



The Battle for Mitt Romney's Soul

Which faction of the Republican Party is winning? We asked three smart conservatives to weigh in.

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Foreign Policy asked three smart conservatives of different stripes to analyze Mitt Romney's big foreign-policy address, and tell us which wing of the Republican Party is winning the battle for Romney's soul. Here's what they told us:

Danielle Pletka:

I'm glad Mitt Romney delivered a major speech on foreign policy at the Virginia Military Institute. I wrote in the *New York Times* that had the debacle of Benghazi -- and the dreadful murder of four Americans -- not taken place, he probably wouldn't have been willing to take time out of the all-economy-all-the-time election to talk national security. But the White House has screwed up royally in both its substantive management of the terrorist threat from Benghazi and the Arab Spring, and in its messaging on everything from Libya to Syria to Iran to Russia.

Every country -- even the United States -- is constrained in what it can do practically in the face of bloody minded enemies, obstructionist wannabe superpowers and terrorists; everyone understands that our resources are finite. But no leader, and certainly not the commander in chief of the U.S. military, should be constrained in how he articulates

America's commitment to its allies, intolerance of threats to the global order, and vision for the nation's role in the world.

Romney's speech at VMI was a far cry from his previous perorations on the feebleness of the Obama Doctrine of "leading from behind." It departed from the cliches -- "I will never apologize" -- and ignored the Islamophobia of a few among the GOP ticket's supporters. Romney instead offered serious propositions about rethinking aid to the Middle East; measured, yet well-deserved criticism of Russia; and thoughtful, but not drone-obsessed answers to the terrorist threat.

Where did he fall short? Not in failing to talk about Israel-Palestine. Did anyone seriously think that after decades of failed peace processing, he would mouth some platitude about the need for a peace process? Unfortunately, he limped in distinguishing himself from Obama on Iran, where the president has, by any measure other than success in imposing fruitless sanctions, failed. Romney also shied away from tougher talk about the challenge of an increasingly aggressive People's Republic of China.

Still, this was a better speech, a serious speech, and -- on the barometer of Obama promises and orations -- serious in its vision and intent. Would wonks like me prefer more? Possibly, but this is not an election about national security. And the VMI address was enough. Maybe even more than enough.

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Joshua Treviño:

Mitt Romney's Monday-morning address at the Virginia Military Institute will mostly be assessed in its proper primary context -- its effect on the presidential campaign -- but it is also significant for what it says about the Republican Party's positioning within the broader foreign-policy and national security debates.

The short version: After several years' absence, the GOP is back.

The close of the George W. Bush years found the traditional Republican edge on military and foreign-policy matters almost completely eroded. The general public perceived the party to be a spent force in this realm, and that perception was not entirely inaccurate. No single incident from the last presidential campaign illustrated this better than the August 2007 exchange over the proper U.S. relationship toward Pakistan. "If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets [in Pakistan] and President Musharraf won't act, we will," Barack Obama **told** a crowd at the Woodrow Wilson Center. "I do not concur in the words of Barack Obama in a plan to enter an ally of ours," was Mitt Romney's **reply**.

Five years and one Osama bin Laden at the bottom of the Indian Ocean later, things have changed. "America can take pride in the blows that our military and intelligence professionals have inflicted on al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan," Romney told his VMI audience, "including the killing of Osama bin Laden."

The point here is not that Romney has changed his tune. (Politician reverses himself: film at eleven.) Rather, what we see here are two strains of thought within the Republican Party's foreign-policy apparatus emerging and seeking to accommodate one another.

The first affirms that much of what Obama sought and accomplished in the spheres of war and diplomacy will be furthered in a Republican administration. What could be major points of contention with the Obama administration record -- drone campaigns, the Asia "pivot," the 2014 Afghanistan withdrawal -- were either explicitly endorsed or left unaddressed in Romney's remarks. If the big story about the current president's national-security policy is how much it continues Bush's, then the big story about Romney's may be how much it continues Obama's.

The second strain is apparent in Romney's characterization of the present conflicts in the Middle East as "struggle[s] between liberty and tyranny, justice and oppression, hope and despair." Perhaps not coincidentally, this rhetoric echoes Sunday's *New York Times* op-ed by the American Enterprise Institute's Danielle Pletka, in which she exhorts Romney to "make the case that when people fight for their freedom, they will find

support -- sometimes political, sometimes economic and sometimes military -- from the American president."

This is the ideological facet of Romney's emerging foreign-policy line, and in the VMI address, we saw it generate one significant departure from the present administration's policy: "In Syria, I will work with our partners to identify and organize those members of the opposition who share our values and ensure they obtain the arms they need to defeat Assad's tanks, helicopters, and fighter jets."

Going to war in Syria, even allowing the dubious proposition that it could be done wholly by proxy, is a big deal. Not even Iran received this sort of attention in the VMI address -- like the president, Romney avoided explicitly drawing the "red lines" requested by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu -- and so one is left with the impression that a Romney administration might well pull the the United States into engagements that are less than compelling from a realpolitik standpoint.

None of this is to argue that realpolitik should wholly dictate American action abroad; even Obama doesn't think so. What it highlights is the probable shape of the Romney administration's foreign policy: continuity with a particular ideological sheen. The persons and tendencies that believed Iraqis in 2003 were basically Czechs in 1989 will return to the corridors of power -- but they'll affect the agenda rather than dictate it. Romney won't represent a return to Bush's first term. Instead, as we saw at VMI, he will seek to integrate its reflexes and aesthetic into the existing agenda. What Obama began will continue -- but it will appear different at home, if not abroad.

It's worth recalling here the last comparable transition between a Democratic one-termer and an improbable Republican victor. In David Hoffman's *The Dead Hand*, former Soviet ambassador to the U.S. Anatoly Dobrynin is quoted as saying that he couldn't "imagine anything much worse than [Jimmy] Carter," but eventually found Ronald Reagan "to be far worse and far more threatening." This, of course, flies in the face of American popular memory, which casts the obvious difference between Carter and Reagan as that between weakness and strength. In time, the Soviets arrived at the same perception -- but it took time.

In a handoff from Obama to Romney, we might expect a comparable dynamic. The successor will build upon the predecessor's foundation, and even further most of his agenda -- but as we saw at VMI today, the optics will be different. Whether that leads to triumph or tragedy is for history to tell, but we already know one thing: After nearly half a decade in the foreign-policy wilderness, Republicans are finding their voice.

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Justin Logan:

Mitt Romney's speech to the Virginia Military Institute was puzzling, but not for substantive reasons. The real question isn't why the Republican nominee says what he does on foreign policy, but why he's focusing on it at all. Everyone urging him to talk foreign policy seems to think doing so can help get him elected, but unless the campaign has some fascinating internal polls, there's no evidence for that. The idea that a soaring foreign-policy speech is a good use of the candidate's time has two interlocking problems: a) voters don't care about foreign policy in this election, and b) when asked, they prefer Barack Obama by 10 or so points. To make inroads, Romney would need both to make voters care and to make them prefer *him*. Spending even as much time as he has on the subject is hard to understand.

The speech itself was long on rhetoric and short on strategy. Swimming through the rhetorical fog, one can make out a few foreign-policy judgments. Romney deployed language reminiscent of George W. Bush's second inaugural address to describe the tumult in the Middle East. Far from being something more mundane, what's going on there is a fight "between liberty and tyranny, justice and oppression, hope, and despair," he said. But which side was, say Egypt's Hosni Mubarak on, and which was the Muslim Brotherhood? What are the implications for policy? Perhaps the region is more complicated than Romney framed it.

It also looks like Romney thinks leaving Iraq was a mistake. He laments the fact that the Obama people couldn't renegotiate Bush's Status of Forces Agreement to make U.S. servicemembers above Iraqi law, but offers no suggestion as to how this change could

have been produced. In the category of "distinction without a difference" is Romney's attempt to market his Afghanistan policy. Romney, like Obama, promises to have us out in 2014, but Romney's transition, we are informed, will be "real and successful." Noted.

As to the tensions between the United States and Israel, Romney takes what a more demagogic observer might term a "blame America first" approach. Romney is willing to overlook Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's mismanagement of the relationship, including his **humiliation of U.S. Vice President Joe Biden during a trip to Israel**, laying blame squarely at the feet of the Obama administration for **taking the slow road** rather than the express lane to war with Iran. Meanwhile, Romney wants to ensure that there is no "daylight" between the United States and Israel while simultaneously deputizing a new Middle East czar to produce "good governance, free enterprise, and greater trade" in the Islamic world. Those two ideas go together about as well as wine and ice cream.

Perhaps most importantly, Romney made clear his view that "what makes America exceptional" is not our dying form of limited, decentralized government, but our track record of involvement in war and power politics. That's one version of conservatism, I suppose, but it fits better in an intellectual tradition with Wilhelm II and Teddy Roosevelt than it does in one with (small-r) republican conservatives like Thomas Jefferson or Dwight Eisenhower.

At bottom, the Romney campaign and its emphasis on hawkish foreign policy is proof that almost 10 years after the neoconservatives drove the nation into a ditch, they're still clutching the steering wheel of the GOP. The United States is so safe that even Iraq-sized errors won't lead voters or party elites to force a change. **Until some external or internal pressure emerges**, U.S. grand strategy will stay **more or less the same**. To create internal pressures for change, what is needed is an effort much like **the one the neocons led decades ago**: a vigorous attempt to create a Republican counter-establishment that can vie for control of the party's foreign policy. The neocons raised tens of millions of dollars and created a number of institutions, magazines, and pressure groups to shape and then capture the GOP's foreign policy. Looking at today's political landscape, even the spadework for a realist renaissance has yet to begin.

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