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GOP National Security and Foreign Policy Debate: What to Ask the Candidates

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The economy is likely to dominate next year's presidential race, so it is surprising that Republicans would choose to conduct two debates focused on foreign policy in the span of 10 days. The first, co-hosted by CBS News and *National Journal*, was held last Saturday evening. ([CBS apparently thought most people had better things to do; they preempted the final 30 minutes with an NCIS rerun](#) [3]). CNN, no doubt, hopes that the sequel, to be held Tuesday, November 22, will draw a wider audience.

I wonder if the RNC hopes that it doesn't. In fact, there are many reasons why GOP leaders would want to get the whole subject of foreign policy and national security out of the way. Or, at least, well before next year. Let Michele Bachmann and Rick Santorum wax poetic about the wisdom of waterboarding, and let them do it after television viewers have stopped watching. Better to save the talk of joblessness and massive federal debt for the main event with President Obama, when tens of millions of Americans, including many independents and undecided voters, might actually rely on the debates to inform their choices. ([Unlikely, I know](#) [4], but hope springs eternal.)

Foreign policy blunders have cost the GOP votes in three of the last four elections (it was a non-factor in 2010). Once trusted by the electorate as the voice of prudence and reason when it came to diplomacy and the use of force, the Republican brand has been sullied by the war in Iraq, and the quagmire in Afghanistan.

One might think that the party has learned its lessons, and that those aspiring to carry the GOP banner into next year's elections would be determined to draw distinctions between themselves and the recent past.

Judging from last Saturday's debate, they haven't. The answers provided by the presumptive front-runner, Mitt Romney, and his leading challengers, Herman Cain and Newt Gingrich, reveal a reflexive commitment to the status quo, and an unwillingness to revisit the rationales for war with Iraq, or for nation-building in Afghanistan. They hinted

at expanding the U.S. military's roles and missions, to include possible conflict with Iran. They continued to speak of a "war on terror." And they struggled to draw distinctions between themselves and President Obama, at times criticizing him for doing too little, other times for doing too much.

In advance of last week's debate, [several](#) [5] [bloggers](#) [6] suggested some questions. Some of these made it to prime time. However, two big sets of questions—one pertaining to the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, the other related to the costs of our foreign policies—remain unexplored. I hope that the questioners in next week's debate, or perhaps the other candidates, would try to get some answers. Be sure to follow me on Twitter ([@capreble](#) [7]) for a conversation during the debate. Justin Logan will also be [live blogging](#) [8] the event over at RealClearWorld. In the meantime, here are some questions I would like answered:

Iraq, Afghanistan, and Nation-Building: Knowing what you know now, was it a mistake for the United States to have invaded Iraq in March 2003? Did any of you speak out against the war before it started? If you did not, but now have doubts, why should Americans trust you to exercise good judgment as president if you failed to do so when in a position of power and influence in late 2002 and early 2003? Did President Bush make a mistake when he negotiated an agreement with the Iraqis to remove all forces by the end of 2011? Do you believe that U.S. troops should have remained in Iraq even if the Iraqi government refused to extend them conventional legal protections that we enjoy in other countries, including the right to be tried in U.S. courts? What lessons have you taken away from the war, and how would they inform your conduct of foreign policy as president?

We now have nearly 100,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, and we will spend at least \$110 billion this year. Is that too much or too little? What criteria do you use for assessing the costs and benefits of military operations there, as opposed to the range of other counterterrorism missions being conducted elsewhere around the world? Should we be planning to conduct many more Iraq- and Afghanistan-style missions, a decade or more of 100,000+ U.S. troops on the ground, at a cost of \$100+ billion a year? Or would you employ the U.S. military in a different way, relying less on ground troops, the Army and Marine Corps, but perhaps bringing power from the sea and air when required?

Military Spending: What we spend on our military is the primary measure of the costs of our foreign policy. With respect to military spending, the Pentagon's base budget -- excluding the costs of the wars -- has grown by over \$1 trillion since 9/11. This year, in 2011, U.S. taxpayers will spend more on national security (in real, inflation-adjusted dollars) than at any time since the end of World War II. Is this too much? How much is enough? By some estimates, Governor Romney's plan would add \$2 trillion in military spending over the next decade. Do the other candidates agree that we should increase military spending by that amount, or should we be spending even more? Or less?

If you agree that we should spend more, what additional responsibilities should the U.S. military take on? If you think we should spend less, what missions can it afford to shift to

others? Should the U.S. military be responsible for defending other countries that could defend themselves? Should Americans be willing to spend five or ten times as much on the military as do people in other wealthy countries? The United States has formal security relationships with dozens of countries around the world. Many of these date back to the Cold War. Have these become, as Hillary Clinton says, embedded in our DNA? Would you be willing to revisit any of these alliances?