

Moammar Gaddafi, President Obama and the 2012 election

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The death of deposed Libyan dictator Moammar Gaddafi will be touted by Democrats as another foreign policy success story for President Obama but seems unlikely to seriously affect his political fortunes heading into a 2012 campaign still laser-focused on the struggling U.S. economy.

Reports of Gaddafi's passing come just days after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Libya and expressed hope that he would be either captured or killed. It's been nearly eight months since President Obama authorized military intervention in Libya, an involvement that led to Gaddafi's removal from power.

It also comes less than six months after a military strike authorized by President Obama led to the death of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

In the wake of bin Laden's death, President Obama experienced a temporary bump in his poll numbers as Americans gave him credit for the death of the world's most recognizable terrorist.

A May Washington Post-Pew Research Center survey conducted immediately after bin Laden's death showed Obama's job approval rating at 56 percent — a nine point improvement from an April poll.

But, that same survey showed virtually no positive movement for Obama when it came to his handling of the economy — the central issue on the minds of most voters — and even the broader political benefits to Obama from bin Laden's death quickly wore off. In the latest Post-ABC poll his job approval rating stood at just 42 percent.

"If Obama only got a brief, small bump from bin Laden's death, Gaddafi's death isn't going to matter at all by the time we hand out candy this October, much less next October," said Glen Bolger, a Republican pollster whose firm is working for the presidential campaign of former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. "The election is much more about Americans losing their jobs than about Gaddafi losing his head."

A look at most recent national polling backs up Bolger's point that Americans are almost exclusively focused on the economy.

In the October Post-ABC News national poll, 51 percent of respondents said the economy was the most important issue facing the country while just one percent named "foreign policy".

At the recent slew of Republican presidential debates, foreign policy has been an afterthought — at best — as the candidates squabble over domestic policy issues like job creation and immigration reform.

History, too, suggests that at times of domestic economic peril, foreign policy victories tend to play a minor role in campaigns.

Following the conclusion of the first Gulf War in 1991, President George H.W. Bush was regarded as unbeatable. But, the economy soured, Bill Clinton emerged and the phrase "it's the economy, stupid" forever won a place in the political lexicon.

Democratic pollster Fred Yang argued that that even though the Gaddafi news won't be a 2012 game changer, it will further bolster Obama's credentials as a leader.

"Good news, even if overseas, is always good for an incumbent during these tough times," said Yang. "This will help the President — and even if the impact of the specific event dissipates, this adds another positive piece to the puzzle of the President as commander-in-chief."

Reaction from the Republican presidential field was slow in coming.

Romney, in a visit to western Iowa on Thursday morning, said that "it's about time" when asked about Gaddafi's death and added: "The world is a better place with Gaddafi gone."

Texas Gov. Rick Perry said Gaddafi's death was "good news", adding: "It should bring the end of conflict there, and help them move closer to elections and a real democracy."

Arizona Sen. John McCain, the Republican party's presidential nominee in 2008, said that Gaddafi's death "marks an end to the first phase of the Libyan revolution".

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