

Field Report from Concord, New Hampshire

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

If one were seeking a crowd with an appetite for strong American leadership on foreign policy, this diner in Nashua, New Hampshire, hosted by the city Republican committee, would seem the place.

John Bolton, George W. Bush's former UN ambassador, was the keynote speaker. Bolton delivered a hawkish message—including a call to strike Iran if it were on the verge of developing nuclear capability—and it was surely what some, like mechanical engineer, David Hunt came to hear. Hunt says the US's long-term security demands a foreign policy that never shrinks from confronting Islamic extremism.

"It has to be a total war: economic, political, religious. This is a decadal, if not a centuries-long war. It has to be thought of in that way, and unfortunately our political cycle does not easily lend itself to that."

When you talk to rank and file voters here in New Hampshire it's clear that Republican thinking on foreign policy may be at a pivot point. Since 9/11 it's been driven largely by an aggressive attitude towards engagement abroad. In 2008, Senator John McCain rode support for the Iraq troop surge to his party's nomination. But four years later, isolationist currents within the party appear to be gaining strength.

Even Republicans like Dale Kunce, who says he's always favored a hawkish approach abroad, thinks the nation's economic challenges require a change. Kunce supported the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but now thinks the costs of those conflicts have become prohibitive.

"The problem we've gotten ourselves into with the debt and deficit is that we can't afford do everything we used to do, which is to use the threat of American involvement because people know that we are going to war with borrowed money. It's not a good situation."

If there's one area of US international policy where many GOP voters do feel certainty it's Israel.

On a Wednesday night, a rally called "Stand with Israel" drew several hundred people to a park in downtown Manchester. Staffers from several presidential campaigns passed out leaflets to a crowd thick with Tea Party activists. From the stage, politicians like William O'Brien, speaker of the NH house, proclaimed that the US and Israel share a fundamental affinity.

"Our bond with Israel stems from a shared love of freedom and a history of our peoples who have immigrated to fight for liberty and democracy. These shared values make us natural allies."

But at some Republican political events, the talk is almost exclusively about the economy. Phyllis Woods is a state delegate to the Republican National Committee. She's had audiences with all the 2012 Republican Presidential candidates, and is a fixture at right-of-center gatherings of every stripe.

"I think that just about everyone is ready to dial it back a notch. Don't you? I mean, isn't that the sense of it? And I think that the Democrats must be also saying the same thing."

Perhaps, but it must be said that not every Republican is entirely comfortable with that. Gordon Humphrey, a former US Senator, stands a few yards away.

"I am honestly disturbed by that we are hearing so little about foreign policy and a tiny bit of a dovish tenor in the campaign thus far."

In the 1980s, Humphrey was instrumental in funneling millions of dollars in US aid to the mujahedin fighting the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

Humphrey says the case for interventionist foreign policy remains persuasive.

"It's a lot better to keep the enemy, if you will, off balance on his own territory than to give him an opportunity to catch us unawares. And I'm hoping that the candidates will be a little less timid in expressing the same point of view."

But at the same time, Humphrey was wearing a baseball cap bearing the logo of his pick for president, Texas Governor Rick Perry. And Perry's emphasis so far has been mainly on domestic issues.

—Reported by Josh Rogers for America Abroad.

Roundtable Discussion.

Guests include: **Carroll Doherty**, Associate Director at the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press; **Susan Glasser**, Editor in Chief of *Foreign Policy Magazine*; **Jennifer Rubin**, columnist and blogger for *The Washington Post*.

Ray Suarez (RS): Carroll Doherty, were you surprised by any of the answers you just heard from New Hampshire voters and do think they're atypical given the numbers that you are looking at?

Carroll Doherty: No, not at all. They reflect Republican views nationwide. We ask a question about *peace through strength* which of course the classic Reagan principle. Most Republicans still embrace *peace through strength* as a foreign policy principle. But most also want to roll back military commitments overseas to reduce the deficit.

RS: Jennifer Rubin, when you watch some of these candidates' forums, some of the biggest applause lines of the night involve extracting the United States from overseas involvement. But I didn't hear a lot of that from our voters in New Hampshire.

Jennifer Rubin: In fact, I think some of this is overplayed. If you look at the top contenders and even some people who are not the top contenders for the Republican nomination, these are all people who by and large do embrace a forward leaning Reaganesque foreign policy. Rick Perry has concentrated on domestic policy as the segment indicated, but some of his strongest speeches and his biggest applause lines have been for Israel. He's been quite clear, for example, on providing F16s, the most modern ones to Taiwan. He certainly is in no sense an isolationist and the individuals who have embarked on a more isolationist tone are not doing very well. When you ask individuals what their top priority is, you'll get a very low number for foreign policy. In fact, these things do matter because they convey a certain tone. They convey a certain set of values that are very important. Not the least of which are those amongst Christian conservatives who take foreign policy very seriously.

RS: Susan Glasser, we heard from New Hampshire Republican voters, a former US senator lamenting a dovish tenor in the forum, and one speaker talking about the need for total war against Islamic extremism. And one man saying, "Look, we used to project our power around the world but now we're a little weary of going to war on borrowed money." Not necessarily no longer hawks but maybe exhausted hawks, no?

Susan Glasser (SG): I do think we are seeing an adjustment inside the Republican Party, and a convergence in aspects of both the right and the left in this country increasingly perceiving the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq in the context of our current economic tough times. I think that regardless of where the front runners in each party are positioning themselves, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge that there's a shift in the tenor of the political conversation this year.

RS: But given the mix of what a Republican Party in transition has to say about these questions, how does a candidate fashion his appeal to this kind of ambivalence?

SG: Mitt Romney is a very good example of how carefully they need to calibrate their responses. Romney is a candidate once again. He was four years ago as well. He's a much more carefully calibrated candidate when it comes to America's presence in the world in this election season than he was in a 2008 primaries and I think that speaks to the shift in the party around him. Romney, as we all know, is nothing if not attuned to the delegate shifts in the weather inside the Republican electorate.