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HUFF POST POLITICS

President Obama Whiffs at the Debate

By Robert J. Elisberg - 10/18/2012

Okay, yes, I know all polls have shown that President Barack Obama won the second debate with Mitt Romney and his magical Binder of Women. And yes, I know that the airwaves are full of videos of "smackdown" moments by the president.

But the president had a softball lobbed across the plate on one question, and he missed blasting it far over the wall for an easy, Ruthian grand slam home run. Instead, he wound up with a ground-rule double.

The question came from Susan Katz who expressed "fear" of a return to "failings and missteps" of George Bush policy and was concerned that Mitt Romney might not be able to differentiate himself from Mr. Bush, leading the country back to those same "economic and international problems." Of course, few Americans want that -- including most Republicans. Witness the invisibility of President Bush from the Romney campaign. Better yet, witness Mr. Romney's own answer, detailing his "differences," rather than insisting how much he admires the wondrous George W. Bush.

Yes, I know that President Obama gave a highly-effective, clever answer that ridiculed how much worse Mr. Romney would be than Mr. Bush. And he was right. But it totally missed what would have had the audience running for the hills to duck-and-cover.

Consider all that the president left out.

Consider what he didn't say:

As Paul Richter in the [Los Angeles Times](#) reported about Romney foreign policy, the former governor relies "on a group of about 200 outside advisors, campaign staff and other experts. About two-thirds are veterans of the Bush administration."

Two-thirds.

These include:

John Bolton, George Bush's Under Secretary of State and ambassador to the United Nations. He is such a neocon war hawk that Mr. Bolton told officials in Israel that America's next targets after attacking Iraq would be Syria, Iran and North Korea.

Dan Senor, the former Bush spokesman in Iraq during Paul Bremer's disastrous "Provisional Authority" period when the Iraqi Army was disbanded and civil riots exploded. (He also has led foreign policy briefings for Vice Presidential-candidate Paul Ryan.)

Robert Joseph was the National Security Council official who wrote the notorious "sixteen words" lie in President Bush's 2003 State of the Union speech that falsely claimed Iraq was trying to buy enriched uranium.

Eric Edelman not only was an important Bush official in the Pentagon, but it was [his suggestion](#) to boss Dick Cheney that Scooter Libby "out" CIA covert agent Valerie Plame. He also served in the Defense Department and pressed to attack Iran.

Other Bush neocon and war hawk advisers on the Romney team include Elliott Abrams, the Bush deputy national security aide; and Elizabeth Cheney, a State Department official and daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney.

Sorry, if you're running out of paper for taking notes, but we're only getting started.

Beyond these experts comprising its foreign policy brain trust, the Romney website lists its "special advisers." These include:

Michael Hayden, the Bush CIA director.

Michael Chertoff, homeland security director for Mr. Bush.

Richard Williamson, ambassador to the U.N. Security Council, and the Bush special envoy to Sudan.

And all of this, Barack Obama left out of his answer. But then, out of kindness to the far right, he also left out that:

On Mitt Romney's foreign policy team, "Fifteen of the 22 members were policy advisers under the George W. Bush administration." And further, as [Policymic](#) states, "six of them are former members of PNAC," the neocon Project for a New American Century.

Indeed, when Mitt Romney released his white paper on foreign policy (neocon-named, "An American Century"), the foreword was by Eliot Cohen -- counselor to

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. And a founder of PNAC. Mr. Cohen has advocated that the U.S. "actively seek the overthrow" Iran. He refers to his policy as "World War IV."

The importance of all this direct. Bush-neocon, war hawk influence on Mitt Romney has been put into perspective by Ari Berman in [The Nation](#). He quotes Christopher Preble, foreign policy expert of the conservative/libertarian Cato Institute:

"I can't name a single Romney foreign policy adviser who believes the Iraq War was a mistake. Two-thirds of the American people do believe the Iraq War was a mistake. So he has willingly chosen to align himself with that one-third of the population right out of the gate."

(But there's an even larger perspective. These Bush/Romney neocons are the same crack-experts who advised George Bush to ignore the briefing, "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in U.S." An intelligence failure of ghastly worldwide proportions where 3,000 American lives were directly lost, and [4,488 more killed](#) in Iraq -- and over [100,000](#) additional war deaths -- as a result of it. It makes their advice to Mitt Romney to create a political issue of the Benghazi consulate attack all the more pathetic and empty.)

But wait, don't stop taking notes yet. The Romney campaign doesn't just have all these Bush alumni advising on foreign policy... but counseling domestic policy, as well.

After all, Mitt Romney's [economic advisers](#) include:

Glenn Hubbard, chairman of Mr. Bush's Council of Economic Advisers. (How'd that advice work out?) And an architect of the Bush-era tax cuts, which led to the \$1.3 trillion budget deficit.

N. Gregory Mankiw was George Bush's main economic adviser from 2003 to 2005.

Even on judicial issues, the Romney list of [Judicial Advisers](#) -- chaired by Robert Bork, the divisive, partisan, failed Supreme Court nominee -- has at least 10 lawyers related to the Bush administration Justice Department.

These include [Steven Bradbury](#), who as head of the Office of Legal Counsel, infamously signed three memos giving Mr. Bush the opinion that waterboarding torture was legal.

Mitt Romney's staff of education advisers [once included](#) Margaret Spellings, George Bush's secretary of education.

In fact, two of Mitt Romney's top political strategists, Russ Schriefer and Stuart Stevens, both come from the Bush-Cheney campaigns. As does Romney campaign adviser Kevin Madden, who was also spokesman for the Bush Justice Department.

So, there you have it. What the president should have said. The deeper answer to Susan Katz's "fear" about whether the Romney campaign is too heavily tied to the failings and missteps of the Bush administration.

As you see, she has nothing to fear.

No, indeed. She has everything to fear.