**Headline:** The Rotten Alliance of Liberals and Neocons Will Likely Shape U.S. Foreign Policy for Years to Come

**Teaser:** Trump’s rise has led to unity in the ranks opposing his foreign policy.

By Marshall Auerback and James Carden

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**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by* [*Economy for All*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/economy-for-all/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** North America/United States of America, Economy, Presidential Elections, Politics, GOP/Right Wing, Democratic Party, Intelligence Agencies, War, History, News, Opinion, Time-Sensitive, Middle East/Afghanistan, Middle East/Iraq, Middle East/Syria, Middle East/Israel, Middle East/United Arab Emirates, Europe/Germany, Europe/Russia, Asia/China, Europe/Ukraine, Europe/Belarus

**[Article Body:]**

The emergence in recent weeks of a coalition of neocon Republicans and former national security officials who have thrown their support behind the candidacy of Joe Biden is an ominous development to those who believe U.S. foreign policy should be guided by the principles of realism and military restraint, rather than perpetual wars of choice.

In early June, a group of former officials from the George W. Bush administration launched a PAC in support of Joe Biden’s candidacy. The group, [43 Alumni for Biden](https://43alumniforjoebiden.com/), boasts [nearly 300 former Bush officials](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/more-100-former-aides-john-mccain-endorse-biden-president-n1238393) and is seeking to mobilize disaffected Republicans nationwide.

The mobilization appears to be having an impact: More recently, “more than 100 former staff of [recently deceased Senator John] McCain’s congressional offices and campaigns also endorsed Biden for president,” [according to NBC News](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/more-100-former-aides-john-mccain-endorse-biden-president-n1238393), as well [as dozens of former staffers](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/08/27/mitt-romney-staffers-support-joe-biden-402408) from Senator Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential campaign.

That GOP support comes in addition to the more than 70 former U.S. national security officials, who teamed up [and issued a statement](https://www.defendingdemocracytogether.org/national-security/) urging Biden’s election in November. Citing what they believe is the grave damage Trump has done to U.S. national security, the group does include some mainstream Republicans like Richard Armitage and Chuck Hagel, but also features notable neocon hardliners like Eliot Cohen, John Negroponte and David Kramer, who, perhaps not incidentally, played a [leading role in disseminating](https://apnews.com/fca60cfe642ec55027b77fcebe0ab526) the utterly discredited Steele dossier prior to Trump’s inauguration.

These are not merely grifters or desperate bids for attention by unscrupulous and avaricious Beltway swamp creatures. Though there are those too: the so-called [Lincoln Project](https://lincolnproject.us/), helmed by neocon operative Rick Wilson, which is an outside group of Republicans (including former RNC Chair Michael Steele) [devoted to defeating](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/the-once-mocked-never-trump-movement-becomes-a-sudden-campaign-force/2020/07/11/8683c14c-c1f3-11ea-b178-bb7b05b94af1_story.html?itid=lk_inline_manual_5) Trump in November.

As the historian David Sessions recently [tweeted](https://twitter.com/davidsess/status/1297995927312117765), “Basically nobody in liberal circles is taking seriously the consequences of the fact that the exiled cadre of the Republican Party are building a massive power base in the Democratic Party.”

The merger between Democrats and neocons is not merely confined to the world of electoral politics; it is already affecting policy as well. Over the summer, in response to theNew York Times’ [dubious “Russia bounty” story](https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/three-glaring-problems-with-the-nyt-russian-taliban-bounty-story/), Democratic Congressman Jason Crow [teamed up](https://thehill.com/policy/defense/505568-house-panel-votes-to-constrain-afghan-drawdown-ask-for-assessment-on) with Republican Congresswoman Liz Cheney (daughter of the former vice president) to prohibit the president from withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. Republicans and Democrats in the Senate and the House Armed Services Committee also collaborated to pass an amendment that [imposed restrictions on Trump’s plan to withdraw troops from Germany](https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2020/06/30/congress-moves-to-block-trumps-germany-troop-withdrawal-plans/), showing, if nothing else, that the bipartisan commitment to the new cold war is alive and well.

It is noteworthy that while there has been considerable pushback to economic neoliberalism within the Democratic Party in recent years, thanks, mainly, to the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, the advocacy of reformers like Elizabeth Warren and the increasing popularity of economists like [Stephanie Kelton](https://stephaniekelton.com/), the same cannot be said for foreign policy. Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden has evinced an openness to being “pushed left” on social and economic policies, but on external affairs he still largely operates within the standard Washington foreign policy playbook.

If anything, on foreign policy Democrats have moved rightward in recent years, having fallen not only under the spell of “Russiagate” but also increasingly under the influence of neocons and other former Bush officials who have pushed that discredited narrative for their own ends. The Democrats have also displayed a rather supine obeisance in regard to the country’s intelligence community, in spite of a [multiplicity of well-documented lies or half-truths](https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/steve-chapman/ct-cia-james-clapper-spying-steve-chapman-oped-080-20140807-column.html) that would at the very least justify some skepticism about their claims or motivations.

Nobody should be surprised.

The neocons had been signaling their intention to flee the GOP as early as 2016 when it was widely reported that Robert Kagan had decided to endorse Hillary Clinton and speak at a Washington, D.C., fundraiser alongside other national security fixtures worried about the alleged isolationist drift within the Republican Party. Indeed, the Democrats welcomed the likes of Kagan and fellow neocon extremist Max Boot with open arms, setting the stage for where we are today: A Democratic nominee running to the *right* of the Republican nominee on foreign policy.

**Missing: Whither the Progressives?**

Over the past few election cycles, progressive Democrats have increasingly challenged the party’s prevailing neoliberal bias on domestic economic policy. Equally striking, however, is that they have been delinquent in failing to provide an alternative to the hegemonic influence of militarists and interventionists growing within their party regarding foreign policy.

As it stands today, the so-called progressive foreign policy alternative is really no alternative at all. To the contrary, it evokes Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s seminal work, [*The Leopard*](https://www.amazon.com/Leopard-Giuseppe-Lampedusa/dp/0679731210), whose main character, Tancredi, [sagely observes to his uncle](https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/the-leopard/tancredi-falconeri#:~:text=Previous%20Next-,Tancredi%20Falconeri,and%20cheating%20on%20his%20wife.), “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.” So it is with much of what passes for a genuine foreign policy alternative: the rhetoric slightly changes, the personnel certainly change, but in substance, the policy status quo largely remains.

Consider a [recent interview with the socialist Jacobin magazine](https://jacobinmag.com/2020/08/bernie-sanders-foreign-policy-matt-duss), featuring Matt Duss, a foreign policy adviser to Senator Bernie Sanders. Duss, who seeks to articulate the foundations of a new “progressive” foreign policy, told the Quincy Institute’s Daniel Bessner that:

“We have neither the right nor the ability to transform other countries, but **we should do what we can to protect and expand the political space in these countries for local people to do that work. We can also provide funding or resources for American civil society actors to work in solidarity with their international counterparts.” [emphasis ours]**

That sounds anodyne enough, but in reality, it is nothing but a form of liberal imperialism. Historically, seemingly benign initiatives conducted under the aegis of local people backed by so-called democracy-building programs have often planted the seeds for more malign military intervention later. Who makes the decision as to which local people to support? How does one (purportedly) protect and expand that political space? We have seen how well that worked out in Afghanistan, Iraq, or, indeed, in the mounting human tragedy that is Syria today.

Comments like that of Matt Duss amount to this: “We don’t have the right to transform other countries… but we’re going to try anyway.” Forswearing preemptive military action (wars of choice) isn’t enough. Change will only come about when U.S. foreign policy adheres to the principles of the UN Charter, and above all, the ancient Westphalian principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. American policymakers need to learn that less is more.

That used to be a guiding principle of Democrats, for example, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “[good neighbor policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_Neighbor_policy#:~:text=The%20policy's%20main%20principle%20was,exchanges%20with%20Latin%20American%20countries.)” that repudiated intervention in the domestic affairs of Latin America. Of course, as subsequent events such as World War II illustrated, there may be a point at which external assistance/intervention in other parts of the world might become necessary; but the United States should not perpetually arrogate to itself the role of sole judge and jury in determining when that line should be crossed, no matter how benign its intentions might appear.

The broader point is that explicating a foreign policy somewhat less hawkish and merely paying lip service to international law that transcend the norms established by the Bush-Cheney neocons isn’t enough. That is the foreign policy equivalent of the GOP lite economic agenda embraced by “[New Democrats](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Democrats)” such as Bill Clinton, Robert Rubin, Barack Obama, and Timothy Geithner, whereby the Democrats internalize the GOP’s market fundamentalist paradigm, but simply promise to implement it more fairly, rather than do away with it altogether.

That appears unlikely to change under a future Biden administration: As American Conservative editor Kelley Beaucar Vlahos [has noted](https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/neocon-wolves-dressed-in-never-trumper-clothing/), “Democratic interventionists and Blob careerists now [sit] at the right hand of [Biden]… like [Antony] Blinken, Nicholas Burns, Susan Rice, Samantha Power and [Michele Flournoy](https://www.theamericanconservative.com/state-of-the-union/michele-flournoy-queen-of-the-blob/), who has been touted as a possible Secretary of Defense. They would sooner drag the country back into Syria, as well as position aggressively against China if the military pushed hard enough and there was a humanitarian reason to justify it.” Nowhere in Biden’s foreign policy ambit do we find mainstream figures warning about the dangers of a new cold war with Russia or China, nor to the broader problems posed by America’s overall propensity toward militarism. In fact, [Biden does just the opposite](https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2017-12-05/how-stand-kremlin).

**The Shape of Things to Come?**

With the notable (and noble) exceptions of a few anti-war Democrats like Barbara Lee, Tulsi Gabbard, Ro Khanna and Jeff Merkley, the opposition party has spent much of the Trump era turning themselves into the party of war. Meanwhile, one could envision a future where the GOP, under the influence of “national conservatives” such as Josh Hawley, Rand Paul, or even Trump advisers such as [Colonel (Ret.) Douglas Macgregor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Macgregor) (recently nominated to be U.S. ambassador to Germany), becomes the party of realism and restraint abroad.

To the limited extent that President Trump has been guided by any kind of restraint (which has been [capricious at best](https://apnews.com/7693c246dee553da3f4995f8e36df0c4)), it has paid dividends for the United States. In the Middle East, for example, given that the United States is now largely energy-self-sufficient, it no longer needs to play policeman in that part of the world. That fact, [writes David Goldman](https://lawliberty.org/america-first-pays-off-in-the-middle-east/), has induced “the Gulf states to act responsibly as a matter of self-preservation. As long as the Gulf States remained de facto US protectorates, they could claim that the ‘Arab Street’ stood in the way of relations with Israel. Now that they have to take responsibility for their own defense, they look to Israel for help.” As Goldman concludes, this consideration played a key role in the United Arab Emirates’ recent “agreement to [normalize relations with the State of Israel](https://www.wsj.com/articles/israel-united-arab-emirates-agree-to-establish-formal-diplomatic-relationship-11597333313), almost certainly the first of several Arab states [likely] to make such agreements.”

Likewise, there is little to be gained via aggressive American intrusion into the affairs of countries that have historically been in the domain of Russia. That mistake was made in Ukraine in 2014, when prominent members of U.S. officialdom—from the State Department, Congress, and the Obama administration—publicly and privately urged the removal of Viktor Yanukovych, even though he was the constitutionally elected president. As Professor Stephen Cohen [has persuasively documented](https://www.amazon.com/War-Russia-Putin-Ukraine-Russiagate/dp/1510745815), that ill-advised intervention contributed to Crimea’s annexation by Russia and to the still ongoing U.S.-Russian proxy war in eastern Ukraine. It is also worth noting that [Ukraine’s largely IMF-funded economy continues to fail.](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/which-will-be-europe-s-poorest-country-ukraine-or-moldova/)

In Belarus, the same predictable pattern has reasserted itself. Even though much of the evidence points to the falsification of the country’s August 9 election result, there is little to be gained by replicating the Ukraine formula: advocating mass uprising is unlikely to engender a stable, democratic post-Lukashenko government. What is required is U.S. policy cooperation with Russia, which becomes problematic when leading Democrats, such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, [mindlessly persist in perpetuating Russophobia](https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/28/pelosi-putin-trump-russia-afghanistan-342926): “All roads lead to Putin.” Working with Putin, rather than instinctively attacking him for sustaining an authoritarian regime, is more likely to ensure a relatively stable transition to a new government, especially if it continues to avoid the economic shock therapy treatment that destabilized so many post-Soviet regimes. To his credit, Belarussian President Lukashenko [has at least avoided inflicting that particular form of misery on his people](https://www.thenation.com/article/world/belarus-lukashenko-election-protests/).

In external affairs, Donald Trump’s erratic conduct makes profound change in U.S. foreign policy unlikely in the near term. The [attempted normalization of the neocon Bush/Cheney administration](https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/22/politics/george-w-bush-favorable-poll/index.html) is a sign that for many, the old normal (which was largely a failed normal) will be enough. Unfortunately, this reassessment obscures the fact that Trump’s shattering of many existing shibboleths in foreign policy helped get him [elected in the first place](https://theintercept.com/2017/07/10/study-finds-relationship-between-high-military-casualties-and-votes-for-trump-over-clinton/). These policies should be separated from the man himself, and force a long-overdue discussion of the country’s increasingly costly international engagements.

The more modest aspirations that used to characterize U.S. foreign policy realism appear to have gone AWOL. There may indeed be times when international engagement and a corresponding reliance on international institutions, such as the United Nations, is wise. However, it is worth recalling that a vibrant nation-state with robust democratic checks and balances provides the best defense against unnecessary foreign policy expansionism. Constitutional brakes have been increasingly undermined (through the acquiescence of both parties), and an imperial presidency has taken hold. It is the very hollowing out of many of those traditional checks and balances that has sustained and expanded America’s increasingly militaristic foreign policy, in [spite of ample evidence](https://www.charleskochinstitute.org/news/new-poll-americans-want-troops-home-from-afghanistan-iraq-opposed-to-more-military-engagement/) that domestic opposition to such policies is growing. In their eagerness to defeat Trump, the Democrats seem to have overlooked that fact, as they enthusiastically embrace their newfound neocon allies (whose past policy failures should preclude their return to government, let alone allow for any kind of influence).

Being one of the victors of World War II does not give the United States carte blanche to be the world’s global cop in perpetuity. The American foreign policy establishment needs to respect the boundaries set by national sovereignty, both at home and abroad. Endless interventionist efforts aimed at reshaping other nations as America sees fit give us a world of chaos and blowback, not peace and stability.