



Mitt Romney vs. Barack Obama: Hawk vs. Hawk

By BENJAMIN H. FRIEDMAN - October 26, 2012

Rhetorically, Monday's foreign policy debate was peaceful. President Barack Obama kept saying that it's time to stop nation-building abroad and do it here instead. Mitt Romney used the words peace or peaceful a dozen times. For doves like me, this Kumbaya chorus was rare good news. The candidates are not saying these things haphazardly; they are reading polls. American swing voters, they have noticed, are tired of war.

The bad news for peace is that each candidate's position doesn't match his rhetoric—a point I'll belabor a bit, given that Republican talking points make the president a cowering surrenderer. Obama, as Dick Cheney gleefully notes, has mostly continued the Bush administration's counterterrorism policies. That goes for National Security Agency surveillance (legalized with Senator Obama's vote); the Guantanamo Bay prison (congressional opposition killed his efforts to close it and end the military tribunals); the PATRIOT Act; the state secrets doctrine; unwillingness to prosecute anyone for killing prisoners in Iraq and Afghanistan seemingly with unsanctioned interrogation methods; and more.

None of that came up in the debate. The candidates did discuss drone strikes, which this administration has massively increased. But Romney merely expressed enthusiasm for them. Neither he nor moderator Bob Schieffer mentioned that this White House has adopted the Bush administration's claim that the 2001 authorization of military force against the organizers of the September 11 attacks and those who harbored them allows the U.S. military to kill or indefinitely detain anyone the president wants, including American citizens. Also unmentioned: this administration's refusal to release legal documents explaining how it decides who it can so target; the National Defense Authorization Act, passed last December, which affirms those claims; and the Attorney General's response to complaints that they violate U.S. citizens' due process rights—that executive branch deliberations alone satisfy those requirements.

Senior Obama campaign adviser Robert Gibbs did comment on these matters after the October 16 debate. When asked by camera-wielding activists/journalists what gave this

administration the right to kill Abdulrahman al-Awlaki—a 16 year-old U.S. citizen not accused of terrorism, who had the misfortune of traveling to Yemen to find his father Anwar, the alleged al Qaeda leader killed in another drone strike later the same month—Gibbs repeatedly dodged the question and then answered with incoherent bluster, "I would suggest that you should have a far more responsible father if they are truly concerned about the well being of their children."

The foreign policy debate, like the other debates, included no debate about last year's U.S. war in Libya, though of course the laboriously-created controversy about the murder of Ambassador Christopher Stevens in Benghazi in September received ample time from the candidates. Obama, ignoring everything he said when he launched the war, pretended the goal was always to overthrow Muammar Qadhafi. No one asked whether Qadhafi's torture and murder at the hands of the Libyan rebels we backed undermined one of the administration's main arguments for war: It would convince other Middle-Eastern dictators to peacefully hand over power to democratic protestors or rebels. Nor did Romney, who supported the war, complain that the administration's other main rationales for it—the creation of liberal democracy and the prevention of genocidal killing—also look quite dubious in retrospect.

On the Iraq War, Obama reminded us in the debate that he opposed the war and he withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq (on a schedule negotiated by the Bush administration). Romney seems to think we should have kept them there. But Romney did not say that Obama's secretary of defense, Leon Panetta, also believes that the war was "worth it." Obama also claimed that we are now "able transition out of Afghanistan." No one pointed out that his current plans do not call for fully exploiting that ability. We plan to leave tens of thousands of U.S. troops there for some sort of nation building.

Romney's response to all this, of course, is to call the president weak and apologetic, adopt the mostly same policies, but improve their modifiers. He wants to be closer to Israel, tougher on Iran, and to more responsibly leave Afghanistan. He is against fighting in Syria's civil war, but wants to arm and better organize the rebels. I could go on to defense policy, homeland security, China, and allies but the picture is basically the same: hawk versus somewhat more tough-talking hawk.

What should we make of this gap between rhetoric and reality? Probably two things. First, policy is a lagging indicator of politics, so U.S. foreign policy will likely become more peaceful in the near future. Like Obama, Romney, neoconservative advisers notwithstanding, is unlikely to start any new major wars—including in Iran. Even his promise to boost military spending is dubious given fiscal reality and public opinion. Second, because the public has few complaints about costless militarism—drone strikes, special operations, and even limited wars, as in Libya—it is unlikely to abate. The same goes for our alliances and far-flung garrisons, whose costs are mostly hidden. So welcome to the era of the Iraq syndrome and whimsical war. One of these days maybe we'll debate it.