

Pick Your Poison: Clinton Vs. Trump on Foreign Policy

In their remarks to the nation following the Orlando massacre, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump made their differences—and disturbing similarities—crystal clear.

Trump [attacked](#) Hillary Clinton for refusing to label the violence carried out by a mentally-disturbed American-born gunmen of Muslim background as a manifestation of “radical Islam.” He reiterated his call to ban Muslims from entering the United States and to subject American Muslims to special surveillance and restrictions.

To her credit, [Hillary Clinton](#) rejected such bigotry. However, she called for returning to the “spirit of 9/12,” ignoring how that reaction to 9/11 resulted in a major crackdown on civil liberties and preparation for war. She stated: *“The attack in Orlando makes it even more clear, we cannot contain this threat. We must defeat it.”*

Though there is no evidence of any operational ties between ISIS and the lone Orlando gunman, she piled on, saying: *“We should keep the pressure on ramping up the air campaign, accelerating support for our friends fighting to take and hold ground.”*

Sam Adler-Bell, a journalist and policy associate with The Century Foundation, [observed](#): *“I fear we’ve already begun to enlist the 49 dead into the project of American empire, here and abroad, into the endless, borderless war that began on 9/12.”*

In previous weeks, both incipient nominees had given what have been called “major foreign policy addresses.” Though both lacked detail and substance, Clinton [made a strong case](#) that Trump really does not have the experience, knowledge, or temperament to be commander-in-chief.

Still, while former Secretary of State Clinton would be among the most experienced and knowledgeable nominees on foreign policy in modern history, she is probably the most hawkish Democratic nominee in decades.

Phyllis Bennis of the Institute for Policy Studies [noted](#): *“She talked about all of the crazy stuff that Donald Trump has said. That’s easy to do, [but] the choice between the kind of chaos of Trump’s policy, that’s so incredibly dangerous, versus a very clear militaristic commitment to regime change and U.S. domination in [Clinton’s] foreign policy, is not much of a choice.”*

In certain areas, Clinton has even placed herself to the right of the incipient GOP nominee. For example, Trump has questioned why Americans must pay for overseas bases, carrier groups, and other forward deployment to



Donald Trump by Gage Skidmore, Uncle Sam by James Montgomery Flagg, Hillary Clinton by C-Span

defend wealthy European, Middle Eastern, and Western Pacific allies who could afford to defend themselves, but whose military budgets are only a fraction of those of the United States. [Clinton](#) has denounced what she refers to as his threat “to abandon our allies in NATO.”

She has denounced Trump for wanting to negotiate directly with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and calls instead for a U.S.-led military buildup in East Asia, including a costly missile defense system in Japan. Harkening back to the rhetoric once used against liberal Democrats by their hawkish electoral opponents, [Clinton](#) said that if her opponent is elected, “they’ll be celebrating in the Kremlin.”

Rather than support collective security arrangements, a stronger United Nations, expanding nuclear-free zones, or other multilateral efforts, Clinton [insists](#) that “if America doesn’t lead, we leave a vacuum—and that will either cause chaos, or other countries will rush in to fill the void.” Anything short of U.S. primacy “is not an outcome we can live with.”

This drew a [rebuttal](#) from Columbia University’s Jeffrey Sachs: “*This kind of arrogance—that America and America alone must run the world—has led straight to overstretch: perpetual wars that cannot be won, and unending and escalating confrontations with Russia, China, Iran, and others that make the world more dangerous. It doesn’t seem to dawn on Clinton that in today’s world, we need cooperation, not endless bravado.*”

Clinton [falsely accused](#) Trump of saying he would “stay neutral on Israel’s security.” In reality, Trump said that in order to effectively mediate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the United States should take a more neutral position in the negotiations. A longstanding assumption in the field of conflict resolution is that mediators shouldn’t take sides.

The sad fact is that American voters this November will probably be forced to choose between a Republican nominee who thinks the United States should ban Muslims from entering the country versus a Democratic nominee who thinks the United States has a right to invade Muslim countries; a Republican nominee who agrees with George W. Bush that it’s okay to torture prisoners in the name of fighting terrorism versus a Democratic nominee who agrees with Benjamin Netanyahu that it’s okay to bombard crowded civilian neighborhoods in the name of fighting terrorism; a Republican nominee who supports building a wall on the border to keep Mexicans out of the United States versus a Democratic nominee who supports Israel building a wall far beyond its border to keep Palestinians out of Palestine.

Overall, Trump may be the bigger militarist. Though he has attacked Clinton for backing the invasion of Iraq and the bloody counter-insurgency war that followed, archived interviews have indicated that Trump did not actually oppose the war as he’s claimed. Same with U.S. intervention in Libya. Indeed, in both cases, Trump called for an even greater use of force, including seizure of oil fields for U.S. economic benefit. He also agrees with Clinton to militarily intervene in Syria to create “safe zones” for refugees and to escalate U.S. bombing against ISIS.

Trump’s call for pulling U.S. forces back from overseas is accompanied by a call for such countries as Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia to develop their own nuclear weapons. He opposes the nuclear agreement with Iran. [He has falsely accused](#) President Obama of having “supported the ouster of a friendly regime in Egypt . . . and then helped bring the Muslim Brotherhood to power in its place.” He charges that Obama, whose administration has given unprecedented amounts of aid to Israel and [blocked](#) the United Nations from addressing human rights concerns, “has not been a friend to Israel,” saying the President has “snubbed and criticized” what he calls “the one true Democracy in the Middle East.”

Trump also [claims](#) “our nuclear weapons arsenal”—on which Obama [plans to spend](#) nearly \$1 trillion over the next thirty years—“has been allowed to atrophy and is desperately in need of modernization and renewal.” He has criticized Obama’s cancellation of the missile defense program, despite extraordinary cost and highly dubious efficacy. He pledges to dramatically increase military spending.

“Our military,” he laments, “is depleted, and we’re asking our generals and military leaders to worry about global warming”—which, according to Trump, does not exist.

Clinton, throughout her career, has been a hawk. Not only did she support the Iraq War, she has backed the Israeli and Moroccan occupations, the Honduras coup, various allied dictatorships, higher military spending, and a more interventionist foreign policy. She’s thumbed her nose at the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court, and various reputable international human rights and arms control agencies.

Yet, ironically, her foreign policy agenda will likely be treated as the “left” wing of the debate by the mainstream media this fall, and perhaps for the next four to eight years.

This is why those of us who have a truly progressive vision of foreign policy need to mobilize and put on the pressure.

The good news is that Clinton has been forced to downplay her hawkish tendencies in order to get the Democratic nomination, while Trump is on the verge of winning the Republican nomination by exaggerating his dovish tendencies. This indicates that an increasing number of American voters are questioning the militarization of U.S. foreign policy.

With only a few exceptions, virtually every change in U.S. foreign policy—including ending the Vietnam War, accepting the Central American peace plan, imposing sanctions on apartheid South Africa, curbing the nuclear arms race, ceasing support for Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor, and phasing out most U.S. involvement in Iraq—came not from the initiative of enlightened politicians but from the American public.

Elections are important. Yet just as important are the other forms of pressure we can provide to force a saner and less militaristic foreign policy.

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