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Op-Ed: Is Romney the Neoconservative's new Front Man?

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Before embarking on his overseas trip to England, Israel and Poland, Mitt Romney delivered a major address at the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Reno, Nevada. Sadly, Romney's speech lacked anything original or genuine to say about the subject.

Repeating the rhetoric he used during the GOP primary season, Mitt Romney Tuesday harshly criticized Barack Obama's foreign policy [but offered no specifics](#) regarding any changes he would make if he defeats President Obama in November's General Election.

The entire foreign policy platform Romney has so far articulated comes in two forms. One involves [blasting specific actions Barack Obama has taken](#) without explaining what he'd do differently. Romney has also attacked Obama over foreign policy actions the president has never taken, regularly accusing President Obama of [apologizing to America's enemies](#), which is of course fiction.

The purpose of these attacks is to advance Romney's only message: that Obama is a failure. It matters not that Obama's presidency has included the killing of Osama bin Laden and leading a successful NATO strategic bombing operation to rid Libya of Moammar Gadhafi. The president has actually infuriated some on the left with his continuation of Bush-era policies on [indefinite detention](#) and [unmanned drone attacks](#).

The second form is Romney's [embrace of the neoconservative cause](#) championed by the Bush administration. Though Romney [lists former Secretaries of State](#) Henry Kissinger, James Baker and George Shultz among his senior advisers, the most vocal and active members of his foreign policy team are from the party's neoconservative wing that dominated George W. Bush's first term in office. Of Romney's identified foreign policy advisers, many were enthusiastic backers of the Iraq War, and are proponents of a United States or Israeli attack on Iran. On some key issues, like Iran, Romney and his team are [to the right of Bush](#).

"I can't name a single Romney foreign policy adviser who believes the Iraq War was a mistake," says the [Cato Institute's Christopher Preble](#). During a [foreign policy speech in April](#), Vice President Joe Biden said that Romney and his chief

advisers "see the world through a cold war prism that is totally out of touch with the realities of the twenty-first century."

A Quick Study

Romney knew [little about foreign policy](#) when he ran for president in 2008. An [internal dossier from John McCain's presidential campaign](#) said among other things that "Romney's foreign affairs resume is extremely thin, leading to credibility problems." After being branded as too liberal by conservative GOP activists four years ago, Romney has [aligned himself with John Bolton](#) and other neocons to gain some credibility on the issue. Today there is little difference between Romney and the neocon agenda.

Bolton is one of eight Romney advisers who signed letters drafted by the [Project for a New American Century \(PNAC\)](#), an influential neoconservative advocacy group founded in the 1990s, urging the Clinton and Bush administrations to attack Iraq. PNAC founding member Paula Dobriansky, a [leading advocate of Bush's "freedom agenda"](#) recently joined the Romney campaign full time.

Another PNAC founder is [Eliot Cohen](#), an advisor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from 2007 to 2009. After 9/11, he dubbed the war on terror "World War IV," arguing that Iraq was an "obvious candidate, having not only helped Al Qaeda, (later proved to be patently false), but...developed weapons of mass destruction (later proved as exaggerated)," should be its center.

Excluding the aforementioned Secretaries of State, [Romney's foreign policy team](#) is flush with former Bush aides tarnished by the Iraq fiasco: [Robert Joseph](#), the National Security Council official who inserted the infamous "sixteen words" in Bush's 2003 State of the Union message claiming that Iraq had tried to buy enriched uranium from Niger; [Dan Senor, former spokesman for the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq](#); and [Eric Edelman](#), a top official at the Pentagon under Bush.

Shortly after McCain's 2008 defeat, Robert Kagan, Edelman, Senor and Weekly Standard editor Bill Kristol launched the [Foreign Policy Initiative \(FPI\)](#), a successor to PNAC. FPI's mission has been to keep the Bush doctrine alive in the Obama era by: supporting a troop increase in Afghanistan and opposing a 2014 withdrawal; advocating a 20,000-troop residual force in Iraq; backing a military strike and/or regime change in Iran; promoting military intervention in Syria; urging a more confrontational posture toward Russia; and opposing cuts in military spending.

Edelman worked for Dick Cheney in both Bush administrations. Reportedly he suggested to Scooter Libby the idea of [leaking the identity of CIA agent Valerie Plame](#) as retaliation for Joe Wilson's New York Times op-ed detailing the falsified Iraq-Niger connection. As ambassador to Turkey in 2003, Edelman failed to

persuade the Turks to support the Iraq invasion. [Turkish columnist Ibrahim Karagul called him](#) "probably the least-liked and trusted American ambassador in Turkish history." He's one of nearly a dozen of Romney advisers who have urged that the United States consider an attack Iran.

Senor is best known for his comical stint in Iraq under Paul Bremer, when the United States disbanded the Iraqi Army and tried to privatize the economy. In his book on Iraq, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, Rajiv Chandrasekaran of the Washington Post [wrote of Senor](#), "His efforts to spin failures into successes sometimes reached the point of absurdity." Senor now serves as a conduit between Romney and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "Mitt-Bibi will be the new Reagan-Thatcher," Senor tweeted after the New York Times ran a [story about the decade's long friendship](#) between the two men.

Indeed, toward the beginning of his Tuesday remarks, he reprised the main theme of the major [foreign policy address he delivered at The Citadel](#) last October in the heat of the primary campaign: "This century must be an American Century" in which "we have the strongest economy and the strongest military in the world." He repeated the "American Century" phrase seven times, and each time it hearkened me back to the PNAC and the Iraq disaster.

Return to the Bush years

Romney's case for election rests on his credentials as a competent businessman who can restructure the economy and government. However, his choice of foreign policy advisers undercuts that sales pitch, by re-elevating the radical ideologues from the last Bush administration that previously spent recklessly on unnecessary wars. That can serve a dual blow to the Republican candidate as the country can see a potential [return of a disastrous foreign policy](#), as well as [the disastrous fiscal policies](#) that caused the latest financial meltdown if Romney were elected.

If the suddenly severely conservative Willard Mitt Romney wants to run a fiscally prudent, internationally strong and well-managed country, his GOP model should be [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#), or even [George H.W. Bush](#). Today, [neither would likely make it through a Republican primary](#). Elder statesmen from the George H.W. Bush administration including [Colin Powell](#) and [Brent Scowcroft](#) are much closer to Obama's views than to Romney's. Lawrence Wilkerson says the likes of Powell and Scowcroft are "very worried about their ability to restore moderation and sobriety to the party's foreign and domestic policies." In 2012 Obama is running as Bush 41 and Romney as Bush 43.

Romney would like to make the 2012 election a [replay of 1980](#), when Ronald Reagan defeated Jimmy Carter. Romney has attacked Obama calling him "America's most feckless president since Carter." But Romney hasn't been able to make this argument stick, because Obama has been [more hawkish than many](#)

[liberals and conservatives](#) would like to admit. His [foreign policy triumphs are tangible](#).

Romney has already committed a string of foreign policy gaffes while on the campaign trail. He was chided by House Speaker John Boehner for [criticizing Obama while the president was overseas](#). He was widely derided for calling [Russia "our No. 1 geopolitical foe"](#) and demanding that Obama release the transcripts of his conversations with foreign leaders. Peter Feaver, an adviser to Bush at the National Security Council, urged Romney to "walk back from reckless campaign promises."

So far he's had a [very inauspicious foray into foreign policy](#) during his trip to London. The purpose of Romney's first diplomatic outing was to show that he could handle himself on the world stage, but by insulting his hosts on the eve of the Olympics, Romney handed Barack Obama a potential gift. Democrats wasted no time exploiting it. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid says that it's embarrassing for the U.S. "to have somebody that's nominated by one of the principal parties to go over and insult everybody." It is Romney who has actually had to [engage in a frantic apology tour](#).

So far Romney's [overseas debut looks dreadful](#) compared to Obama's '08 tour, where he was so polished the Republicans tried to label him as a celebrity. Then candidate Obama displayed the [poise and presence of a seasoned statesman](#) when speaking to the press and foreign leaders in the war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as in Jordan, Israel, France, Britain, and Germany. Romney has so far fallen well short, but he has [visits to Israel](#) and [Poland](#) to improve his performance.

Four years after Bush [left office in disgrace](#), Romney is the neocons best shot to get back in power. Listening to Romney speak Tuesday in Reno, (and [reading others' views](#)) you'd never know that Bush left office mired by two unpopular wars that cost America dearly in blood and bounty. A thorough review of his statements during the primaries and his choice of advisers suggest he would return to the hawkish, unilateral interventionism of the George W. Bush administration should he win the White House in November.

What would Romney do?

Romney's sucking up to the neocons, even if done only to woo the right, could become a foreign policy nightmare if he's elected. If the electorate takes the candidate at his word - not an easy task with his penchant for changing positions - a Romney administration would pursue the same aggressive policies they advocated under Bush. Yet Romney inexplicably [continues to get the benefit of the doubt](#) from some, who feel if he is elected he will govern from a more centrist position as he did as Massachusetts' governor.

Daniel Larson [writes in The American Conservative](#), "I wouldn't assume that someone as smart as Romney is supposed to be doesn't seriously hold the foreign policy views he has publicly stated." Aaron David Miller of the Woodrow Wilson Center [discounted Romney's hawkish positions](#) saying, "He's articulating policies he wouldn't follow," adding, "Barring an extraordinary event like September 11, Romney will be much more moderate, much less reckless than George W. Bush."

But can voters be so sure? After the Bush 43 can Americans take for granted that for Romney the neoconservative ideology is one of convenience? A Romney's presidency is an advantage for his neocon advisers, potentially giving them an opportunity to shape their own world view, as they did with Bush after 9/11.

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