

12-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Dorff, Robert H. Dr., "Strangely Silent: The Missing Strategic Debate in the 2010 Mid-Term Elections" (2010). *Articles & Editorials*. 210.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/210

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December 2010

STRANGELY SILENT: THE MISSING STRATEGIC DEBATE IN THE 2010 MID-TERM ELECTIONS

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As dust settles on the November 2, 2010, elections—and the dust storm leading to the November 6, 2012, elections begins—there is no dearth of analysis and explanation of what these mid-term elections meant. Traditional Republican victories combined with some untraditional Tea Party victories yielded an historic shift in power in the House of Representatives, and echoed across state legislatures and governorships throughout the country. Those results suggest that “lower taxes, less government spending, and smaller government” will prevail in the policymaking that begins in earnest in January.

However, from the perspective of U.S. national security policy and strategy, what is most striking is the strange silence. For an election year characterized as intense and historical in its implications, the virtual absence of campaign discussions concerning the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the role of the U.S. in the world, the overall national security strategy to fulfill that role, defense spending, and the size and composition of U.S. military forces to support that strategy is remarkable.

Of course, this absence is not itself without explanation. The dominance of domestic issues and problems—job losses, unemployment, the economy, health care reform, and government spending and debt—left little room for national security issues to find a place on the electoral agendas of candidates and voters alike. With the notable exception of very public debates about the military strategy in Afghanistan, this absence of strategic deliberation and decisionmaking has characterized most of the post-2008 period. Consequently, this uncharacteristic silence is remarkable despite current domestic problems given past voter discontent with the national security agenda of the Bush Administration and the Republican congressional majorities that were eliminated in the 2006 and 2008 elections.

The absence of a national security debate is also troublesome for many reasons most of which stem from some fairly simple facts about the Federal budget.¹ For FY 2011, the Federal budget is \$3.83 trillion. Of that total, \$2.39 trillion, or 62.4% is mandatory spending—expenditures on programs that are mandated by law such as Social Security and Medicare. That leaves only \$1.44 trillion, or 37.6%, for discretionary spending—the budget expenditures negotiated by the President and Congress each year. Interestingly,

security spending—essentially Department of Defense, Department of Homeland Security, overseas contingency programs, and a few others—accounts for about 60% of all discretionary spending. Eliminating ALL nonsecurity discretionary spending, essentially all other Federal programs, would yield a budget savings of about \$553 billion, or roughly 43%, of the projected deficit even if revenues remained constant.

While no one is arguing for such draconian and swift steps to reduce the deficit, the implications are clear. Promises to reduce taxes (i.e., cut revenues) must be accompanied by significant reductions in spending, which cannot be accomplished without national security or entitlement spending, or both, being on the table. It is highly unlikely that costs of ongoing operations (military and nonmilitary), especially in Afghanistan, will be significantly reduced by 2012 or even relatively soon thereafter. Probably even less likely is that the newly elected members of Congress or incumbents will target broad entitlement programs like Social Security for the kinds of significant reductions required. Republicans will be hoping to consolidate and make further gains in 2012; Democrats will be hoping that the burden of governing will once again prove the undoing of the party victorious at the polls. The possibility is real that major adjustments in security spending outside of current operations will be required.

So, precisely what this country needs most—a serious debate about the ends, ways, and means of our overall national security strategy—is what has been largely, if not wholly, absent, both in the policymaking process since 2008 and on the campaign trails in 2010. If we are to avoid a dramatic and uncalculated shift in strategy being forced upon us by an inability to muster the means to accomplish the desired ends, that debate must occur. It must include how we are organized and what we need in order to formulate and execute a strategy to protect and promote our national interests.

That debate must involve our best national security professionals, including our senior military leaders, for it is almost a given that our military will need to be reconfigured in fundamental and significant ways to be effective, affordable, and sustainable in its strategic role. Because of its role in resourcing the strategy, Congress will, of necessity, be involved; but the realities addressed above will pull its members and indeed Congress itself in very different and competing directions. Left to its own devices, Congress will likely choose defense spending for “big ticket items” within districts and states, and it will not likely base those decisions on strategy-driven budgeting.

Therefore, the debate and decisionmaking we require must be led by the President and his administration. Congress, both individually and collectively, continues to suggest that Americans can have difficult-to-achieve ends with little pain and almost no sacrifice. Military leaders often prefer not to engage in such debates about overall strategy, and service-centered perspectives for protecting existing and preferred future programs frequently overwhelm attempts to conduct genuine strategic-level reviews, as the most recently concluded *Quadrennial Defense Review* once again demonstrated. We need those senior leaders and their best strategists to play a vital and vibrant role in this process.

At a time when the hopes for bipartisanship and the desire to leave politics at the water's edge seem to be dashed beyond repair, the national security of this country clearly depends as it always does on presidential leadership. But it also rests squarely on leadership among our best and brightest senior military leaders, working closely and creatively with their civilian counterparts not only to craft the strategy that will include an effective, affordable, and sustainable military for the 21st century, but to help prepare the American public for supporting it. The strange silence on such matters in our recent electoral and policy processes makes this shared responsibility even more necessary and urgent.

ENDNOTE

1. These numbers are obviously very large and, depending on the source one uses, slightly different figures can be found. However, the arguments made here do not depend on those specific amounts. Regardless of the numbers used, the overall relationships between mandatory and discretionary spending, and security and nonsecurity spending, remain very much the same. See, for example, *useconomy.about.com/od/usfederalbudget/US_Federal_Budget.htm*.

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