

# Ryan Pick Leaves Global Void

In picking House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan for the vice presidential slot, Mitt Romney signaled a disinterest in filling his own gap in foreign policy experience as well as a likely avoidance of international affairs as a major topic in the presidential race, observes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

To the extent that choices of vice-presidential running mates make any difference at all, one effect of Mitt Romney's selection of Paul Ryan will be for foreign policy to recede even farther into the background in the presidential election campaign.

As much commentary has already noted, with Ryan known chiefly for his austere budget plan, attention will intensify toward salient features of that plan, including proposals involving Medicare, discretionary spending and the definition of taxable income.

Romney evidently is happy to be associated with those proposals, and Democrats certainly will be happy to sink their teeth more deeply into them. The more overriding attention these issues get, the less attention will be left over for everything else.

Possibly Democrats will question whether a 42-year-old who has spent most of his still-young adult life on Capitol Hill and has had no other involvement with foreign relations has sufficient experience to be entrusted with the duties of the presidency if he had to assume them and to respond to those proverbial 3:00 a.m. phone calls.

This is unlikely to become a significant issue in the campaign. John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin four years ago shifted the frame of reference for judging vice-presidential candidates along these lines. Ryan seems to be a smart and shrewd man and a quick learner, and any efforts to portray him otherwise probably would not gain traction.

Romney appears to have concluded, not surprisingly, that foreign policy does not offer him many potentially winning issues. Reactions to his foreign tour, which, fairly or unfairly, were disproportionately negative, probably firmed up that conclusion. It may be no accident that reportedly his choice of Ryan also firmed up about the time he was finishing the foreign trip.

This year's campaign probably was never going to be one of the better ones anyway for useful foreign-policy debate. Where President Obama should be most

subject to challenge, on matters ranging from the war in Afghanistan to pressure on Iran to the kinetic approach to counterterrorism, meaningful challenges would have to come from a direction other than the Republicans.

Romney's pronouncements on foreign policy have consisted in large part of statements that are delivered forcefully as if they were criticisms but substantively resemble restatements of current policy. The press and the commentariat are left to try to discern whatever pieces of daylight they can between the two presidential candidates.

Expectations of how Romney would handle a situation differently from Obama are more a matter of conjecture and inference, and of applying Kremlinology-type analysis to Romney's roster of advisers, than of any openly stated positions.

Romney evidently does believe he can gain votes through obsequiousness to the government of Israel, but the practical difference between him and Obama there is so far little more than a difference between always deferring to Benjamin Netanyahu and almost always deferring to him.

Maybe a second-term Barack Obama would do some significant things differently in foreign affairs than a first-term Barack Obama, or a first-term Mitt Romney. As Obama remarked earlier this year to Dmitri Medvedev, this will be his last election, and afterward he will have "more flexibility." But this, too, is a matter of conjecture and inference and not of anything the president has felt it politically safe to say now.

Foreign policy has generally, of course, played less of a role in presidential campaigns than domestic and especially economic issues. The partial exceptions have come mostly amid major and costly wars such as those in Korea, Vietnam and Iraq.

In the remaining 12 weeks of this year's campaign there is still the possibility of some jolting event overseas that will force itself into the campaign. If so, the Oct. 22 presidential candidates' debate that is reserved for foreign-policy issues could become interesting.

But most likely this encounter, which will be the last of the candidates' debates and comes just 15 days before the election, will determine few votes and not be remembered as a major event.

All of this is too bad, because there is no shortage of important foreign-policy issues that could use much more vigorous public debate than they have received. These include questions, such as Afghanistan and the U.S. military posture in the eastern Pacific, that are related to the overall role of the United States in the world.

They also include matters, such as counterterrorist strategy and the economic war being waged against Iran, that involve assumptions that ought to be far more energetically questioned than they have been.

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## Romney-Ryan Bet on 'Greedy Geezers'

**Exclusive:** Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan were quick to assure U.S. seniors that they will be grandfathered in to today's Medicare even if younger Americans get stuck with an inferior system a bet that the selfishness of "greedy geezers" will grease the way to a Republican victory, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The newly minted Republican ticket of Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan is placing a big and some might say cynical bet that the stereotype of the "greedy geezer" is real, that Americans now eligible for Medicare or close to it don't care that the popular health program won't be there for their children and grandchildren.

In picking Rep. Ryan as his vice presidential running mate, Romney has taken on Ryan's plan for replacing Medicare for senior citizens with a voucher program that will end the current fee-for-service program and shift more of the financial burden for health care onto Americans after they turn 65.

However, as Romney and Ryan quickly explained in a TV interview, the Ryan plan wouldn't affect people currently on Medicare. In its current form, Ryan's plan for turning Medicare into a voucher system (or "premium support" as Ryan calls it) wouldn't begin until 2022.

Since senior citizens vote in higher percentages than other demographic groups, Romney and Ryan are trying to split the current Medicare recipients away from those Americans in later generations. The reasoning goes: If today's seniors think that they'll still get theirs, they won't care that their kids and grandkids might be stuck with an inferior program costing each one more than \$6,000 extra.

Last year, when Ryan's was pushing his Medicare overhaul, he and other advocates specifically stressed to seniors at town hall meetings that they would continue to get the system's guaranteed benefits, an explanation that drew applause from some voters in that age group but prompted concerns from others.

For instance, in Elkhorn, Wisconsin, 64-year-old Clarence Cammers hesitantly asked Ryan a question that got to the heart of the matter. After describing himself as a disabled veteran living on Social Security, Cammers said he could stand some cutbacks for himself; that wasn't his concern.

"I will be fine," Cammers said. "I guess what I'm saying is, what are all these changes going to mean for my son?"

Cammers was noting the hard truth that it would be younger Americans who would face Ryan's scheme of replacing Medicare with government vouchers that would fall short of covering the costs of private insurance.

### **Pleasant Language**

Though Ryan inserted some pleasant language promising that the sick will get adequate care, the reality is sure to be different, essentially requiring the elderly many who will have preexisting conditions to navigate through a complex system of insurance companies offering varying levels of coverage. Plus, many insurance companies don't want anything to do with old and sick people.

As the Brookings Institute's Henry Aaron explained to the Washington Post's Ezra Klein, "We've all heard about the great proportion of health services used by people in the last year of life. That means if you're an insurer, you want desperately to not enroll those people. That means you need to try every marketing device you can not to get stuck with the sickies."

Indeed, the projected budget savings from Ryan's "premium support" system would be derived from the shortfalls between the vouchers and the cost of medical care for seniors. In other words, the money would be taken out of the pockets of the elderly or be saved by them skipping treatments that they otherwise would receive.

Even for current and near-term Medicare beneficiaries, the Republican plan would have that effect for people needing lots of prescription drugs. The Ryan plan would repeal the current subsidy for seniors facing the "doughnut hole" gap in drug benefits.

But the hardest impact of the Ryan plan would hit those turning 65 in 2022 and later. Though Ryan's sketchy 2011 proposal lacked many of the specifics needed to fully evaluate its effects, a New York Times editorial noted, "there is

little doubt that the Republican proposal would sharply reduce federal spending on Medicare by capping what the government would pay at very low levels.

“The Congressional Budget Office estimates that by 2022 new enrollees would have to pay at least \$6,400 more out of pocket to buy coverage comparable to traditional Medicare. Huge numbers of Medicare beneficiaries live on modest incomes and are already struggling to pay medical bills that Medicare does not fully cover. We should not force them into private health plans that would charge them a lot more or provide much skimpier benefits.”

In the years beyond 2022 – under Ryan’s original plan – the gap between Ryan’s voucher and the actual cost of medical care would widen even more because he would attach it to a slower measure of inflation than the rise in medical costs.

“We’re looking at linking to an index that grows less rapidly than health-care costs by three to four percentage points a year,” said Aaron of the Brookings Institute. “Piled up over 10 years, and that’s a huge erosion of coverage.”

Ryan’s plan also would repeal the Affordable Care Act, known as “Obamacare,” meaning that tens of millions of non-seniors would be on their own to grapple with large insurance companies that aggressively seek to weed out customers with preexisting conditions that might require expensive care.

In December 2011, Ryan did embrace a compromise Medicare plan with Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, that would index government support levels to the average rise in insurance costs and would let seniors sign up for what essentially amounts to a “public option,” i.e. a government-run program.

However, assuming Romney and Ryan win in November – and bring in a Republican House and Senate – it’s not clear which plan the Republicans would push, since they might no longer need significant Democratic help. They might go back to Ryan’s initial plan which was approved by the House Republican majority.

### **Premature Death**

The obvious result of Ryan’s original Medicare plan would be that many Americans who are now under 55 would die prematurely because they would have to skip treatments or be forced deeper into poverty as they struggled to meet the premium demands of the insurance industry.

Which gets us back to Clarence Cammers’s question: “what are all these changes going to mean for my son?”

The Republican assumption about the “greedy geezers” is that they don’t share Cammers’s concern; all they care about is their own welfare; they want to live

as long and as healthy a life as possible but don't feel the same for their kids and grandkids.

But the GOP bet on the "greedy geezers" is even more startling in that Romney and Ryan are gambling that these seniors and near-seniors would prefer lowering the top tax rates even more for millionaires and billionaires than seeing their progeny enjoy a full and fulfilling life.

Because of Romney-Ryan new tax cuts (and President George W. Bush's old tax breaks), Ryan's budget plan doesn't foresee a balanced budget for nearly three decades and only then if his original Medicare overhaul plan is enacted and medical costs are shifted heavily onto the backs of the next generations.

Romney and Ryan are further betting that Americans are ready to embrace a brave new world of unbridled selfishness as envisioned by Ryan's idol, novelist Ayn Rand, who dreamed of a place where "supermen" of industry would be unchained from a society demanding that they share the bounty of their success with others.

In her influential writings, Rand ranted against social programs that enabled the "parasites" among the middle-class and the poor to sap the strength from the admirable rich. But she secretly accepted the government benefits of Medicare after she was diagnosed with lung cancer.

A two-pack-a-day smoker, Rand had denied the medical science about the dangers of cigarettes, much as her acolytes today reject the science of global warming. However, when she developed lung cancer, she connived to have Evva Pryor, an employee of Rand's law firm, arrange Social Security and Medicare benefits for Ann O'Connor, Ayn Rand with an altered spelling of her first name and her husband's last name.

In *100 Voices: An Oral History of Ayn Rand*, Scott McConnell, founder of the Ayn Rand Institute's media department, quoted Pryor as saying: "Doctors cost a lot more money than books earn and she could be totally wiped out."

So, when push came to shove, even Ayn Rand wasn't above getting help from the despised government. But her followers, including Paul Ryan, now want to strip those guaranteed benefits from other Americans of more modest means than Ayn Rand.

### **Lecturing a Voter**

These Republican priorities hit home at a town hall meeting held by Rep. Rob Woodall, R-Georgia, in May 2011 when one of his constituents worried that Ryan's plan would leave Americans like her, whose employer doesn't extend health

benefits to retirees, out of luck.

“Hear yourself, ma’am. Hear yourself,” Woodall lectured the woman. “You want the government to take care of you, because your employer decided not to take care of you. My question is, ‘When do I decide I’m going to take care of me?’”

However, another constituent noted that Woodall accepted government-paid-for health insurance for himself. “You are not obligated to take that if you don’t want to,” the woman said. “Why aren’t you going out on the free market in the state where you’re a resident and buy your own health care? Be an example.

“Go and get it in a single-subscriber plan, like you want everybody else to have, because you want to end employer-sponsored health plans and government-sponsored health plans. Decline the government health plan and go to Blue Cross/Blue Shield or whoever, and get one for yourself and see how tough it is.”

Woodall answered that he was taking his government health insurance “because it’s free. It’s because it’s free.”

The Romney-Ryan ticket has shoved its chips into the middle of the table with a gamble that Americans so despise the federal government and the country’s first African-American president that they will ignore such hypocrisies as demonstrated by Ayn Rand and Rep. Woodall.

And for those already on or soon to be on Medicare, the Republican bet is that these seniors and near-seniors will be the greediest of geezers, enjoying the health program for themselves but willing to take the risk that their children and grandchildren will be left at the mercies of private insurance giants.

The Romney-Ryan calculation suggests the Republicans really do believe that today’s senior citizens represent the most selfish generation in American history.

**To read more of Robert Parry’s writings, you can now order his last two books, *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, at the discount price of only \$16 for both. For details on the special offer, [click here](#).]**

**Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at [neckdeepbook.com](http://neckdeepbook.com). His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & ‘Project Truth’* are also available there.**

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# Olympic Ideals and Reality of War

The Olympic ideal of replacing armed conflict with athletic competition has fallen to the pressures of nationalism and money. Now, the Olympics are celebrated even as nations continue the killing and plan for more, Danny Schechter writes from Johannesburg.

By Danny Schechter

When the modern Olympics were first conceived, they were intended as a peaceful alternative to war. The nations of the world were supposed to lay down their arms and stop fighting during the games out of respect for the Olympic ideal. That, of course, has not happened.

In 1936, Adolf Hitler used the Berlin Olympics to showcase his "ideals," and, now, today, the sports spectacle in London became a showcase of corporate branding and entertainment while wars rage without comment by the global TV machine that focuses only on the play-by-play of who's ahead and who's behind on the fields of sports and politics.

The Games themselves encourage patriotism without reflection, while TV companies fight a war for ratings and revenues. Uri Avnery, the Israeli peace activist, goes further, arguing that sports are a way to funnel aggression:

"Konrad Lorenz, the Austrian professor who researched the behavior of animals as a basis for understanding human behavior, asserted that sports are a substitute for war. Nature has equipped humans with aggressive instincts. They were an instrument for survival.

"When resources on earth were scarce, humans, like other animals, had to fight off intruders in order to stay alive. This aggressiveness is so deeply imbedded in our biological heritage that it is quite useless to try to eliminate it. Instead, Lorenz thought, we must find harmless outlets for it. Sport is one answer."

Needless to say, this type of analysis is missing in all the pomp and circumstance of flags waving and anthems playing.

When you turn away from the contests and leave the sports pages to return to the news pages, you note that the games politicians play are less open and much more covert, concealed with rhetoric and labeling that makes it much harder to identify the players or watch their coaches and advisers, who stay in the shadows. It's far more fascinating, apparently to watch Curiosity rove about



Mars, than look closely at the way the battle for Syria is being portrayed.

Hillary Clinton has been visiting South Africa, in part, to try to win support for U.S. policy in the endless “terror war” and regarding “human rights” for the people of Syria. That is the way the issue is being framed in the U.S. where the media talks only about the righteousness of the “rebel” fight for “democracy.”

Of course, the contradiction of non-democratic monarchies like Saudi Arabia and Qatar arming an opposition that enjoys Al Qaeda backing is seldom mentioned.

It’s significant that while the U.S. Secretary of State visits the aging Nelson Mandela and praises his “smile,” Mandela’s wife Graca Machel and the visiting former Irish President Mary Robinson blast the U.S. for undermining the UN’s efforts to mediate a peaceful solution in Syria. (Kofi Annan is leaving the UN “team” with an Algerian envoy expected to replace him. Recall that it was Algeria that was the intermediary for the release of American hostages in Iran in 1981)

What Washington is doing at the UN, meanwhile, is a basketball-style “full court press” to get the General Assembly to pressure the Security Council to authorize a fuller war. So far, China and Russia have used vetoes that the Obama Administration finds infuriating

The French magazine, Le Nouvel Observateur, while criticizing the Russians, points out, “Though Moscow is a difficult partner, it doesn’t always refuse cooperation – the US is the country that has used its veto the most.”

Needless to say that “fact” rarely, if ever, surfaces in U.S. media accounts. Another one that is missing is that Iran is trying to find a formula to end the fighting in Syria. Russia is attending its conference but the opposition has not been invited.

Says Russia: “Naturally, we intend to firmly pursue our line [calling for] an immediate end to bloodshed and the suffering of the civilian population, as well as for achieving a peaceful resolution in the interest of all Syrians through a broad political dialogue.”

The only people who would dismiss the idea of a broad political dialogue are those who are determined to overthrow the Syrian government. That’s why most observers now say diplomatic breakthroughs are unlikely and the military stalemate will continue, according to WorldCrunch:

“Russia’s strategic maneuvering in the UN, along with China, has shielded the Syrian regime from sanctions and full-scale international intervention. “

How long will the impasse continue? Washington is chomping at the bit to intervene even more, beyond covert financial subsidies and overt posturing, to enhance Obama's status as a commander-in-chief. Just this past week, he signed a new set of tougher sanctions.

Israel was predictably one of the first countries out of the box to blast the Iranian peace initiative, with the Jerusalem Post quoting anonymous sources: "Western diplomats have dismissed the conference as an attempt to divert attention away from bloody events on the ground and to preserve the rule of Syrian President Bashar Assad," adding:

"The Islamic Republic's support for Assad's regime is hardly compatible with a genuine attempt at conciliation between the parties,' said one Western diplomat based in Tehran."

But aside from toppling Assad, it is uncertain what these unnamed, or invented, self-styled Western diplomats envisage or propose about "conciliation." The Seattle Post Intelligencer reports that there are now fears of "chaos" in essence a replay of the deadly aftermath of the Libya intervention with its bloody liquidation of Muammar Gaddafi, toll in human lives and continuing uncertainty despite the pretense of elections.

Jordan says that the Syrian Foreign Minister who went there will soon leave, while Lebanon's Daily News reports that Syrian refugees in the tent camps set up in Jordan are finding not freedom but "snakes, scorpions and dust storms."

My hunch is that too few in the world are paying much attention to the Syrian scenario, caught up as they are with the Games in London. Surely someone there can say something about how the Olympics were supposed to promote peace in a world that would apparently rather fight it out, than negotiate it out.

**News Dissector Danny Schechter blogs at [newsdissector.net](http://newsdissector.net). His latest books are *Occupy: Dissecting Occupy Wall Street* and *Blogothon*. He hosts a weekly radio show on Progressive Radio Network, (PRN.fm) Comments to [dissector@mediachannel.org](mailto:dissector@mediachannel.org)**

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