



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on November 8, 2014

Will GOP Senate Mean More U.S. Wars?

“Republican control of the Senate = expanded neocon wars in Syria and Iraq. Boots on the ground are coming!”

So tweeted Ron Paul, the former Republican congressman from Texas, who was clearly not joining in the euphoria sweeping over Republican partisans celebrating Tuesday’s election results, giving the party more governors and a significant increase of the Republican majority in the House as well as GOP control of the Senate.



One might think Republican control of both houses of Congress would make things more difficult for a president of the opposing party to have his way in policy matters, but that is not always true, especially in the areas of foreign trade and foreign policy. Recall that it was congressional Republicans who gave President Clinton the lion’s share of the votes he needed to pass the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), opposed by organized labor and most congressional Democrats. And Republicans, in control of both houses in the latter half of the 1990s, had no deterrent effect on Clinton’s air war over Kosovo, carried out without a scintilla of authorization from Congress. In fact, the Republican-controlled House voted three times against that military campaign, but otherwise did nothing about it. Republican members chose instead to impeach the president for perjury committed during an investigation into his sexual dalliances with a White House intern.

The Republican takeover of the Senate might well move the country back toward the mindset of the Bush era, when support for the invasion of Iraq was widely taken as a show of patriotism. Joni Ernst’s victory in Iowa sparked election night replays of her fond memories of castrating hogs as a farm girl in the Hawkeye State and her pork-cutting promise to “make them squeal” in Washington. But Ernst is also an Iraq War veteran [who still believes](#) the war was justified based on the “weapons of mass destruction” the Bush administration assured us would be found once our troops liberated the land and exorcised Saddam Hussein.

Senator-elect Tom Cotton of Arkansas has, according to Alexander Burns at *Politico*, “distinguished himself as his party’s most aggressive advocate for military action overseas.”

Rep. Cory Gardner defeated Sen. Mark Udall in Colorado with the help of a National Republican Senatorial Committee ad that showed ominous images of ISIL combatants while mocking Udall’s assertion that “ISIL does not present an imminent threat to this nation.”

An important word in that sentence is “imminent.” A prudent nation will respond differently to a possible future threat than to one that is imminent. In his speech to the nation on September 10, President Obama said: “While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland, ISIL leaders have threatened America and our allies.” The militant organization, the president warned, “poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East — including American citizens, personnel and facilities. If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region — including to the United States.”



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That word “could” suggests the threat to the “homeland” remains in the realm of theory, not fact. It should serve as a reminder that the war with Iraq was all about what Saddam Hussein could do with his alleged “weapons of mass destruction.” He could pass some of those weapons on to terrorist groups who could use them against us. We couldn’t wait for definitive proof about those weapons because the “smoking gun” might turn out to be a “mushroom-shaped cloud.” Basing an invasion on such shadowy and ill-informed possibilities brought the United States and its coalition allies into an eight-and-a-half-year war in Iraq, resulting in a war debt measured in trillions, more than 4,000 dead and upwards of 32,000 wounded Americans, and a devastated Iraq, with hundreds thousand of thousands of Iraqis dead and millions made refugees by the war’s devastation. In the war’s wake came a power vacuum that has drawn ISIS and other extremists into the fray.

Now Obama has said he will seek congressional authorization for the air war he has been conducting in Iraq since August and in Syria since September. “If one were being generous,” Glenn Greenwald observed, “One could say that seeking congressional authorization for a war that commenced months ago is at least better than fighting a war even after Congress explicitly rejected its authorization, as Obama lawlessly did in the now-collapsed country of Libya.”

The Authorization for the Use of Military Force that was passed after the 9/11 attacks and the AUMF for the Iraq War are no longer relevant, the president explained at his post-election news conference Wednesday:

With respect to Iraq, there was a very specific AUMF. We now have a different type of enemy. The strategy is different, and how we partner with Iraq and other Gulf countries and the international coalition, that has to be structured differently. So, it makes sense for us to make sure that the authorization from Congress reflects what we perceive to be not just our strategy over the next two or three months, but our strategy going forward.

Going where, with what, and for how long? These are questions to which we will not likely get satisfactory answers when the president and Congress come to a meeting of the minds on a new war authorization. Such resolutions tend to be broadly written and subject to expansive interpretation, as when the Vietnam Resolution (an act of Congress authorizing the president to take whatever action might be necessary to protect American troops and civilian personnel in South Vietnam) became for the Johnson administration “the functional equivalent of a declaration of war.” President Obama has said repeatedly that he will not send U.S. ground forces in Iraq or Syria. But it seems likely the new AUMF he seeks will be ambiguous enough to permit an interpretation authorizing the use of ground forces if the commander in chief should change his mind.

It is easy, somehow, to overlook just how deeply our nation has become immersed in the hopeless maze of Middle East wars and political conflicts over the past few decades. Historian and political scientist Andrew Bacevich of Columbia University has [counted 14 Muslim nations](#) the United States has bombed or invaded since 1980. Yet our bombs and bullets have a strange way of failing to bring about “peace” and “stability” in the region — the goal proclaimed by a succession of U.S. presidents as key to our interests there.

Despite their stated threats and brutal acts, none of the fanatical groups we have been bombing and fighting in the Middle East poses a serious threat to the United States while it remains the most powerful nation on earth. “Our intelligence community,” President Obama warned in that September speech, “believes that thousands of foreigners — including Europeans and some Americans — have joined ISIL [ISIS] in Syria and Iraq. Trained and battle-hardened, these fighters could try to return to



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their home countries and carry out deadly attacks.” Recently the Department of Homeland Security warned of possible terrorist attacks as a reprisal for our air war against ISIL.

So assuming that we can’t kill them all, will all our bombing in Iraq and Syria prevent some individuals or groups of people from coming here on terrorist missions — or make it more likely that they will? If we had invaded Afghanistan *before* 9/11, would that have prevented the hijackers — most of whom were from Saudi Arabia — from carrying out their deadly plot?

Dan Sullivan, the apparent winner over Democrat Mark Begich in the Senate race in Alaska, has decried the “tepid approach to global leadership” of the past six years, an approach he says “signals weakness and weakness is provocative.” Apparently in Sullivan’s mind and the minds of many others in Congress, an America that might mind its own interests and tend to its own business would be more “provocative” than all the invasions and bombings by a superpower adept at creating more problems than its military might can solve.

Another open-ended resolution authorizing the president to take whatever military action he deems necessary will be a further sowing of the wind. And it will reap more whirlwinds.



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