

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN, 2012 : THE REPUBLICANS AND FOREIGN POLICY

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Though they are rarely decisive, questions relating to foreign policy and national security remain an essential element of American presidential campaigns. Apart from the constitutional duty of the President of the United States as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, the military presence in Afghanistan, the instability in the Middle East and in North Africa, as well as the assertion of Chinese power bring a distinctively heavy content to the subject this year.

In the domain of international affairs, The Republican Party has a very rich history and tradition. From the realism of the Nixon-Kissinger tandem to the interventionism of George W. Bush and the nationalism of Ronald Reagan, the Grand Old Party (GOP) has presented a variety of ideological facets to support the change of the place of the United States in the world since the end of the Second World War. Thrown off course by the attacks of 11 September 2001, the two terms of George W. Bush, the last Republican president to date, accorded a much more important place to foreign policy than was planned. The eight years of Mr. Bush in the White House, marked by military interventions in Afghanistan, then in Iraq, fed the debates in conservative circles and brought to light the primacy, then the ebb of the Neoconservative current.

More than ten years after the attacks of New York and Washington, the absence of any large scale terrorist act, combined with the death of Ossama Bin Laden during an operation by American special forces in Pakistan, have progressively refocused the concerns of a majority of Americans on domestic affairs. For the Republican Party, after eight trying years, the arrival of a Democratic president in the White House opened a welcome period of reflection and introspection.

Today, the GOP is in the middle of the process of designating the person who will face Barack Obama next November, and the international situation remains characterised by great instability. In this context, it is relevant to look into the general orientation of the Republican discussion of these questions, as well as the positioning of the principal candidates.

1. Unity against the policy of the Obama administration, in accordance with the ideological evolution of the Republican Party

While questions linked to foreign policy and terrorism occupied an important place in the campaigns of 2004 and 2008, **the difficult economic context points to a 2012 campaign focused on the topics of domestic policy.** This hypothesis is all the more likely given that foreign policy figures among the main strong points of President Obama, according to recent opinion polls. Last November, research by the Gallup Institute gave President Obama high satisfaction ratings on the themes of terrorism (63%), Iraq (52%) and Afghanistan (48%). His overall conduct of foreign affairs was approved by 49% of those polled, while his economic policy was given a favourable opinion by only 30%¹. This trend was confirmed by a poll taken at the end of February². In these conditions, when the concerns of Americans revolve around the economy, one can understand that the topic of foreign policy is not the preferred angle of attack by candidates from the Republican Party.

This is why the several debates devoted to international affairs have above all focused on a **unanimous criticism of the actions of the Democratic president.** ‘We are here this evening to say to the American people why each of us is better than Barack Obama³,’ said the favourite of the Republican primaries, Mitt Romney, when opening a discussion of foreign policy on 12 November last year. Generally speaking, **the Republican candidates have reproached President Obama for lacking firmness on the international scene,** with the exception of Ron Paul, who, true to an anti-interventionist tradition, reproached him for too great involvement in world affairs. On the question of Iran and its nuclear programme, the Republican candidates have denounced the presidential strategy which, according to Rick Santorum, has transformed the United States into a ‘paper tiger’⁴. In an op-ed published in the *Washington Post*, Mitt Romney compared Mr. Obama to President Jimmy Carter and predicted that Iran will have the bomb if he is re-elected⁵.

The unity of the Republicans has also shown itself with regard to the policy of the Obama administration vis-à-vis Syria. On this point, **a consensus has emerged between the principal candidates on the need to provide support to the opposition.** Mitt Romney has proposed coordinating action with Turkey and Saudi Arabia so as to ‘provide the Syrian opposition with the arms it needs’, while Rick Santorum has called upon Mr. Obama to be more aggressive in order to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad⁶. For his part, Newt Gingrich has come out in favour of ‘covert operations’ intended to aid the Syrian opposition⁷. One also notes that the former Republican presidential candidate in 2008 and present supporter of Mitt Romney, the influential Senator John McCain, recently crossed a new threshold in the rhetorical escalation of his party by calling for air strikes, underlining

¹ David Jackson, ‘Poll: Obama strong on foreign affairs, weak on domestic’, *USA Today*, 9 November 2011. <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2011/11/obama-strong-on-foreign-affairs-weak-on-domestic/1#.T1SVTIe96Bw>

² Celinda Lake, Daniel Gotoff, Kristin Pondel, ‘Obama strong vs. Beleaguered GOP foes’, *Politico*, 27 February 2012. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0212/73305.html>

³ Jim Rutenberg, Ashley Parker, ‘Up for Debate: Foreign Policy and Obama’, *The New York Times*, 12 November 2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/us/politics/up-for-debate-foreign-policy-and-obama.html?_r=1&ref=politics

⁴ Helene Cooper, ‘Candidates Hammer Obama Over Iran, but Approaches Differ Little’, *The New York Times*, 5 March 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/06/us/politics/republican-policies-for-iran-differ-little-from-obamas.html?_r=1&hpw

⁵ Mitt Romney, ‘How I would check Iran’s nuclear ambition’, *The Washington Post*, 5 March 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/mitt-romney-how-i-would-check-irans-nuclear-ambition/2012/03/05/gIQAnEYItR_story.html?hpid=z3

⁶ Ben Smith, ‘Partisan lines grow stark on Syria’, *Politico*, 1 March 2012. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0212/73483.html>

⁷ Lucy Madison, ‘Gingrich suggests covert action in Syria’, *CBS News*, 5 February 2012. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-3460_162-57371670/gingrich-suggests-covert-action-in-syria/

the moral and strategic obligation of the United States to act against the regime in Damascus⁸.

On these points, all the Republican candidates except Mr. Paul, subscribe to the ideological continuity of the party which, during the second half of the 19th century, favoured a foreign policy which was more and more interventionist. This progressive mutation was rendered possible by the opportunities and responsibilities linked to the position of the United States on the international scene in the bipolar world of the Cold War, then in the multipolar world which appeared in the 1990s. **The Republican Party profited from these situations to present itself as the party of force and firmness, a positioning which was largely successful for it from the electoral point of view.** Inversely, the Democratic Party, at the same time, moved towards more prudence and restraint. These trends are perfectly embodied by the two last presidents to date: President George W. Bush, with his military intervention in Iraq of 2003 and President Obama with his administration's withdrawn attitude during the popular uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East of 2011.

2. A great variety of positions

While, unsurprisingly, the Republican candidates are developing positions which conform with the traditions of their party, we see, nonetheless, a rather great variety of positions taken. This was particularly striking even before the launch of the Republican primaries and during the first phase of the campaign.

Thus, **on the question of Egypt and the position of the Obama administration vis-à-vis President Hosni Mubarak, some big discrepancies appeared.** Though one accepts abstractly the need for the opposition candidates to distance themselves from the presidential action, one notes that Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich came out in favour of the departure of the Egyptian president, while Rick Santorum and Michele Bachmann gave their support to Mr. Mubarak. **Mr. Romney was the first of the potential candidates to ask for the departure of the Egyptian president,** adding, however, that it was inopportune for the White House to call publicly for the retirement of Mr. Mubarak⁹. Rick Santorum explained his position by comparing the Egyptian situation to the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, recalling that the abandonment of the Shah made possible the accession to power of a 'radical Islamist regime'¹⁰. **For her part, Mrs. Bachmann, a candidate close to the Tea Party movement, seriously regretted the fall of Mr. Mubarak and the lack of support from the Obama administration¹¹.** One will recall that in parallel, **the Neoconservative current, which was very influential within the Republican Party during the first term of George W. Bush, supported the departure of the Egyptian president and even regretted that the Obama administration did not give greater support to the demonstrators.** True to their objective of promoting democracy in the Middle East, eminent personalities in the Neoconservative movement like Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan and Elliott Abrams in fact

⁸ 'McCain: US should lead international effort toward airstrikes on Syria to force out Assad', Associated Press, 5 March 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mccain-us-should-lead-international-effort-toward-airstrikes-on-syria-to-force-out-assad/2012/03/05/gIQAERK3sR_story.html

⁹ James Oliphant, 'Mitt Romney calls for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down', *The Los Angeles Times*, 1 February 2011. <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/01/news/la-pn-romney-egypt-20110202>

¹⁰ Kasie Hunt, 'GOP hopefuls warn of an Islamist Egypt', *Politico*, 29 January 2011. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0111/48405.html>

¹¹ Sarah Huisenga, 'Bachmann calls Arab Spring "radical," blasts Obama's Middle East policy', CBS News, 17 September 2011. http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-20107699-503544.html

applauded the fall of the Egyptian president despite the risks for regional stability and, in particular, for Israel¹².

On Libya, we observe similar tendencies. Mr. Romney, holding a pragmatic approach which comes close to the traditional position of the GOP establishment but also of President Obama, supported United States involvement alongside the Libyan rebels to overthrow Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. Mrs. Bachmann, adopting a more conservative stance, rejected any participation of her country in a military campaign in North Africa. Lastly, the Neoconservatives, in conformity with their idealism, came out in favour of American intervention and criticised the Obama administration for its hesitations and its timorous attitude.

While these fault lines constitute the heart of the Republican debate on foreign policy, other divergences, more anecdotal, have appeared on such subjects as interrogation techniques to be used on terror suspects. Thus, Messrs Huntsman and Paul expressed their opposition to waterboarding, a controversial technique of simulating drowning likened to torture by the former Republican candidate John McCain. On the other hand, Mrs. Bachmann and Messrs Cain and Perry indicated that they would reinstate this practice, which was prohibited by President Obama, if they were elected¹³.

The progress of the primaries – and the successive withdrawals of Herman Cain, Michele Bachmann, Jon Huntsman and Rick Perry – have nevertheless clarified the situation within the GOP. **With the exception of Ron Paul, we see in fact a greater consistency between Messrs Romney, Santorum and Gingrich who, notwithstanding some nuances, come together on the main topics.** This closing of ranks has a certain downside from the electoral point of view, since it deprives the Republican candidates of a chance to distinguish themselves from Barack Obama. That is particularly apparent on the occasion of the debate over Iran, which constitutes a priority for the Republican candidates as it is for the Democratic president. On this question, Mr. Romney wants a hardening of the sanctions and Mr. Gingrich, an intensification of covert operations targeting Iranian scientists. Both maintain that the military option must remain ‘on the table¹⁴’ and that the prospect of a nuclear Iran is unacceptable. **There is not a great difference with the policy of the Obama administration, which favours pursuing the diplomatic path – and particularly the sanctions – while refusing to exclude a military outcome.** According to Nicholas Burns, an officer in the State Department in charge of Iran under George W. Bush, the Republicans are attacking Mr. Obama over his weakness and boast about the firmness of the GOP ‘but when you look at the details, you don’t see much difference¹⁵.’

Despite their criticism of the position of the administration in power, the main Republican candidates hardly present a real alternative. In the domain of foreign policy, they have the same concerns and agree on the objectives to be achieved. They distinguish themselves by asserting that they will succeed where President Obama has failed. But in reality, **one may wonder about the ability of a future Republican president to put an end to the Iranian nuclear programme, to stabilise Afghanistan or to compel Beijing to revalue its currency.**

¹² Ben Smith, Josh Gerstein, ‘Hosni Mubarak splits Israel from neocon supporters’, *Politico*, 3 February 2011. <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0211/48747.html>

¹³ Michael Levenson, Shira Schoenberg, ‘GOP candidates reveal foreign policy differences’, *The Boston Globe*, 13 November 2011. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/news/politics/2011/11/13/gop-candidates-reveal-foreign-policy-differences/BGukqFLfLrCUYm8F7H9EP/story.html>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Helene Cooper, ‘Candidates Hammer Obama Over Iran, but Approaches Differ Little’, *op. cit.*

3. A period of profound changes within the Republican Party

As we have seen, **the primaries have underlined many basic tendencies within the Republican Party which give the 2012 elections a special dimension and should influence its position in foreign policy in the years to come.**

Thus, in 2009, there appeared the so-called Tea Party movement, a populist current opposed to the increase of public spending and to an overly big place for the federal government. **The audience of this movement developed within sympathetic Republicans thanks to the economic crisis and in reaction to the domestic policy of Barack Obama, which was deemed to be too statist and interventionist.** Although it has no true leader, a number of eminent figures in the GOP like Sarah Palin, Ron Paul, his son Rand Paul and Michele Bachmann are regularly associated with it. This diversity of sensibilities, which go from libertarians to social conservatives, illustrates the heteroclit nature of this political current. This peculiarity upsets our understanding of this movement and complicates all efforts aimed at defining it. **This is all the more true in the domain of foreign policy, where the isolationism of Ron Paul rubs shoulders with more interventionist and proactive approach represented by the Vice Presidential candidate under John McCain in 2008, Sarah Palin.** In addition, you have to note that the success of the Tea Party such as it was, given concrete form in the midterm elections of 2010, could be ephemeral. We see in fact that during the Republican primaries of 2012, the candidates closest to the movement, like Ron Paul and Michele Bachmann, have not succeeded in profiting from the popularity of this current to impose their views within the party. For all that, as Walter Russell Mead explains, **this tendency, represented presently by the Tea Party and coming down from Jacksonian principles, opposing the people to the elites, has been long anchored in American political life**¹⁶. It will thus keep an **important influence within the Republican Party and have an impact on the future orientation of the party, in particular in the domain of foreign policy.** For that, it is necessary nevertheless that the debate which sees Ron Paul opposed to Sarah Palin be concluded. On this point, the posture incarnated by Mrs. Palin, which is more in keeping with the recent history of the party and with the interests of the United States, appear to have the advantage.

At the same time, **we see that the primaries – and more generally the term of Barack Obama – confirmed the decline of a moderate current in the GOP, having a realist and bipartisan approach on questions of foreign policy.** This trend, which one associates generally with the establishment of the Republican Party, goes back to the end of the 19th century. It brought together many individuals, principally moderate Republicans coming from the patrician families of the Northeast, who considered foreign policy as a sacred calling whose importance necessitated going beyond the party boundaries. These people served under Democratic presidents like Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman, and their influence left its mark on the foreign policy of the United States all during the 20th century¹⁷.

Already, on the occasion of the presidential campaign of 2008, certain observers announced the end of this current with the rallying of Colin Powell to Barack Obama and the positions taken by persons emblematic of this tradition like Henry Kissinger, by the National Security Adviser of Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush, Brent Scowcroft, and by the Secretary of

¹⁶ Walter Russell Mead, 'The Tea Party and American Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2011. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67455/walter-russell-mead/the-tea-party-and-american-foreign-policy>

¹⁷ Jacob Heilbrunn, 'Twilight of the Wise Man', *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2011. http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/12/twilight_of_the_wise_man_republican?hidecomments=yes

State of George H. W. Bush, James Baker¹⁸. One must also note that the Neoconservative influence during the first term of George W. Bush was evidence of the weakening of the moderate tendency in the Republican camp. The decision of George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, to keep his job under the presidency of Barack Obama confirmed **that this tendency within GOP turned once again towards the Democratic camp**. This impression was also reinforced by the advice given unofficially by Brent Scowcroft to Barack Obama¹⁹.

Some recent developments, like the opposition of members of the Tea Party to some Republican senators or the retirement announced by other personalities in Congress, have accentuated this sentiment. Thus, Richard Lugar, the most senior Republican member of the Senate, must confront a candidate of the Tea Party in a primary which will determine whether he can run for a seventh term as Senator from Indiana next November. His adversary, Richard Mourdock, attacked Senator Lugar for being too close to Mr. Obama (in 2008 the Democratic candidate mentioned the influence of Mr. Lugar on his vision of foreign policy) and a bipartisan approach which has led the country 'to the edge of bankruptcy'²⁰. Meanwhile, the Senator from Maine, Olympia Snowe, recently announced that she would not seek a new term in 2012, citing the deterioration of the working atmosphere in Congress, which fuelled 'partisanship'²¹. **Contrary to Senator Lugar, Senator Snowe is not particularly distinguished in the domain of international affairs but, like him, is looking for consensus, and was thus a symbol of the moderate Republican current which is now threatened by the anti-elite posture of the Tea Party.**

4. Conclusion

Despite the context of crisis which has relegated international affairs to the background, the Republican primaries have facilitated the emergence of a richly informative debate. They have firstly confirmed the interventionist dimension of the party in the domain of foreign policy. In contrast with a Barack Obama depicted by the Republicans as weak and as someone who rejects American exceptionalism, the GOP will present itself during the 2012 presidential elections as the party of firmness and the guarantor of the preeminent role of the United States on the international stage. While this is above all electorally motivated and intended to conceal the only slight difference between the objectives set by the party candidates and those of President Obama, this posture, which has been indissociable from the image of the party for more than fifty years, could turn out to be profitable if a major international crisis should arise during the presidential campaign.

Nevertheless, the primaries have underlined a certain pluralism and have shown the confrontation of visions which are sometimes antagonistic within the party. In this domain, the emergence of the Tea Party is indisputably the most pronounced fact of the last four years. Set within an anti-elite tradition, praising the good sense of the common man and rejecting experts in all their forms, this current has prospered thanks to the economic crisis which struck

¹⁸ James Joyner, *Republican Foreign Policy Establishment, R.I.P.?*, The Atlantic Council, 22 October 2008. http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/republican-foreign-policy-establishment-rip

¹⁹ 'Obama aides say Clinton 'on track' for secretary of state job', CNN, 20 November 2008. http://articles.cnn.com/2008-11-20/politics/transition.wrap_1_obama-aide-president-elect-obama-secretary-of-state-job?_s=PM:POLITICS

²⁰ Jacob Heilbrunn, 'Twilight of the Wise Man', *op cit*.

²¹ Paul Kane, Chris Cillizza, 'Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) says she'll retire, citing partisanship in Congress', *The Washington Post*, 29 February 2012. http://www.washingtonpost.com/sen-olympia-snowe-a-maine-moderate-wont-seek-another-term/2012/02/28/gIQAnvOAhR_story.html?hpid=z9

the country in 2008. With respect to foreign policy, its positioning is still not easy to read due to the opposition between interventionist and isolationist tendencies, which limit its influence. Nevertheless, this form of populism, a real cultural and political force in the United States since the 1830s, seems to have a promising future. It is therefore worth noting that its resurgence has come when the centrist current of the party, which exercised a very great influence on the foreign policy of the United States, is more and more marginalised.

For all that, after a breakthrough by the Tea Party in 2010, the electors have favoured this year more consensual candidates. The frontrunner of the Republican camp, Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, is, indeed, an incarnation of the East coast establishment which is rejected by part of the Republican party sympathisers. The presentation of his team and of his ideas in the domain of international affairs has confirmed that Mr. Romney fits within the tradition of his party. If he should become the Republican candidate to face Mr. Obama in November, this positioning would limit his ability to distinguish himself from the outgoing president. This closeness, which illustrates above all the reduced margin for manoeuvre of the United States on the international scene, is not going to encourage a confrontation on the topic of foreign policy. Unless one of these issues, like Iran or Syria forces its way into the campaign...

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