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Obama-Romney debate can't avoid 'nation-building'

Recent presidents campaigned against nation-building only to take it up as necessary for what defines America's ideals and strategic interests. Voters need to hear what Romney and Obama would do differently.



Somalia's new parliamentarians pray Aug. 20 during an inauguration for members of the country's first parliament in 20 years. Once a failed state, the country is being put back together slowly with UN, US, and African support. (Stuart Price/Reuters)

By the Monitor's Editorial Board
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In each election, America redefines itself. But over the decades, one constant remains: Presidential candidates promise to focus on building up the nation, and then once in the Oval Office, they also do “nation-building” abroad.

In 1992, Bill Clinton put the economy first only to be forced to intervene in Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and Kosovo. In 2000, George W. Bush ran against nation-building and promised a “more humble” foreign policy. His secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, famously asked why US troops were walking Bosnian kids to school. After 9/11, however, Mr. Bush changed his mind, launching into nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In 2009, Barack Obama declared – in reaction to Bush’s actions – “The nation

that I'm most interested in building is our own."

But even Mr. Obama has kept up nation-building in Afghanistan, helped Somalia produce its first functioning government in 20 years, and provided billions in aid to a weak and dangerous Pakistan. His latest project is Yemen, where he promises to promote "governance and development."

"Nation-building is the core way of thinking for Americans when we're confronted by threats and areas [of the world] that are causing us harm," states University of Texas historian Jeremi Suri, author of "Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building From the Founders to Obama."

Or as Roberts Gates, secretary of defense for both Bush and Obama, put it: "The security of the American people will increasingly depend on our ability to head off the next insurgency or arrest the collapse of another failing state."

As a nation created on universal ideals, America also tends to want to implant those ideals in other lands, from the Philippines in the early 20th century to postwar Japan and Germany to today's Yemen. Thomas Jefferson saw the need for the world to become a "society of states."

This American mix of altruism and self-defense embedded in nation-building makes it a difficult campaign topic, especially in economic hard times and with an overstretched military. During last spring's GOP debates, the candidates were divided, with Ron Paul on the stay-at-home side and Rick Santorum and Jon Huntsman Jr. noting America's indispensable global role.

So far, Obama and Mitt Romney have not squared off on the issue. Obama's liberal base remains wary of nation-building while Republicans are torn between tea party isolationists and the "realist" wing of internationalists.

One of the coming presidential debates should focus on nation building. Election campaigns must help Americans find a pragmatic middle ground that balances US domestic needs with the challenges of helping troubled nations.

Polls show a strong dislike of "foreign aid," but when asked about specific problems, Americans tend to be more generous. They also know that events can force the US to act: the cold war, African famines, pending massacres, sea piracy, or terrorism. Who knows what climate change might bring?

Not all of America's attempts at nation-building succeed. Iraq, for example, remains a fragile state. Knowing when to quit or when to seek the help of allies is essential.

In Afghanistan, when Afghan soldiers are killing NATO troops, sustaining that effort to build basic institutions requires a fresh look at the trade-offs.

By now, voters should know that a candidate's promise of avoiding "foreign

entanglements,” as George Washington warned against, may not always stick. It’s difficult to know when the US will again be needed as the world’s go-to repairman.

But nation-building remains a part of what defines America – for itself and others.

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