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The Foreign Policy of the GOP

By Justin Raimondo

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If the "first tier" Republican presidential debate revealed anything, it is the huge empty space that is at the heart of the conservative mind, circa 2015. No wonder a vacuous nonentity like Donald Trump is leading in all the polls: his gargantuan ego has invaded that vast emptiness and expanded like a giant hot air balloon. As to how soon that gaseous zeppelin will pop – well, it's anybody's guess. All we know is that if and when it does another big nothing will take its place.

Speaking of a big nothing, the performance of Sen. Rand Paul, once the great hope of anti-interventionists and libertarians, was even worse than this writer expected. The first mention of foreign policy was the following question posed by Fox News anchor Brett Baier to the junior Senator from Kentucky:

"BAIER: Senator Paul, you recently blamed the rise of ISIS on Republican hawks. You later said that that statement, you could have said it better. But, the statement went on, and you said, quote, 'Everything they've talked about in foreign policy, they've been wrong for the last 20 years.'

"Why are you so quick to blame your own party?"

"PAUL: First of all, only ISIS is responsible for the terrorism. Only ISIS is responsible for the depravity. But, we do have to examine, how are we going to defeat ISIS?"

"I've got a proposal. I'm the leading voice in America for not arming the allies of ISIS. I've been fighting amidst a lot of opposition from both Hillary Clinton, as well as some Republicans who wanted to send arms to the allies of ISIS. ISIS rides around in a billion dollars worth of U.S. Humvees. It's a disgrace. We've got to stop – we shouldn't fund our enemies, for goodness sakes. So, we didn't create ISIS – ISIS created themselves, but we will stop them, and one of the ways we stop them is by not funding them, and not arming them."

Pauls's answer was not merely inadequate, and shot through with an undertone of abject cowardice – it was confusing as well. To begin with, as Baier phrased his question, Paul's original critique was directed at "Republican hawks," i.e. the neoconservatives, a group of Republican ideologues the Senator used to criticize quite freely and regularly. Yet Paul let Baier get away with equating this group with every single Republican on earth: instead of challenging the premise of the question, Paul did what he's been doing for months now, at great cost to his campaign – he backtracked.

Missing a great opportunity to point out that the neocons – his enemies – have indeed been spectacularly wrong about everything for the last 20 years, Paul instead went into a vague peroration about how we're supposedly sending arms to allies of ISIS without specifying who those allies are. Are they the Turks? The Saudis? The Qataris? All three of these countries have been implicated in funding or otherwise assisting Syria's jihadis, including ISIS. What I presume Paul meant is that the United States has been funding the Syrian rebels, who have gone over to ISIS and Al Qaeda in large numbers. Yet he didn't deign to say that – which left millions of television viewers scratching their heads in puzzlement.

The next question segued right into the question of the NSA's spying on American citizens – and also spotlighted how obviously Fox had set up the questions to suit their ideological agenda:

"MEGYN KELLY: Alright, gentlemen, we're gonna switch topics now and talk a bit about terror and national security."

"Governor Christie. You've said that Senator Paul's opposition to the NSA's collection of phone records has made the United States weaker and more vulnerable, even going so far as to say that he should be called before Congress to answer for it if we should be hit by another terrorist attack."

"Do you really believe you can assign blame to Senator Paul just for opposing he bulk collection of people's phone records in the event of a terrorist attack?"

"CHRISTIE: Yes, I do. And I'll tell you why: because I'm the only person on this stage who's actually filed applications under the Patriot Act, who has gone before the federal – the Foreign Intelligence Service court, who has prosecuted and investigated and jailed terrorists in this country after September 11th."

Funny how all the other candidates were confronted by the Fox team with questions that spotlighted their weaknesses, and yet Christie, was lobbed this softball, which could be translated into: "Governor Christie, could you please tell us why you hate Rand Paul's guts?"

Christie gladly obliged, getting into a heated exchange with Paul, but not before boasting that "I'm the only person on this stage who's actually filed applications under the Patriot Act, who has gone before the federal – the Foreign Intelligence Service [sic] court, who has prosecuted and investigated and jailed terrorists in this country after September 11th." As usual with this puffed up hot air balloon, his self-inflating rhetoric is empty of any real content. Christie's prosecution of the "Fort Dix Five" – which he used as a launching pad for his gubernatorial campaign – was an absolute farce, more security theater than national security, as this piece in *The Intercept* makes all too clear:

"Beyond the sensational headlines is the story of paid FBI informants with long criminal histories who spent a year working to befriend the [defendants] and enlist them as terrorists. This effort, both expensive and time-consuming, nevertheless failed to convince the Duka brothers to take part in a violent attack. Indeed, over the course of hundreds of hours of surveillance, the plot against Fort Dix was never even raised with them."

If ever there was a case of brazen entrapment then Christie's pursuit of the hapless Duka brothers – Albanian émigrés who ran a pizza joint and a building contracting business – is a textbook example. Here is a perfect example of why the prospect of having this bully in the White House is a dystopian nightmare – one that, fortunately, is unlikely to come true in real life, as his poll numbers put him near the bottom of the Republican pack.

Paul's argument that the Bill of Rights needs to be defended against people like Christie is correct, of course, and yet the Senator didn't help his case when he said:

"I don't trust President Obama with our records. I know you gave him a big hug, and if you want to give him a big hug again, go right ahead."

It was a good line if the debate was a showdown between rival comedians, but as a political line it's seriously flawed: does Paul trust a *Republican* President with our records?

Team Fox moved on to the question of "how would the candidates stop the treacherous actions of ISIS," and this was catnip for Sen. Ted Cruz, who answered with the same odd incantation that many of the GOP candidates invoke when this subject comes up:

"Megyn, we need a commander in chief that speaks the truth. We will not defeat radical Islamic terrorism so long as we have a president unwilling to utter the words, 'radical Islamic terrorism.'"

Juxtapose this next to the answer Gov. Bobby Jindal gave to virtually the same question asked of him at the "second tier" debate:

"Well, to start with, unlike President Obama, I'll actually name the enemy that we confront. We've got a president who cannot bring himself to say the words 'radical Islamic terrorism.'"

This weirdly robotic stock answer is very close to meaningless: their voices, when uttering the phrase, take on a certain hushed tone, as if they're awed by the Satanic majesty of what they're

describing. It's a strange form of magical thinking that has nothing to do with confronting the very real problem of terrorism. It's an incantation aimed not at any terrorists but at the audience they're addressing – the Fox News/GOP hardcore – and is calculated solely to score brownie points.

But what, indeed, *are* they describing? The answer is: *nothing!* There's nothing specific in the words they're using: quite the opposite. The phraseology is vague enough to include everything from fanatical Sunnis of the Al Qaeda/ISIS variety to Alawites to Iranian Shi'ites. And that is precisely why they use it: they want to be sure to include Tehran in their wholesale condemnation of Islam per se. And yet the fundamentalist variety of Islam that generates nearly all of the Islamic terrorism directed against the US is the Sunni-Wahabist strain encouraged and funded by our great "allies," the Saudis and their satellites among the Gulf states. One is forced to conclude that these Republican bloviators either don't know this, or are intent on covering it up.

A sinister coda to Cruz's answer was his apparent endorsement of one of the world's most brutal dictators:

"We need a president that shows the courage that Egypt's President al-Sisi, a Muslim, when he called out the radical Islamic terrorists who are threatening the world."

While I'm not sure how many people "President" al-Sisi has murdered, to date, and how many he has jailed without a real trial, it must be in the thousands by now. He has imprisoned journalists in record numbers for casting his authoritarian regime in a bad light, and his regime has been condemned by human rights organizations. *This* is the example Cruz wants to uphold in the face of an Islamist challenge?

The GOP debate hit all the low notes, from the demagogic to the merely pathetic, and an example of the latter was surely Jeb Bush's response to this question:

"KELLY: Governor Bush, for days on end in this campaign, you struggled to answer a question about whether knowing what we know now..."

"BUSH: ...I remember..."

"KELLY: ...we would've invaded Iraq..."

"BUSH: ...I remember, Megyn."

"(LAUGHTER)"

"KELLY: I remember it too, and ISIS, of course, is now thriving there. You finally said, 'No.'

"To the families of those who died in that war who say they liberated and deposed a ruthless dictator, how do you look at them now and say that your brother's war was a mistake?"

Bush looked like a bowl of oatmeal left out overnight throughout the entire debate, and upon hearing this question he seemed soggy than ever, his face dissolving into a pleading look that expected no mercy. His answer made absolutely no sense, and I'm not going to waste my readers' time by reproducing it here. Suffice to say that he stumbled over his own words for a few minutes and wound up concluding:

"Here's the lesson that we should take from this, which relates to this whole subject, Barack Obama became president, and he abandoned Iraq. He left, and when he left Al Qaida was done for. ISIS was created because of the void that we left, and that void now exists as a caliphate the size of Indiana.

"To honor the people that died, we need to – we need to – stop the – Iran agreement, for sure, because the Iranian mullahs have their blood on their hands, and we need to take out ISIS with every tool at our disposal."

So we should honor the dead by starting a war with Iran – because piling up more dead bodies is the way to reassure the relatives and loved ones of the fallen that there's more where that came from. In what universe does this make sense?

As for who "abandoned" Iraq, it was George W. Bush and no one else who failed to conclude an agreement with the Iraqis to keep US troops stationed there: not that we should've stayed, but if we're going to talk about who "abandoned" what then let's have this discussion, shall we? It was Jeb's brother who refused to agree to the Iraqis' terms: that US soldiers would be subject to punishment by the Iraqi authorities if they acted in their usual manner, i.e. killing, torturing and otherwise abusing innocent civilians. So the Americans were asked to leave.

What Jeb might have said, if he really wanted to stick it to Kelly, is that the overwhelming majority of Americans – including Republicans – think that the Iraq war was a complete loss and that we never should have become involved in the first place. But that conflicts with the neoconservative orthodoxy that has the GOP in a death grip, and so such an answer never even occurred to him.

From this point on the debate descended from the slightly mad into the downright macabre. Wisconsin governor Scott Walker showed a bizarre affinity for Middle Eastern despots when Inquisitor-in-chief Kelly asked him:

"In February you said that we needed to gain partners in the Arab world. Which Arab country not already in the US led coalition has potential to be our greatest partner?"

He replied:

" ... We need to focus on the ones we have. You look at Egypt, probably the best relationship we've had in Israel, at least in my lifetime, incredibly important.

"You look at the Saudis – in fact, earlier this year, I met with Saudi leaders, and leaders from the United Arab Emirates, and I asked them what's the greatest challenge in the world today? Set

aside the Iran deal. They said it's the disengagement of America. We are leading from behind under the Obama-Clinton doctrine – America's a great country. We need to stand up and start leading again, and we need to have allies, not just in Israel, but throughout the Persian Gulf."

To hear Walker talk you'd never know that the Saudis have been implicated in funding and otherwise assisting the 9/11 hijackers: you'd never suspect that the Saudis have been spreading their virulent form of Sunni fundamentalism throughout the Middle East and even reaching into central Europe. Not to mention their appalling human rights record.

Ben Carson, perhaps the least articulate of all the candidates, often seemed like someone who had somehow wandered into the debate by mistake: his eyes wandered, looking off into space as if contemplating some private vision discernible only to himself. His answer to the question on whether he would allow torture of prisoners under his administration was delivered with the listlessness of someone who had overdosed on Prozac, and indeed his contention that "wars aren't politically correct" was given in the spirit of a person whose moral sense has been anesthetized and rendered inoperable.

The one intrusion of reality into these proceedings was – naturally – provided by The Donald, who sidestepped a question about his position on healthcare by saying:

"First of all, I'd like to just go back to one. In July of 2004, I came out strongly against the war with Iraq, because it was going to destabilize the Middle East. And I'm the only one on this stage that knew that and had the vision to say it. And that's exactly what happened.

"BAIER: But on ObamaCare...

"TRUMP: And the Middle East became totally destabilized."

The part about him being “the only person on stage” to have opposed the Iraq war isn't quite true: Rand Paul, back when he was himself – or, at least, when he was not the over-calculating politician he has become – opposed the Iraq war. However, it was refreshing to hear this outburst of truth on a stage full of Republican blind men who would rather pluck out their own eyes than see what the rest of the world acknowledges as indisputable. The look of dismay on Brett Baier's face was almost worth the price of having to sit through hours of posturing and lies.

When it came to the question of the Iran deal, we were treated to remarks made by Gov. Rick Perry – who is almost out of the race at this point – and the new favorite of the necons, Carly Fiorina, whose ability to put a string of words together in a coherent sentence gave her superstar status when compared to the rest of the bunch. Both clips, weirdly, were all about Fiorina: the first, featuring Perry, showed him saying "I would've a whole lot rather had Carly Fiorina over there doing our negotiation than John Kerry." And the second showed La Fiorina herself sternly declaiming:

"When America does not lead, the world is a dangerous and a tragic place. This is a bad deal. Obama broke every rule of negotiation. Yes, our allies are not perfect, but Iran is at the heart of most of the evil that is going on in the Middle East through their proxy."

If Iran is "the heart of most of the evil" in the Middle East then what is ISIS? Is Iran beheading hundreds of people? Are they carrying out car bombings in Baghdad? Isn't Iran the only country in the region that actually seems to be *fighting* ISIS?

Asked what he would do – after "tearing up the agreement on day one" – Gov. Walker went into a riff about hanging yellow ribbons and the hostages taken from the US embassy at the beginning of the 1980s, as if it had the slightest relevance to the question or the agreement under discussion. This was just a way for him to bide time so he could remember what little he knows about the Iran deal, and when he finally got around to answering the question this is what he said:

"To me, you terminate the deal on day one, you reinstate the sanctions authorized by Congress, you go to Congress and put in place even more crippling sanctions in place, and then you convince our allies to do the same. This is not just bad with Iran, this is bad with ISIS. It is tied together, and, once and for all, we need a leader who's gonna stand up and do something about it. It's yet another example of the failed foreign policy of the Obama-Clinton doctrine."

And this is yet another example of the failure of Gov. Walker to convince anyone that he knows anything about foreign policy beyond what he learned from watching Sean Hannity. The international sanctions are gone, even if Congress votes to disapprove the agreement: does Walker really think the Russians and the Chinese are going to be somehow "convinced," not to mention the British who are urging Congress to approve the deal? Gov. Walker is in over his head: he should stick to trying to push "stadium socialism" down the throats of Wisconsinites and quit trying to push our allies around.

Rand Paul was asked the same question, and his answer wasn't much better: indeed, it was far worse because he knows better:

"I oppose the Iranian deal, and will vote against it. I don't think that the president negotiated from a position of strength, but I don't immediately discount negotiations. I'm a Reagan conservative. Reagan did negotiate with the Soviets. But you have to negotiate from a position of strength, and I think President Obama gave away too much, too early. If there's going to be a negotiation, you're going to have to believe somehow that the Iranians are going to comply. I asked this question to John Kerry, I said 'do you believe they're trustworthy?' and he said 'No.' And I said, 'well, how are we gonna get them to comply?' I would have never released the sanctions before there was consistent evidence of compliance."

Paul's rendition of his exchange with Kerry is a lie. Here is the exchange: Kerry's answer to Paul's question about whether he trusted the Iranians to comply with the agreement was that "trust isn't built in to this agreement" – it's all about verification. Another lie is Paul's contention that the Ayatollah Khamenei declared that the Americans didn't stop his country from getting nuclear weapons. As Kerry pointed out at that hearing, and as numerous libertarians pointed out on Twitter, the Ayatollah was saying they never had any intentions of making a nuclear bomb in the first place, so it wasn't the Americans who are responsible for that fact. What makes this worse is that Sen. Paul is quite well aware of what he's doing.

This is Sen. Paul at his most chameleon-like: he's pretending to be for negotiations while parroting the nonsensical propaganda of the neocons, who are still out to get him no matter what he says. Whatever support for the Senator existed among libertarians and anti-interventionists has long since dissipated, and his shameful performance on the Iran deal issue was the absolute last straw.

This debate was especially depressing for me because we here at Antiwar.com have fought long and hard to make inroads in the GOP with the anti-interventionist message. Due in part to the treachery of the Rand Paul campaign, whatever gains were made have been mostly lost. It's more than a shame – it's a tragedy.

Way back in 1987, I was part of an effort to carry out an "entryist" strategy aimed at the Republican party. I and a few of my libertarian co-thinkers were convinced that a) the cold war was ending, and b) that the time was right for a libertarian "invasion" of the GOP. The third party strategy, embodied in the Libertarian Party, had failed to make significant gains, apart from introducing voters to the libertarian idea. And we were right – at the time. But these are different times – and the Republican party is a different sort of creature.

A decade and a half after 9/11, the GOP has degenerated into an appendage of Fox News. And, as such, it is on the way out, as its performance in the last two presidential elections and its growing unpopularity indicates. Those who stayed Republican through the Bush years are so imbued with the poisonous nationalism and militarism that characterized those years are beyond hope – they aren't about to be converted to libertarianism. Far from it: they are the enemies of liberty.

Yes, there are still some libertarian figures in the GOP at the local level, but they will find themselves isolated in the years to come, their position increasingly precarious. Reps. Justin Amash and Walter B. Jones have already had to fight off well-funded primary opponents, and you had better bet that the neocons will keep trying until they finally succeed.

The "entryist" strategy worked as well as might be expected: Ron Paul's two presidential campaigns recruited many thousands of people into the libertarian movement, and we are stronger than ever. Now, however, is the time to lead these people out of the GOP and reestablish the organizational and political independence of libertarianism. The Republican ship is sinking, and the question is: do we want to go down with it?