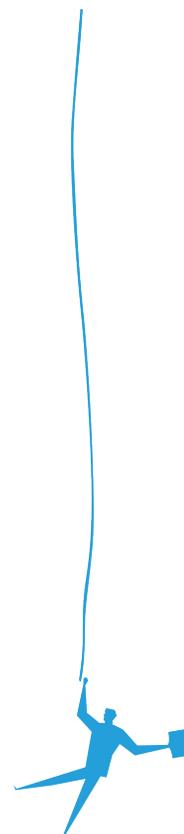


THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATIVE FOREIGN POLICY

Colin Dueck



In this featured roundtable essay for Vol. 2, Iss. 1, Colin Dueck takes stock of conservative foreign policy — past, present, and future.

The Trump era has triggered an intense, yet useful discussion on the political right and center-right about the proper direction of American foreign policy. Conservatives within the United States — like Americans generally — have oscillated between realist and idealist interpretations of world affairs, just as they have between military intervention and non-intervention, always trying to find the right balance. But American conservatives have also made these choices in their own characteristic ways. In particular, a recurring tension has long existed between placing emphasis on national versus international priorities. Conservative nationalists have tended to stress U.S. sovereignty,¹ while conservative internationalists have tended to stress the need for U.S. strategic engagement overseas.² These two emphases are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and at times have been compatible. But the 2016 Trump presidential campaign had the effect of highlighting the differences, rather than the commonalities, and, at least at the level of elite opinion, these differences have yet to subside.

There is a wide range of opinion among conservative foreign policy experts over the wisdom of President Donald Trump's international approach. Nor do these opinions always fall along predictable factional lines. For example, there are GOP foreign policy realists who believe Trump's international direction to be mostly sound, and GOP foreign policy realists who disagree.³ There are neoconservatives who largely support the president's approach, and neoconservatives who do not.⁴ There are anti-interventionists who

like the president's basic direction, and anti-interventionists who don't.⁵ Moreover, some of these differences go straight to the heart of the matter. Indeed, the entire history of the U.S. conservative intellectual movement, beginning in the 1950s, has in a way been a series of attempted purges, redefinitions, or excommunications of one view or another that were considered as being outside the permissible bounds.⁶ As it turns out, however, the great majority of conservative GOP voters say they support the Trump administration's foreign policy approach.⁷ This raises an interesting question: Can the intellectuals excommunicate the voters? Probably not.

What then is the role of conservative intellectuals in a populist era? One answer is to try and provide foreign policy recommendations and principles, and foster a deeper understanding of the issues, whether or not it is politically popular. Another is to listen to the concerns of conservative voters, in the realization the public may understand something that the intellectuals do not. It may even be possible to do both of these things at the same time. But regardless of which path is pursued, conservative intellectuals will first need to acknowledge that, as an empirical historical reality, there is more than one specific way of defining conservative foreign policy — and that the debate between these various options cannot be constructively advanced without first accepting the possibility of honest disagreement between intelligent people.

It is in this spirit that the *Texas National Security Review* convenes this particular roundtable,

1 For related arguments, see John Fonte and John O'Sullivan, "The Return of American Nationalism," *National Review*, Nov. 18, 2016, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/11/donald-trumps-win-american-nationalism-returns/>; Yoram Hazony, *The Virtue of Nationalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005); Julian Koo and John Yoo, *Taming Globalization: International Law, the US Constitution, and the New World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Jeremy Rabkin, *Law Without Nations? Why Constitutional Government Requires Sovereign States* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

2 Various definitions can be found in Thomas Knock, *To End All Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 55–58; Charlie Laderman, "Conservative Internationalism: An Overview," *Orbis* 62, no. 1 (2018): 6–21, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2017.11.009>; Paul Miller, *American Power and Liberal Order* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016); and Henry Nau, *Conservative Internationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

3 Randall Schweller, "Three Cheers for Trump's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 5 (September/October 2018), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-08-13/three-cheers-trumps-foreign-policy>; Dov Zakheim, "Trump's Perilous Path," *National Interest*, June 18, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trumps-perilous-path-26325>.

4 Elliott Abrams, "Trump the Traditionalist," *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 4 (July/August 2017), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2017-06-13/trump-traditionalist>; Robert Kagan, *The Jungle Grows Back* (New York: Knopf, 2018).

5 Patrick Buchanan, "Trump Calls Off Cold War II," *American Conservative*, July 17, 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/buchanan/trump-calls-off-cold-war-ii/>; Curt Mills, "A Year On, Foreign Policy Restrainers Assess the Trump Administration," *National Interest*, Nov. 7, 2017, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/year-foreign-policy-restrainters-assess-the-trump-23088>.

6 George Hawley, *Right-Wing Critics of American Conservatism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), chap. 2.

7 *Monthly Harvard-Harris Poll*, The Harris Poll, October 2018, https://harvardharrispoll.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HHP_Oct2018_Topline_Memo_RegisteredVoters.pdf.



drawing from a wide range of notable foreign policy voices on this topic. Our contributors each represent their own distinct point of view, offering analysis, predictions, and/or recommendations of their own. The purpose of this opening essay is not to offer a thunderous statement about what conservative foreign policy should or will be. Rather, it is simply to prompt and provoke broader discussion and debate, by pointing out certain historical patterns, current tendencies, and possible future directions.

Past Examples

Any judgment on the future of conservative foreign policy necessarily rests upon a judgment regarding both its past and its present. Conservatism in America is not identical with the Republican Party, but over a period of many years it has become more closely associated with it. The GOP has been America's more rightward political party going back at least to Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal era, if not earlier, and social or cultural traditionalism has since been layered on as an added point of difference with Democrats.⁸ To discuss conservative foreign policy over the past century is, therefore, to discuss Republican foreign policy.⁹ And here, conservatives have more than one historical model upon which to draw. These models tend to focus on differing presidencies, but are not limited to them. Or, to put it another way, when reviewing the history of conservative foreign policy one must ask: What past U.S. foreign policy leaders are today's conservatives supposed to emulate? Ronald Reagan? Either Bush presidency? Richard Nixon? Dwight Eisenhower? Or should future conservatives look to even earlier examples of a more detached U.S. approach?

Conservatism as a self-conscious intellectual-political movement within the United States only coalesced after World War II, under the leadership

of public figures such as William F. Buckley.¹⁰ But of course a range of recognizably conservative U.S. foreign policy options existed long before that. In the 1920s, for example, Republican presidents from Warren Harding to Herbert Hoover pursued an international approach based upon U.S. economic nationalism together with strict limitations against American military commitments overseas.¹¹ This approach had certain serious, inherent weaknesses, but was politically very popular in its day.

Congressional Republicans such as Sen. Robert Taft (R-OH) argued for the continuation of a non-interventionist approach well into World War II.¹² An opposing faction of Republican internationalists rose to prominence during the great foreign policy debate of 1940–41, calling for increased U.S. aid to Great Britain to help fight Nazi Germany. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, and Hitler's declaration of war on the United States, ended that particular debate. But Taft and other Midwestern conservatives continued to favor limitations on America's postwar international commitments, even as the Soviet Union advanced its influence over Eastern Europe during and after Hitler's defeat.¹³

Many GOP conservatives remained profoundly skeptical of the need for broad, expansive multilateral commitments in the late 1940s. It was only a fierce anti-communism that convinced these Republicans of the need to adopt a forward strategic posture. Taft himself outlined an alternative foreign policy strategy in 1950–51, one that emphasized U.S. airpower and anti-communist rollback, rather than indefinite containment via major American commitments on land.¹⁴ Eisenhower — Taft's opponent for the 1952 Republican nomination — did not entirely disagree with this emphasis. But both as candidate and as president, Eisenhower combined it with underlying reassurances to U.S. allies. It was under Eisenhower that most American conservatives became reconciled, in practical terms, to a genuinely global U.S. foreign

8 Alan Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); David Legee et al., *The Politics of Cultural Differences* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 27–28, 254–58; Gary Miller and Norman Schofield, "The Transformation of the Republican and Democratic Party Coalitions in the US," *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 3 (September 2008): 433–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592708081218>; and James Sundquist, *Dynamics of the Party System* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1983), chaps. 8–12, 16–17.

9 Colin Dueck, *Hard Line: The Republican Party and US Foreign Policy since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

10 George Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006 edition), chap. 5.

11 Herbert Hoover, *Memoirs, Volume II: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 1920-1933* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1952), 28, 70, 81–82, 330–332, 366, 377.

12 Clarence Wunderlin, *Robert A. Taft: Ideas, Tradition, and Party in US Foreign Policy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 2–6, 9–31, 36–38.

13 Wunderlin, *Robert A. Taft*, 77–90, 112–32.

14 Robert Taft, *A Foreign Policy for Americans* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1951), 11–23, 39, 47–66, 73–87, 100–120.

policy role.¹⁵

The Republican right's acceptance of a forward U.S. role in combatting communism did not indicate a full acceptance of the liberal internationalist policy menu. Far from it. Early Cold War conservatives such as Buckley and Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-AZ) argued for rollback rather than containment, U.S. national sovereignty rather than multilateral institutions, and U.S. military strength rather than foreign economic aid programs.¹⁶ Goldwater's capture of the 1964 Republican nomination, along with his subsequent general election defeat, revealed the political weight of these arguments on the right, as well as a continuing inability to win the presidency itself.

In the wake of the Vietnam War, Nixon, with his adviser Henry Kissinger, offered a very different conservative foreign policy approach — one based upon great power balancing, realpolitik, and limited U.S. retrenchment alongside tactical bolstering of American positions.¹⁷ This approach had some practical successes, but, in turn, invited its own critique from both left and right. By the mid-1970s, a growing number of conservatives felt that superpower détente had benefitted the Soviet Union more than the United States. California Gov. Ronald Reagan became the leading spokesman for this critique, adding his own criticisms as well.

Reagan was a heartfelt anti-communist hawk who recoiled from the concept of mutual assured destruction, while believing that the Soviet Union had unappreciated vulnerabilities.¹⁸ After winning the presidency in 1980, he pursued an energetic strategy to pressure the Soviet Union and its allies, openly proclaiming the superiority of the democratic model. At the same time, in practice,

Reagan was very careful not to overextend U.S. forces in direct, protracted, large-scale warfare.¹⁹ In the end, his anti-Soviet pressure campaign succeeded, allowing George H.W. Bush to manage the Cold War's denouement with impressive professionalism and skill.²⁰

For conservatives, the collapse of international communism opened up the possibility of completely new directions in U.S. foreign policy. Former Nixon speechwriter Pat Buchanan, in particular, called for "a new nationalism" through a series of presidential campaigns emphasizing trade protection, immigration restriction, military non-intervention, and an "America first" approach.²¹ In the short term, however, broad satisfaction with the GOP's performance in the Cold War seemed to argue for the maintenance of America's international leadership role. Buchanan would foretell more long-term trends.

Texas Gov. George W. Bush, in his campaign for the presidency in 2000, ran well within the mainstream conservative approach at that time, emphasizing U.S. military strength, international alliances, free trade agreements, and the dangers of nation-building exercises overseas.²² But after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Bush became convinced of the need for a U.S. policy shift in the direction of assertive counter-terrorism efforts, preventive counter-proliferation strikes, and a Middle East freedom agenda centered on the invasion and democratization of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Bush brought most American conservatives along with him in this shift, despite increased discontent during the course of his second term.

One provisional conclusion to draw from the above examples is that every single Republican

15 Robert Bowie and Richard Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 47, 96–108, 139–46; Aaron Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 115–25, 130–33; Douglas Irwin and Randall Kroszner, "Interests, Institutions, and Ideology in Securing Policy Change: The Republican Conversion to Trade Liberalization After Smoot-Hawley," *Journal of Law and Economics* 42, no. 2 (October 1999): 643–74, <https://doi.org/10.1086/467437>; and Gary Reichard, *The Reaffirmation of Republicanism: Eisenhower and the Eighty-Third Congress* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975), 28–68, 87–96, 227–28.

16 William F. Buckley, Jr., "The Magazine's Credenda," *National Review*, Nov. 19, 1955, <https://www.nationalreview.com/1955/11/our-mission-statement-william-f-buckley-jr/>; Barry M. Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, ed. C.C. Goldwater (1960; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 6–19, 27–31, 37, 53–65.

17 Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), 9–48, 55–61, 69, 116–19, 127–30, 195, 265–69, 535, 765, 1089, 1132–34, 1250–55; Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, rev. ed. (1978; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 51, 340–341, 344–51, 393–94, 551–80, 618, 697, 701–2, 725–26, 743.

18 Paul Lettow, *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Random House, 2005), 16, 22–27, 61–72.

19 "U.S. National Security Strategy," The White House, May 20, 1982, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd32.pdf>. See also John Arquilla, *The Reagan Imprint* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 38–43, 51–53, 227–35; Richard Pipes, *Vixi: Memoirs of a Non-Belonger* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 188–202; and Peter Rodman, *More Precious than Peace: The Cold War and the Struggle for the Third World* (New York: Scribner, 1994), 197, 317–23.

20 Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

21 Patrick Buchanan, "America First – and Second, and Third," *National Interest*, no. 19 (Spring 1990), 77–82; Timothy Stanley, *The Crusader: The Life and Tumultuous Times of Pat Buchanan* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012), 157.

22 George W. Bush, "A Distinctly American Internationalism" and "A Period of Consequences," in *The George W. Bush Foreign Policy Reader*, ed. John W. Dietrich (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005), 22–31; and Alexander Moens, *The Foreign Policy of George W. Bush* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 60–68, 87–117.

president has struck a somewhat different balance between national versus international concerns, realist versus idealist approaches, and interventionist versus non-interventionist tendencies, each defined according to the circumstances of the moment. And past Republican presidents have had a remarkable ability, in this way, to rework the very definition of American conservatism on foreign policy issues, by bringing their party along with them.

The Trump Phenomenon

Barack Obama's electoral success in 2008, running against the Iraq war, returned conservatives to the role of the opposition, and gave them time to reflect on foreign policy fundamentals. At the elite level, Republican internationalists continued to predominate on national security issues, including in the 2012 Mitt Romney campaign. Most grassroots conservatives agreed that Obama's counter-terror approach was unsatisfactory. But beneath the surface, there was growing discontent at the base of the party with a whole host of international policy-related issues, including immigration, pro-democracy interventions in the Muslim world, and the downside of economic globalization.²³ A political opening existed for a Republican nationalist able to thread the needle by voicing these concerns without seeming weak on terrorism.

A common assumption among journalists through much of the Obama era was that the only real alternative to existing GOP foreign policy ideas lay in the libertarian stance of former Texas congressman Ron Paul and his son, Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky. However, Trump picked the lock of the 2016 Republican presidential primary, running on a highly unusual platform that emphasized nationalist rather than libertarian themes. Like the Pauls, Trump emphasized U.S. sovereignty, the dangers of "globalism," and the costs of the Iraq war. But at the same time, he stressed the need for a U.S. military buildup, an aggressive counter-terrorism agenda, renegotiated trade arrangements, and tightened restrictions on immigration. This particular combination of emphases — together with an attention-getting personality and a fiercely anti-establishment demeanor — helped power the New York billionaire through

the Republican primaries. In doing so, Trump overturned much conventional wisdom regarding apparent inevitabilities in American politics. No GOP nominee since the 1930s had spoken so openly against assumptions of U.S. international leadership. At the same time, and especially as the presidential campaign wore on, Trump offered a number of assurances that, in his own way, he would bolster America's global position rather than undermine it.²⁴ After his surprise general election victory, the world held its breath to see what he would do.

The actual practice of the Trump administration's foreign policy since January 2017 has, in fact, been a hybrid of elements distinctive to Trump, elements common to past Republican administrations, and elements common to all presidencies from both parties since World War II. The Trump administration has not dismantled U.S. alliances and forward bases overseas. On the contrary, in some cases it has bolstered them. At the same time, Trump pursues certain specific international priorities very much his own. These include, for example, an emphasis on renegotiated trade arrangements with U.S. allies, assertive efforts to secure increased allied defense spending, and an intense pressure campaign against Chinese foreign economic practices. The United States has retained a great many international commitments under this administration. But the starting point was a fresh emphasis on U.S. national sovereignty and U.S. national interests — as understood by the president.

Future Possibilities

Conservative GOP voters largely support Trump's foreign policy approach. Yet, when it comes to issues beneath the surface, significant differences in opinion continue to exist. Like most Americans, conservative Republicans have mixed feelings about a number of U.S. commitments overseas. One segment of party voters is deeply skeptical regarding the continued benefits of U.S. alliances, free trade agreements, military intervention, foreign policy activism, and economic globalization. Another segment of conservative Republican voters — no less numerous — is considerably more supportive of

23 "Beyond Red vs. Blue: The Political Typology," Pew Research Center, June 26, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/26/the-political-typology-beyond-red-vs-blue/>. See also Brian Rathbun, "Steeped in International Affairs? The Foreign Policy Views of the Tea Party," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, no. 9 (January 2013): 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2012.00196.x>.

24 Donald J. Trump, "Trump on Foreign Policy," *National Interest*, April 27, 2016, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trump-foreign-policy-15960>.

all these things.²⁵

Viewed over a period of several decades, the Republican Party has become more populist, precisely by adopting conservative positions on cultural and social issues.²⁶ This has left the GOP with increasingly strong support from working-class white voters — once a core New Deal constituency. But this opens up the possibility of intra-party tensions between economic conservatives and culturally right-leaning populists, including on certain foreign policy issues. In 2016, this tension was fully revealed. Trump's most distinctive and earliest primary supporters were non-college educated Republicans skeptical of bipartisan elites, centrist on numerous economic issues, deeply concerned about immigration, culturally conservative, and nationalist rather than internationalist. Today, his core supporters tend to favor trade protection and a less interventionist foreign policy. They are also more prepared to question traditional U.S. alliances overseas. An equally large bloc of party voters is more traditionally Republican, conservative across the board, pro-trade, and supportive of a muscular U.S. foreign policy role combined with immigration restrictions at home. These traditional GOP voters are more likely to favor free trade, U.S. foreign policy activism, and international alliances.²⁷ Only by combining these two political constituencies was the Trump campaign able to win the 2016 election, including surprise victories in Rust Belt states around the Great Lakes. This leaves today's GOP, like every major American party historically, as a big-tent coalition with some significant internal differences, and these differences now clearly extend to foreign policy. In other words, there has been a long-term trend toward culturally populist conservatism within the Republican Party, with important consequences for U.S. foreign relations — and this trend is unlikely to fade.

In the short term, it seems probable that most conservative GOP voters will continue to support Trump's foreign policy for some time to come. This will, in turn, shape congressional Republican responses. As in any administration, the key

foreign policy decisions will be made by the president, though not always in ways he originally anticipated.

A more intriguing question is what conservative foreign policy will look like after Trump. And on this question, there are a variety of possible scenarios.

In the abstract, conservatives could embrace a foreign policy stance of strict non-intervention, dismantling existing military alliances overseas, and offering deep cuts in U.S. defense spending. Alternatively, a post-Trump conservatism could take Republicans even further along the path initially indicated by the president during his campaign on issues including trade, immigration, and alliance dynamics. Finally, a post-Trump conservatism could attempt a full-blown return to the 2002–03 Bush doctrine, involving rogue state rollback, preventive strikes, a Middle East freedom agenda, and pro-democracy interventions.

Theoretically, all of the above scenarios are possible. Still, even to list them is to note the great domestic and international obstacles to any one of them. A more probable direction — as Trump himself has found out — is that future GOP leaders will have to build coalitions and strike a balance between pure versions of conservative internationalism, non-intervention, and hardline American nationalism. But the particular manner in which this is done, in terms of character and substance, will be up to future conservative leaders, under circumstances different from those of 2018.

The Trump phenomenon has broken preexisting orthodoxies and cracked open a once-latent debate over the fundamentals of American foreign policy.²⁸ The president and his supporters have made some valid points against the post-Cold War liberal internationalist consensus. Bipartisan U.S. opinion elites and transatlantic associates will have to come to terms with this. The 2016 election was an alarm bell — if one was even required — that Wilsonian bromides are not as compelling as once believed. Donald Trump is certainly among the least ideological of presidents. But he has tapped into and spoken on behalf of one specific

25 Dina Smeltz, Ivo H. Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, *What Americans Think About America First* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2017), 8, 13, 22–23, 33, https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/ccgasurvey2017_what_americans_think_about_america_first.pdf; *Political Typology Reveals Deep Fissures on the Right and Left* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017), 63–64, <http://www.people-press.org/2017/10/24/political-typology-reveals-deep-fissures-on-the-right-and-left/>.

26 Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), chap. 10; Miller and Schofield, "Transformation of the Republican and Democratic Party Coalitions."

27 Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *What Americans Think*; Emily Elkins, "The Five Types of Trump Voters," *Democracy Fund Voter Study Group*, June 2017, <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publications/2016-elections/the-five-types-trump-voters>; Pew Research Center, *Political Typology Reveals Deep Fissures*, 1–3, 13, 19, 21–24, 48, 61–65, 74–76, 79, 84, 88, 95–98.

28 Michael Anton, "America and the Liberal International Order," *American Affairs* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 113–25, <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2017/02/america-liberal-international-order/>.



form of American nationalism that is very real. And because it is larger than Trump, it will no doubt outlast him. Whether in this form or some other, a conservatism oriented toward the relative advantages of a sovereign American nation-state will remain within the mainstream for many years to come. ●

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