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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/96x9d7rf>

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### Publication Date

2012-09-17

Peer reviewed

# Romney's Apology Frame

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Mitt Romney responded to the recent Cairo events with an apology frame. America, he said, must never apologize for its values, and he claimed that the Obama administration was apologizing when it pointed out a moral constraint on free speech.

One of the things Americans are taught in grammar school about free speech is that there are legal and moral limits to it. The example usually given is: "You don't shout 'Fire!' in a crowded theater." There are legal and moral constraints on incendiary free speech.

In the case of the recent anti-Islamic video, *The Innocence of Islam*, which was certainly incendiary, the legal framework doesn't apply. However, the moral framework does. The video not only violated the American principle of freedom of religion, it was intended to incite violence in the Islamic world. It did, and the chain of causation led to the killing of our Ambassador to Libya and three other Americans, as well as the death of at least two demonstrators in Tunisia, three in Sudan and one in Lebanon.

The American legal principle of free speech does not cover such cases of immoral incendiary speech. We have no laws against them. Indeed, our laws protect even immoral cases like the present one, lest too tight a line be drawn around our freedom of speech.

The Cairo embassy, President Obama, and Secretary of State Clinton responded appropriately to the events. They rightly condemned the content and intention of the video on the grounds of the American principle of freedom of religion, and they rightly condemned the violence against our embassies. Clinton drew a clear line between verbal and physical attacks, saying that violence is never sanctioned as a response to verbal attack. And she pointed out that, in America, freedom of speech is so fundamental a value that it extends even to such immoral cases.

Mitt Romney used the occasion of the Cairo and Libyan events to attack President Obama and the Administration for what he called "apologizing" for American principles and thereby showing weakness. Other conservatives, especially Fox News commentators, backed him up and adopted the apology frame. Here is the sequence of events that led to Romney's first use of that frame.

In response to the video before any violence occurred, the Cairo embassy tried to head off violence with the following statement:

The Embassy of the United States in Cairo condemns the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims -- as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions. Today, the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, Americans are honoring our patriots and those who serve our nation as the fitting response to the enemies of democracy. Respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy. We firmly reject the actions by those who abuse the universal right of free speech to hurt the religious beliefs of others.

After the violent breach of the embassy and before the events in Libya, the Cairo embassy released the following on Twitter: "This morning's condemnation (issued before the protest began) still stands. As does our condemnation of unjustified breach of the Embassy."

In short, to head off the violence, the embassy issued a condemnation of the video and of any degradation of religious beliefs, upholding "the universal right of free speech." After the violence, the embassy confirmed the statement and condemned the violence.

Romney framed this embassy statement as "the White House response," accusing Obama and the administration of "apologizing for American values." He called this "a disgraceful statement on the part of our administration to apologize for American values," and said that the embassy statement was "apologizing for the right of free speech."

Here is Romney's logic: The embassy -- and the President -- should have defended the video absolutely on the basis of the American principle of free speech, despite its content and intention, instead of condemning the video with a defense of the American principle of freedom of religion -- even though the content and intention of the video led not only to four American deaths, but also the deaths of protestors and injuries of both protestors and security personnel. In Romney's frame, anything short of a complete defense of the video on free speech grounds is an "apology."

For Romney, this framing is anything but new, given his 2010 book, *No Apology: The Case for American Greatness*, which argues at length that greatness is constituted not through diplomacy but through "strong leadership" that amounts to military and economic intimidation. Romney used the exact same framing when he argued that Obama's initial diplomacy tour in 2009 was "an apology tour." Later on, when the facts about Cairo and Libya came in, Romney switched to the administration's position. But his apology rhetoric is still to be found on Fox News and conservative blog comments. The apology frame is not going away because it fits a general conservative frame for international policy.

For Romney and other conservatives, diplomacy is more often than not a sign of weakness. Anything short of America imposing its will, its interests, and its values on other nations is a "failure of leadership" and weakness. Moreover, the Christian right has been waging an attack on Islam in general, stereotyping it unfairly in extremist terms. To defend the anti-Islamic video as "free speech" without condemning its content is implicitly supporting the right-wing stereotyping of Islam.

The media on the whole has rightly criticized Romney as jumping the gun and using a national tragedy for political purposes.

But Romney's remarks are even worse than that. They violate what legal philosopher Jeremy Waldron has called democracy's "affirmative responsibility for protecting the atmosphere of mutual respect against certain forms of vicious attack."

Romney's use of "apology" for diplomacy will continue to surface. Here is what Romney said in his book: [Obama] "has apologized for what he deems to be American arrogance, dismissiveness, and derision; for dictating solutions, for acting unilaterally, and for acting without regard for others; for treating other countries as mere proxies, for unjustly interfering in the internal affairs of other nations, and for feeding anti-Muslim sentiments; for committing torture, for dragging our feet on global warming and for selectively promoting democracy." A great many other Americans agree with Obama that such an approach to foreign policy must end because it does not lead to peace.

There is a clear division here on what American foreign policy should be. America, Romney suggests, should continue those behaviors that characterize a foreign policy based on force and intimidation as opposed to treating other nations with the respect required for effective diplomacy and the protection of human life around the world.

The Heritage Foundation, when discussing President Obama's diplomacy efforts in 2009, used the apology frame that also Romney adopted: "Apologizing for your own country projects an image of weakness before both allies and enemies. It sends a very clear signal that the U.S. is to blame for some major developments on the world stage. This can be used to the advantage of those who wish to undermine American global leadership."

Romney's statement has to be seen in this larger context. It does not merely reflect Romney's attitude and it is not just about this political moment. The frame he chose reflects a core belief among extreme conservatives about foreign policy, diplomacy, and America's role in the world.

Romney's framing of the events goes far beyond an attempt to score political points in the midst of a national tragedy. It is intended to strengthen extreme conservative

beliefs about American foreign policy. Why no apologies? Because America, operating under conservative ideology, is seen as the world's ultimate legitimate authority, whose actions define what is right. Therefore, there should be no need to apologize for doing what is right, and since that authority must be maintained, it would be wrong to apologize even if an apology were warranted. Even operating diplomatically, with real mutual respect, would be showing weakness by giving up the authority that should be maintained in all negotiations. That is a view that poses a real danger to peace both in the US and abroad.