

# The Washington Times

## **Analysts: Romney knowledgeable, less hawkish at presidential debate**

By Guy Taylor - 10/23/2012

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Mitt Romney passed the sniff test on foreign policy knowledge in Monday night's debate, according to foreign policy analysts on both sides of the aisle, although most said the Republican nominee also clearly backed off the previously hawkish posture he had embraced on the campaign trail.

Consensus among many observers was that the outcome was either a tie, or that President Obama carried a slight edge and appeared more confident — as is traditionally the case for incumbents who've had four years to see the world from the Oval Office.

"I think Obama won because he projected, he seemed more comfortable, and I think that demonstrates the power of experience in incumbency when it comes to foreign policy," said Brian Katulis, a senior fellow focusing on the Middle East and South Asia at the left-leaning Center for American Progress.

Alternatively, Michael Rubin, a resident Middle East scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, said Mr. Romney triumphed on a key point even standing presidents have been known to bungle.

"What Romney needed to do was display basic competence on foreign policy," Mr. Rubin said. "You can agree with Romney or you can disagree, but he did show he's master of his game."

"There weren't any gaffes like Gerald Ford saying Poland was a free country," Mr. Rubin said, in reference to President Ford's famous flub during a 1976 debate with Jimmy Carter.

Others, however, were quick to observe Mr. Romney's apparent shift toward the center on key foreign policy issues.

The former Massachusetts governor delivered several powerful statements — asserting that America's "purpose is to make sure the world is more peaceful" and that doing so "requires for us to be strong." But he put the brakes on previous statements about how vital a role the military must play in order to achieve such strength.

“It was sort of ‘etch a sketch’ Mitt,” said Justin Logan, director of foreign policy at the Cato Institute in Washington. “I thought he was really bobbing and weaving, and I don’t think his neoconservative supporters were very happy with that.”

With regard to the Middle East, when Mr. Romney “said that ‘we can’t kill our way out of this mess,’ it seemed to me that he was trying to deflate this idea that he’s George W. Bush redux,” Mr. Logan said.

Some were left struggling to see any clear light between Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama on specifics.

“What was surprising to me was that on most of the critical issues, the bottom lines were basically the same,” said P.J. Crowley, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs until last year.

“There were several instances where Romney gave a detailed explanation of Obama’s foreign policy,” said Mr. Crowley, now a fellow at George Washington University.

“They agreed that this was not the time for a U.S. military intervention in Syria, they agreed on the timeline of departure for U.S. forces from Afghanistan, [and] they agreed on the bottom line regarding Iran,” he said.

Such congruence could likely be credited to a careful strategy employed by Mr. Romney, added Clifford D. May, president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a conservative policy shop in Washington.

“He didn’t diverge terribly far from Obama on a lot of the issues and that may have been useful from the point of view of political calculation,” Mr. May said. “It would have been difficult for him to take a very different view from Obama and not have the president make him look like an extremist.”

“I think there are a lot of people on the right who would have been geared up to hear a very clear message from Romney, that he was not going to let America’s enemies prevail, that he was going to be more like Roosevelt and Churchill, but now I don’t think any of them are going to say, ‘Gee, I’m so disappointed that I’m not going to vote for him.’ “

The calculation likely also factored into the seemingly soft tone Mr. Romney took toward Mr. Obama on last month’s terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya, where Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans were killed.

Recent weeks saw Republican lawmakers dog Mr. Obama over his handling of security in Libya. And initially, Mr. Romney had also leveled harsh criticism toward the administration over the slowness with which officials had

acknowledged the Benghazi attack was premeditated and not spawned by a protest against an anti-Islam YouTube video.

Yes the incident was scarcely mentioned on Monday night. “Romney got burned once for being accused of playing politics with the incident in Libya, and I don’t think he wanted to risk doing it again,” Mr. Rubin said.

On Syria, close observers felt neither candidate presented a serious plan toward resolving the bloody civil war that threatens to destabilize the entire Middle East.

“In Obama’s case, this is quite disheartening because he’s been following the situation and been involved in it from the beginning,” said Ammar Abdulhamid, a fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. “It’s as if he’s putting together a eulogy rather than a policy.”

While Mr. Abdulhamid credited Mr. Romney with doing “some good posturing” on Syria policy, he added that it was “not clear if Romney is going to bring a coherent policy other than saying we’ll throw some weapons at the problem and hopefully it will solve itself.”

But when it came to big-picture narratives, at least one analyst said Mr. Romney carried the day.

“He had a larger and more coherent vision of the future and of America’s role in the world,” Mr. May said. “President Obama kept painting a very rosy picture of the world situation and how it’s evolved over the last four years.”