



Less Focus on Afghan War in 2012 Election

Sean Maroney - October 24, 2012

The foreign policy debate between President Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney was their first opportunity to challenge each other directly on the way forward in Afghanistan.

Four years ago, the Afghan war played a role in the U.S. presidential election. Then-Senator Barack Obama even visited Afghanistan during the campaign.

"I think one of the biggest mistakes we have made strategically after 9/11 was to fail to finish the job here, focus our attention here," said Obama.

But now, as this year's election approaches, major polls show U.S. voters are worried more about the economy than one of their country's longest wars.

The CATO Institute's Malou Innocent says it was only a matter of time before Americans turned their focus back toward home.

"I think the war fatigue factors in tremendously to the extent to which Americans really just do not care to what happens abroad," said Innocent.

With thousands of U.S. troops dead or injured and billions of dollars spent in a tough economy, Innocent says it's hard for Americans to see tangible gains from the conflict.

As recently as March, half of Americans polled said they want the U.S. to withdraw troops from Afghanistan faster.

In their foreign policy debate, President Obama and challenger Mitt Romney agreed on withdrawing combat forces.

"We're now able to transition out of Afghanistan in a responsible way, making sure that

Afghans take responsibility for their own security," said President Obama.

"We don't want another Iraq. We don't want another Afghanistan. That's not the right course for us," said Romney.

Political analyst Robert Guttman says the candidates are playing off of public sentiment.

"They both want to get out of Afghanistan. I think that Romney could have said let us get out now," said Guttman.

Many analysts say the Afghan government is not ready to take over security now or even in 2014 when foreign combat troops are scheduled to leave. But Innocent says this does not matter; the American public has again turned away from Afghanistan. She says Americans did this for the first time during the Iraq war.

"What was once 'The Good War' became 'The Forgotten War,' then became 'The Good War' and now once again is 'The Forgotten War,'" she said.

In the meantime, U.S. troops continue to cycle in and out of Afghanistan, while Washington and Kabul hammer out details for continued U.S. aid through at least 2024.