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The World According to Mitt

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For his 2012 campaign, Mitt Romney has appropriated Henry Luce's famous phrase in calling for the twenty-first century to be "an American Century." This slogan is plastered all over his website, and he has referred to it often in speeches. In his major foreign-policy [address](#) [3] last October at the Citadel, Romney said:

I am guided by one overwhelming conviction and passion: This century must be an American Century. In an American Century, America has the strongest economy and the strongest military in the world. In an American Century, America leads the free world and the free world leads the entire world.

Romney's embrace of the American Century idea as the guiding theme of his foreign policy represents one of the more striking elements that emerges from an expansive review of his campaign statements on U.S. defense policy and international relations. His vision puts the necessity for American power—especially military power—at its core. As described on his [website](#) [4], "The unifying thread of his national security strategy is American strength. When America is strong, the world is safer."

In talking about the use of force on behalf of American values, Romney often sounds a bit like George W. Bush. As he said in a [speech](#) [5] last fall to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, "I start with the fundamental conviction that America is the greatest nation in the history of the world and a force for good." Like other GOP candidates, Romney aggressively embraces the concept of American exceptionalism. At the Citadel, he said: "I believe we are an exceptional country with a unique destiny and role in the world." This role is "that of a great champion of human dignity and human freedom."

Romney has regularly blasted President Obama for "hollowing" out America's defense forces. In contrast, Romney says, he would strengthen U.S. military capabilities by [adding](#) [6] one hundred thousand new active-duty military troops; increasing navy shipbuilding from nine to fifteen ships per year; committing to "a robust, multi-layered national ballistic-missile defense system to deter and defend against nuclear attacks on our homeland and our allies"; and modernizing the "aging inventories" of all three military services.

All this will not be cheap. Romney has [pledged](#) [7] to set funding for “core” defense—that is, not including ongoing wars—at a “floor of 4 percent of GDP.” He has given no indication as to when this goal might be reached, and one of his spokesmen described the number as a “[target](#) [8].” If taken literally, N’s Chris Preble has [calculated](#) [9] that based on OMB projections, at these levels the Pentagon would spend an average of \$744.8 billion per year over the next ten years—44 percent higher than Obama’s projected budgets and 59 percent higher than under the sequestration scheduled to take effect in December.

On the question of when and where America ought to use military force, Romney consistently has staked out more hawkish positions than the Obama administration, though his stances at times have been somewhat difficult to pin down:

- On Afghanistan, Romney has repeatedly attacked Obama for setting an “arbitrary timetable” for withdrawing U.S. troops. He [argues](#) [10] that Obama’s proposed schedule has “no military rationale” and raises questions about whether the timing is “politically inspired.” While this suggests he would keep troops in Afghanistan longer, he has not actually said so. He has promised instead to conduct a full review of Afghan policy and announced that under his leadership, withdrawal “will be based on conditions on the ground as assessed by our military commanders.”
- On Iraq, he [criticized](#) [11] Obama’s decision to withdraw all U.S. troops by the end of 2011 as an “astonishing failure” that “put at risk the victories that were won through the blood and sacrifice of thousands of American men and women.” In an Dec. 18 [interview](#) [12], he said that the United States should have left from ten thousand to thirty thousand personnel there to bolster the Iraqis’ own military capabilities. (It is unclear whether he believes we should have done so even in the absence of a status-of-forces agreement to protect the immunity of U.S. soldiers.)
- On Libya, Romney supported the NATO intervention but criticized Obama for its handling. In his VFW [speech](#) [13], he said the U.S. involvement “was marked by inadequate clarity of purpose before we began the mission, mission muddle during the operation, and ongoing confusion as to our role in the future.”
- On Syria, he has been generally quiet but has grown more hawkish as time passes. Like most U.S. politicians, he called for isolating and eventually removing the Assad regime, and he advocated aggressive sanctions through the UN Security Council. Last week, he went one step further, issuing a [statement](#) [14] saying “we should work with partners to arm the opposition so they can defend themselves.”

During the primary campaign, the U.S.-Israeli relationship was probably the single issue on which the Republican challengers were most united in their

criticism of President Obama. Romney [repeatedly excoriated](#) ^[15] Obama for “[throwing] Israel under the bus.” He particularly blasted Obama’s effort to persuade Israel to cease construction of new West Bank settlements. He also echoed Benjamin Netanyahu in labeling any Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement based on the 1967 borders “[indefensible](#)” ^[16].

Romney repeatedly has stressed that he would follow Israel’s lead. In a [speech](#) ^[17] to the AIPAC Policy Conference, he said of himself and Netanyahu: “In a Romney administration, there will be no gap between our nations or between our leaders.” In an [interview](#) ^[18] with an Israeli newspaper, he elaborated by saying, “I believe that the role of an ally is to stand behind your friends and let them speak for themselves.” He added: “The actions that I will take will be actions recommended and supported by Israeli leaders.”

One of Romney’s [favorite campaign lines](#) ^[19] has been: “We must not allow Iran to have a nuclear weapon. . . . If I am president, that will not happen. If we reelect Barack Obama, it will happen.” Yet despite Romney’s relentless criticism of Obama on this issue, it isn’t clear what he would do differently. In a *Washington Post* [op-ed](#) ^[20] in March, he said he would “press for ever-tightening sanctions, acting with other countries if we can but alone if we must.” Romney also contends that the key to solving the issue is [conveying](#) ^[21] to Iran “that a military option to deal with their nuclear program remains on the table.” This is to be accomplished through both increased military aid to Israel and through “restoring the regular presence of aircraft carrier groups in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf region.” He also attacked Obama for failing to support the Iranian Green Movement in 2009.

Even before Romney’s recent [remarks](#) ^[22] that Russia is America’s “number one geopolitical foe,” he was well known for taking strident rhetorical positions against Moscow. During the summer of 2010, he was one of the first conservatives to take the lead in [vocally opposing](#) ^[23] the New START agreement on nuclear reductions, a position he has maintained ever since. He likewise blasted the Obama administration for abandoning the Bush-era plans for missile-defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic in favor of the Phased Adaptive Approach. Romney repeatedly characterizes these and other gestures as unilateral “concessions” for which the United States got nothing from Russia in return. He has called Obama’s broader “reset” policy a failure. As he [wrote](#) ^[24] in *Foreign Policy* online, “For three years, the sum total of President Obama’s policy toward Russia has been: ‘We give, Russia gets.’”

Romney also criticizes Russia’s human-rights record. He writes on his [website](#) ^[25], “A Romney administration will be forthright in confronting the Russian government over its authoritarian practices. Mitt Romney will support measures to increase the flow of information into Russia that highlights the virtues of free elections, free speech, economic opportunity, and a government free of corruption.”

His treatment of China follows along similar lines. His proposed military buildup is in large part designed to counteract China's rising power. As he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, he [would](#) ^[26] "reverse the Obama administration's defense cuts and maintain a strong military presence in the Pacific." Romney also promised to confront China on economic issues, most notably by issuing this pledge: "On day one of my presidency I will designate it a currency manipulator and take appropriate counteraction." He [suggests](#) ^[27] this "counteraction" would consist of sanctioning China if it does not move to float its currency.

As with Russia, Romney also emphasizes China's human-rights record. As he writes on his [website](#) ^[28], "The United States has an important role to play in encouraging the evolution of China toward a more politically open and democratic order." He adds: "A Romney administration will vigorously support and engage civil society groups within China that are promoting democratic reform, anti-corruption efforts, religious freedom, and women's and minority rights."

In short, Romney has made it clear that he favors a more hawkish foreign policy that spends more on defense and speaks out louder in defense of American values than the Obama administration has. However, within this general framework, he has been careful not to tie himself down too closely to specific positions. The charitable interpretation is that Romney is intent on preserving maximum flexibility for himself should he be elected president in November; the uncharitable one is that he wants to continue hammering Obama in general terms on foreign policy while limiting the number of politically difficult stances he has to take.

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