

ON POLITICS WITH LISA LERER

# The Republican Retreat on World Affairs

What will G.O.P. foreign policy be post-Trump? Who knows!



By Lisa Lerer

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*Hi. Welcome to On Politics, your wrap-up of the week in national politics. I'm Lisa Lerer, your host.*

In 2005, two senators went on a global tour.

They visited dilapidated factories in eastern Ukraine where workers were taking apart artillery shells. They drank vodka toasts with foreign leaders and local dignitaries in Saratov, Russia. And on the way home, they met Tony Blair, then the British prime minister, at 10 Downing Street in London.

From Russia to Ukraine and Azerbaijan to Britain, one of the men was greeted like a superstar. And it wasn't Barack Obama.

"I very much feel like the novice and pupil," Mr. Obama said during the trip, looking out the window as he flew over the Russian countryside.

His teacher? Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana, one of a caste of Republican foreign policy mandarins who prided themselves on bipartisan deal-making on matters of global importance. Mr. Lugar was a smart choice for a mentor: Nearly a decade before the Sept. 11 attacks, he worked with Sam Nunn, the Democratic senator from Georgia, to pass legislation that helped destroy surplus stocks of nuclear weapons, keeping dangerous materials from reaching terrorists.

Yet Mr. Lugar would serve only one more term after that trip. Seven years later, Mr. Lugar lost by more than 20 percentage points in a primary battle against Richard E. Mourdock, a conservative Tea Party candidate who attacked his moderate opponent for

his willingness to work with Mr. Obama, by then the president. And today, the story of that trip — one where an older senator spent weeks tutoring a younger member of the opposing party in the ways of foreign policy — feels distinctly sepia-toned.

I was thinking a lot about that history this week, as I watched President Biden announce his decision to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11. It was a humbling moment for the country, a painful admission that the staggering costs in money and lives of the “forever war” would never accomplish the mission of ushering in a stable democracy.

But for Republicans, the withdrawal offered another reminder of the party’s own unresolved conflict. As I detailed in the paper on Friday, the usual suspects gave the usual responses to the decision. The statements largely mirrored the reception to a pledge last year by former President Donald J. Trump to withdraw by May 1, 2021 — though with a bit of added vitriol.

Senator Mitch McConnell, the minority leader, called it “a retreat in the face of an enemy.” Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina said it was “dumber than dirt and devilishly dangerous” and warned that the withdrawal could lead to another terrorist attack. Representative Liz Cheney of Wyoming called the decision a “huge propaganda victory for the Taliban, for Al Qaeda.”

But the pushback was hardly overwhelming. Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky heralded the move, tweeting, “Enough endless wars.” And Senators Josh Hawley of Missouri, Ted Cruz of Texas and Mike Lee of Utah offered various degrees of praise.

It’s clear from that divergent response that there is little agreement within the party on a fairly basic question: How do Republicans view America’s place in the world?

The post-9/11, Bush-era, hawkish consensus that guided the party for years is under siege, weakened by Mr. Trump’s more transactional, “America First” foreign policy that rejected the internationalist order that was party orthodoxy for decades.

To the extent that Republican voters care about foreign policy, they are now largely driven by Mr. Trump’s interests and isolationist tendencies.

Neil Newhouse, a Republican pollster, said he saw three foreign policy issues resonating with G.O.P. voters: restricting immigration, taking a tougher stance against China (which many blame for the spread of the coronavirus) and ending foreign entanglements.

“Just because Donald Trump is no longer president, that doesn’t mean that Republicans aren’t taking their lead from him on the issue of foreign policy,” Mr. Newhouse said.

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But those views aren’t shared by some of the party’s leaders and a foreign policy establishment that was effectively exiled from policymaking posts during Mr. Trump’s administration.

“A small minority believe that we need to make our peace with the populist impulses that have driven President Trump’s choices,” said Kori Schake, who directs foreign and military policy studies at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and served on the National Security Council under President George W. Bush. “But my sense is that an inchoate larger plurality is converging around the notion that we haven’t done our jobs well enough of explaining to Americans, who don’t spend all their times thinking about foreign and defense policy, why the positions that we advocate make the country safer and more prosperous.”

This is hardly the only area where Mr. Trump has scrambled Republican orthodoxy by shifting his party in a more populist direction. As I wrote last week, the cracks that he has created between Republicans and their traditional allies in the business community have become a chasm. The huge amount of new spending during his time in office has made it difficult for the party to revert to its traditional position of fiscal responsibility and argue against the huge price tags of Mr. Biden’s coronavirus relief and spending bills. On Friday, Mr. Bush published an op-ed article striking a gentler tone on immigration, quite a contrast from Mr. Trump and his calls to “build the wall.”

There is very little unity in the G.O.P. right now when it comes to setting a policy agenda. And there doesn’t appear to be overwhelming interest in confronting these divides.

During the first months of the Biden administration, Republicans have been consumed with issues like so-called cancel culture, re-litigating the election and corporate “wokeness.” Those culture-war topics fire up the conservative base, leading to interview requests and campaign cash for Republican candidates and politicians.

But in all of this discussion of conspiracy theories and culture wars, there’s little room — or apparent desire — to sort out what the post-Trump Republican Party stands for on the biggest issues of the day.

### **Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan**

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**Who are the Taliban?** The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here’s more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Mr. Lugar died in 2019. Just two years later, the bipartisan comity that he championed certainly feels like a relic from a bygone era. What’s far harder to see is whether his party’s leaders, activists and voters can find their way to a future where they agree even with themselves.

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