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Written by **Jack Kenny** on April 28, 2015

Rand Paul Calls Iraq War a "Mistake," Libya a "Disaster"

Emphasizing his foreign policy differences with Hillary Clinton — and with most of his Republican senate colleagues — GOP presidential contender Rand Paul (shown) told a group of about 30 Orthodox Jewish leaders in Brooklyn on Monday that overthrowing Saddam Hussein in Iraq was a "mistake" and ousting Libyan strongman Moammar Gadhafi was a disaster. The Kentucky senator at the same time insisted he was not opposed to all U.S. military interventions.

"I'm not an isolationist," he said, contrary to the criticism of his foreign policy views by some members of his own party. "I'm somebody who believes that war is the last resort." He pointed to the apparently unintended consequences of recent U.S. military operations.

"Each time we topple a secular dictator, I think we wind up with chaos, and radical Islam seems to rise," said Paul, who also voiced tentative support for President Obama's efforts to negotiate an acceptable agreement with Iran to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons.

"The interim agreement that we are under now, while not perfect, is better than no agreement and no inspections," he said, again distancing himself from GOP hawks, who have kept up a barrage of criticism against the administration's diplomatic efforts with Iran and have called for even greater economic sanctions than have already been imposed against a nation that U.S. State Department has listed as a state sponsor of terrorism.

"I'm for negotiations as opposed to war," Paul said, criticizing unnamed others who, "I think, frankly, have a simplistic understanding of this, who think war is the only option." Stressing his preference for peace, Paul nonetheless added, "That doesn't mean I favor a bad deal, though."

Paul drew sharp criticism from generally supportive followers in the non-interventionist camp when he joined 46 other Republican senators in signing a letter to Iran's foreign minister stating that any agreement concerning the nation's nuclear program could be scuttled by Congress or by the next president. Indeed, the framework for a final agreement, announced last month, was condemned in advance by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a March 3 speech to a joint session of Congress, a point not lost on Paul's audience Monday, described by the *New York Times* as "a specially arranged group of Orthodox Jews, to whom Israel's security is of great importance."

"Clearly Senator Paul does not pander," said Michael Fragin, host of a weekly radio program about politics in New York. Fragin, a Republican, was not favorably impressed with Paul's presentation, however, describing it to the *Times* reporter as "a rambling and incoherent expression of foreign policy that puts him closer to Bernie Sanders than anyone in the G.O.P." Coming from a Republican, the comparison of Paul to Vermont's independent U.S. senator and self-proclaimed socialist was surely not meant as a compliment.

"Telling this audience that the Middle East was better off with Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi

in power shocked me," Fragin said. Otherwise, the audience was, the *Times* noted, both "heavily Democratic" and "quite friendly" to Paul, with several members asking questions "so laudatory of Mr. Paul that they could have been scripted."

Paul and fellow U.S. Senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Marco Rubio of Florida are so far the only formally declared candidates for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination, though the growing roster of non-candidates "exploring" a run might include 20 or more names. Paul, however, may be the only one to offer a clear alternative to the foreign policy positions of Hillary Clinton, which are arguably as hawkish as those of such GOP stalwarts as Senator John McCain of Arizona, the party's failed 2008 nominee, and former Ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton. Clinton was the secretary of state during Obama's first term and supported the air war against Gadhafi in Libya that resulted in his fall from power and execution by rebel forces. "We came, we saw, he died," she said, boasting of the regime change. After leaving office, however, the former secretary criticized Obama for not intervening to help the rebels in Syria's civil war.

Paul has frequently assailed Clinton's handling of Libyan matters, particularly those related to the September 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic outpost in Benghazi that killed four Americans, including the U.S. Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens. That alone should forever "preclude her from holding higher office," Paul has stated repeatedly. On Monday, he was unsparing in his assessment of "Hillary's war" in Libya.

"Gadhafi wasn't a good guy, but he suppressed radical Islam," Paul said, adding, "Now that Gadhafi is gone, the country is in civil war, the ambassador was killed, our embassy fled." The Kentucky senator also noted the growing influence of Iran in the Middle East since the United States and its coalition partners knocked over Saddam Hussein during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Calling the Iraqi dictator a "bulwark" against Iran's influence in the region, Paul said, "It was a mistake to topple Hussein."

That again creates a clear contrast between Paul and Clinton, while at the same time setting the GOP contender apart from the other declared and likely presidential candidates in his own party. Among the declared Democrat candidates, Clinton, the former senator from New York, is the only one who voted to authorize President George W. Bush's war in Iraq. Among the yet-undeclared GOP hopefuls, only Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina was in Congress at the time of the war authorization in the fall of 2002. Graham, an unrepentant hawk, voted for it.

But former Florida Governor Jeb Bush is not the only candidate who would be loath to criticize Clinton for voting to support his brother's ill-fated war. The invasion lead to eight and a half years of war for the United States in Iraq, and the power vacuum created by the overthrow of Hussein and the disbanding of his army opened the door to the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq and later the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. But the invasion of Iraq, the toppling of Saddam, and the establishment of a pseudo-Democratic government in Baghdad remain the singular foreign policy achievement of the last Republican president. So far, only Senator Paul among the GOP presidential hopefuls has been willing to point out the folly of that disastrous war of choice.

Thanks to the growing unpopularity of that war, Republicans lost control of Congress in 2006 and the White House in 2008. Hillary Clinton's refusal to admit her vote for the war was a mistake that no doubt contributed to her defeat by Iraq war opponent Barack Obama for the Democratic nomination for president in 2008. But for Paul, this year's flock of GOP presidential hopefuls seems to have forgotten that the last Republican president won the White House, however narrowly, while promising a more "humble" foreign policy and an end to "nation-building" in foreign lands. They seem to believe that

America is ready to elect Republicans as the "Wars 'R' Us" party.

If there is a surer road to defeat, the Grand Old Party hasn't discovered it yet.

Photo of Senator Rand Paul (R-Ky.): AP Images

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