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Bipartisan Middle East policy insanity

By **Christopher Preble** and **Malou Innocent**, Special to CNN

Editor's note: Christopher Preble (@capreble) is vice president for defense and foreign policy studies, and Malou Innocent (@malouinnocent) is a foreign policy analyst, at the [Cato Institute](#). The views expressed are their own.

In the wake of violent protests in [Egypt](#), [Libya](#), and [elsewhere](#), as embassies and consulates scramble to [beef up security](#), the focus here in the United States has shifted to the U.S. presidential campaign. As the candidates trade shots over [apology tours](#) and [ham-fisted reactions](#), their partisan bickering obscures an uglier truth: both of the major parties have supported policies that have failed to deliver tangible benefits to the American people and made the United States look weak.

Whether it is economic assistance to authoritarian allies, or wars of liberation and nation-building, the most powerful country in the world conveys the impression of begging for cooperation from nations of marginal importance. Democratic and Republican administrations alike have pursued such misguided policies. It's time to stop, and the appalling response to a low-budget film mocking the Prophet Mohammad should prompt such a change.

In Egypt, the most populous Arab country and a long-time U.S. partner, a violent mob seized on the film as a pretext to ransack our embassy and tear up its American flag. In neighboring Libya, extremists apparently hijacked the spontaneous uprisings against the film, and used them as cover for a violent attack that killed four Americans serving our country, including the U.S. ambassador. Protests have since spread to [Yemen](#), [Tunisia](#), [Morocco](#), [Indonesia](#), and reportedly as many as [25 other countries](#). The destruction of property and the killing of U.S. officials are reprehensible. The perpetrators must be brought to justice.

While many observers have blamed the controversial film for this crisis, Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney has condemned the Obama administration's failed policies.

Romney is only partly correct: U.S. policies have failed, but those failures are bipartisan. Some policies, such as concerted efforts to improve Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors, or counterterrorism practices intended to degrade al-Qaeda's capabilities, have been constructive, and some have even enhanced America's security. Other policies, however, such as the invasion and occupation of Iraq, or aid programs that have propped up brutal and corrupt governments, have tethered America to the region's parochial quarrels and have allowed extremists to gain influence by blaming the West for their countries' problems.

Take, for example, the U.S. response to the Arab Spring. Rising food costs and economic distress sparked the region's "awakening." In Egypt, U.S. taxpayers had given tens of billions in foreign assistance to Cairo for more than a quarter century, but aid failed to promote long-term economic development. Indeed, it likely retarded it. To make matters worse, Washington's preference for funneling aid through tyrants made it an enemy of those tyrants' opponents. Those opponents spanned a broad ideological spectrum, from [al-Qaeda-inspired jihadists](#) to [tech-savvy liberal protesters](#).

In Washington, neoconservatives and liberal hawks alike sought to reverse that pattern, endorsing the overthrow of other tyrants like Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi and now Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Washington has a poor track record of picking winners and losers in distant civil wars, but that hasn't stopped Romney's top foreign affairs adviser from [claiming](#) that not arming Syria's opposition "gives us less leverage to dictate the future after Assad." Former Obama State Department official Anne-Marie Slaughter agrees. Writing at the *New York Times*' Room for Debate, Slaughter [claims](#) that the killing of four Americans in Libya, including Ambassador Christopher Stevens, should prompt Washington to become even more deeply involved in Syria's civil war.

Such bipartisan calls persist despite the fact that U.S. policies in the region – billions in aid, the occasional war, and decades of painstaking diplomacy – appear to have purchased [little goodwill](#) for America. Indeed, the mere fact that [an](#) amateurish video uploaded to YouTube can undermine decades of policymaking in a matter of days illustrates just how tenuous Washington's standing is.

Americans can be forgiven for asking what exactly all their money, and the sacrifice of the troops, has bought us. Surveying anti-American sentiment throughout the region, even reflexive hawk Victor Davis Hanson [asked](#), 10 days before the attacks, "Why, then, bother?"

Unfortunately, that is not what either Obama or Romney is asking. Though they differ on specifics, both remain committed to the same failed policies. Both reserve the right to funnel hard-earned American tax dollars into foreign countries,

and intervene militarily in pursuit of amorphous goals. The bipartisan foreign policy consensus exemplifies the definition of insanity: repeating mistakes over and over and expecting different results.

Voters concerned about perceptions of American weakness should consider the nature and extent of that weakness. Weakness, strictly defined, is a lack of physical power. That clearly does not describe the United States. We possess enormous physical power. Our moral authority should augment that power. Policymakers undermine both when they entangle our country in religious, ideological, and political controversies that have no clear connection to our vital interests.