

GUEST ESSAY

Hawks Are Standing in the Way of a New Republican Party

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Mr. Ahmari, Mr. Deneen and Mr. Pappin have written extensively about conservatism and American politics.

A painful contradiction lies at the heart of the American right. Even as conservatives are breaking with some Cold War orthodoxies on domestic policy, Republican politicians remain wedded to that era's violently expansionist foreign policy. They oppose liberal imperialism in the United States — the aggressive push to impose progressive values, often joined to corporate power — while still contriving to spread the same order to the ends of the earth.

It's a contradictory vision, and for many members of the so-called new right who are pushing for a political realignment of the Republican Party, it presents a major stumbling block. We do not want to see this new vision of conservative American politics co-opted by hawkish ideologues more interested in posturing abroad than in reform here at home. Conservatives must make a clear break with *neo-neoconservative* foreign policy and instead emphasize widely shared material development at home and cultural nonaggression abroad as the keys to U.S. security.

The crisis in Ukraine illustrates the problem. Even Republicans sympathetic to the new right haven't been able to resist the hawkish temptation. Among the loudest voices calling for escalation were Republican Senators Tom Cotton of Arkansas and Marco Rubio of Florida, politicians who have otherwise tried to articulate a more populist domestic vision for their party. Senator Rubio resorted to inapt Churchill-Hitler parallels (though he later said he opposes deploying troops to Eastern Europe); Senator Cotton lambasted President Biden for "appeasing Vladimir Putin."

The Israeli scholar Yoram Hazony has suggested he wants to forge a new, more solidaristic and inwardly focused consensus to replace the old, broken fusion of pro-business libertarians, religious traditionalists and foreign-policy hawks. Yet even at the 2021 national conservatism conference, the hawks were amply represented and pitched the same old belligerence, especially against China.

Today's nationalist hawks often speak of an obligation to defend democratic allies dotting the peripheries of revanchist powers like Russia and China. But if they had their way, the real-world effects would be little different from those of their hawkish predecessors: protracted and destabilizing conflicts that would distract us from domestic reform — not to mention imperil the lives of overwhelmingly working-class young Americans in uniform.

Even on the new right, then, the goal of securing America by "making the world safe for democracy" refuses to die. It's important to revisit the intellectual history to understand how it was that the right came to advance what is a liberal cause in the first place.

Since the earliest days of our nation, a division has existed between those who argued that America should be an "exemplary republic" and those who called instead for a "crusader nation." The exemplarist camp figured that America could best serve liberty and self-government by perfecting domestic republicanism — without going abroad in search of "monsters to destroy," as John Quincy Adams put it. The crusaders sought to expand liberal democracy abroad, partly because they thought this would make America more secure and partly because they believed it was our destiny to baptize all nations in liberal ideals.

The party of restraint was seen as conservative: cautious about the danger posed by war to republican virtues, respectful of enduring civilizational differences, humble in the face of unpredictable global events, hesitant to commit American blood and treasure to all but the most necessary military causes. By contrast, it was characteristically "liberal" to insist on an American duty to enlarge the liberal empire, whether through soft or hard power, a tradition exemplified by Woodrow Wilson and John F. Kennedy.

More recently, self-described conservatives came to embrace the crusader project, a misguided shift culminating in President George W. Bush's second Inaugural Address, with its fantasy of eliminating "tyranny" everywhere. What had been previously central to the liberal worldview came to be reframed as modern American "conservatism."

Many of today's Republicans thus came of age at a time when hawkishness on behalf of liberal values was understood as conservative. Yet the values lying at the foundation of that worldview and shaping our institutions are antithetical to everything conservatives claim to cherish: a ruthless market ideology that puts short-term shareholder gains and the whims of big finance above the demands of the national community; a virulent cultural libertinism that dissolves bonds of family and tradition.

What conservatives revile as "woke capital" is just this acidic combination of a market-centric economics and liberal cultural arrogance. Yet as conservatives tub-thump for NATO expansion in Europe and hawkishness elsewhere, they seem clueless as to what these things entail: the integration of evermore geographic space into the same socioeconomic order they find so oppressive at home.

From the post-Cold War “Washington consensus” (the idea that privatization, deregulation and free trade would lead to broad prosperity) to the post-9/11 regime-change wars, “crusader” foreign policy immiserated ordinary people: Thoughtless NATO expansion bred resentment in a wounded-but-still-strong Russia, setting the stage for recurring crises; economic “shock therapy” applied by disciples of Milton Friedman empowered predatory oligarchs in post-Soviet lands; the shattering of Arab states in the name of “freedom” created ungoverned spaces across vast swaths of the Middle East and North Africa, kindling terrorism and sending millions of migrants into Europe.

Like soldiers who haven’t realized the old war is over, Republicans must grasp the current state of play: Liberal imperialism ought no longer to be mistaken for a conservative cause. It is time to repurpose older conservative foreign-policy values.

The first pillar of such a foreign policy should be a sound restraint, especially where the United States doesn’t have formal treaty obligations, and a general retrenchment of the Western alliance’s ambitions. Senator Josh Hawley, a lawmaker sympathetic to the new right, showed a better path on Wednesday by calling on President Biden to rule out admitting Ukraine into NATO. Mr. Hawley suggested his move would help Washington shift resources to East Asia. But even there, Americans should beware of mindless China hawkism. Yes, the United States has real differences with Beijing. We must punish industrial espionage. We must defend treaty allies. And we must seek a more balanced trade relationship. But we should also find areas of cooperation, exchange and shared interests, seeking to avoid any future wars and instead communicating with mutual respect for a civilizational equal.

Domestic industrial prowess and energy independence should be the second pillar. Without factories manufacturing all sorts of goods, we won’t be able to shift production to defense — or to P.P.E. and vaccines — when a real crisis hits. Moreover, as Michael Lind has emphasized, the industrial-military blocs of the future — spheres of influence led by America, Europe, China and India — will be only as strong as their regional supply chains and their internal stability allow.

Many G.O.P. leaders couldn’t be happier if the impulses toward Republican realignment were limited to mere jingoism. That, after all, has sated the Republican base while keeping economic policy firmly neoliberal. The party establishment would far rather talk about Ukraine than about declining working-class life expectancy and the fentanyl crisis.

The persistence of donor-backed Republican hawkishness remains an obstacle to national development — of industrial capacity and widely shared solidarity — that would strengthen America’s defenses and ennoble its culture. The monsters that menace us don’t lurk abroad.

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