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Election 2012: Foreign Policy

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Distinctly Catholic

This election will not be decided on foreign policy issues. Very few elections are. This tells us more about the electorate than it does about the presidency. Most U.S. presidents spend as much if not more of their time on foreign policy concerns on a daily basis than they do on domestic issues. (Most non-U.S. heads of government have to spend a disproportionate amount of time on their relationship with the U.S. president!) Ever since the end of World War II, the U.S. role in the world is unique and often uniquely challenging.

How has Barack Obama handled those challenges? I would give him a B+. He promised to end the Iraq War, and he did. This may not feel like an achievement. The end of the Iraq War felt like Dunkerque, more of an escape than a victory. The decision to go into Iraq was a tragic mistake and getting out of there then became the least bad option. That said, Obama seems to have managed the withdrawal well, Iraq has not descended into civil war ? which is no small accomplishment ? and the U.S. no longer has a scarlet ?I? on its diplomatic forehead.

Obama has taken the fight to Al-Qaeda throughout the world. I am not a fan of drone strikes, anymore than I would have been a fan of strategic bombing in World War II. But, whereas strategic bombing did little to directly shorten the war, apart from drawing off some of the Luftwaffe from the Eastern front, the drone strikes have had an immediate effect, killing key members of Al-Qaeda and disrupting their operations. As long as there are unstable countries where terrorists can work, and as long as terrorists are committed to hiding themselves behind human shields, civilians will be killed in these strikes. But, it is quite clear that we do not intend the killing of civilians in these strikes, and while their moral and legal status is murky, as long as there are terrorists who actually do intend the murder of civilians, I think the U.S. is permitted to use methods like drones to take the fight to the terrorists.

The Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring has been widely criticized, but as often as not, the criticisms betray a partisan agenda. In Libya, Mr. Romney was against U.S. involvement before he was for it, before he was against it again, or something like that. Obama was much criticized for "leading from behind" but an actor on the world stage must know when the script requires it to stand in the wings. We let the Europeans take the lead in Libya, gave ample support, used no-fly zones to limit the effectiveness of Qaddafi's forces, and the end result was a victory for the Libyan people and by the Libyan people. Why is this important? Had the U.S. sent in ground troops, I suspect the Qaddafi regime would have seen a groundswell of support: No one likes foreigners invading their country. More importantly, something really important happened this past weekend when the Libyan people, and then their government's forces, raided the camps and the safe houses of extremists. This was huge. The war against terror will never be won until the host populations decide to throw them out. The Libyans can do what we can't without whipping up a geo-political firestorm, getting the civilians out of harm's way and arresting the extremists. This to me was a huge achievement and a complete vindication for the much-maligned "leading from behind" approach. Moderate Muslim leaders, committed to arresting extremists and terrorists, supportive of minority rights and the education of girls and women, open to all the frustrations that democracy entails, such moderate Muslims are gold. In Libya, they are also triumphant.

Conversely, the administration's unwillingness to do more about Syria is as misguided as it is disheartening. I understand that the decision to arm the rebels is a difficult one, and only those with the relevant classified information can make the call: We armed the "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and they became Al-Qaeda in the 1990s. But, a no-fly zone in regions of the country under attack by the murderous Assad regime is the kind of step, defensive in nature, that would diminish the regime's ability to kill people and allow us to show some support for, and hopefully win some chits with, the opposition. More can and should be done in Syria.

Iran. Talk about no good options. I know that I am something of a hawk. It is quite clear to me that if we could launch a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear capabilities that would blot them out for ten years, we should do so. It is not clear to me that we have the capability to achieve that kind of effect. It seems lunacy to launch an attack unless we can definitely cripple their nuclear capability: Not only would Iranians rally around the regime's flag, but we would destabilize the entire region further. The key thing I would want to know from intelligence agencies is the degree of in-fighting within the Iranian regime. There are fairly regular pieces of evidence that such in-fighting exists, and a U.S. or Israeli strike would bring that in-fighting to an end, providing a common foe for all to fight. The best hope for a peaceful resolution of the situation, and by peaceful I mean that Iran does not acquire a nuclear capability, is that the regime will consume itself with in-fighting and, like the Arab Spring, there will be a Persian Spring.

My greatest disappointment with Obama's foreign policy is tied to my greatest disappointment with his domestic policy. It is not clear that the administration has paid much attention whatsoever to Latin America and especially Mexico. Our closest neighbor to the south faces huge challenges. We can't send in the Marines "been there, done that" but there is a great deal we can do to help the Mexican government reclaim control over its judicial system, its police forces, and its jails, without which, any efforts to curtail the activities of the drug cartels will come to naught. We also can take more steps to frustrate the U.S. demand for drugs that makes the cartels so lucrative in the first place. I grew up at a time when it was no big deal if someone smoked a joint. I have become fiercely intolerant of any drug use, not because I have become a prude, but because drug use in the U.S. is directly responsible for the deaths of thousands of Mexicans and Afghans and Burmese and others. It is no skin off my nose if someone wants to get high, but no one has a right to help these cartels destroy our neighbor.

What is not clear at all in this election is what Mr. Romney would do differently. He likes to talk tough,

that's for sure, and he has displayed a penchant for talking a bit too soon. Bellicosity and trigger-happiness do not seem like the kinds of characteristics most Americans want in the Oval Office. Indeed, I suspect over the next four years, the principal challenge will be to build public support for engagement with the world, not the other way round, but the engagement that will be needed is not the 101st Airborne. I worry that a Romney administration, which appears to be dominated in its foreign policy counsels by leftovers from the Bush-Cheney-Rumsfeld years, would find it too frustrating to build such support for limited engagement and, instead, send in the troops prematurely. They did it before.

As I said at the outset, these issues and Obama's record, will probably not dominate the campaign. It is difficult to make a 30 second spot that does justice to the complexities of the Libyan situation or why, Sean Hannity notwithstanding, the ride of President Morsi could be a good thing, still less the mess in Iran. But, those of us who try and be thoughtful should give these issues some thought. Many Americans and even more Iraqis lost their lives because of the mistakes of the previous president and, indeed, our involvement in Iraq has limited our options in other countries, including Iran, for decades. On the world stage, America cannot afford more mistakes like that.

Note to Readers: Thank you so much for your kind wishes and suggested remedies for the flu. I am feeling much better this morning.

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