

# The Neocons' Waiting Game

Mitt Romney tried to burnish his foreign policy credentials with a speech lambasting pretty much everything President Obama has done. But the rhetoric may be less important than the neocons around Romney who hope to reclaim control of U.S. global affairs, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Many realities of foreign policy do not lend themselves to clear, coherent positions in an election campaign. The reasons for this go beyond the fact that in most election years far more votes are to be won or lost on domestic issues than foreign ones, even during better economic times than we have now.

One of the reasons is the reactive nature of much of foreign policy, in which presidents are forced to spend more of their attention dealing with problems the world throws at them than on imposing their own program on the world, however much they may have hoped to do such imposing when coming into office.

Even when a foreign-policy issue does figure significantly in an election campaign (Wilson kept us out of war in Europe; Eisenhower will get us out of war in Korea), it is usually a matter of dealing with a problem the world threw at the United States, such as a war someone else started.

It is often said that presidents have more autonomy in foreign than in domestic affairs, and that is true in the sense of having fewer energized domestic political forces to contend with. But having to deal with the problems of a big, unruly world that is even more outside the ability of a U.S. president to shape than are affairs inside U.S. borders means that despite that relative autonomy, there are no greater opportunities to impose an agenda or program in foreign affairs than in domestic ones.

The exceptional major cases of imposing such an agenda, either a successful one (Nixon's triangular great-power diplomacy) or an unsuccessful one (the Iraq War) still did not figure into getting the relevant presidents elected. The possibility of launching a war in Iraq had no role in the 2000 campaign; the nuances of the diplomatic strategy Nixon brought into office were too sophisticated to influence many voters in 1968.

Appeals to candidates to sound more strategic and to lay out a foreign-policy strategy are common. But even for the foreign-policy intelligentsia, it may be difficult to distinguish in practice between policy that would be the product of sound strategy and policy that would be the result of what is simply good,

skillful, pragmatic handling of the succession of unavoidable problems the world throws at us.

And when what purports to be strategy gets formulated in the lexicon of political campaigns, the line between strategy and sloganeering can get very thin. Most of the tradeoffs and complexities that need to be addressed by a good foreign policy are beyond the comprehension or at least the cognizance of the great majority of voters. There are tradeoffs and complexities in domestic policy too, of course, but more of them are ones (e.g., more spending on Medicare means more strain on the federal finances) that much of the electorate can relate to.

We see some of these realities playing out in the fight for Mitt Romney's foreign-policy ear, with some of the most ardent fighters being on the largely neocon Right. Danielle Pletka of the American Enterprise Institute, in [a piece](#) titled "Romney's Missing Foreign Policy," lays into the Republican nominee pretty strongly with the "we need a strategy" theme.

Pletka says, "Mr. Romney needs to persuade people that he's not simply a George W. Bush retread, eager to go to war in Syria and Iran and answer all the mail with an F-16." She correctly notes, "Criticisms of Mr. Obama's national security policies have degenerated into a set of clichés about apologies, Israel, Iran and military spending." What Romney must do, she says is to "put flesh on the bones of his calls for a renewed American greatness."

Setting aside whether Pletka's own recommendations ever really get beyond sloganeering and offer any meat, [the speech](#) that Romney delivered on Columbus Day at the Virginia Military Institute should have left any meat eaters hungry. Romney talks about strategy, too, and perhaps the most laudable line in the speech is that the use of drones is "no substitute for a national security strategy in the Middle East." Quite so.

But the most one can extract from the speech about Romney's own strategy is that if one proclaims often enough and loudly enough that America is great, that it is exceptional, that it is a leader and that others in the world want our leadership, somehow those bedeviling problems in the Middle East and elsewhere will get solved.

Much of what the candidate said runs up against that reality of how a U.S. president, even if he enjoys autonomy from domestic political constraints, cannot snap his fingers and thereby make things happen overseas. A major element of Romney's "strategy" seems to be the belief that simply by expressing a desire or objective firmly enough, it will be attained, never mind whatever obstacles have kept it from being attained and what U.S. interests may be at stake with

those obstacles.

This was the case with what he said, for example, about free-trade agreements and also with his criticism of the president for an “abrupt withdrawal” of U.S. troops from Iraq without mentioning that the hang-up in extending the withdrawal deadline that the Bush administration negotiated (even if such an extension would have done anyone any good) concerned the need to guarantee immunity for U.S. personnel from prosecution in Iraqi courts.

One can be confident that if the Obama administration had extended the troop presence without such a guarantee and even a single U.S. soldier had wound up in an Iraqi court, this would have been a major point of attack in Romney’s speech.

The most prominent feature of the speech is that on most issues, including Afghanistan, Syria and sanctions on Iran, Romney’s words were mostly a description of current policy. There is nothing wrong with that. It is a tacit recognition of the reality about the United States having only a limited range of action without endangering its own interests.

To the extent one tries to extrapolate any differences from current policy, such as inferring the consequences of maintaining no “daylight” between the United States and the prime minister of Israel, as Romney says he intends to do, then the consequences really would endanger U.S. interests.

To the extent Romney’s refraining from spelling out the implied policies suggests not duplicity but instead the prospect that if elected he would not actually adopt such policies, then good for him. Let Danielle Pletka and other meat-eating critics remain unsatisfied.

To be sure, there is plenty in this speech that the candidate should not be allowed to get away with. Perhaps most fundamental is the whole notion that upheaval and instability in the Middle East is the fault of the president of the United States.

The assertion that “the risk of conflict in the region is higher now than when the president took office” is a strange campaign point, given that President Obama ended U.S. involvement in the one war in the Middle East in which it was still fighting and given that the person most likely to start a new war in the region damaging to U.S. interests is Romney’s friend and backer, the “no-daylight” Israeli prime minister.

The candidate’s reference to “President Obama’s deep and arbitrary cuts to our national defense” ignores the fact that the only such deep and arbitrary cuts in store are those in the sequestration agreement, which was part of a bipartisan way of trying to overcome the impasse created when Congressional members of

Romney's party attempted extortion by threatening to make the nation default on its debt.

And Governor Romney really needs to get past trying to exploit the deaths of U.S. officials in Libya in suggesting that the natural development of the analysis and investigation of the incident was instead some kind of withholding of an honest explanation by the Obama administration. This exploitation is especially rich given that Romney's own initial statement on the subject was a falsehood that described as the administration's "initial response" to the lethal incident an embassy statement that was released before the incident had even occurred.

But as for the lack of a meat-on-the-bones strategy that distinguishes Mr. Romney from his opponent, let us go easy on Romney. That lack is not a failing of the candidate so much as it reflects an immutable reality of foreign policy.

This election will make a difference in foreign policy but not primarily in ways that are clearly discernible in this speech. We ought to pay more attention to those who will have Romney's ear not just now but if he were the president. Conspicuous among them are the neocons who never seem to go away.

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## How Petraeus's Afghan 'Surge' Failed

In 2009, Gen. David Petraeus insisted on a troop "surge" in Afghanistan like the one he had overseen in Iraq. Yet, despite the positive PR for Petraeus and his "surges," little was accomplished beyond putting more U.S. GIs within range of devastating IEDs, as Gareth Porter wrote for Inter Press Service.

By Gareth Porter

Although the surge of "insider attacks" on U.S.-NATO forces has dominated coverage of the war in Afghanistan in 2012, an even more important story has been quietly unfolding: the U.S. loss of the pivotal war of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to the Taliban.

Some news outlets have published stories this year suggesting that the U.S. military was making “progress” against the Taliban IED war, but those stories failed to provide the broader context for seasonal trends or had a narrow focus on U.S. fatalities. The bigger reality is that the U.S. troop surge could not reverse the very steep increase in IED attacks and attendant casualties that the Taliban began in 2009 and which continued through 2011.

Over the 2009-11 period, the U.S. military suffered a total of 14,627 casualties, according to the Pentagon’s Defense Casualty Analysis System and iCasualties, a non-governmental organization tracking Iraq and Afghanistan war casualties from published sources.

Of that total, 8,680, or 59 percent, were from IED explosions, based on data provided by the Pentagon’s Joint IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO). And the proportion of all U.S. casualties caused by IEDs continued to increase from 56 percent in 2009 to 63 percent in 2011.

U.S. Pentagon and military leaders sought to gain control over the Taliban’s IED campaign with two contradictory approaches, both of which failed because they did not reflect the social and political realities in Afghanistan.

JIEDDO spent more than \$18 billion on high-tech solutions aimed at detecting IEDs before they went off, including robots, and blimps with spy cameras. But as the technology helped the U.S.-NATO command discover more IEDs, the Taliban simply produced and planted even larger numbers of bombs to continue to increase the pressure of the IED war.

The counterinsurgency strategy devised by Gen. David Petraeus and implemented by Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, on the other hand, held that the IED networks could be destroyed once the people turned away from the Taliban. They pushed thousands of U.S. troops out of their armored vehicles into patrols on foot in order to establish relationships with the local population.

The main effect of the strategy, however, was a major jump in the number of “catastrophic” injuries to U.S. troops from IEDs.

In his Aug. 30, 2009 “initial assessment”, McChrystal said the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) “cannot succeed if it is unwilling to share risk at least equally with the people.” In an interview with USA Today in July 2009, he argued that “the best way to defeat IEDs will be to defeat the Taliban’s hold on the people.” Once the people’s trust had been gained, he suggested, they would inform ISAF of the location of IEDs.

McChrystal argued that the Taliban were using “the psychological effects of IEDs and the coalition force’s preoccupation with force protection” to get the U.S.-

NATO command to reinforce a “garrison posture and mentality”.

McChrystal ordered much more emphasis on more dismounted patrols by U.S. forces in fall 2009. The Taliban responded by increasing the number of IEDs targeting dismounted patrols from 71 in September 2009 to 228 by January 2010, according data compiled by JIEDDO.

That meant that the population had more knowledge of the location of IEDs, which should have resulted in a major increase in IEDs turned in by the population, according to the Petraeus counterinsurgency theory. But the data on IEDs shows that the opposite happened. In the first eight months of 2009, the average rate of turn-ins had been three percent, but from September 2009 to June 2010, the rate averaged 2.7 percent.

After Petraeus replaced McChrystal as ISAF commander in June 2010, he issued a directive calling for more dismounted patrols, especially in Helmand and Kandahar, where U.S. troops were trying to hold territory that the Taliban had controlled in previous years. In the next five months, the turn-in rate fell to less than one percent.

Meanwhile, the number of IED attacks on foot patrols causing casualties increased from 21 in October 2009 to an average of 40 in the March-December 2010 period, according to JIEDDO records. U.S. troops wounded by IEDs spiked to an average of 316 per month during that period, 2.5 times more than the average for the previous 10-month period.

The Taliban success in targeting troops on foot was the main reason U.S. casualties from IEDs increased from 1,211 wounded and 159 dead in 2009 to 3,366 wounded and 259 dead in 2010.

The damage from IEDs was far more serious, however, than even those figures suggest, because the injuries to dismounted patrols included far more “traumatic amputation” of limbs arms and legs blown off by bombs and other more severe wounds than had been seen in attacks on armored vehicles.

A June 2011 Army task force report described a new type of battle injury “Dismount Complex Blast Injury” defined as a combination of “traumatic amputation of at least one leg, a minimum of severe injury to another extremity, and pelvic, abdominal, or urogenital wounding.” The report confirmed that the number of triple limb amputations in 2010 alone had been twice the total in the previous eight years of war.

A study of 194 amputations in 2010 and the first three months of 2011 showed that most were suffered by Marine Corps troops, who were concentrated in Helmand province, and that 88 percent were the result of IED attacks on dismounted

patrols, according to the report. In January 2011, the director of JIEDDO, Gen. John L. Oates, acknowledged that U.S. troops in Helmand and Kandahar had seen “an alarming increase in the number of troops losing one or two legs to IEDs.”

Much larger numbers of U.S. troops have suffered moderate to severe traumatic brain injuries from IED blasts mostly against armored vehicles. Statistics on the total number of limb amputations and traumatic brain injuries in Afghanistan were excised from the task force report.

In 2011, U.S. fatalities from IEDs fell to 204 from 259 in 2010, and overall fatalities fell from 499 to 418. But the number of IED injuries actually increased by 10 percent from 3,339 to 3,530, and the overall total of wounded in action was almost the same as in 2010, according to data from iCasualties. The total for wounded in the first eight months of 2012 are 10 percent less than the same period in 2011, whereas the number of dead is 29 percent below the previous year’s pace.

The reduction in wounded appears to reflect in part the transfer of thousands of U.S. troops from Kandahar and Helmand provinces, where a large proportion of the casualties have occurred, to eastern Afghanistan. The number of IED attacks on dismounted patrols in the mid-July 2011 to mid-July 2012 period was 25 percent less than the number in the same period a year earlier, according to JIEDDO.

The Pentagon was well aware by early 2011 that it wasn’t going to be able to accomplish what it had planned before and during the troop surge. In a telling comment to the Washington Post in January 2011, JIEDDO head Gen. Oates insisted that the idea that “we’re losing the IED fight in Afghanistan” was “not accurate,” because, “The whole idea isn’t to destroy the network. That’s maybe impossible.”

The aim, he explained, was now to “disrupt them” a move of the goalposts that avoided having to admit defeat in the IED war. And in an implicit admission that Petraeus’s push for even more dismounted patrols is no longer treated with reverence in the ISAF command, the August 2010 directive has been taken down from its website.

**Gareth Porter, an investigative historian and journalist specialising in U.S. national security policy, received the UK-based Gellhorn Prize for journalism for 2011 for articles on the U.S. war in Afghanistan. [This article first appeared at Inter Press Service.]**

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# Mitt Romney Lies to the World

**Exclusive:** Mitt Romney gave a rousing speech about how his foreign policy would be much more muscular than President Obama's. But Romney displayed again his proclivity to lie on specifics and distort the broader reality, too, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

While it's true that all politicians play games with the facts, it is actually rare for a politician to be an inveterate liar. But Mitt Romney is one of that rare breed on matters both big and small. And with some polls showing his surge toward victory on Nov. 6, his dishonesty may soon become an issue for the entire world.

Romney's foreign policy speech on Monday was another example of his tendency to lie on minor stuff as well as weighty issues. For instance, he claimed that President Barack Obama "has not signed one new free trade agreement in the past four years" though Obama secured passage of agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama and signed them in October 2011.

Romney apologists suggest that the Republican presidential nominee was hanging his truthiness on the word "new" since negotiations on the agreements began late in George W. Bush's presidency. But the work was completed by Obama and he pushed the deals through Congress despite resistance from some of his own supporters in labor unions.

So, by any normal use of the English language, Obama had signed new trade agreements, but Romney simply stated the opposite.

Romney also accused Obama of staying "silent" in the face of street protests in Iran over the reelection of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009. But Obama wasn't "silent." He did speak out, with his comments becoming increasingly harsh as more images of violence emerged.

"The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, beatings and imprisonments of the last few days," the President said on June 23, 2009. He added that he strongly condemned "these unjust actions."

If Romney wished to criticize Obama for not condemning Iran in even stronger terms or for not using his harshest language immediately that might be one thing, but to say, the President was "silent" is just a lie.

More broadly, Romney's depiction of U.S. foreign policy as weak and feckless

under Obama is almost the inverse from the truth. For instance, Obama helped organize an international military force to wage war in Libya, enabling rebels to overthrow longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi, but Romney acts as if that never happened.

Instead, Romney lays every foreign policy problem at Obama's door and credits others with every accomplishment, including the killings of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders.

On that topic, Romney said: "America can take pride in the blows that our military and intelligence professionals have inflicted on Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including the killing of Osama bin Laden." But Romney gives no credit to Obama for ordering these strikes and taking criticism from many on the Left for his aggressive use of drone attacks.

### **The Palestine Flip-Flop**

Another jaw-dropping example of Romney's dishonesty was his sudden embrace of negotiations leading to a Palestinian state after he was recorded in his infamous "47 percent speech" last May as deeming such talks hopeless.

"I look at the Palestinians not wanting to see peace anyway, for political purposes, committed to the destruction and elimination of Israel, and these thorny issues, and I say there's just no way," Romney told a group of wealthy donors. "The Palestinians have no interest whatsoever in establishing peace and that the pathway to peace is almost unthinkable to accomplish."

As for what the U.S. policy would be in a Romney administration, he said, "we kick the ball down the field."

However, on Monday, Romney declared: "I will recommit America to the goal of a democratic, prosperous Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with the Jewish state of Israel."

And again, all the blame for the impasse is placed on Obama: "On this vital issue, the President has failed, and what should be a negotiation process has devolved into a series of heated disputes at the United Nations. In this old conflict, as in every challenge we face in the Middle East, only a new President will bring the chance to begin anew."

And then, there's the traditional hypocrisy that you get from both parties but most notably from the Republicans, preaching the value of liberty and democracy but advocating ever closer ties with the oppressive monarchies of the Persian Gulf.

Romney declared about Obama's approach to the Arab Spring that "the greater tragedy of it all is that we are missing an historic opportunity to win new friends who share our values in the Middle East, friends who are fighting for their own futures against the very same violent extremists, and evil tyrants, and angry mobs who seek to harm us."

However, Romney then added, "I will deepen our critical cooperation with our partners in the Gulf."

### **Neocon Revival**

Besides the lies and misrepresentations in the speech, there were some genuine policy differences expressed by the Republican presidential nominee. For instance, he vowed to expand the U.S. military and to deploy it more aggressively around the globe.

Romney also repeated his pledge to yoke U.S. foreign policy to Israel's desires. "The world must never see any daylight between our two nations," he said.

And Romney renewed his belligerence against Russia, which he had previously deemed "without question, our No. 1 geopolitical foe." In his speech on Monday, Romney said, "I will implement effective missile defenses to protect against threats. And on this, there will be no flexibility with [Russian President] Vladimir Putin."

Despite the Depression-level economic crisis gripping Europe, Romney also announced that he "will call on our NATO allies to keep the greatest military alliance in history strong by honoring their commitment to each devote 2 percent of their GDP to security spending. Today, only 3 of the 28 NATO nations meet this benchmark."

One might regard Romney's neoconservative revival as delusional in a variety of ways further driving the United States toward bankruptcy even as U.S. interventionism in the Muslim world would surely make matters worse but it is Romney's reliance on systematic lying that perhaps should be more troubling to American voters.

Romney has long been known as a serial flip-flopper who changes positions to fit the political season, but his pervasive mendacity has been a concern since the Republican primaries when his GOP rivals complained about him misrepresenting their positions and reinventing his own. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Mitt Romney: Professional Liar.](#)"]

That pattern has continued into the general election campaign, with Romney telling extraordinary whoppers on the campaign trail and even during last

Wednesday's presidential debate, such as when he claimed his health-care plan covered people with pre-existing conditions when it doesn't. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Mitt Romney as Eddie Haskell.](#)"]

## **Strategic Lying**

One reason that I criticized Romney's debate performance though many other Americans, including many Democrats, disagreed with my assessment was that I felt his lying and his squirrely behavior were more important than Obama's sluggishness. Telling lies while waving your arms shouldn't trump telling the truth in a moderate tone.

Indeed, as a journalist, I simply cannot abide politicians who lie systematically, who don't just trim the truth once in a while but make falsehoods a strategic part of their politics and policies.

When I arrived in Washington in 1977 as a reporter for the Associated Press, the nation had just emerged from the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. To reassure the country that the government could be honest, President Jimmy Carter promised never to lie to the American people.

But then came the Reagan administration with its concept of "perception management," i.e., the manipulation of the public's fears and prejudices for the purpose of lining up the people behind new foreign adventures. A chief "public diplomacy" goal of the administration was to cure the American people of "the Vietnam Syndrome."

Thus, minor threats, like peasant uprisings in Central America, were portrayed as part of a grand Soviet strategy to invade the United States through Texas. The strength of the Soviet Union was itself exaggerated to justify a massive U.S. military build-up. Today's neocons cut their teeth of such distortions and lies.

Post 9/11, with George W. Bush in the White House, this neocon strategy of fear-mongering led the United States into the debacle of the Iraq War (in pursuit of imaginary weapons of mass destruction).

Now, less than a year after U.S. military forces left Iraq – and with a withdrawal from Afghanistan finally underway – the latest polls suggest that the American voters are shifting toward the election of another neocon President who promises more soaring rhetoric about U.S. "exceptionalism" and more interventionism abroad.

It's almost as if many Americans like being lied to.

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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