



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on September 28, 2012

## Advice for Mitt Romney: Cast out Neoconservative Demons

A couple of weeks ago, while on *Meet the Press*, Peggy Noonan offered some advice to Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney. Romney, she said, “has to kick away from and define himself against what happened for the eight years of George W. Bush’s presidency.” I couldn’t agree more.

As Noonan rightly observes, not only did Bush’s tenure culminate in “economic collapse;” it presided over “two long, frustrating wars that people think were not won.” Romney, Noonan insists, must resist his opponents’ efforts to depict him as determined to “bring that stuff back.” Indeed.

To hear the Republican pundits of talk radio and Fox News tell it, one could be pardoned for thinking either one of two things. One sufficiently reasonable inference we can draw is that the Bush presidency was not an unqualified betrayal of everything that these very same “conservative” pundits claim to affirm. The other — the only other — proposition left for us to conclude is that the eight years of Bush never occurred.

But the hard, ugly fact of the matter is that the Bush presidency most certainly did occur. And for as memory-impaired as Americans tend to be, they remember it.

This, though, isn’t as surprising as it may sound. In fact, with Bush supporters such as Bill Bennett — one of Noonan’s interlocutors on Sunday — rehashing the same talking points that figured so prominently for the better part of a decade, it would be surprising if Americans hadn’t yet recovered completely from their Bush fatigue.

Bennett asserted that we shouldn’t “throw out” the entirety of Bush’s presidency, for the 43rd president “did a lot of fine things.” Predictably — incredibly? — the only example of such “fine things” that Bennett offered was that of the Iraq War. “We won the war in Iraq,” he declared definitively.

Now, whether Bennett’s judgment is accurate or not is not the issue. The point is that very few Americans think that Bennett and his ilk are correct on this score. And of those who sympathize with his position, most don’t believe that the blood, time, and treasure our country invested in Iraq was worth it.

But it isn’t just Bennett who reminds voters of the Bush years. From talk radio and Fox News personalities to politicians such as John McCain, Rick Santorum, and Mitt Romney himself, Republicans, whether inadvertently or otherwise, do so as well.





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Whenever Republicans accuse President Obama of being an “appeaser” or of “leading from behind” on the world stage, they remind voters of just how belligerent Bush’s foreign policy really was.

Bear in mind, Obama was responsible for “the surge” of some 30,000 troops in Afghanistan. He deployed soldiers to Libya to assist rebels in overthrowing Moammar Gadhafi, and invaded Pakistan to have Osama bin Laden assassinated. Obama has also arranged for repeated drone attacks on al-Qaeda terrorists in this same country. In other words, Obama is no dove. He could never credibly be mistaken for a pacifist or even a non-interventionist.

Republicans know this. While they blast him for being weak on foreign policy, they also describe his policies as being a continuation of those of Bush! They further concede that Obama is not an “appeaser” when they blast him for deliberately revealing to the media such national security related secrets as the drone attacks that he has authorized.

When Republicans say that Obama is weak on national defense and foreign policy, what they can all too easily be interpreted as saying is that they do indeed want to “bring that stuff back” from the Bush years, to use Noonan’s words. Actually, if Obama’s policies are continuous with those of Bush, but Obama is too weak, then it would appear that Republicans want an agenda that is more aggressive than Bush’s.

This is all worth bringing up. Yet it is especially worthwhile doing so in the immediate aftermath of the American embassy attack that unfolded on our second 9/11 in Libya. This latest event has thrust the issue of foreign policy to the forefront of an election season that has thus far involved relatively little talk of anything other than the economy. Romney has come out forcefully against Obama’s response, in so many words repeating the Republican refrain of weakness against the latter. Romney has been no less forceful in condemning the murderous rioters who stormed the embassy.

As long as both campaigns remain focused on domestic considerations, chances are good that the Romney family will be moving into the White House at the beginning of next year. Even foreign policy discussions don’t have to be excluded from the Romney agenda — as long as the former Massachusetts governor focuses our attention upon Obama’s failed promises in this arena.

But if Romney insists on promoting his current strategy of depicting Obama as weak and timid with respect to America’s relations with the Middle East, then he supplies the president with a golden opportunity to invoke the specter of George W. Bush’s America. And this is just what Obama did this past Sunday, September 23.

During a *60 Minutes* interview, Obama touched upon a topic that, if pursued, could very well hand him an election victory come November. In response to Romney’s objections against his approach to Syria and Iran, the president responded simply: If Romney “is suggesting that we should start another war,” Obama said, “he should say so.”

This is the last thing that any Republican should want. A Republican that isn’t a neoconservative ideologue will not want for Americans to be reminded of President Bush’s foreign policy. In fact, he will want nothing more than for his compatriots to forget all about Bush’s designs to remake the Islamic world in the image of some democratic ideal.

The problem is that the neoconservative foreign policy that dominated during Bush’s two terms in office isn’t just one policy option among others. It is the cornerstone of neoconservative ideology. And, in spite of its wild unpopularity with the American electorate, neoconservative ideology remains the ideology of the Republican Party.



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So, while Republicans will stop at nothing to compromise on virtually every conceivable issue, they resolutely refuse to compromise on the one issue — foreign policy — that cost them both chambers of Congress in '06, and the presidency in '08. Romney should avoid like the plague the drawing of comparisons between Bush and himself.

There are two reasons for this. First, the country has had war fatigue since the Bush era. The average American neither understands nor appreciates why his government insists upon deploying his resources in blood and treasure in the Middle East.

It isn't necessarily that the average American is ignorant of the line that Bush and his supporters have tirelessly pushed in the service of this end. He may very well know all about our last president's determination to remake the Islamic world in the image of some democratic ideal. And he may know equally well that, by Bush and his supporters' lights, only if such a project comes to fruition can Americans bet on achieving "national security."

The average American knows what the neoconservatives believe. He just can't believe that anyone can seriously believe it. Yet his incredulity gives way to fear once this belief becomes our nation's foreign policy. This fear in turn becomes paralyzing at the thought that this foreign policy should be resurrected with a vengeance in the event of a Romney victory.

The second reason that Romney should emphatically disavow all comparisons between himself and the neoconservative Bush is a bit more theoretical. Still, theory intersects straight through practical politics on this score. Simply put, both morally and intellectually, there is a glaring inconsistency between calls for a more "limited" government, on the one hand, and, on the other, a more robust foreign policy. A more robust foreign policy, after all, requires a more robust military.

Yet the United States military is the federal government. What this means is that the larger the military, the larger must be the federal government of which it is a part. In turn, this implies that everything that can be said against big government can just as easily — and inescapably — be said against big military.

For example, if big government is financially unsustainable, as Romney and Republicans continually tell us, then, because big military is big government, a big military is financially unsustainable. More tellingly, if big government is a betrayal of the liberty-centered ethical vision of America's founders, then big military is as well.

Indeed, no Republican should want for Americans to be reminded of neoconservative foreign policy this election year. The one Republican who should desire this least of all is Mitt Romney.



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