

Rumors of Wars

By [Philip Girdi](#)

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The presidential candidates' failure to have a serious discussion about Afghanistan and America's other ongoing wars has been noted by many. Mitt Romney did not mention Afghanistan at all in his acceptance address. In his defense, he [cited](#) a speech made to the American Legion on the night before his appearance in Tampa. "The president was also invited to the American Legion and he was too busy to go. It was during my convention. I went to the American Legion, described my views with regards to our military, my commitment to our military, my commitment to our men and women in uniform."

Paul Ryan also pitched in to defend the Afghanistan omission, [telling](#) Charlie Rose on Sept. 4 that Romney "repeatedly" speaks about Afghanistan, expressing gratitude for the "sacrifice of our troops" and striving for "peace through strength." He also noted that he had spoken about veterans in his own convention speech, "I talked about veterans and what they've done for our country." The remainder of the Ryan interview, including a series of foreign policy bromides bereft of any content, was largely incoherent, concluding with a comment that the President Romney position on Afghanistan would include making "an assessment" through consulting with "our generals" on how to manage security arrangements both preceding and after 2014.

Obama did at least [mention](#) Afghanistan, dissing the Republicans with an argument that was used against him in 2008, "My opponent and his running mate are new to foreign policy." He explained further, "but from all that we've seen and heard, they want to take us back to an era of blustering and blundering that cost America so dearly. After all, you don't call Russia our number one enemy — not al-Qaeda, Russia — unless you're still stuck in a Cold War mind warp. You might not be ready for diplomacy with Beijing if you can't visit the Olympics without insulting our closest ally. My opponent said it was 'tragic' to end the war in Iraq, and he won't tell us how he'll end the war in Afghanistan. I have, and I will."

Romney and Ryan should perhaps consider that telling veterans' groups of their respect for American soldiers is not exactly a foreign policy, while listening to the generals is a formula for Vietnam *redux* or maybe even *Apocalypse Now*. Obama for his part wants to tell us about what dangerous things the Republicans might do rather than explaining what he is doing and why. "Osama is dead" only buys so much favorable press, and the president fails to grasp that his softer defense policy has replaced several biggish wars with a whole bunch of possibly avoidable smaller conflicts. But what is missing from both sides is any genuine consideration of the underlying premise, whether the United States is actually responding to real threats and whether the ruinously expensive wars actually make the United States safer.

If there were to be a serious consideration of foreign policy it has to deal primarily with war and impending wars because they have the potential to bring about a radical realignment of

the international order. It should probably begin with the major war that the United States is still fighting and the one it has just concluded, then moving on to the minor conflicts, continuing with an assessment of current threats, and concluding with a consideration of over-the-horizon developments.

Afghanistan, President Obama's "good war" and a war that the GOP would prefer to forget, takes center stage because it continues to consume American lives and resources and it is rapidly developing into a bottomless pit into which billions of dollars will pour without any tangible gains. It would be good to hear an honest assessment from the president, noting that the training program is bedeviled by increasing "green on blue" violence that is threatening to derail the handover to Afghan forces, and confronting honestly the problem of massive corruption and drug trafficking that mean that no nation building can be successful. Every American who follows the news knows that to be true, so why shouldn't the president say it, abandoning any pretense of fudging his way through another year and then escaping shortly before the point where it is necessary to send in helicopters to take survivors off the roof of an American Embassy under siege. From the Republicans, it would be interesting to learn what exactly they expect the generals to tell them that would be (a) credible or (b) would alter the developing narrative about overwhelming corruption, Afghan security forces incompetence, and lack of any exit strategy or endgame. Both Republicans and Democrats should explain why leaving in 2014 will be any more "victorious" or successful than leaving tomorrow, as Clint Eastwood somewhat whimsically suggested.

And then there is the *postmortem* on the recent big war just completed. Have I heard President Obama or Mitt Romney admit that Iraq was a massive failure at a cost of nearly 6,000 American lives and possibly trillions of dollars, producing an unstable yet fundamentally autocratic regime that cannot maintain security and is leaning politically toward Iran? Again, most Americans have figured it out, so why can't the politicians say it, respond to it, and learn something from it?

And then there is the global war on terror, which includes all the little wars and "constabulary actions" that have sprung up in places like Yemen, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Uganda, Kenya, Mauritania, Mali, Colombia, the Philippines, and Pakistan. Do any of those places threaten the security of the United States? I think not, with the possible exception of Pakistan, which is in crisis precisely because of the American intervention in the region. Shouldn't someone be explaining exactly why humanitarian interventionism should be a driver of U.S. foreign policy or, alternatively, why Washington should be using armed force as a first option in situations where there is no demonstrable threat? Shouldn't someone at least make an effort to justify drone warfare? Or extrajudicial killing of U.S. citizens overseas as a response to terrorism?

President Obama has rightly noted that the Romney's campaign's general belligerency guarantees poor relations with Russia and China, two key competitors. But should the discussion stop there? Obama has also been sharply critical of both countries and he should explain how he believes that the State Department is supporting American interests in getting involved in their internal politics. Romney should try to explain why Russia is "public enemy number one" and exactly how he would actually address China's currency manipulation short of taking steps that would turn a major trading partner and holder of U.S. Treasury notes into an enemy.

And then there is Iran, the now, tomorrow and over the horizon threat all rolled into one. The debate should be over what the actual U.S. interests are and are together with a consideration

of what steps should be taken to resolve the areas of disagreement short of a war. Iraq should be held up as the model of what might happen, only worse. If Romney can make a case for attacking Iran which actually relates to American as opposed to Israeli interests he or Paul Ryan should explain what exactly it would be. Obama should be required to explain how sanctions and the negotiations that he has not seriously engaged in at any point can possibly be the key to resolving the crisis. Both Republicans and Democrats should try to explain how Iran actually threatens the United States even though it has no nuclear weapons program, has not threatened to attack anyone, and has not initiated an offensive war for at least three centuries. And they should be willing to discuss in a serious way what the possible consequences for the U.S. military, Americans traveling overseas, and also for the U.S. economy might be if a war does start.

And finally there is the cost. Someone should be explaining why the country is still involved in a hideously expensive war on terror, possibly exceeding \$1 trillion per year if state and local costs are included, when more Americans are [killed](#) annually by bee stings or falling television sets than by terrorists. Iraq might possibly cost \$5 trillion when all the accumulated debts and legacy costs are paid, a war that the Pentagon initially sold as paying for itself from oil revenue. The bill and still counting on Afghanistan is \$1 trillion. And focusing on all that money makes it easy to forget the human costs of 6,600 dead Americans, 1,500 dead NATO and "Coalition of the Willing" allied soldiers, hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqis, and tens of thousands of dead Afghans.

Jobs and the economy are rightly the focus of the upcoming election because of their immediate impact on every American, but it is also essential to address the issue of how a dysfunctional and horrifically expensive foreign and defense policy has made every American poorer and even threatened the continued existence of our republican form of government. It is a discussion that must take place even if the two major parties do their best to avoid it.

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