

# Weighing Foreign Policy Choices

Monday's presidential debate offered a startling case of President Obama defending his first-term foreign policy and challenger Mitt Romney abandoning many of his harsh criticisms of the incumbent. But ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar suggests some common-sense ways for Americans to assess global choices.

By Paul R. Pillar

After a debate that did not do a lot, to put it charitably, to clarify and illuminate differences between the candidates on issues of foreign and security policy, how should a citizen who would like foreign policy to be an important factor in electoral choices think about the choice to be made next month?

Here are some considerations that such a citizen (whose recognition of the importance of foreign policy ought to be applauded) should bear in mind and that do not require explicit reference to either of this year's candidates or to specific statements they have made in the campaign.

*Limits of the possible.* The big, messy, violent and troublesome world outside our borders will be big, messy, violent and troublesome in most of the same respects no matter what the United States does.

Even the superpower cannot solve all the problems out there, much less remake the rest of the world in its image. Unfortunately much of what has been said about foreign affairs in this campaign has failed to recognize that principle.

That part of the campaign has mirrored the domestic part by sounding as if the question at hand were simply whether we like or dislike what has been going on lately rather than who has the best response to problems that exist and the best understanding of what can or cannot be done about them.

We also hear many references to "strategy" but without any specifics about the content of a strategy and without recognition that the first step in formulating a sound strategy is to recognize the limits to what is possible, what we can and cannot do given our available powers and resources. We need to ask in the face of unpleasant happenings, even before asking what we should do about them, whether there is *anything* we can do about them.

*First do no harm.* The Hippocratic principle ought to apply to the nation's choice of its leadership. Think about ways in which we would want to revise U.S. foreign policy of the past if somehow we could do that.

Probably most of the revisions, and surely most of the really consequential

ones, would involve *not* doing something that turned out to be harmful to the nation's interests, rather than failing to do something one might hope would have been beneficial.

In this respect what may be sound advice for living an individual life is not good advice for leading a nation. Maybe it is true that in old age one will regret not trying something more than one will regret trying and failing.

For a nation, where the consequences of failure are far greater and long lasting, the regrets will be more about the failures. In choosing leaders we should pay at least as much attention to avoiding those who pose a bigger risk of failure as we do to picking ones who hold out a promise of greater success.

*The appointees.* A peculiarity of the U.S. political system, as compared to most other advanced democracies, is the installation of huge numbers of political appointees with each change of presidential administration. This political stratum, belonging neither to the ranks of elected politicians nor to the professional bureaucracy, tends to have major influence over foreign policies even more so than domestic ones.

So we should realize we are choosing not just a president but a corps of appointees, most of whom have their own strong ideas about the direction policy ought to go. We cannot determine in advance exactly who will wind up in what positions, but we can get a good idea of the possibilities by looking at who has become associated with the campaigns.

The more that the candidate at the head of the campaign lacks his own strong and original ideas about foreign policy, as a matter of lack of experience in this area or overall changeability, the more important it is to consider the possible appointees.

*Outside influences.* Something similar could be said about likely influences on the next president that do not themselves become appointed officials. The influences in question here are ones that could affect foreign policy, but the influences could be found either inside or outside the United States.

The latter would include any foreign countries or governments to which the candidate has developed a particular affinity. As with potential appointees, we can get a fairly good idea of the influences on a future president in office from where he has been receiving support and advice before entering office.

*First term vs. second term.* This is unavoidably a major consideration whenever an incumbent president is running for reelection. It embraces two sub-issues. One is a matter of risk propensity and in that regard is related to the earlier point about risk of failures.

An incumbent's record, and whatever is good or bad about it, will always give us a better idea of what we can expect from the same person in the next four years than the idea we would have with someone who has never held the office. A caveat to the preceding point is that a president in a second term has different political equities or vulnerabilities than he had in a first term.

That gets to the second sub-issue. It concerns the difference between the sorts of policies produced by a president who will never be running for office again and the sort produced by a president who, given the competitive partisanship that has become a permanent feature of American politics, will be campaigning for reelection from the day he takes the oath of office.

Domestic political considerations will naturally bear more heavily on the policies of a first-term president. The foreign-policy-concerned citizen needs to ask whether this influence will on balance tend to produce better or worse policy on matters of importance to him.

On that last point, there is something to be said for the Mexican-style system of electing presidents to a single nonrenewable six-year term. But that's not the system we have.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is now a visiting professor at Georgetown University for security studies. (This article first appeared as a [blog post](#) at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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## 'Moderate Mitt': Neocon Trojan Horse

**Exclusive:** Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney did all he could in Monday's debate to calm voters' fears that he would revert to George W. Bush's neocon foreign policy. But there was one telling slip-up when Romney signaled that his heart remains with the neocon plan to remake the Middle East, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Mitt Romney's peculiar sense of geography thinking Iran was some landlocked country that needed Syria as a "route to the sea" may have raised some eyebrows over Romney's lack of basic knowledge, but another part of the same answer, referring to the civil war in Syria as "an opportunity," should have raised more alarm.

Though Romney's goal in Monday's foreign policy debate was to downplay his warlike neoconservative stands, his reference to the Syrian chaos as "an opportunity" suggests that his more moderate rhetoric is just another ploy to deceive voters and win the election, not a real abandonment of neocon strategies.

In that sense, the new "moderate Mitt" is less a sign of a neocon retreat from his earlier bellicosity than a Trojan Horse to be wheeled onto the White House grounds on Jan. 20, 2013, so the neocons can pour forth from its hollowed-out belly and regain full control of U.S. foreign policy.

So, the neocons don't really mind that Romney has suddenly abandoned many of their cherished positions, such as extending the Afghan War beyond 2014 and returning U.S. troops to Iraq. The neocons understand the political need for Romney to calm independent voters who fear that he may be another George W. Bush.

In Monday's debate, Romney said, "Syria's an opportunity for us because Syria plays an important role in the Middle East, particularly right now. Syria is Iran's only ally in the Arab world. It's their route to the sea. It's the route for them to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon, which threatens, of course, our ally Israel. And so seeing Syria remove Assad is a very high priority for us. Number two, seeing a, a replacement government being responsible people is critical for us."

The "route to the sea" comment with its faint echo of a distant time in geopolitics represented proof that Romney lacks even a rudimentary knowledge of world geography, since much of Iran's southern territory fronts on the Persian Gulf and Iran could only reach Syria by transiting Iraq. Syria and Iran have no common border.

But more significantly, Romney was revealing the crucial connection between the neocon desire for "regime change" in Syria and the neocon determination to strangle Israel's close-in enemies, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Romney's demand for a new Syrian government of "responsible people" further suggests that the Republican presidential nominee shares the core neocon fantasy that the United States can simply remove one unsavory Middle East dictator and install a pro-Western, Israel-friendly leader who will then shut off aid to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

That was the central fallacy in the Iraq War, the notion that United States with its unparalleled military might could shift the Mideast's political dynamics to Israel's advantage through coercive "regime change." In Iraq, the U.S. military

eliminated Saddam Hussein but then saw a new Iraqi government ally itself with Iran.

The new Iraq may be less of a military threat, but it has not reached out and embraced Israel as some neocons had hoped. Indeed, by removing Hussein's Sunni-controlled regime and ending up with a Shiite-dominated one Bush's Iraq War essentially eliminated a major bulwark against the regional influence of Iran's Shiite regime.

### **Dream Still Alive**

Yet, despite the bloody and costly catastrophe in Iraq, the heart of the neocon dream is still beating and Romney's comment indicates that he shares its illusions. Dating back at least to the mid-1990s, the neocon idea has been to use violent or coercive "regime change" in Muslim countries to secure Israel's security.

The neocons' first target may have been Iraq, but that was never the endgame. The strategy was to make Iraq into a military base for then removing the governments of Iran and Syria. Back in the heady days of 2002-2003, a neocon joke posed the question of what to do after ousting Saddam Hussein in Iraq whether to next go east to Iran or west to Syria. The punch-line was: "Real men go to Tehran."

According to the neocon grand plan, once pro-Israeli governments were established in Iran, Iraq and Syria, Israel's hostile neighbors, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, would lose their benefactors and shrivel up, without money or weapons. Then, Israel could dictate its terms for peace and security.

This neocon strategy emerged after the lopsided U.S. victory in Kuwait, in which President George H.W. Bush demonstrated the leaps-and-bounds advantage of the high-tech U.S. military over the Iraqi army whose soldiers were literally blown to bits by U.S. missiles and "smart bombs" while American casualties were kept to a minimum.

After that 1991 victory, it became conventional wisdom in Washington that no army on earth could withstand the sophisticated killing power of the U.S. military. That belief combined with frustration over Israel's stalemated conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah led American neocons to begin thinking about a new approach, "regime change" across the Middle East.

The early outlines of this aggressive concept for remaking the Middle East emerged in 1996 when a group of neocons, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, went to work for Israel's Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu during his campaign for prime minister.

The neocon strategy paper, called "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm," advanced the idea that only regime change in hostile Muslim countries could achieve the necessary "clean break" from the diplomatic standoffs that had followed inconclusive Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

Under the "clean break," Israel would no longer seek peace through mutual understanding and compromise, but rather through confrontation, including the violent removal of leaders such as Iraq's Saddam Hussein who were supportive of Israel's close-in enemies.

The plan called Hussein's ouster "an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right," but also one that would destabilize the Assad dynasty in Syria and thus topple the power dominoes into Lebanon, where Hezbollah might soon find itself without its key Syrian ally. Iran also could find itself in the cross-hairs of "regime change."

But what the "clean break" needed was the military might of the United States, since some of the targets like Iraq were too far away and too powerful to be defeated even by Israel's highly efficient military. The cost in Israeli lives and to Israel's economy from such overreach would have been staggering.

In 1998, the U.S. neocon brain trust pushed the "clean break" plan another step forward with the creation of the Project for the New American Century, which urged President Bill Clinton to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

However, Clinton would only go so far, maintaining a harsh embargo on Iraq and enforcing a "no-fly zone" which involved U.S. aircraft conducting periodic bombing raids. Still, with Clinton or his heir apparent, Al Gore, in the White House, a full-scale invasion of Iraq appeared out of the question.

### **An Opening**

The first key political obstacle was removed when the neocons helped engineer George W. Bush's ascension to the presidency in Election 2000. However, the path was not fully cleared until al-Qaeda terrorists attacked New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, leaving behind a political climate across America for war and revenge.

Of course, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 had other motives besides Israeli security from Bush's personal animus toward Saddam Hussein to controlling Iraq's oil resources but a principal goal of the neocons was the projection of American power deep into the Muslim world, to strike at enemy states beyond Israel's military reach.

In those days of imperial hubris, the capabilities of the U.S. military were

viewed as strategic game-changers. However, the Iraqi resistance to the U.S. conquest, relying on low-tech weapons such as “improvised explosive devices,” dashed the neocon dream at least in the short run. The “real men” had to postpone their trips to Tehran and Damascus.

But the dream hasn't died. It just had to wait out four years of Barack Obama. In Campaign 2012, the neocons have returned to surround Mitt Romney, who like George W. Bush a decade ago has only a vague understanding of the world and is more than happy to cede the direction of U.S. foreign policy to the smart, confident and well-connected neocons.

The neocons also understand the need to manipulate the American people. In the 1980s, when I was covering Ronald Reagan's Central American policies, I dealt with the neocons often and came to view them as expert manipulators whose view of democracy was that it was okay to trick the common folk into doing what was deemed necessary.

So, the neocons learned to exaggerate dangers and exploit fears. They tested their skills out in Central America with warnings about how peasant rebellions against corrupt oligarchs were part of some grand Soviet scheme to conquer the United States through the soft underbelly of Texas.

When the neocons returned to power under George W. Bush, they applied the same techniques in hyping the threat from Iraq. They pushed baseless claims about Saddam Hussein sharing non-existent weapons of mass destruction with al-Qaeda, all the better to scare the American people.

### **Painful Reversals**

The neocons faced some painful reversals when the Iraq War foundered from late 2003 through 2006, but they salvaged some status in 2007 by pushing the fiction of the “successful surge,” which supposedly turned impending defeat into victory, although the truth was that the “surge” only delayed the inevitable failure of the U.S. enterprise.

After Bush's departure in 2009 and the arrival of Obama, the neocons retreated, too, to Washington think tanks and the editorial pages of national news outlets. However, they continued to influence the perception of events in the Middle East, shifting the blame for the Iraq defeat as much as possible onto Obama.

New developments in the region also created what the neocons viewed as new openings. For instance, the Arab Spring of 2011 led to civil unrest in Syria where the Assad dynasty based in non-Sunni religious sects was challenged by a Sunni-led insurgency which included some democratic reformers as well as some radical jihadists.

Meanwhile, in Iran, international resistance to its nuclear program prompted harsh economic sanctions which have undermined the Islamic rule of the Shiite mullahs. Though President Obama views the sanctions as leverage to compel Iran to accept limits on its nuclear program, some neocons are already salivating over how to hijack the sanctions on behalf of “regime change.”

At this pivotal moment, what the neocons need desperately is to maneuver their way back into the White House behind Mitt Romney’s election. And, if that requires Romney to suddenly soften his hard-line neocon rhetoric for the next two weeks, that is a small price to pay.

Which brings us back to Monday’s foreign policy debate in which Romney abandoned what had been his supposedly principled stands, such as denouncing Obama’s schedule to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Though Romney had called that a major mistake telling the Taliban when the Americans were departing he embraced the same timetable. The voters could breathe a sigh of relief over “Moderate Mitt.”

However, in Romney’s comment about Syria, he showed his real intent, the neocon desire to exploit the conflict in Syria to replace Bashar al-Assad with a new leader who would accommodate Israel and shut down assistance going to Lebanon’s Hezbollah. It was in that context that Romney termed the Syrian violence, which has claimed an estimated 30,000 lives, an “opportunity.”

But the real opportunity for the neocons would come if the American voters, satisfied that Romney no longer appears to be the crazy war hawk of the Republican primaries, elect him on Nov. 6 and then celebrate his arrival next Jan. 20 by pushing a crude wooden horse through the gates of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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