

‘Moderate Mitt’: Neocon Trojan Horse

Mitt Romney’s peculiar sense of geography – thinking Iran was some landlocked country that needed Syria as a “route to the sea”

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Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney did all he could in Monday’s debate to calm voters’ fears that he would revert to George W. Bush’s neocon foreign policy. But there was one telling slip-up when Romney signaled that his heart remains with the neocon plan to remake the Middle East.

Mitt Romney’s peculiar sense of geography – thinking Iran was some landlocked country that needed Syria as a “route to the sea” – may have raised some eyebrows over Romney’s lack of basic knowledge, but another part of the same answer, referring to the civil war in Syria as “an opportunity,” should have raised more alarm. Though Romney’s goal in Monday’s foreign policy debate was to downplay his warlike neoconservative stands, his reference to the Syrian chaos as “an opportunity” suggests that his more moderate rhetoric is just another ploy to deceive voters and win the election, not a real abandonment of neocon strategies.



Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney striding onto the debate stage. (Photo credit: mittromney.com)

In that sense, the new “moderate Mitt” is less a sign of a neocon retreat from his earlier bellicosity than a Trojan Horse to be wheeled onto the White House grounds on Jan. 20, 2013, so the neocons can pour forth from its hollowed-out belly and regain full control of U.S. foreign policy.

So, the neocons don't really mind that Romney has suddenly abandoned many of their cherished positions, such as extending the Afghan War beyond 2014 and returning U.S. troops to Iraq. The neocons understand the political need for Romney to calm independent voters who fear that he may be another George W. Bush.

In Monday's [debate](#), Romney said, "Syria's an opportunity for us because Syria plays an important role in the Middle East, particularly right now. Syria is Iran's only ally in the Arab world. It's their route to the sea. It's the route for them to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon, which threatens, of course, our ally Israel. And so seeing Syria remove Assad is a very high priority for us. Number two, seeing a — a replacement government being responsible people is critical for us."

The "route to the sea" comment — with its faint echo of a distant time in geopolitics — represented proof that Romney lacks even a rudimentary knowledge of world geography, since much of Iran's southern territory fronts on the Persian Gulf and Iran could only reach Syria by transiting Iraq. Syria and Iran have no common border.

But more significantly, Romney was revealing the crucial connection between the neocon desire for "regime change" in Syria and the neocon determination to strangle Israel's close-in enemies, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah.

Romney's demand for a new Syrian government of "responsible people" further suggests that the Republican presidential nominee shares the core neocon fantasy that the United States can simply remove one unsavory Middle East dictator and install a pro-Western, Israel-friendly leader who will then shut off aid to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

That was the central fallacy in the Iraq War, the notion that United States with its unparalleled military might could shift the Mideast's political dynamics to Israel's advantage through coercive "regime change." In Iraq, the U.S. military eliminated Saddam Hussein but then saw a new Iraqi government ally itself with Iran.

The new Iraq may be less of a military threat, but it has not reached out and embraced Israel as some neocons had hoped. Indeed, by removing Hussein's Sunni-controlled regime — and ending up with a Shiite-dominated one — Bush's Iraq War essentially eliminated a major bulwark against the regional influence of Iran's Shiite regime.

Dream Still Alive

Yet, despite the bloody and costly catastrophe in Iraq, the heart of the neocon dream is still beating — and Romney's comment indicates that he shares its illusions. Dating back at least to the mid-1990s, the neocon idea has been to use violent or coercive "regime change" in Muslim countries to secure Israel's security.

The neocons' first target may have been Iraq, but that was never the endgame. The strategy was to make Iraq into a military base for then removing the governments of Iran and Syria. Back in the heady days of 2002-2003, a neocon joke posed the question of what to do after ousting Saddam Hussein in Iraq — whether to next go east to Iran or west to Syria. The punch-line was: "Real men go to Tehran."

According to the neocon grand plan, once pro-Israeli governments were established in Iran, Iraq and Syria, Israel's hostile neighbors, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, would lose their benefactors and shrivel up, without money or weapons. Then, Israel could dictate

its terms for peace and security.

This neocon strategy emerged after the lopsided U.S. victory in Kuwait, in which President George H.W. Bush demonstrated the leaps-and-bounds advantage of the high-tech U.S. military over the Iraqi army whose soldiers were literally blown to bits by U.S. missiles and “smart bombs” while American casualties were kept to a minimum.

After that 1991 victory, it became conventional wisdom in Washington that no army on earth could withstand the sophisticated killing power of the U.S. military. That belief – combined with frustration over Israel’s stalemated conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah – led American neocons to begin thinking about a new approach, “regime change” across the Middle East.

The early outlines of this aggressive concept for remaking the Middle East emerged in 1996 when a group of neocons, including Richard Perle and Douglas Feith, went to work for Israel’s Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu during his campaign for prime minister.

The neocon strategy paper, called “[A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm](#),” advanced the idea that only regime change in hostile Muslim countries could achieve the necessary “clean break” from the diplomatic standoffs that had followed inconclusive Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations.

Under the “clean break,” Israel would no longer seek peace through mutual understanding and compromise, but rather through confrontation, including the violent removal of leaders such as Iraq’s Saddam Hussein who were supportive of Israel’s close-in enemies.

The plan called Hussein’s ouster “an important Israeli strategic objective in its own right,” but also one that would destabilize the Assad dynasty in Syria and thus topple the power dominoes into Lebanon, where Hezbollah might soon find itself without its key Syrian ally. Iran also could find itself in the cross-hairs of “regime change.”

But what the “clean break” needed was the military might of the United States, since some of the targets like Iraq were too far away and too powerful to be defeated even by Israel’s highly efficient military. The cost in Israeli lives and to Israel’s economy from such overreach would have been staggering.

In 1998, the U.S. neocon brain trust pushed the “clean break” plan another step forward with the creation of the Project for the New American Century, which urged President Bill Clinton to overthrow Saddam Hussein.

However, Clinton would only go so far, maintaining a harsh embargo on Iraq and enforcing a “no-fly zone” which involved U.S. aircraft conducting periodic bombing raids. Still, with Clinton or his heir apparent, Al Gore, in the White House, a full-scale invasion of Iraq appeared out of the question.

An Opening

The first key political obstacle was removed when the neocons helped engineer George W. Bush’s ascension to the presidency in Election 2000. However, the path was not fully cleared until al-Qaeda terrorists attacked New York and Washington on Sept. 11, 2001, leaving behind a political climate across America for war and revenge.

Of course, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003 had other motives besides Israeli security – from Bush’s personal animus toward Saddam Hussein to controlling Iraq’s oil resources – but a principal goal of the neocons was the projection of American power deep into the Muslim world, to strike at enemy states beyond Israel’s military reach.

In those days of imperial hubris, the capabilities of the U.S. military were viewed as strategic game-changers. However, the Iraqi resistance to the U.S. conquest, relying on low-tech weapons such as “improvised explosive devices,” dashed the neocon dream – at least in the short run. The “real men” had to postpone their trips to Tehran and Damascus.

But the dream hasn’t died. It just had to wait out four years of Barack Obama. In Campaign 2012, the neocons have returned to surround Mitt Romney, who like George W. Bush a decade ago has only a vague understanding of the world and is more than happy to cede the direction of U.S. foreign policy to the smart, confident and well-connected neocons.

The neocons also understand the need to manipulate the American people. In the 1980s, when I was covering Ronald Reagan’s Central American policies, I dealt with the neocons often and came to view them as expert manipulators whose view of democracy was that it was okay to trick the common folk into doing what was deemed necessary.

So, the neocons learned to exaggerate dangers and exploit fears. They tested their skills out in Central America with warnings about how peasant rebellions against corrupt oligarchs were part of some grand Soviet scheme to conquer the United States through the soft underbelly of Texas.

When the neocons returned to power under George W. Bush, they applied the same techniques in hyping the threat from Iraq. They pushed baseless claims about Saddam Hussein sharing non-existent weapons of mass destruction with al-Qaeda, all the better to scare the American people.

Painful Reversals

The neocons faced some painful reversals when the Iraq War foundered from late 2003 through 2006, but they salvaged some status in 2007 by pushing the fiction of the “successful surge,” which supposedly turned impending defeat into victory, although the truth was that the “surge” only delayed the inevitable failure of the U.S. enterprise.

After Bush’s departure in 2009 and the arrival of Obama, the neocons retreated, too, to Washington think tanks and the editorial pages of national news outlets. However, they continued to influence the perception of events in the Middle East, shifting the blame for the Iraq defeat – as much as possible – onto Obama.

New developments in the region also created what the neocons viewed as new openings. For instance, the Arab Spring of 2011 led to civil unrest in Syria where the Assad dynasty – based in non-Sunni religious sects – was challenged by a Sunni-led insurgency which included some democratic reformers as well as some radical jihadists.

Meanwhile, in Iran, international resistance to its nuclear program prompted harsh economic sanctions which have undermined the Islamic rule of the Shiite mullahs. Though President Obama views the sanctions as leverage to compel Iran to accept limits on its nuclear program, some neocons are already salivating over how to hijack the sanctions on behalf of “regime change.”

At this pivotal moment, what the neocons need desperately is to maneuver their way back into the White House behind Mitt Romney's election. And, if that requires Romney to suddenly soften his hard-line neocon rhetoric for the next two weeks, that is a small price to pay.

Which brings us back to Monday's foreign policy debate in which Romney abandoned what had been his supposedly principled stands, such as denouncing Obama's schedule to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. Though Romney had called that a major mistake - telling the Taliban when the Americans were departing - he embraced the same timetable. The voters could breathe a sigh of relief over "Moderate Mitt."

However, in Romney's comment about Syria, he showed his real intent, the neocon desire to exploit the conflict in Syria to replace Bashar al-Assad with a new leader who would accommodate Israel and shut down assistance going to Lebanon's Hezbollah. It was in that context that Romney termed the Syrian violence, which has claimed an estimated 30,000 lives, an "opportunity."

But the real opportunity for the neocons would come if the American voters, satisfied that Romney no longer appears to be the crazy war hawk of the Republican primaries, elect him on Nov. 6 and then celebrate his arrival next Jan. 20 by pushing a crude wooden horse through the gates of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

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