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# MINNPOST

## Declaring victory and retreating: Some difficult questions about Afghanistan

By Nick Hayes | 10/05/12



REUTERS/Lucas Jackson

An Afghan boy peeks out of his home to watch a paratrooper from Chosen Company of the 3rd Battalion (Airborne), 509th Infantry near the town of Ahmad Khel in Afghanistan's Paktiya Province.

If you want to argue in favor of **"American exceptionalism,"** better to skip over the history of the U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. The country has not granted us an easement on the lessons of history. Afghanistan history has not been so kind as to give foreign powers an easy and dignified exit from wars conducted on its soil.

We are in the eleventh year of a losing war in Afghanistan and the second year of a failing "surge." Either President Obama or Gov. Mitt Romney could have at least mentioned this in Wednesday presidential debate.

Let's not be disingenuous and let them off the hook by repeating what the moderator, Jim Lehrer of the "NewsHour" on PBS, who reminded them: that the "rules" of the debate limited the first

encounter to domestic policy. Both Obama and Romney showed about as much respect for the rules of the debate as they did for the moderator.

There's a precedent here. Fifty-two years ago, CBS News anchor Howard K. Smith started the first and **historic debate** between Sen. John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon with the same admonition. The rules of our nation's first televised presidential debate in 1960 also limited Kennedy and Nixon to the discussion of domestic policy.



The first to speak, Kennedy opened by invoking Abraham Lincoln's 1860 statement that a nation cannot exist half free and half slave and applying it to the Cold War world that could not exist half free and half Communist. He called for "the defense of freedom" in face of the threat of "Mr. Khrushchev" and the "Chinese Communists."

Nixon followed, agreeing "to the spirit" of Kennedy's remarks and reminding the nation that it stood "in a deadly competition with the men in the Kremlin and Peking."

The two men differed little in their remarks on foreign policy. The 60 million television viewers concluded that the fight against Russian communism would be better led by the telegenic Kennedy than five-o'clock-shadow Nixon.

## Conspicuously absent

In our first debate, any reference to foreign policy was as conspicuously absent as Lehrer's duties as moderator.

The morning after the debate, Afghanistan's President **Hamid Karzai injected his views** into the U.S. presidential campaign. Karzai indiscreetly pronounced Obama's strategy in Afghanistan as a likely failure. Unless, he added, Washington was willing to take the war on terrorism to Pakistan and provide a major upgrade of weapons to the Afghani forces.

Also on Thursday, the Pentagon confirmed news reports that over the weekend that we had suffered our 2,000<sup>th</sup> military casualty in Afghanistan. Over two-thirds of our casualties in the war in Afghanistan have occurred on Obama's watch. Like so many of the previous fatalities, the most recent death apparently was the result of "an insider attack" by our Afghan "allies." Keep that trend in mind when you assess Karzai's request for more advanced and lethal weapons.

We need to talk about Afghanistan. In the next debate Oct. 16, the first question from moderator Candy Crowley of CNN should be: "The U.S. involvement in the war in Afghanistan is winding down.

What is your position on the scheduled timetable for the withdrawal of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan? Will you keep to the schedule for a complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2014? And what do you see as the continued role or presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan beyond 2014?"

The question would force Obama to defend the weakest point in his foreign policy. His best defense is that at least he has kept his word. Two years ago, he called for a surge that put 33,000 additional troops on the ground in Afghanistan. In his visit to Kabul last May, he said the United States would end all combat operations by the end of this year and the Afghani forces would assume all the responsibility for security in their country by 2014. Obama, nevertheless, vows "to finish the job," declares that "the tide has turned" against the Taliban, and makes ambiguous references to a continuing American presence in Afghanistan after 2014.

## Taliban stronger

Meanwhile, U.S. intelligence reports that the Taliban is stronger today than it was two years ago when Obama ordered the surge. In the past month, as we have drawn down our troops and asked our Afghani "allies" to take on a greater share of the fighting, "insider attacks" by Afghani police and soldiers have accounted for more and more U.S. military fatalities. Obama's policy appears to be dangerously close to what turned out to be Nixon's "secret plan" in 1968 to end the Vietnam War: Declare victory and retreat.

At least, Obama has a plan. Although Romney did not bother to mention the war in Afghanistan in his speech to the Republican National Convention, he has lately added a few talking points on the Afghan situation to his stump speeches on the campaign. In principle, he supports the president's plan for a withdrawal. In his view, Obama should not have made the timetable for the withdrawal public. Romney tells us that his decisions would be based on the opinions of the military commanders on the ground and not on politics.

In case you miss Romney's point, his running mate, Rep. Paul Ryan, makes explicit what Romney implies. This past Monday, **he told conservative radio host** Laura Ingraham that Obama's decision to withdraw 22,000 troops from Afghanistan in September endangered the lives of U.S. troops and ignored the wishes of American commanders in the field.

Crowley should ask the obvious follow-up questions:

*Mr. President, considering that in 2014 the United States will end its military involvement in Afghanistan and leave behind a political situation that is at best as unstable as it was two years ago at the beginning of the surge, what would you say to the families of the 2000 soldiers who died there?*

*Gov. Romney, if you would receive and accept a request from military commanders to continue or increase U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan, how would you explain to the families of the American soldiers why it is worth risking the death of one more soldier in*



## *Afghanistan?*

Let us also hope that Crowley insists that both Obama and Romney answer the question.

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