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Blowback and the Consequences of Obama's Foreign Policies

By Conor Friedersdorf

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The GOP won't critique his approaches. But absent a reckoning, America won't be able to weigh whether long-term costs are worth the short-term benefits.



Mitt Romney is constrained in the foreign policy critique that he can make by the Republican coalition, where outspoken hawkishness has been a theme since the September 11 terrorists attacks. But if the GOP were less slavishly beholden to the ideology of Dick Cheney and *The Weekly Standard*, its standard bearer -- or another nominee with better judgment and advisers --

would marshal a powerful argument that President Obama has done grave damage to long term American security by being short-sighted in the way that he's fought the War on Terrorism.

Various Obama administration policies have yielded benefits. But at what cost? Challengers are supposed answer that question. It's one salutary effect of elections. The loyal opposition has a powerful incentive to make sure that the citizenry is well informed about the downside of tradeoffs being made by their representatives. Alas, the GOP hasn't marshaled an adequate critique. Meanwhile, the political press mostly covers whatever arguments Republicans and Democrats are having, a tendency that effectively outsources judgment about what's important to partisans.

In this case, they've decided to argue about whether the president went on an apology tour, whether he thinks America is exceptional, and whether he leads from in front or behind. It's depressing.

So granting again that his policies have had some benefits, what costs are going unacknowledged?

Let us confront some of them.

Yes, Osama bin Laden was killed. But at what price? Jeffrey Goldberg and Marc Ambinder [report](#) that Pakistan's response to the bin Laden raid made that country less stable and its nuclear arsenal less secure. And the [fake vaccination program](#) the CIA sponsored in a failed attempt to get bin Laden family DNA is certain to make already paranoid populations in developing countries even more averse to legitimate public health programs than they already are -- a potential tragedy that also has the potential to make Americans less safe if a given disease spreads.

Yes, President Obama's drone program has killed lots of al Qaeda operatives. But at what price? The dead innocents, including dozens if not hundreds of women and children, are most worrisome. The radicalizing effect of these attacks are next. Al Qaeda uses them as a recruitment tool. Folks whose innocent children or spouses were killed by American weapons need no recruiter to radicalize them. How many Pakistanis, Yemenis, Somalis, Iraqis, and Afghans would mail anthrax to retaliate if given the opportunity? And in a world where technology is permitting fewer people to do more harm with less every year, how long till they'll possess an equivalent capability? Even anonymous officials in the Obama Administration [worry that the drone program creates more terrorists than it eliminates](#), but they aren't permitted to come forward with their concerns, partly because the president has kept even the existence of the program classified, even as he permits his chosen spokespeople to defend it in the press.

Yes, the Libyan civil war in which President Obama involved us helped topple the Gaddafi government. But at what price? Every strongman who saw the regime give up its nuclear ambitions during the Bush Administration, only to be overthrown by his successor, is that much more likely to pursue its own nuclear insurance. Inside Libya, the [conflict turned out to be](#) a humanitarian disaster. Islamist influence in the country is [on the rise](#). The conflict was [overwhelmingly unpopular among Libya's neighbors](#), who are now less favorably disposed toward NATO and the United States as a result. And the worst consequences have been in Mali,

where [spillover from the Libyan conflict](#) resulted in a coup and brutal crackdown by Islamist militias.

Yes, President Obama's [decision](#) to escalate a cyber-attack on Iran perhaps set back its nuclear program, or even delayed an Israeli strike on its facilities. But as my colleague Robert Wright [points out](#), he did so after declaring that cyber-aggression is equivalent to conventional acts of war. As Bob noted: "There are times when the exposure of hypocrisy is particularly costly. One is when you face the dawn of a new technological age and you're trying to establish rules of the road that will benefit countries like yours in particular. A reasonably effective global norm against cyber-warfare wasn't an impossible dream, but thanks to President Obama, it may be now."

Yes, President Obama's Afghan surge resulted in a Taliban weaker than it otherwise would've been. But at what price? American blood and treasure spent on objectives that weren't achieved.

There is a common thread running through these policies: the benefit is immediate, whereas many of the costs are apparent only over a longer time horizon. The blowback, the diminution of our soft power, the normalization of cyber-warfare, the precedent of ordering drones into countries with which we aren't officially at war ([sure to be cited one day by the Chinese](#)) -- all of these things and more ought to be factored into the strategic calculus, but Obama's incentives are misaligned. To once again [invoke my colleague](#), "The president can launch strikes to impede terrorism in the short run and let the blowback show up on the next president's watch. I'm not saying the calculation is always this consciously cynical, but the result can be the same even when it's not."

Shortsightedness is the defining feature of post-9/11 national security policy. It's partly a result of the same psychology that causes people to foolishly insist on certain medical procedures, the effects of which are more likely to kill you than the scary diseases that they're meant to detect. Doing nothing *seems* more risky. So we invade Iraq, roughly 5,000 of our young people are killed, many times more suffer terrible injuries or post-traumatic stress disorder, countless American families suffer, the cost of the care that we provide veterans skyrockets, the deficit grows, Iran is empowered with the death of their longtime enemy, American credibility is dealt a huge blow when we're unable to find WMDs, and countless Iraqis whose loved ones we killed hate us.

A lot of people who once supported the Iraq War now think it was a mistake. Folks who once thought it was imprudent to "do nothing" now appreciate, in that case, that doing "something" was worse.

I fear we'll look back on President Obama's policies with the same chagrin. Or perhaps we ought to do so, but we won't, because so many on the left who used to be incisive critics of short-term foreign policy thinking -- a faction once led by candidate Barack Obama -- have followed him down the rabbit hole. The GOP, whose foreign policy critique of Obama is largely shallow nonsense, isn't fulfilling the loyal opposition's role of drawing attention to the costs of Obama's policies.

So who will?

Election time is the opportunity to maximize the impact of these critiques. It is the one time when even incumbent presidents must stand before the press and the public to regularly answer detailed questions. Even Bush, who won reelection, moderated his foreign policy during his second term, partly as a result of the forceful critiques to which his actions were subject. Whereas this election is being squandered. Romney has nothing valuable to say about foreign policy. The Libertarians are ignored. The left, so vocal in its opposition to Bush, has accepted policies they once claimed to abhor because they're advanced by a man they like more, or else because few want to say anything that will jeopardize his reelection bid. Until we reckon with the costs of our current foreign policy we'll continue to pay them in full, sooner or later. But I no longer see a mechanism through which we will reckon with the costs.