



Trump and Biden want you to believe they're more anti-war than they are

"This may be a peace election without a peace candidate," an expert told Vox.

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For the first time in years, the foreign policy fight in the 2020 US presidential election isn't about which candidate would best win wars, but rather which would most quickly end them.

President Donald Trump and former Vice President Joe Biden are both trying to position themselves as the leader who will finally extricate America from its "forever wars" and focus more on domestic issues. In essence, in what has turned into a "peace election," they're both pushing to be the "peace candidate" despite having track records that make it hard to claim such a title.

"I'm bringing our troops back from Afghanistan. I'm bringing our troops back from Iraq. We're almost out of almost every place," Trump said during an ABC News town hall last Tuesday — even though the total number of US troops abroad has slightly increased since his predecessor Barack Obama left office. Trump also referenced two normalization agreements between Arab Gulf nations and Israel the US helped broker, to convince voters his foreign policy brought about harmony without bloodshed.

Two days later, during a CNN town hall, Biden answered an Afghanistan War veteran who asked if the Democrat would bring US troops home from that 19-year conflict. "Yes, I would," Biden replied, citing his opposition to troop increases during the Obama administration, though he said he'd keep a small counterterrorism force behind. Then he went after Trump: "This president is the one that has increased the number, not reduced the number" of soldiers in Afghanistan.

It's clear why Trump and Biden are fiercely competing on this issue. A survey by the Eurasia Group Foundation this month found supporters of both candidates prefer they maintain "a focus on the domestic needs and the health of American democracy, while avoiding unnecessary intervention beyond the borders of the United States."

After decades of war with little to show for it, Americans of all political stripes appear tired of the deadly, bloody, and costly misadventures — and the leaders of both parties have taken notice.

“No one should be surprised that candidates are fighting over this ground. It’s where most of the voters are,” said Matthew Duss, Sen. Bernie Sanders’s foreign policy adviser, who is also consulting Biden’s campaign on foreign policy. “There’s a real base for these ideas: a trans-partisan, restraint-oriented movement making its presence felt.”

The problem, though, is that both Trump and Biden are deeply flawed messengers here.

Trump, for example, must contend with the military’s Friday announcement that it would send about 100 more troops into Syria to defend against Russian provocations, even though that same day the president told reporters “we’re out of Syria.”

And Biden must still address why he would never again back a faulty war, like the one in Iraq, and why he doesn’t want to make drastic cuts to the defense budget.

Both candidates, then, aren’t exactly who they say they are. “This may be a peace election without a peace candidate,” said Stephen Wertheim, author of *Tomorrow, the World: The Birth of US Global Supremacy*.

Presidential candidates often promise peace and then reverse course

A peace election like 2020 is extremely rare, in part because foreign policy rarely features so prominently in the battle for voters. That’s also the case this time around, but the difference is the grand consensus on what to do about America’s wars: End them.

Experts told me there hasn’t been an election like this one in a long time. There was the election of 1940, when debate raged over America’s potential entrance into the European war, or 1968, when both candidates claimed they knew how to achieve peace in Vietnam. In both instances, the winning candidate had to appeal to voters worried about the nation embroiling itself in war, even if they ultimately didn’t live up to that promise.

In 1940, Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt sought a third term against Republican Wendell Willkie. The nation debated whether it should send troops to fight in what would later be known as World War II, with most Americans opposed to the idea. Willkie presented himself as more anti-war than he was, putting FDR in a tight spot.

So on October 30, 1940 — a week before Election Day — the incumbent reiterated the bold vow he and others knew he couldn’t keep but that he kept promising anyway: “I have said this before, but I shall say it again, and again, and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars,” FDR boomed, receiving a large ovation from the Boston crowd.

After the attacks on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the US entered the war in Europe at President Roosevelt’s direction. Fighting that war was the right call, in the end, but experts said it still hurt FDR’s credibility with some Americans who’d believed what he promised them.

Nearly 30 years later, in 1968, Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon ran on an unabashedly hawkish anti-communist platform. But public opposition to the Vietnam War was growing in the US, particularly after the North Vietnamese forces’ shocking attacks in January 1968, known as the Tet Offensive, made it painfully clear that President Lyndon Johnson’s

claims that the war was going well and that US troops might soon be able to withdraw were false.

By the spring of 1968, Nixon was running against Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey, after Johnson had stunned the nation by announcing he would not run for reelection.

Humphrey was Johnson's vice president, and was thus intimately involved in — and, in the eyes of some voters, tainted by — the Johnson administration's escalation of the war in Vietnam. So in part to help boost Humphrey's electoral chances, then, the Johnson administration initiated peace negotiations aimed at finally ending the Vietnam War.

Nixon now suddenly needed to somehow make himself look less like the anti-communist hawk he was known to be and more of a peacemaker. To do this, he pursued a two-pronged strategy: First, he met privately with journalists and told them in background and off-the-record briefings that, contrary to his more publicly hawkish statements, he had a plan to end the war. Second, he set about trying to secretly sabotage the Johnson administration peace talks.

He wasn't actually planning to end the war if he won, but that didn't matter. The rumor that Nixon had a "secret plan" to do so made its way to the public, just as he'd known it would.

After Nixon prolonged America's involvement in Vietnam from the Oval Office, some voters felt duped because they'd bought the idea that he was the peace candidate — a sense of betrayal that contributed to the scale and staying power of years-long anti-war protests.

There's been a recent change to that trajectory. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, presidential candidates had to detail how they would command the military to defeat terrorists and all other enemies abroad. While the elections featured war-weary skeptics of those endeavors, candidates still had to prove a desire to keep fighting.

Barack Obama rose to prominence partly due to his Iraq War opposition, yes. But what many forget is that, at the same time, he argued for sending *more* troops to Afghanistan. "For at least a year now, I have called for two additional brigades, perhaps three" in Afghanistan, then-Sen. Obama said during the 2008 presidential election. "I think one of the biggest mistakes we've made strategically after 9/11 was to fail to finish the job here, focus our attention here. We got distracted by Iraq."

Today, though, it seems the debate has shifted back to promising less war, not more of it. That's why Trump and Biden are working overtime to make their cases stick, though they clearly have their work cut out for them.

Why Trump and Biden will struggle to be the peace candidate

If you take a quick look at Trump's and Biden's records, it becomes clear neither is — or may ever be — the peace candidate.

Under Trump's watch, the US has dropped bombs at a record pace in Afghanistan; killed the leaders of ISIS and Iran's elite forces; supported the Saudi-led war in Yemen despite bipartisan congressional opposition; escalated US attacks on terrorist targets in Somalia without

seriously investigating civilian casualties; and threatened military action in Venezuela and North Korea.

Meanwhile, Biden voted to invade Iraq and authorized airstrikes on Yugoslavia while in the Senate, and backed Obama's failed interventions in Syria and Libya, though the former vice president later said he didn't support the North African operation. He also told Stars and Stripes last week that he doesn't foresee making any large cuts to the defense budget, despite its enormity.

Such previous actions and positions explain why Trump and Biden are having to work hard to look more dovish now. "Both candidates are particularly weak on this issue," said Andrew Johnstone, co-editor of *US Presidential Elections and Foreign Policy: Candidates, Campaigns, and Global Politics from FDR to Bill Clinton*.

During Tuesday night's ABC News town hall, for example, Trump played up the recent normalization-of-relations agreements between the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain with Israel.

"You'll have peace in the Middle East, and this is without war and without losing — and I'm talking about on both sides — but without losing our great, young soldiers," Trump said. "Going there" — the region, he meant — "was the worst decision in the history of our country. We've spent \$8 trillion and we've lost thousands of lives but really millions of lives because I view both sides."

Trump is also touting his two nominations by right-leaning Scandinavian politicians for the Nobel Peace Prize — one for the Middle East deals and another for a new US-brokered pact between Serbia and Kosovo — though it's unclear if he'll win the award. What's more, he's promising to sign a new Iran nuclear deal in the first month of his second term instead of boasting that he'll bomb the country.

Biden is also using any opportunity he gets to note his opposition to fighting new and old wars unless core US interests are at stake. "It's past time to end the forever wars, which have cost us untold blood and treasure," he said during a major foreign policy address in July 2019.

"We should bring the vast majority of our troops home — from the wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East — and narrowly focus our mission on al-Qaeda and ISIS. And we should end our support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen," he continued. "Staying entrenched in unwinnable conflicts drains our capacity to lead on other issues that require our attention, and it prevents us from rebuilding the other instruments of American power."

Biden later told the New York Times he'd "bring American combat troops in Afghanistan home during my first term. Any residual US military presence in Afghanistan would be focused only on counterterrorism operations."

Both candidates have the space to say such things, not only because the public is disenchanted with years-long conflicts but also because there just isn't a new, clear war Americans want to

fight. Unlike with the Nazis in World War II or al-Qaeda in 9/11, there's no enemy the nation can get behind defeating.

Of course, Trump's and Biden's stances could shift over the next two months before the election, or especially during their presidencies. For instance, Johnstone, at the University of Leicester in the UK, warns that "if there was an actual attack on America or troops overseas, that might change things quite quickly."

And Emma Ashford, a US foreign policy expert at the CATO Institute think tank, said that when it comes to China, "we're going to see both sides try to one-up the other on hawkishness."

Trump has blamed China for the coronavirus pandemic and launched a trade war with the country, while Biden's team has spoken openly about denying Beijing further access to the South China Sea and about how his opponent "has sold all of us out to China in every way" — signaling an unwillingness to give Beijing an inch in relations with Washington. Neither stance "is quite the same as war," Ashford notes, "but [they're] certainly a more hawkish approach."

The two questions that arise from all this, then, are 1) how much Americans value Trump's and Biden's "forever war" promises over their track records, and similarly 2) will voters even view the political fight as a peace election? If not, the candidates' rhetoric may not be that important in the end.

Still, it's noteworthy that, time after time, the Republican and the Democrat repeatedly say they will do whatever possible to end the wars America is already in and not initiate a new one. It's certainly a change, and for many like Wertheim, now at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft in Washington, a welcome one.

"Trump and Biden seem to recognize the unpopularity of continued and new wars and are trying to appeal to public sentiment — rightly so," he said.