



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 9, 2012

## For Dems This Year, It's Not "The Economy, Stupid"

The differences are, of course, obvious. Clinton in '92 was the challenger, and the depressed housing market and other woes of a faltering economy were the albatross around the neck of the incumbent, Republican George H.W. Bush. Then, too, Clinton, the Governor of Arkansas, had no foreign policy record to run on. Indeed, his foreign policy résumé was so thin that Republicans liked to say his experience consisted mainly of frequent visits to the International House of Pancakes.



Strangely enough, it was just four years ago that Republicans and Democrat Hillary Clinton, now the Secretary of State, were saying much the same about freshman U.S. Senator and former community organizer Barack Obama. But in less than three and half years, the President has amply demonstrated that the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded him within weeks of his taking office, has not deterred him from a robust prosecution of the international "war on terror," the hunting down and slaying of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, and a "humanitarian intervention" and aerial bombardment in Libya that resulted in the ouster and death of longtime American nemesis Moammar Gadhafi. And the early indications are that in a campaign against likely Republican rival Mitt Romney, Obama will be brandishing his foreign policy and national security record against Republican charges that he is weak in confronting America's enemies and defending U.S. interests abroad.

Four years ago Obama was running against John McCain, a foreign policy hawk and Vietnam War hero with two decades of experience on military and foreign policy issues in the U.S. Senate. This year, Democrats appear ready to portray Romney as a feckless neophyte in foreign affairs, whose public statements reflect his own uncertainty of America's role on the world stage. The former Massachusetts Governor will be confronted with his own contradictory statements, as was Democratic candidate John Kerry in 2004, when Republicans delighted in playing, over and over again, a video clip of the Bay State



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Senator explaining that he had voted *for* an \$80 billion appropriation for the war in Iraq before he voted against it. Comments of Obama campaign press secretary Ben LaBolt, as quoted in Saturday's [New York Times](#), suggest the Democrats intend to use Romney's own words against him:

"He was for and against the removal of Qaddafi, for and against setting a timetable to withdraw our troops from Afghanistan, for and against enforcing trade laws against China, and while he once said he would not move heaven and earth to get Osama bin Laden, he later claimed that any president would have authorized the mission to do so," LaBolt said.

The Romney campaign recently seized on Obama's promise to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev of more flexibility in negotiations over missile defense after the election. Republicans will argue, as they did throughout the 2008 campaign, that Obama is less than resolute on issues related to national defense. The comment to Medvedev was intended to be a private assurance, but its capture on an open microphone provided material for an open letter to the President, signed by three dozen Romney national security advisors, including former UN Ambassador John Bolton, former Pentagon official Eliot Cohen, and author and historian Robert Kagan of the Brookings Institution. Published on the website of the conservative journal *National Review*, the letter included a transcript of the conversation and asked Obama, "What do you mean by 'flexibility'? 'Flexibility' to do what?"

The letter charged Obama with having cut the budget for missile defense and with abandoning plans for missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic and asked: "Should the American people expect more efforts to placate Russia by weakening the missile defense systems that protect us and our allies?" The letter went on to criticize Obama on a range of foreign policy issues, charging that the President has been weak in support of Israel and had "delayed and opposed crippling sanctions" against Iran. It blamed Obama for the growing influence in Latin America of Marxist President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. The group also criticized the administration for relaxing the decades-long economic sanctions against Cuba, for not leaving "an appropriate training force" behind in Iraq and for beginning the withdrawal from Afghanistan according to a "politically driven timetable."

"If you are reelected, would 'flexibility' lead you to abandon completely American commitments, notwithstanding the enormous sacrifices American forces have made, and with little regard for our national security?" the Romney advisers asked. The Obama campaign promptly responded, via [Foreign Policy](#) magazine, with an open letter to Romney from 18 national security experts, most with ties to the Democratic Party. The letter countered the charges one by one and asked Romney:

What specifically would you do to address the Iranian threat that is different from what President Obama is already doing?... Why did you call Russia "without question our No. 1 geopolitical foe," especially when strategic cooperation with Russia is essential for countering the Iranian nuclear threat?

Perhaps those points and counterpoints are a preview of a debate this fall between Romney and Obama on national security issues, an area of concern in which opinion polls in the last several elections have shown that voters place more trust in Republicans than Democrats. Democrats appeared to have lost voter confidence on that issue ever since George McGovern ran for President in 1972, calling for withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Vietnam War and losing 49 states to President Richard Nixon. Republicans have since been seen as the more "hawkish" of the two parties, more willing to intervene in other countries, both militarily and with economic aid, to protect what they perceive to be American interests. That role, assumed during and since the Cold War, is in contrast to an older tradition, today championed by Texas congressman and presidential candidate Ron Paul, of Republicans favoring less



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intervention abroad and blaming Democrats for needlessly involving the nation in foreign wars. As late as 1976, vice presidential candidate Robert Dole made a brief and awkward attempt to revive that charge by stating in a debate with his Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale, that all the wars of the 20th century had been "Democrat wars."

President Clinton intervened in Haiti, conducted a lengthy aerial bombardment of Bosnia in the Kosovo War, despite opposition from a Republican Congress, and ordered bombing raids on Iraq in enforcement of a "no-fly zone" ordered by the United States and Great Britain. And Obama has been no less aggressive than the George W. Bush military in prosecuting the war on terror, even increasing the number of drone attacks in Pakistan and elsewhere in the Middle East, with many of them killing innocent civilians and contributing to a rise in anti-American sentiment in the region. While the Bush administration claimed the right to detain without trial even American citizens suspected of conspiring with al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations, Obama has initiated a policy of targeting U.S. citizens abroad for killing if they are suspected of terrorist activity. American-born Muslim cleric Anwar al-Awlaki was targeted and killed, along with his driver, by a U.S. drone attack in Yemen early this year. Even the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq, a talking point for the Obama campaign, was an extension of the Bush policy in accordance with the December 2011 deadline in the Status of Forces Agreement negotiated in 2008 between the Iraqi government and the Bush administration. Obama has in fact made a virtue of necessity, withdrawing the troops only after Iraq rejected U.S. appeals for an extension of the deadline.

Obama's military and foreign policy positions appear to leave candidate Romney the option of calling for a longer stay in Afghanistan, when polls show most Americans believe its time to get out, and criticizing defense cuts at a time when the nation is running trillion-dollar deficits. The call by Romney and other Republicans for ["truly crippling sanctions"](#) against Iran, a nation with whom the country is at not at war, has been countered by the administration's claim that the United States and its allies now have in place what White House senior political advisor David Axelrod has called "the most withering economic sanctions that have ever been administered against any country." The sanctions continue, despite the fact that both America's Secretary of Defense and its Director of National Intelligence have said there is no evidence that Iran has made a decision to build a nuclear bomb.

So this year it will be the Republicans who will no doubt try to keep the political debate focused on "the economy, stupid," with the goal of keeping Obama on the defensive over an anemic recovery.

"First of all, I think it's just important to remember that it's not like we haven't been doing anything for the last year," [Obama told executives](#) from several online publications during a White House "summit" last week. The President pointed to steps he has taken to stimulate the economy and promote job growth, including the extension of the Bush tax cuts and the JOBS (Jumpstart Our Business Startups) Act he signed last Thursday. The nearly \$800-billion stimulus plan Obama pushed through Congress early in 2009 failed to produce the number of "shovel-ready jobs" the administration hoped for, but Obama spoke again last week of the opportunity to stimulate the economy with needed repair of roads and bridges at a time when interest rates are a historic low and construction workers "are dying to get back to work."

The economy of the last few years have proved stubbornly resistant to stimulus, but the Obama campaign will no doubt seize on news of any bright spot in the overall economic picture as a reason for voters to keep him in his job with another four-year lease on the White House.



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*Correction: When this article was initially posted, it said that Foreign Policy magazine is a publication of the Council on Foreign Relations, but it is not. The CFR's magazine is called Foreign Affairs.*



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