

The Boca Raton presidential debate on foreign policy: panel verdict

Obama was belligerent. Romney played the peacenik. So who won the debate? Our panel of foreign policy experts decides

By Malou Innocent - 10/23/2012

'At last, Romney has adopted a tone of moderation'

At last night's [final presidential debate](#), Governor Mitt Romney diverged sharply from his empty rhetoric of muscular American leadership. How refreshing.

On the campaign trail, Romney has evoked the bluster and relentless chest-thumping of President Bush. But last night, Romney conveyed an attitude of humility that many war-weary Americans are desperate to hear. In his early opening salvo, he congratulated President Obama for "taking out Osama bin Laden," and added:

"But we can't kill our way out of this mess."

Indeed, while going after al-Qaida is the right policy, meeting that challenge only militarily won't resolve the underlying political circumstances that give rise to terrorism.

In another extraordinary turn, Romney said on the subject of getting the Muslim world to reject extremism that "[w]e don't want another Iraq, we don't want another Afghanistan". Perhaps Romney's realist handlers – those who want him to win the presidency – have finally gotten to him: [polls show overwhelmingly that Americans think the Iraq war was a mistake](#), and America paid an enormous price in blood and treasure for an Iraq under considerable Iranian influence. Even [many in the GOP](#) have turned against America's endless wars of nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The governor was vague and evasive at times, perhaps to obscure the fact that his substantive differences with Obama were minimal and mainly semantic. For instance, on Syria, Romney's policy is no different than the incumbent's. He advocates helping the opposition by working with America's partners; finding responsible parties and rebels and arming them; working for the creation of a

responsible government to replace Bashir al-Assad; and not getting drawn into a military conflict by injecting neither American troops nor a no-fly zone.

On military spending, Romney came across as disjointed and contradictory. After all, if a President Romney intends to spend 4% of America's GDP on the military – an increase of \$2tn over the next ten years – then how will his administration pay for that and close the budget deficit?

Part of the problem is that Romney's vision appears to be driven by capabilities and tactics (incremental policies to achieve short-term objectives) rather than a clearly articulated strategy (a broad sense of guidance for our actions and decisions). Worse, both Romney and Obama embrace some of the same hawkish and meddlesome national security and surveillance policies adopted under President Bush. In that respect, President Obama's predecessor – and the pro-interventionist foreign policy establishment in Washington – was the debate's clear winner.

For all of these flaws, though, Governor Romney's shift was still remarkable. Juxtaposed with his previous invocations of the American people watching the world and "shaping events", or having "confidence in our cause" and "resolve in our might", he appears to have realized Americans are tired after enduring the human and financial costs of two prolonged and deeply unpopular wars. At last, the Romney campaign has adopted a tone of moderation in the final weeks before the election.

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