

Republicans on the Defense Trail

Recent Air Force retiree Lindsey O. Graham is trying to get a foothold in the crowded field of GOP presidential contenders by staking out a spot as the group's most vocal and persistent hawk.

The South Carolina senator, a senior Armed Services Committee member, has used his candidacy to warn of dire security threats to the United States, decry the Obama Administration's nuclear deal with Iran, and stress the need for robust defense funding.

Graham's campaign website boasts that the retired Air Force Reserve colonel is "ready to be Commander in Chief on Day One" and is "willing to do whatever it takes, as long as it takes," to defeat the ISIS terrorist group. That, he has said, would include nearly tripling the US military presence in Iraq to about 10,000 troops, and sending perhaps another 10,000 service members to Syria.

"I hope over time we'll start realizing the next President needs to straighten out the world that's falling apart. They'll start thinking about experience when it comes to Commander in Chief and protecting us all," Graham said on MSNBC Sept. 2.

But despite his military experience, Armed Services pedigree, and his hawkish bravado, Graham is barely registering in national polls and falls well behind many of the other candidates in his own home state.

Even support from former GOP presidential contender Sen. John McCain of Arizona, the chairman of the Armed Services Committee who jokingly refers to Graham as his "illegitimate son," has done little to boost his numbers in New Hampshire, a long-time McCain stronghold.

On the other end of the spectrum, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul's far more isolationist rhetoric is also not registering with the base, an indication that security and international affairs are second-tier issues, at least at this point.

"Other issues and other themes right now are significantly more dominant, and that includes domestic issues, if we con-

sider immigration a domestic issue," said Norman J. Ornstein, a political scientist at the American Enterprise Institute. "And it includes the broader theme of, 'Are you part of the establishment that has so repeatedly lied to us and misled us, or are you one of the outsiders?'"

All of this is somewhat surprising, considering a *Wall Street Journal*/ABC News poll in May found that 27 percent of Republican primary voters considered national security and terrorism the govern-

ment's highest priority, more than double the percentage of Democratic primary voters who ranked them tops.

Much of the focus can likely be attributed to the GOP front-runner, Donald Trump, who has largely avoided security issues. By early September, after leading in the polls for nearly a month, the only position paper on Trump's website was immigration reform, a stark contrast to Graham's detailed national security vision.

But some other candidates are attempting to shift focus to security, delivering speeches in recent weeks broadly outlining their plans, should they be the next Commander in Chief. After all, it's hard to clinch the GOP nomination without addressing defense.

At an Aug. 31 event in Michigan, Ohio Gov. John Kasich blasted cuts to the defense budget, signaling that military spending would be a priority in his administration.

"We've allowed the Pentagon and needs of defense to be eroded over time," he said, according to the *Detroit Free Press*. "It's a matter of creating priorities. You fund the things that are critical to you."

Later that day, Kasich sounded another decidedly hawkish tone, telling Fox News that the military needs to be both mobile and lethal.

"And we need to do the things we need to do to make sure that America's security is second to none anywhere in the world," he said. "We are the leader of the world and we ought to stop thinking we are not or apologizing for it."

Meanwhile, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker delivered an Aug. 28 foreign policy speech at the Citadel in South Carolina in which he stressed American intervention, saying the United States cannot be "passive spectators while the world descends into chaos."

"As President, I will send the following message: The retreat is over," he said.

And former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush has tried to bolster his national security cred since the outset of his campaign, even as he has struggled to distance himself from his brother's unpopular policies and assure voters he is his own man.

During an Aug. 14 speech at the Iowa State Fair, Bush vowed to have a strategy to defeat ISIS from his first day in office.

"I believe we are on the verge of the greatest time to be alive if we are strong, rebuild our military, show support for the veterans, bring back competency in government, and grow our economy at a far faster rate," he said.

The next few months will determine whether voters agree. ★

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