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HUFF POST POLITICS

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Romney vs. Reagan

Yesterday, Republican Presidential hopeful Mitt Romney [delivered](#) a major foreign policy speech charging President Barack Obama with a weak and bumbling record. Although Romney emphasized his differences with his opponent on global security challenges, his criticisms highlighted the contradictions within his own foreign policy platform.

Romney [continues](#) to [hammer](#) Obama's [mishandling](#) of the assaults on U.S. [diplomatic posts](#) across the Muslim World, and the administration's [alleged cover-up of events in Libya](#). Yet, Romney hasn't explained how he would have handled Middle East policy differently. Indeed, U.S. policy in the Middle East has been a [bipartisan failure](#). Romney points to Ronald Reagan's foreign policy as his guiding light, but Romney could have leveled similar criticisms against the Republican icon for the handling of the [1983 attacks](#) in Beirut, Lebanon, against the U.S. Embassy and U.S. Marine Corps barracks -- the most visible and vulnerable symbols of American power.

Nearly three decades ago, in support of Lebanon's minority Christian government, President Reagan inserted U.S. forces into that country's multi-sided civil war, a conflict that at one point involved 25 different armed factions. Unsurprisingly, once Washington joined Lebanon's civil conflict, America became the natural enemy of its ally's opponents. In March 1983, Muslim and Druze forces attacked U.S. troops; in April, a car bomb destroyed the U.S. Embassy, killing 17 Americans. Adopting Romney's recommended approach of strong American leadership and a muscular foreign policy, Reagan retaliated. He [expanded](#) America's military presence, [attacked](#) artillery batteries outside Beirut, and initiated a naval bombardment of Muslim and Druze positions -- not to defend American personnel under attack, but in support of the operations of Lebanese Army units.

On October 23, Islamist radicals struck the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut, killing 241 American Marines, soldiers, and sailors. Although Reagan initially responded with the typical American rhetoric of resolve and launched additional air and naval strikes, eventually he recognized that the deployment of U.S. troops were neither protecting vital American interests nor preserving peace in the region, a transformation reflected in his diary. In February 1984 Reagan finally redeployed U.S. Marines to ships off-shore, ending one of Washington's least productive and most pointless military interventions.

Fast forward to today. President Barack Obama's decision to intervene last year in the Libyan civil injected America into an already unstable region. A year later, [reports suggest](#) that operatives linked to al Qaeda remain active. Armed militias have detained

thousands of former [regime loyalists](#) and engaged in [widespread torture](#). The country's [instability](#) has since [spilled](#) into neighboring [states](#). Moreover, Obama's unilateral decision to intervene [contravened](#) the Constitution and congressional war powers. Despite overthrowing a dictator, the fact that our ambassador still became a target only reinforces the argument that Washington should not have intervened where America had no vital interests at stake.

But rather than criticize Obama for a military action that advanced no important strategic interests and demonstrated the limitations of American leadership, Romney -- perplexingly -- is advocating an even more interventionist foreign policy. No wonder a [Pew Research Center Poll](#) last month found that the public believes Obama outstrips Romney [in terms of](#) "good judgment in a crisis" and "making wise decisions in foreign policy." Just as Romney correctly observed that "[hope is not a strategy](#)," neither is Romney's appeal to strength, manliness, and other nebulous traits. As *Washington Times* reporter Stephen Dinan recently [pointed out](#) about Romney, "[E]ven some Republicans have questioned how his tougher talk translates into specific policies."

As they do with Obama, [journalists](#) and [news anchors](#) should press Romney to provide foreign policy specifics beyond relentless fist pumps and chest thumping. Voters at campaign rallies and those in the American news media should ask Romney probing questions about his international plans for the most important job in the land, such as:

- When his campaign claims "we need to shape world events," does that mean a President Romney would intervene more often militarily overseas? If so, how would Romney increase public support for risking American lives for at most peripheral interests?
- With the economy and the deficit the top issues for most Americans, how much more taxpayer dollars would Romney spend on military and economic assistance to foreign countries?
- Given America's fiscal crisis -- and that [a majority](#) of Americans favor cutting military outlays as a way to reduce the deficit -- where would Romney find the money to spend four percent of GDP on military spending -- an increase of \$2 trillion? How would he pay for that *and* close America's budget deficit?

Romney talks as if he plans to fix every problem around the world. Yet precisely how that would be possible -- and how much he would spend in both lives and treasure -- remains unexplained. Over 11 years of perpetual war and drone attacks across Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, Yemen and Somalia have demonstrated that many of the world's most pressing problems cannot be resolved militarily.

No matter how much Romney bloviates, as president he would have no more success than Obama in forcing the rest of the world to do as Washington dictates. The more Romney talks about foreign policy, the more he illustrates that he is tone-deaf about international affairs. After all, the problem for America is that it intervenes around the world too much, not too little.

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