

Obama vs. Romney: Two Shades of Nay by Philip Giraldi

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Many Americans will cast their ballots in November based on their reckoning of which candidate would be less dangerous. Unfortunately, the disappearance of Rep. Ron Paul from the campaign will inevitably mean that the two contenders will not discuss foreign policy in any meaningful way, instead preferring to boast of how tough they would be on America's enemies.

Given the fact that there will be no actual debate on substantive issues, thoughtful Americans who realize that it is precisely the foreign and security policy nightmare that has evolved over the past 10 years that has fueled the domestic crisis might want to consider which of the two candidates will actually make the situation worse. Based on what the candidates are saying and have actually been doing, it is possible to get some idea of what might await us in 2013.

Mitt Romney is more easily categorized. He knows nothing about foreign policy, is almost willfully ignorant, and is completely dependent on his advisers, most of whom are neoconservatives who held positions in the administration of George W. Bush. There are reports of dissent among his advisers on some key issues, but Romney has invariably personally opted to take positions that might be regarded as more extreme in that they choose to rely on military might and confrontation rather than negotiation and accommodation.

Romney was unique among the gaggle of Republican presidential candidates in calling for increasing the size of the military budget and the armed forces in order to confront America's enemies, including Iran, Russia, and China. He also joined some other Republicans in emphasizing American exceptionalism, which confers on the United States the role of world leader together with the apparently God-given authority to act unilaterally. It is significant that Romney was recently the recipient of largess derived from a fundraiser organized by Dick Cheney.

Beyond his general philosophy of America's appropriate role, there are two areas in particular in which Romney's declared foreign policy positions are particularly worrying. First is his antagonism toward Russia. Romney has called Russia America's "number-one geopolitical foe." It is difficult to understand where the hostility toward Moscow derives from, as Russia is actually willing to work with Washington to help resolve potential conflicts worldwide. Russia does not compete with the United States economically and no longer seeks to extend its sphere of political influence far beyond its own borders. Nor is it a military threat. To be sure, there are some legitimate concerns about the health of Russian democracy, but its internal politics are not a threat to the United States and are, quite frankly, none of our business. What does pose a threat to the United States is the large nuclear arsenal mounted on ballistic-missile delivery systems that the Russian Federation possesses. Antagonizing the Russian bear when there is no possible gain that can be derived from such action is madness. It is even potentially suicidal if the antagonism turns to conflict.

Romney's other focus is on Israel. Romney is regularly briefed by Israeli Ambassador to the United States Michael Oren. Mitt will soon be holding a major fundraiser during a visit to Israel in which he will be meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for "consultations." The location of the fundraiser is significant in that it underlines Romney's unwavering support for the Israeli government, though it should also raise some legitimate questions about foreign-citizen billionaires contributing to a candidate in an American electoral campaign. Romney has stated that he will allow Israel to tell him what it needs so that he can better provide American support. He famously complained that Barack Obama had "thrown Israel under the bus" when the president suggested that the

1968 borders might be a starting point for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Romney has pledged that Iran will not be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon, though he is somewhat vague about what exactly that means, and has made clear that he is prepared and more than willing to use military force against Tehran. He calls for intervention in Syria to overthrow the Assad government, an objective supported by Israel. No one should doubt that Romney will follow the Israeli lead on Middle East policy.

Romney apparently supports the abuses in foreign and security policies introduced by George W. Bush and Barack Obama. He has not challenged drone warfare, the presidential authority to kill Americans without due process, and all aspects of the ever-expanding war on terror. He says he will stay in Afghanistan until something called "victory" is achieved. In other areas, Romney is predictably bellicose. Venezuela is "destabilizing, anti-democratic, and anti-American," all of which might even be true, but so what? Oh, and Hugo Chavez is a friend of Iran. But he does not threaten the United States.

So a President Romney will virtually guarantee a war with Iran, will defer to Israeli leadership in the Middle East, and will take on the role of world policeman with increased resources and commitment, leading to more wars of choice. He will heighten confrontation with nearly everyone, including major powers like Russia and China, and stay in Afghanistan as long as the generals tell him it is a good idea to do so.

Barack Obama, in comparison, is running on an actual foreign policy record. He has been touting his national security credentials, boasting that he killed Osama bin Laden, and expanding the war on terror to new areas that apparently threaten Americans, including Yemen, Somalia, and sub-Saharan Africa. Obama introduced the practice of assassinating American citizens by drone, something that had been approved but never actually carried out by his predecessor. He also increased the frequency and lethality of drone operations worldwide and both continued and expanded the dangerous Bush policy of using cyberwarfare to attack America's enemies, particularly Iran. He supported regime change in Libya and is now doing the same in Syria based on the principle of humanitarian intervention.

Obama appears to be genuinely reluctant to initiate a war with Iran, possibly out of fear that it might go poorly and damage his electoral chances. He has nevertheless refused to negotiate with Tehran in any serious way, has consistently deferred to Israel and armed it with new offensive weapons, and has created the conditions for a war with the mullahs by not permitting any alternative to develop. Obama might withdraw most U.S. troops from Afghanistan in 2014, leaving behind a hopelessly corrupt government and an ongoing money pit for the American taxpayer, but he has also expanded U.S. military action to a number of new countries while increasing drone attacks in places such as Pakistan. He has turned the CIA into a killing machine, personally supervising the writing of kill lists at Tuesday morning meetings in the White House situation room.

On the plus side, Obama would be a lame duck. Since he cannot run for a third term, he might actually promote some policies that are good for the nation, though there is no precedent for such a change of heart among recent occupants of the White House. Chances are he won't vacillate, because maintaining the status quo will be the safe thing to do. But he might not go around looking for quarrels, and he would be less inclined to gratuitously poison the relationships with Russia and China. He prefers not to confront people like Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro because he knows they are unimportant, even as he explains plausibly and with feeling how he really likes peace and freedom while simultaneously arming Syrian rebels and blowing up wedding parties in Afghanistan. Obama sounds more sincere than George W. Bush, admittedly no difficult task, but he is willing to stretch the rules beyond the breaking point to make it look as if war is not really war, using surrogates and CIA ops wrapped in state secrets to maintain some notion of deniability about what is taking place.

So this is what the choice comes down to: with Mitt Romney, the likelihood of a new war, with Iran, has to be regarded as extremely high, almost a certainty. Increased confrontation with Russia and China would also be a given and there would be an enemies list of smaller nations that would be isolated and pressured by Romney, places like Venezuela. Beyond that, Romney would undoubtedly support the status quo of drones, CIA and special ops initiatives, the war on terror, military intervention in places such as Syria, and a robust buildup of the U.S. armed forces.

By way of comparison, Barack Obama might actually avoid a war with Iran because of fear of possible negative political consequences, though it is not clear how he would do that given the corner he has painted himself into. And he would be less antagonistic toward Moscow and Beijing and less inclined to pick unnecessary fights with minor personalities like Castro and Chavez. He might well be more disposed to increase the overall level of conflict through alternative means like drones and covert actions rather than straight-out military responses, but he would be reluctant to increase the Pentagon budget. He would definitely be more motivated to undertake a humanitarian intervention, though Romney would admittedly support the same wars based on America's global leadership role.

It seems that Obama wins on points in that he would be slightly less dangerous, but the choice is clearly between bad and worse, or terrible and awful. Until the national consensus on overseas commitments ends and there is an open and serious debate over foreign policy, including America's place in the world, the average citizen will have nowhere to turn to demand actual change at the ballot box. A nation perpetually at war will inevitably wind up losing all its freedoms and end up at war with itself. Will the United States even survive four more years of this insanity? I suppose we are doomed to find out the answer to that one.