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Mitt Romney's Foreign Policy: The Worst of Bush and Obama?

By Conor Friedersdorf

8/7/2012

Major differences between Democrats and Republicans become minor ones when the topic is our post-9/11 national security policies.



Four years after American voters reacted to George W. Bush's tenure by ousting Republicans from the White House, a verdict that partly reflected dissatisfaction with the GOP's foreign policy, Mitt Romney has a shot at winning. But the Republican nominee doesn't seem to realize that the Bush legacy could still hurt his chances, Ross Douthat [observes](#) in his latest column. "A

Republican candidate who won't define himself is a candidate who's easily defined as just another George W. Bush," he writes before adding a bit of advice. "Because Obama's message depends so heavily on voters' unhappy memories of the Bush era, Romney can do himself an enormous amount of good just by exploding the premise that he'll govern as 'Dubya, Part II.'"

The column has inspired a series of writers to grapple with whether a Romney Administration would in fact run the country like the Bush Administration once did, a prospect that is most alarming in the realm of foreign affairs. "Is there any reason to think that a Romney presidency will be different from George W. Bush's presidency? If so, why? In what ways?" Rod Dreher [asked](#).

It may be true that Mitt Romney has a different temperament than George W. Bush, [Daniel Larison](#) replied, that Romney is less ideological, and that he is less inclined to make decisions based on his gut. Yet "the evidence suggests that Romney's conduct in office would be very similar to Bush's," he wrote. "Romney seems more inclined to provoke other major powers than Bush, but this is a difference of degree rather than of kind. The possibility that few people are willing to imagine is that Romney's policies will be similar to Bush's on most issues (except maybe immigration), but Romney will be even worse than Bush at presenting and selling them to the public."

I don't disagree.

But most of what I've read on this subject understates the continuity there'd likely be among Bush, Obama, and Romney Administrations. Given Romney's belligerent rhetoric, his approach toward a country like Russia might well be substantially different from what we see under Obama, and I don't mean to suggest that there aren't lots of significant policies that will change.

In some areas, however, Romney may be even more like Obama than like Bush. Romney's caginess on many subjects makes everything I'm about to say speculative, but it's plausible that Romney would refrain from torture, unlike the Bush Administration; and that like the Obama Administration, he would continue killing suspected terrorists rather than capturing them; he would continue drone strikes at the Obama Administration's pace; he'd assert the right to order the extrajudicial killing of American citizens; he'd prosecute whistleblowers at the Obama pace; he'd order American troops to intervene abroad without bothering to get Congress to sign off on the mission; he'd violate the War Powers Resolution; he'd secretly okay cyber-warfare; and he would continue conducting surveillance on Americans that resembles the Obama Administration approach more than what prevailed during the Bush years.

Neither Republicans nor Democratic partisans have any incentive to acknowledge the continuities between the Bush and Obama Administrations, but there was substantial continuity despite the vast gulf in rhetoric that separated President Bush and candidate Obama. There is less substantive disagreement between President Obama and candidate Romney. So it is plausible that there would be even more continuity across their administrations, or even that a President Romney might adopt and surpass both the needless provocations of the Bush Administration and the extreme assertions of unchecked power seen under Obama.

