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CNN LIVE EVENT/SPECIAL

Full Transcript of CNN NATIONAL SECURITY DEBATE, 20:00-22:00

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WOLF BLITZER, DEBATE MODERATOR AND CNN LEAD POLITICAL ANCHOR: Live from Washington, DC, for the Republican National Security Debate.

(UNKNOWN): It's a president's most important and daunting responsibility, to protect and defend the United States of America. Millions of lives in the hands of one commander-in-chief. It's what legacies are made of.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: A date which will live in infamy.

(END AUDIO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): For better...

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

RONALD REAGAN, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): -- and for worse.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JIMMY CARTER, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: And that is not to do anything that would endanger the lives or safety of the hostages.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): In war...

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GEORGE H.W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Just two hours ago, Allied air forces began an attack on military targets in Iraq and Kuwait.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): -- and peace. On the day everything changed... (BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GEORGE W. BUSH, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): -- and every day since.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BARACK OBAMA, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: The United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Tonight, from an historic hall in the nation's capital, the Republican candidates address the global challenges ahead -- Mitt Romney, who ran an international business and the Olympic Winter Games.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

MITT ROMNEY (R), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: The people of America deserve a regular briefing.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Newt Gingrich, the former House speaker with a PhD in history.

Herman Cain...

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

HERMAN CAIN (R), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: We would use our military might if we have to.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): A business executive who worked for firms with global reach.

Ron Paul, a leading anti-war voice in Congress.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

REP. RON PAUL (R), TEXAS: We should only go to the war when the people in this country declare the war.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Rick Perry, the governor of the state with the longest stretch of international border.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP) BACHMANN: Iran is waiting in the wings.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Michele Bachmann, a member of the House Intelligence Committee.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

HUNTSMAN: Our nation's future is how well prepared we are to compete.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

(UNKNOWN): Jon Huntsman, the former U.S. ambassador to China.

Rick Santorum, who served on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Who has what it takes to be the next commander-in-chief in a world of peril?

The first step toward building a legacy, the Republican National Security Debate begins now.

BLITZER: From Constitution Hall in the nation's capital, this is the Republican presidential debate.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Every U.S. president since Calvin Coolidge has been inside this historic hall, just steps away from the White House.

Tonight, the eight Republican candidates are here with their ultimate goal in sight.

I'm Wolf Blitzer.

We want to welcome our viewers in the United States and around the world.

Tonight's debate is airing on CNN, CNN International, CNN en Espanol and the American Forces Network. We want to thank our co-sponsors, the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute.

Members of these distinguished conservative think tanks, they are here in our audience and some of them will have a chance to question the candidates. They'll add their knowledge and insights to our discussion, making this unlike any debate so far in this presidential campaign.

Viewers also can take part in our debate by sending us your questions online, on Twitter. Make sure to include the hash tag, [cnndebate](#); on Facebook at [Facebook.com/cnnpolitics](#); and, of course, on [CNNPolitics.com](#).

It's time now to meet the 2012 Republican presidential contenders.

Joining us onstage, the former U.S. ambassador to China, Jon Huntsman.

FORMER GOV. JON HUNTSMAN JR, R-UTAH, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: Thank you.

Thank you very much.

Thank you.

Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

HUNTSMAN: Thank you.

BLITZER: Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann.

REP. MICHELE BACHMANN, R-MINN., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: Good to see you, Wolf.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: The former speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: The former president and CEO of Godfather's Pizza, Herman Cain.

(APPLAUSE)

The former Massachusetts governor, Mitt Romney...

(APPLAUSE)

Texas governor, Rick Perry...

(APPLAUSE)

Texas congressman, Ron Paul...

(APPLAUSE)

(inaudible) from Pennsylvania, Rick Santorum.

(APPLAUSE)

Ladies and gentlemen, the Republican candidates for President of the United States.

(APPLAUSE)

Now, please rise for our National Anthem. Please rise. The National Anthem performed by Mauricio Perez, from the Tony Award winning musical, "Jersey Boys," now playing at the National Theater here in Washington, D.C.

(APPLAUSE)

(SINGING NATIONAL ANTHEM)

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Mauricio Perez, thank you.

Candidates, please take your -- to your podiums while I tell you a little bit more about how this debate will work. I'll be the moderator and as I mentioned, our partners from the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute will ask questions as well.

I'll follow up. I'll try to guide the discussion. Candidates, I'll try to make sure each of you gets your fair share of questions.

You'll have one minute to answer, 30 seconds for follow-ups and rebuttals. And I'll make sure you get time to respond if -- if you're singled out for criticism.

This year more than ever we've seen how events beyond our borders directly affect America, including perhaps the biggest national security issue right now, the economy.

Candidates, tonight Republican voters are here. They are watching around the country to decide if you have what it takes to be the next commander in chief, to shape foreign policy, to protect this great nation.

On some of these issues you will agree. On some you'll disagree. But by the end of the night, voters should have a better understanding of how you would lead the nation in times of crisis.

Now, let's have the candidates introduce themselves to our audience, but we'll keep it very brief. Here's an example of what I'm looking for.

I'm Wolf Blitzer and yes, that's my real name. I'll be your moderator this evening and I'm happy to welcome each one of you to our debate.

Rick Santorum, let's begin with you.

FORMER SEN. RICK SANTORUM, R-PA., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: Well, I am Rick Santorum. And it's great to be here and I want to thank AEI and Heritage (inaudible).

... One constitutional responsibility of the federal government and that is national security. And I think we can all agree that if you like what Barack Obama has done to our economy, you'll love what he's done to our national security.

REP. RON PAUL, R-TEXAS, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: I'm Ron Paul, a congressman from Texas. I am pleased to be here at the debate because this is a very important debate. I am convinced that needless and unnecessary wars are a great detriment. They undermine our prosperity and our liberties. They add to our deficits and they consume our welfare. We should take a careful look at our foreign policy.

GOV. RICK PERRY, R-TEXAS, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: I'm Rick Perry, the governor of Texas, and I want to take a moment and introduce you, the beautiful first lady of the state of Texas, Anita. Thank you for being here with me, 29 years of wedded bliss and 45 years ago we had our first date. So I'm a blessed man in many ways to represent a great state, and we're here to ask you for your support, your blessings and your vote.

FORMER GOV. MITT ROMNEY, R-MASS., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: I'm Mitt Romney and yes, Wolf, that's also my first name. And...

(LAUGHTER)

ROMNEY: ... I'm a husband, a father, a grandfather of 16. I love this country very much. I spent my life in the private sector. And as I've watched the direction this president has taken our country, both domestically and internationally, I'm afraid that he's taking us on a perilous course. I want to keep America strong and free, and if I'm president, I'll use every ounce of my energy to do just that.

(APPLAUSE)

HERMAN CAIN, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: I am businessman Herman Cain. I'm delighted to be here to discuss one of the most critical issues we face because, as a result of this administration, our national security has indeed been downgraded.

(APPLAUSE)

FORMER REP. NEWT GINGRICH, R-GA., PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: I'm Newt Gingrich. My father spent 27 years in the infantry. And as a result of that, in the fall of 1958, I decided that national survival was worth the study of a lifetime. I've worked with both Heritage and the American Enterprise Institute for over 30 years. I can't imagine any two institutions better to partner with CNN on the most important single topic, the survival of the United States.

(APPLAUSE)

BACHMANN: My name is Michele Bachmann. I'm a proud member of the United States Congress. I'm privileged to serve on the House Select Committee on Intelligence. My father honorably served in the United States Air Force, my stepfather in the United States Army and my brother in the United States Navy.

I think for every one of us who are here on this stage tonight, I think we all want to send our very best Happy Thanksgiving greetings to all of our men and women in uniform who are serving us overseas, here in the United States and also to their families. Happy Thanksgiving. We appreciate, we love you and we want to get you home as soon as we can.

(APPLAUSE)

HUNTSMAN: My name is Jon Huntsman. I believe this week, in particular, that there is still much to be grateful for in this, the greatest nation that ever was. I'm here with my wife of 28 years, Mary Kay, who is fortuitously sitting in the New Hampshire box up here. We are the wife -- or we are the parents of seven kids, two in the United States Navy.

Twice elected governor of the great state of Utah, I've lived overseas four times, three times as a United States ambassador. I am honored and privileged to be here. Wolf, CNN, Heritage, AEI, thank you one and all for making tonight possible.

BLITZER: Thank you very much. And let's get right to the questions.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Our leadoff question is from the honorable Ed Meese, the former attorney general of the United States, who is representing the Heritage Foundation.

ED MEESE, HERITAGE FOUNDATION: At least 42 terrorist attacks aimed at the United States have been thwarted since 9/11. Tools like the Patriot Act have been instrumental in finding and stopping terrorists.

Shouldn't we have a long range extension of the investigative powers contained in that act so that our law enforcement officers can have the tools that they need?

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich, only this weekend there was an alleged terror plot uncovered in New York City. What do you think?

GINGRICH: Well, I think that Attorney General Meese has raised a key point, and the key distinction for the American people to recognize is the difference between national security requirements and criminal law requirements.

I think it's desperately important that we preserve your right to be innocent until proven guilty, if it's a matter of criminal law. But if you're trying to find somebody who may have a nuclear weapon that they are trying to bring into an American city, I think you want to use every tool that you can possibly use to gather the intelligence.

The Patriot Act has clearly been a key part of that. And I think looking at it carefully and extending it and building an honest understanding that all of us will be in danger for the rest of our lives. This is not going to end in the short run. And we need to be prepared to protect ourselves from those who, if they could, would not just kill us individually, but would take out entire cities.

BLITZER: So, Speaker, just to clarify, you wouldn't change the Patriot Act?

GINGRICH: No, I would not change it. I'm not aware of any specific change it needs. And I'd look at strengthening it, because I think the dangers are literally that great. And again, I've spent years studying this stuff. You start thinking about one nuclear weapon in one American city and the scale of loss of life and you ask yourself, what should the president be capable of doing to stop that?

And you come up with a very different answer. Again, very sharp division. Criminal law, the government should be frankly on defense and you're innocent until proven guilty. National security, the government should have many more tools in order to save our lives.

BLITZER: Congressman Paul, I suspect you disagree.

PAUL: I do.

BLITZER: Tell us why.

PAUL: I think the Patriot Act is unpatriotic because it undermines our liberty. I'm concerned, as everybody is, about the terrorist attack. Timothy McVeigh was a vicious terrorist. He was arrested. Terrorism is still on the books, internationally and nationally, it's a crime and we should deal with it.

We dealt with it rather well with Timothy McVeigh. But why I really fear it is we have drifted into a condition that we were warned against because our early founders were very clear. They said, don't be willing to sacrifice liberty for security.

Today it seems too easy that our government and our congresses are so willing to give up our liberties for our security. I have a personal belief that you never have to give up liberty for security. You can still provide security without sacrificing our Bill of Rights.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: I want to bring others in, but do you want to respond, Mr. Speaker?

GINGRICH: Yes. Timothy McVeigh succeeded. That's the whole point.

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: Timothy McVeigh killed a lot of Americans. I don't want a law that says after we lose a major American city, we're sure going to come and find you. I want a law that says, you try to take out an American city, we're going to stop you.

(APPLAUSE)

PAUL: This is like saying that we need a policeman in every house, a camera in every house because we want to prevent child-beating and wife-beating. You can prevent crimes by becoming a police state. So if you advocate the police state, yes, you can have safety and security and you might prevent a crime, but the crime then will be against the American people and against our freedoms. And we will throw out so much of what our revolution was fought for. So don't do it so carelessly.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Congresswoman Bachmann, let me bring you into this conversation. Are you with Congressman Paul or Speaker Gingrich or do you have your own view?

BACHMANN: Well, I'm with the American people, with the Constitution, and with the job of the commander-in-chief as the number one duty of the president of the United States.

We have to realize we're in a very different war, with very different techniques that are used for that war, and very different bad actors than we've had before in the terrorists and their motivations are very different.

We can't forget that technology is completely different. When we were looking at prior laws, phones were wired in to walls. That's not how it works any more. Today we deal with wireless functions. And we have to completely change the way that we go about investigating.

This is one thing we know about Barack Obama. He has essentially handed over our interrogation of terrorists to the ACLU. He has outsourced it to them. Our CIA has no ability to have any form of interrogation for terrorists.

When the bomber -- or the attempted bomber over Detroit, the underwear bomber was intercepted, he was given Miranda warnings within 45 minutes. He was not an American citizen. We don't give Miranda warnings to terrorists, and we don't read them their rights. They don't have any.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Governor Huntsman, where do you stand on the Patriot Act? Do you believe it's un-American, as Congressman Paul has suggested?

HUNTSMAN: I think we have to be very careful in protecting our individual liberties. We forget sometimes that we have a name brand in this world. And I have seen it shine living overseas. And when our light shines based on the values that we live up to and represent, it moves people, it moves countries, it moves events like nothing else can.

We are a nation of values. And forever, like what we're trying to do in this debate tonight, we'll try to find that balancing act between our individual liberties and security. But we also have to remember as we're talking about security, I see Tom Ridge in the audience here, a great former secretary of Homeland Security. He will tell you, he will tell you that we cannot secure the homeland out of Washington, D.C., itself. We've got to make sure that we have partnerships with governors and mayors, that this is a national effort.

No longer can we compartmentalize intelligence. Those are the old days. Today we've got to share. We've got to make sure that we are prepared as a people, we are prepared not only as a federal government, but we're prepared as well as a local government in a collaborative and sharing kind of relationship.

BLITZER: I'm going to give everyone a chance to respond, but let me get this one question from CNN Politics, that came to cnnpolitics.com, and then we'll bring in the rest of you.

This was the question: "TSA pat-downs: violation of civil liberty or a necessity to ensure national security?"

Governor Romney?

ROMNEY: Well, we can do a lot better than the TSA system. It's going to get better over time. We can use better technology. We can also identify people who are lower risk and allow them to go through the process more quickly than the current process.

But let's come back to the issue that seems to be so confusing here.

And that is Congressman Paul talked about crime. Newt Gingrich was right. There are different categories here. There's crime and there are rights that are afforded to American citizens under our Constitution and those that are accused of crime. Then there's war. And the tool of war being used today in America and around the world is terror. There's a different body of law that relates to war.

And for those that understand the difference between the two, they recognize that we need tools when war is waged domestically to ensure that, as president of the United States, you can fulfill your first responsibility, which is to protect the life, liberty and property of American citizens and defend them from foes domestic and foreign.

And that means, yes, we'll use the Constitution and criminal law for those people who commit crimes, but those who commit war and attack the United States and pursue treason of various kinds, we will use instead a very different form of law, which is the law afforded to those who are fighting America.

that we need tools when war is waged domestically to ensure that as president of the United States you can fulfill your first responsibility which is to protect the life, liberty and property of American citizens and defend them from foes domestic and foreign. That means yes we'll use the constitution and criminal law for those people who commit crimes but those who commit war and attack the United States and pursue treason of various kinds we will use instead a very different form of law which is the law afforded to those who are fighting America.

BLITZER: Governor Perry...

(APPLAUSE)

... you proposed legislation that would criminalize these TSA pat-downs under certain circumstances.

PERRY: Right.

BLITZER: Explain what you have in mind.

PERRY: Well, here's what I would do with the TSA; I would privatize it as soon as I could and get rid of those unions.

(APPLAUSE)

It's working in Denver. They have a program where they're privatizing it. And the airlines and other private-sector groups work together to do the security in our airports. And it makes abundant good sense.

And I agree with most of my colleagues here on the stage when we talk about the Patriot Act. And we need to keep it in place. We need to have -- strengthen it if that's what's required, to update it with new technologies as they come along, Newt.

But here's the other issue that I think we've really failed at, and that is in our ability to collect intelligence around the world. And this administration in particular has been an absolute failure when it comes to expending the dollars and supporting the CIA and the military intelligence around the world, to be able to draw in that intelligence that is going to truly be able to allow us to keep the next terrorist attack from happening on American soil.

BLITZER: Senator Santorum, under certain circumstances in the past, you've supported profiling. Is that correct?

SANTORUM: I have.

BLITZER: What do you have in mind?

SANTORUM: Well, I mean, I think TSA is a good example of that. We should be trying to find the bomber, not the bomb. Other countries have done it. Israel is probably the best example of that.

But to put this enormous expense on the federal government, to put the enormous expense on the traveling public for -- for pat-downs and other intrusions, I think, is too much money. I agree with Governor Perry; I actually voted when I -- when this bill came up, I voted to allow for privatization. I was not for this being a government function. I thought it could be a private function.

But the issue of the Patriot Act is -- is a little different. We are at war. The last time we had a -- we had a threat at home like this -- obviously, it was much more of a threat at home -- was during the Civil War.

And, of course, Abraham Lincoln ran right over civil rights. Why? Because we had a present domestic threat. In the previous wars that we've had, we haven't had this type of threat that we have here in the homeland. And we have to deal with it differently.

I disagree with Governor Huntsman. He made some good points. And we have had the debate. It's been an open debate. It's really shown the values of our country, that we can engage in this open debate and balance those interests, and I think we have done so appropriately.

BLITZER: So just to be precise, is it ethnic profiling, religious profiling? Who would be profiled?

SANTORUM: Well, the folks who are most likely to be committing these crimes. If you look at -- I mean, obviously, it was -- obviously, Muslims would be -- would be someone you'd look at, absolutely. Those are the folks who are -- the radical Muslims are the people that are committing these crimes, as we've -- by and large, as well as younger males.

I mean, these are things that -- not exclusively -- but these are things that you profile to -- to find your best -- the most likely candidate.

BLITZER: Congressman Paul?

PAUL: That's digging a...

(APPLAUSE)

That's digging a hole for ourselves. What if they look like Timothy McVeigh? You know, he was a pretty tough criminal.

I think we're using too much carelessness in the use of words that we're at war. I don't remember voting on -- on a declared -- declaration of war. Oh, we're against terrorism.

(APPLAUSE)

And terrorism is a tactic. It isn't a person. It isn't a people. So this is a very careless use of words. What about this? Sacrifice liberties because there are terrorists? You're the judge and the jury? No, they're suspects.

And they have changed the -- in the -- in DOD budget they have changed the wording on the definition of al-Qaeda and Taliban. It's anybody associated with organizations, which means almost anybody can be loosely associated so that makes all Americans vulnerable.

And now we know that American citizens are vulnerable to assassination.

So I would be very cautious about protecting the rule of law. It will be a sacrifice that you'll be sorry for. (APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Herman Cain, let's bring you into this conversation. Are you with Senator Santorum when he says that there should be religious profiling, that Muslims in particular should get extra screening when they go -- go through airports?

CAIN: I believe we can do a whole lot better with TSA. And I called it, targeted identification.

BLITZER: What does that mean?

CAIN: We can do -- we can do -- targeted identification. If you take a look at the people who are trying to kill us, it would be easy to figure out exactly what that identification profile looks like.

But I want -- but I want to make sure that I get to the Patriot Act. So I believe we can do a whole better. The answer, I believe, also may be privatization.

Now, relative to the Patriot Act, if there are some areas of the Patriot Act that we need to refine, I'm all for that. But I do not believe we ought to throw out the baby with the bathwater for the following reason. The terrorists have one objective that some people don't seem to get. They want to kill all of us.

So we should use every mean possible to kill them first or identify them first -- first.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Now, just to be precise, Mr. Cain. I just want to -- I'll give you a chance. Is it OK for Muslim Americans to get more intensive pat downs or security when they go through airports than Christian Americans or Jewish Americans?

CAIN: No, Blitz. That's oversimplifying it. I happen to believe that if -- if you allow our intelligence agencies to do their job they can come up with an approach -- I'm sorry, Blitz, I meant Wolf, OK?

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE)

This was -- since we on a -- since we on a blitz debate, I apologize. Wolf, what I'm saying is let's ask the professionals to give us an approach of how we can increase the identification of people that might be a danger to civilians as well as a danger to this nation.

BLITZER: Thank you, Cain.

(LAUGHTER)

(APPLAUSE) All right. Go ahead. We have another question. Please give us your name and the organization you represent.

QUESTION: I'm Fred Kagan, resident scholar and director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute.

And my question is, the raid that killed Osama bin Laden was obviously an important success in the struggle against al-Qaeda, although it also drove U.S. relations with Pakistan into a new low.

Do you think that an expanded drone campaign in Pakistan would be sufficient to defeat al-Qaeda and to secure our interests in Pakistan?

BLITZER: Governor Huntsman?

HUNTSMAN: Let me just say that as we talk about foreign policy, let's be reminded that in order to have an effective foreign policy we need a Washington that works.

Today we have a president who can't lead. We have a Congress that can't even figure out how to balance our budget. They need term limits, by the way. We've gotta get our house in order if we...

(APPLAUSE)

Thank you. We've gotta get our house in order if we're gonna expect to get anything done overseas because when our light shines we can influence the rest of the world.

Pakistan is a concern. That's the country that ought to keep everybody up at night. You have not President Zardari in charge but General Kayani over the military, which also is responsible for ISI.

You've got the youngest demographic of the 160 million people in Pakistan. You've got a Mdrasha movement. You've got over 100 nuclear weapons. You've got trouble on the border.

You've got a nation-state that is a candidate for failure. And I say it's a haven for bad behavior. It's a haven -- it's -- it's a haven for training the people who seek to do us harm. And an expanded drone program is something that would serve our national interest.

I think it must be done. And I think it must be consistent with recognizing the reality on the ground of what we need out of Afghanistan -- we don't need 100,000 troops in Afghanistan.

We don't need to nation-build in Afghanistan when this nation so desperately needs to be built.

BLITZER: We're gonna get to Afghanistan.

HUNTSMAN: But we need something. We need something in Afghanistan.

BLITZER: Congresswoman Bachmann, we'll be bringing you in. You're a member... HUNTSMAN: We need Special Forces and drones.

BLITZER: All right. You're a member of the Intelligence Committee. Do you think, as Governor Perry has said, that Pakistan should no longer receive U.S. aid because they've shown they're not a good friend, ally of the United States?

BACHMANN: Pakistan has been the epicenter of dealing with terrorism. They are, as Governor Huntsman said, there are al-Qaeda training grounds there. There's also the Haqqani network that can be trained there as well.

And they also are one of the most violent, unstable nations that there is. We have to recognize that 15 of the sites, nuclear sites are available or are potentially penetrable by jihadists. Six attempts have already been made on nuclear sites. This is more than an existential threat. We have to take this very seriously.

The United States has to be engaged. It is complicated. We have to recognize that the Chinese are doing everything that they can to be an influential party in Pakistan. We don't want to lose influence.

I'm answering your question. You asked me about the money that the United States gives to Pakistan. This is a -- this is a dual answer. A nation that lies, that does everything possibly that you could imagine wrong, at the same time they do share intelligence data with us regarding Al Qaida.

We need to demand more. The money that we are sending right now is primarily intelligence money to Pakistan. It is helping the United States. Whatever our action is, it must ultimately be about helping the United States and our sovereignty...

BLITZER: So...

BACHMANN: ... our safety and our security.

BLITZER: ... you would continue that aid to Pakistan?

BACHMANN: I -- at this point I would continue that aid, but I do think that the Obama policy of keeping your fingers crossed is not working in Pakistan,. And I also think that Pakistan is a nation, that it's kind of like too nuclear to fail. And so we've got to make sure that we take that threat very seriously.

BLITZER: Governor Perry?

PERRY: I understand where she's coming from, but the bottom line is that they've showed us time after time that they can't be trusted. And until Pakistan clearly shows that they have America's best interests in mind, I would not send them one penny, period.

I think it is important for us to send the message to those across the world that, if you are not going to be an ally of the United States, do not expect a dime of our citizens' money to be coming into your country. That is the way we change foreign policy. Now, if we want to engage these countries with our abilities and our companies that go in, and help to economically build these countries up, rather than just writing a blank check to them, then we can have that conversation, because I think that is a change in foreign policy that would be adequate and appropriate and a positive move for us.

But to write a check to countries that are clearly not representing American interests is nonsensical.

BLITZER: You want to respond, Congresswoman Bachmann?

BACHMANN: Well, I -- with all due respect to the governor, I think that's highly naive, because, again, we have to recognize what's happening on the ground. These are nuclear weapons all across this nation. And, potentially, Al Qaida could get hold of these weapons.

These weapons could find their way out of -- out of Pakistan, into New York City or into Washington, D.C., and a nuclear weapon could be set off in this city. That's how serious this is. We have to maintain an American presence.

They certainly aren't looking out for the best interests of the United States. I wouldn't expect them to. But at the same time, we have to have our interests, which is national security, represented. The best way we can do that with an uneven actor state is to have some sort of presence there.

BLITZER: I just want to give Governor Perry the chance to respond.

She just said your views are highly naive.

PERRY: And I -- absolutely we need to be engaged in that part of the world. I never said for us not to be engaged. I just said we need to quit writing blank checks to these countries, and then letting them decide how these dollars are going to be spent.

We've got Afghanistan and India working in concert right now to leverage Pakistan. I think if we would create a trade zone in that part of the world, where you have all of those countries working together, that may be the answer to getting Pakistan to understand that they have to work with all of the countries in that region.

BLITZER: All right, I want to move on.

(CROSSTALK)

BLITZER: I want to move on, but you'll have a chance -- you'll have a chance to respond...

BACHMANN: If I can just -- Wolf, if I could just...

BLITZER: Very quickly.

BACHMANN: ... clarify, we're not writing just blank checks. We're also exchanging intelligence information. So we aren't writing blank checks in that region.

BLITZER: All right. Let's take another question from the audience.

Please give us your name and your organization.

QUESTION: Israel Ortega (ph) with the Heritage Foundation.

Is the money that we've drawn back from U.S. troops in Afghanistan really worth the risk of allowing Taliban to expand territories, and Al Qaida to grow safe sanctuaries?

BLITZER: Governor Romney, \$2 billion a week the United States is spending right now in Afghanistan, \$2 billion, more than \$100 billion a year. And U.S. troops are supposed to stay for another three years at least, till the end of 2014. Is that money well spent?

ROMNEY: We spent about \$450 billion so far, 1,700 or so service men and women have lost their lives there, and many tens of thousands have been wounded. Our effort there is to keep Afghanistan from becoming a launching point for terror against the United States. We can't just write off a major part of the world.

Pakistan is the sixth largest country in the world. We can't just say goodbye to all of -- of what's going on in that part of the world.

Instead, we want to draw them toward modernity. And for that to happen, we don't want to literally pull up stakes and run out of town after the extraordinary investment that we've made. And that means we should have a gradual transition of handing off to the Afghan security forces the responsibility for their own country.

And for the region, what happened in Indonesia back in the 1960s, where -- where we helped Indonesia move toward modernity with new leadership. We -- we brought them in the technology that allowed them to trade in the world.

We need to bring Pakistan into the 21st century -- or the 20th century, for that matter, so that they -- they can engage throughout the world with trade and with modernity.

Right now, American approval level in -- in Pakistan is 12 percent. We're not doing a very good job with this huge investment we make of \$4.5 billion a year. We can do a lot better directing that to encourage people to take advantage of the extraordinary opportunities the West and freedom represent for their people.

BLITZER: Now, Governor Huntsman, do you agree with Governor Romney that the U.S. has to stay in Afghanistan at these levels?

HUNTSMAN: No, I -- I totally disagree. I think we need to square with the American people about what we've achieved. We need an honest conversation in this country about the sacrifices that have been made over nearly 10 years. We have -- we have dismantled the Taliban. We've run them out of Kabul. We've had free elections in 2004. We've killed Osama bin Laden. We've upended, dismantled al Qaeda. We have achieved some very important goals for the United States of America.

Now, the fact that we have 100,000 troops nation-building in Afghanistan when this nation so desperately needs to be built, when, on the ground, we do need intelligence gathering, no doubt about that. We need a strong Special Forces presence. We need a drone presence. And we need some ongoing training of the Afghan National Army.

But we haven't done a very good job defining and articulating what the end point is in Afghanistan. And I think the American people are getting very tired about where we find ourselves today.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Let me let Governor Romney respond.

ROMNEY: Well, let me respond.

Are you suggesting, Governor, that we just take all our troops out next week or what -- what's your proposal?

HUNTSMAN: Did you hear what I just said?

I said we should draw down from 100,000. We don't need 100,000 troops. We don't need 100,000 troops in Afghanistan...

(CROSSTALK)

HUNTSMAN: -- many of whom can't even cross the wire. We need a presence on the ground that is more akin to 10,000 or 15,000.

That will serve our interests in terms of intelligence gathering and Special Forces response capability. And we need to prepare for a world, not just in South Asia, but, indeed, in every corner of the world in which counter-terror -- counter-terrorism is going to be in front of us for as far as the eye can see into the 21st century.

ROMNEY: And the -- and the commanders on the ground feel that we should bring down our surge troops by December of 2012 and bring down all of our troops, other than, perhaps, 10,000 or so, by the end of -- of 2014.

The decision to pull our troops out before that, they believe, would put at risk the extraordinary investment of treasure and blood which has been sacrificed by the American military.

I stand with the commanders in this regard and have no information that suggests that pulling our troops out faster than that would do anything but put at -- at great peril the extraordinary sacrifice that's been made. This is not time for America to cut and run. We have been in for 10 years. We are winding down. The Afghan troops are picking up the capacity to secure their country. And the mission is pretty straightforward, and that is to allow the Afghan people to have a sovereign nation not taken over by the Taliban. BLITZER: Let me bring the speaker in. What do you say...

GINGRICH: I would...

BLITZER: -- pull out?

HUNTSMAN: Just -- just one point.

BLITZER: You want -- oh, go ahead.

HUNTSMAN: Yes, just about the generals on the ground. And listen, I think it's important for the American people to know we have achieved some very important objectives in raising standards in Afghanistan and helping to build civil society.

But at the end of the day, the president of the United States is commander-in-chief, commander-in-chief. Of course you're going to listen to the generals. But...

(APPLAUSE)

HUNTSMAN: -- I also remember when people listened to the generals in 1967 and we heard a certain course of action in South Asia that didn't serve our interests very well.

The president is the commander-in-chief and ought to be informed by a lot of different voices, including of those of his generals Jr.) on the ground.

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich?

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: It's...

ROMNEY: Look, I've got a good -- he gets a response, I get a response.

BLITZER: All right.

ROMNEY: Of course the commander-in-chief makes -- make the final decision.

PAUL: How about the rest of us?

ROMNEY: Of course the final -- look...

PAUL: How about us who haven't had a response?

BLITZER: (INAUDIBLE) got a chance.

ROMNEY: Of course the commander-in-chiefs makes the -- makes the final decision. But the commander-in-chief makes that decision based upon the input of people closest to the ground. And -- and we -- we've both been to Afghanistan. I've been to Afghanistan. The people I speak with there say we have a very good prospect of the people in Afghanistan being able to secure the peace and their sovereignty from the Taliban, but that if we pull out on a precipitous basis, as Governor Huntsman suggests, that we could well see that nation and Pakistan get pulled into terror and become another launching point to go after America. That's a mistake. That's why you listen and then make your decision.

BLITZER: Speaker?

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: Well, Wolf, I'm a little confused about exactly what we're currently debating, because I think -- I think we tend to get down to these narrow questions that -- that, in a sense, don't get at the -- at the core issues.

The very first question I thought about Pakistan is the one that should be the starting point.

The gentleman said that when we went in and killed bin Laden, that we drove U.S.-Pakistan -- did I have -- is this like a 30-second response?

BLITZER: Go ahead.

GINGRICH: I mean, I'm happy to play by the rules, I just want to know what they are. But I think this is the heart of the American dilemma. We were told, a perfectly natural Washington assumption that our killing bin Laden in Pakistan drove U.S.-Pakistan relations to a new low.

To which my answer is, well, it should have because we should be furious.

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: Now, and that's where this has got to start. You want to keep American troops in Afghanistan, you accept hot pursuit, you say no sanctuaries, you change the rules of engagement, you put the military in charge of the military side, you overhaul the State Department and AID so they get the job done, and you do it for real and you do it intensely, and you tell the Pakistanis, help us or get out of the way, but don't complain if we kill people you're not willing to go after on your territory where you have been protecting them.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Senator Santorum?

SANTORUM: I agree with Ron Paul. We are not fighting a war on terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic. We're fighting a war against radical Islam. And what radical Islam is telling -- all of the radical Islamist leaders are saying is that just wait America out, America is weak, they will not stand for the fight, they cannot maintain this, they'll set time limits, politics will interfere, and we will tell the people in Afghanistan, we will tell the people in Iraq and other places that we will be the strong horse in the region.

And President Obama, by making political decision after political decision about timelines and constraints on rules of engagement, has validated everything these radical Islamists are saying.

So the answer to you, Jon, is that you're doing exactly -- Governor Huntsman, is that you're doing exactly what all of the radical leaders are saying that America will do, that we are not in this to win, we are going to play politics with this, and then we will find this problem in Afghanistan on our shores in a very short order.

BLITZER: We are going to come to Congressman Cain (sic) in a moment. But just hold your horses for a second because we're going to take a quick break. Much more coming up. The former chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff calls this the number one threat to America's national security. The candidates will answer that question on this topic, coming up next.

We want you to send us your questions for the candidates. Go to cnnpolitics.com or facebook.com/cnnpolitics or on twitter use #cnndebate. Our coverage of this historic debate at Constitution Hall in Washington continues in a moment.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: Welcome back to historic Constitution Hall here in the nation's capital.

(APPLAUSE)

We're continuing the CNN national security debate. Let's go right to the audience. We have a question from the audience.

(APPLAUSE)

Go ahead with your question.

Hello?

No question from the audience.

Yes, we do. We do have a question from the audience.

(LAUGHTER)

We were waiting for you.

(LAUGHTER)

QUESTION: I'm Mike Gonzalez (ph) of the Heritage Foundation.

BLITZER: Thank you.

QUESTION: If Israel attacked Iran to prevent Tehran from getting nuclear weapons, would you help Israel launch the attack or support it otherwise? BLITZER: All right. We've got the question. Let me ask Herman Cain first. Did you get the question?

CAIN: I didn't quite get the question.

BLITZER: If -- the specific question is, if Israel attacked Iran to prevent Tehran from getting nuclear weapons, would you help Israel launch the attack or support it otherwise?

CAIN: I would first make sure that they had a credible plan for success, clarity of mission and clarity of success.

Remember, when you talk about attacking Iran, it is a very mountainous region. The latest reports say that there may be 40 different locations, and I would want to make sure that we had a good idea from intelligence sources where these are located.

And if Israel had a credible plan that it appeared as if they could succeed, I would support Israel, yes. And in some instances, depending upon how strong the plan is, we would join with Israel for that, if it was clear what the mission was and it was clear what the definition of victory was.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Congressman Paul, would you support Israel and help Israel in such an attack?

PAUL: No, I wouldn't do that.

(LAUGHTER)

But there would be good reasons because I don't expect it to happen. Because, you know, the Mossad leader that just retired said it would be the stupidest thing to do in the world. And it's a big argument over in Israel. They're not about to do this.

They've just polled 40 major experts on foreign policy here by the National Journal. Not one of them said there should be a unilateral attack on -- on the sites in -- in Iran.

So that's not going to happen. And if it did -- you're supposing that if it did, why does Israel need our help? We need to get out of their way. I mean, we interfere with them. We interfere with them...

(LAUGHTER)

... when they deal with their borders. When they want to have peace treaties, we tell them what they can do because we buy their allegiance and they sacrifice their sovereignty to us. And then they decide they want to bomb something, that's their business, but they should, you know, suffer the consequences. When they bombed the Iraqi missile site, nuclear site, back in the '80s, I was one of the few in Congress that said it's none of our business and Israel should take care of themselves. Israel has 200, 300 nuclear missiles. And they can take care of themselves. Why should we commit -- we don't even have a treaty with Israel. Why do we have this automatic

commitment that we're going to send our kids and send our money endlessly to Israel? So I think they're quite capable of taking care of themselves.

I think we do detriment -- just think of all the money we gave to Egypt over 30 or 40 years. Now, look, we were buying friendship. Now there's a civil war, they're less friendly to Israel.

The whole thing is going to backfire once we go bankrupt and we remove our troops, so I think we should be very cautious in our willingness to go to war and send troops without a proper declaration by the U.S. Congress.

BLITZER: Let me let Herman Cain respond.

(APPLAUSE)

CAIN: Thank you.

I stated if the mission and the plan were clear, that it could succeed, but I pointed out that that is highly unlikely, given the terrain, the mountainous terrain in Iran.

But here's the other reason that we should help Israel in an initiative live that. Back to Afghanistan: if we pull out of Afghanistan too soon, Iran is going to help to fulfill that power vacuum in Afghanistan. And so it is in our best interests, the United States of America, to prevent them from being able to help fill that power vacuum in Afghanistan.

BLITZER: Let's stay on this subject. And I want all of you to weigh in. We have another question.

Please give us your name and your organization.

QUESTION: Good evening. I'm Danielle Pletka (ph); I'm the Vice President for Foreign and Defense Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute. Yesterday the United States and the U.K. slapped new sanctions on Iran. But we haven't bought oil directly from Iran in over 30 years. We've had targeted sanctions on Iran for more than half that time.

Nonetheless, Iran is probably less than a year away from getting a nuclear weapon. Do you believe that there is any set of sanctions that could be put in place that would stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon?

BLITZER: Let's go to Governor Perry. What do you think?

PERRY: Absolutely. We need to sanction the Iranian Central Bank. That would be one of the most powerful ways to impact that. As a matter of fact, Congressman Paul, that is what we need to do before we ever start having any conversations about a military strike, is to use every sanction that we have. And when you sanction the Iranian Central Bank, that will shut down that economy. At that particular point in time, they truly have to deal with the United States. And it's one of the reasons that I call for the -- there is an area over there, of all of them working together -- and I'm talking about Syria -- and bringing them into the mix as well.

As I called for, one of the options is to have a no-fly zone over Syria at the same time you're putting those types of sanctions against Iran. And in that moment, they will understand that America is serious. This President refuses to do that, and it's another show of lack of leadership from the President of the United States.

BLITZER: The argument, Speaker Gingrich -- and I know you've studied this, and I want you to weigh in -- on the sanctioning of the Iranian Central Bank, because if you do that, for all practical purposes, it cuts off Iranian oil exports, 4 million barrels a day.

The Europeans get a lot of that oil. They think their economy, if the price of gasoline skyrocketed, which it would, would be disastrous. That's why the pressure is on the U.S. to not impose those sanctions. What say you?

GINGRICH: Well, I say you -- the question you just asked is perfect, because the fact is we ought to have a massive all-sources energy program in the United States designed to, once again, create a surplus of energy here, so we could say to the Europeans pretty cheerfully, that all the various sources of oil we have in the United States, we could literally replace the Iranian oil.

Now that's how we won World War II.

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: So, I think you put your finger, Wolf, on the -- on the -- you know, we all get sucked into these tactical discussions. We need a strategy of defeating and replacing the current Iranian regime with minimum use of force. We need a strategy, as Rick Santorum was saying, of being honest about radical Islam and designing a strategy to defeat it wherever it happens to exist.

We need a strategy in central Asia that recognizes that, frankly, if you're Pashtun, you don't care whether you're in Pakistan or Afghanistan, because you have the same tribal relationships. So we need to be much more strategic and less tactical in our discussion.

But if we were serious, we could break the Iranian regime, I think, within a year, starting candidly with cutting off the gasoline supply to Iran, and then, frankly, sabotaging the only refinery they have.

BLITZER: But sanctions on the Iranian Central Bank now, is that a good idea or a bad idea?

GINGRICH: I think it's a good idea if you're serious about stopping them having nuclear -- I mean, I think replacing the regime before they get a nuclear weapon without a war beats replacing the regime with war, which beats allowing them to have a nuclear weapon. Those are your three choices.

BLITZER: I want Congresswoman Bachmann to weigh in. Go ahead.

(APPLAUSE)

BACHMANN: I agree with all of that. And energy independence is something that President Obama certainly has avoided.

BLITZER: But that's going to take many years.

BACHMANN: It -- it will but the president -- almost every decision that the president has made since he came in has been one to put the United States in a position of unilateral disarmament including the most recent decision he made to cancel the Keystone Pipeline.

That would have not only created jobs but it would have helped us in energy independence.

But I want to go back to something. That's the fact why is it that we're talking about Israel having to make a strike against Iran? It's because Iran has announced they plan to strike Israel.

They've stated, as recently as August just before President Ahmadinejad came to -- to the U.N. General Assembly. He said that he wanted to eradicate Israel from the face of the earth.

He has said that if he has a nuclear weapon he will use it to wipe Israel off the face of the earth. He will use it against the United States of America.

This isn't just an idle threat. This is a reality. And that's why President Obama has -- has failed the American people because for two and a half years he gave the Iran the luxury of time.

He met with them with no preconditions. It's the doctrine of appeasement. He has changed the course of history because at the time when we needed a leader most, we didn't have one.

That's what I'll do differently as President of the United States. I'll lead.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Thank you. All right. I -- I -- I want to -- I want to -- we're gonna continue this but we have another question from Paul Wolfowitz. Go ahead.

QUESTION: My name is Paul Wolfowitz. I'm a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and my question is about development assistance.

Under George W. Bush, who was a conservative Republican, the United States spent billions of dollars to fight AIDS and malaria in Africa and elsewhere and set up the Millennium Challenge Corporation to encourage governments of poor countries to pursue policies that promote economic growth and job creation.

Do you believe those are still wise expenditures? Or do you think we can no longer afford them?

BLITZER: Senator Santorum?

SANTORUM: Well, as the author of the Global Fund Bill and the Millennium Challenge in the United States Senate and someone who worked with the president on PEPFAR to deal with the issue of AIDS in Africa, I believe it's absolutely essential.

Africa was a country on the brink. On the brink of complete meltdown and chaos, which would have been fertile ground for the radical Islamists to be able to -- to get -- to get a foothold.

We're seeing it already. But the work that we've done in stabilizing that area, while humanitarian in nature, was absolutely essential for our national security.

And I hear people up here talking about zeroing out foreign aid and humanitarian aid in particular. I think that's absolutely the wrong course.

You want to -- you want to spend more money on the military, zero out all the things we do to develop relationships around the world and we will spend a lot more money on the military.

It's important for us to use all the assets we have. Promote our values. America is that shining city on the hill. It is -- it is the city that comes to the aid of those in trouble in America -- in the world.

We have done more good for America in Africa and in the third world by the things that we've done. And we have saved money and saved military deployments by wisely spending that money not on our enemies but on folks who can and will be our friends.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Herman Cain?

CAIN: Here again...

BLITZER: All right, here's the question. Can the United States afford to continue that kind of foreign assistance to Africa for AIDS, malaria -- could run into the billions of dollars? CAIN: It depends upon priorities. Secondly, it depends upon looking at the program and asking the question, has that aid been successful.

In other words, let's look at the whole problem. It may be worthwhile to continue. It may not. I would like to see the results.

Just like every program we have here domestically, what have the results been. Then we make a decision about how we prioritize.

BLITZER: Ron Paul?

PAUL: I -- I think the aid is all worthless. It doesn't do any good for most of the people. You take money from poor people in this country and you end up giving it to rich people in poor countries.

And they're used as weapons of war so you accomplish nothing. We should export some, maybe some principles about free markets and sound money and maybe they could produce some of their -- their own wealth.

But this whole idea of -- of talking about the endless wars and the endless foreign aid, it seems like nobody cares about the budget. I mean, we -- we're in big trouble and -- and -- and nobody wants to cut anything.

So if you're gonna keep sending foreign aid overseas and these endless wars that you don't have to declare and -- and go into Libya without even consulting with the Congress, the biggest threat -- the biggest threat to our national security is our financial condition.

And this is just aggravating it.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Governor Romney?

ROMNEY: Congressman Paul, what they're doing is cutting a trillion dollars out of the defense budget. They're cutting a trillion dollars out of the defense budget, which just happens to equal the trillion dollars we're putting into "Obama-care."

And so what you have is a president that has a priority of spending us into bankruptcy, but he's not just spending us into bankruptcy, he's spending the money foolishly.

We need to protect America and protect our troops and our military and stop the idea of "Obama-care." That's the best way to save money, not the military.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Hold on one second because Ron Paul wants to respond to that point.

PAUL: Well, they're not cutting anything out of anything. All this talk is just talk.

(APPLAUSE)

PAUL: Believe me. They're cutting -- they're nibbling away at baseline budgeting, and its automatic increases. There's nothing cut against the military. And the people on the Hill are nearly hysterical because they're not going -- the budget isn't going up as rapidly as they want it to. It's a road to disaster. We had better wake up.

(APPLAUSE)

ROMNEY: OK. Let's just talk about what they're cutting with the first \$350 billion, not the next 600 which is coming down the road. The first \$350 billion, what do they cut? They stopped the F-22. They delayed aircraft carriers. They stopped the Navy cruiser system. They said long range Air Force bombers aren't going to be built. They're trying to cut our troops by 50,000. The list goes on.

They're cutting programs that are cutting the capacity of America to defend itself. Look, let's stand back for a moment, because we've been talking about Israel and Iran. What we're talking about here is a failure on the part of the president to lead with strength.

And that's why we have discussions about whether Israel should have to step in to stop the nuclear program, whether Iran is going to become nuclear. We have a president who pursued an agenda of saying we're going to be friendly to our foes and we're going to be disrespectful to our friends.

The right course in America is to stand up to Iran with crippling sanctions, indict Ahmadinejad for violating the Geneva -- or the Genocide Convention, put in place the kind of crippling sanctions that stop their economy. I know it's going to make gasoline more expensive. There's no price which is worth an Iranian nuclear weapon.

And the right course for Israel is to show that we care about Israel, that they are our friend, we'll stick with them. If I'm president of the United States, my first trip -- my first foreign trip will be to Israel to show the world we care about that country and that region.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. We're going to stay on this subject.

Go ahead.

ALISON ACOSTA FRASER, FORMER DEPUTY DIRECTOR, OKLAHOMA OFFICE OF STATE FINANCE: Hi, my name is Alison Acosta Fraser, and I'm the director of the Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at the Heritage Foundation. And my question is this, the next president will have to make some very, very tough choices in order to solve the nation's spending and debt crisis. Would you be willing to say that our national security is so paramount that cuts to the defense budget are unacceptable?

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich.

GINGRICH: No. I helped found the Military Reform Caucus in 1981 at the beginning of the Reagan buildup because it's clear that there are some things you can do in defense that are less expensive.

It's clear, if it takes 15 to 20 years to build a weapons system at a time when Apple changes technology every nine months, there's something profoundly wrong with this system. So I'm not going to tell you automatically I'm going to say yes. (APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: But let me make a deeper point. There's a core thing that's wrong with this whole city. You said earlier that it would take too long to open up American oil. We defeated Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan in three years and eight months because we thought we were serious.

If we were serious, we would open up enough oil fields in the next year that the price of oil worldwide would collapse. Now, that's what we would do if we were a serious country. If we were serious...

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: One last thing, if we were serious, we would apply Strong America Now's model of Lean Six Sigma, we would save \$500 billion a year by having an efficient effective federal government. We would open up federal lands, increasing dramatically both jobs and the amount of revenue of the federal government.

There are lots of things you can do if you decide break out of the current mindless bureaucracy of this city and just get the job done, including, by the way, making the Millennium Challenge work and doing it in a way that we actually help people even more effectively and at a much lower cost by having public/private partnerships.

BLITZER: I'm going to bring Governor Huntsman in, but very quickly, Mr. Speaker, would you, if you were president of the United States, bomb Iran's nuclear facilities to prevent it from becoming a nuclear power?

GINGRICH: Only as a last recourse and only as a step towards replacing the regime. No bombing campaign which leaves the regime in charge is going to accomplish very much in the long run. You have to seriously talk about regime replacement, not just attacking them.

But I will also say -- this is, I guess, where I disagree with my good friend Ron Paul. If my choice was to collaborate with the Israelis on a conventional campaign or force them to use their nuclear weapons, it will be an extraordinarily dangerous world if out of a sense of being abandoned they went nuclear and used multiple nuclear weapons in Iran. That would be a future none of us would want to live through.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Governor Huntsman, where do you stand on defense cuts?

HUNTSMAN: Well, let's face the economic reality. Let's face the deficit reality we have as a country. We have an economic deficit. And I'd argue that 70 percent debt-to-GDP is a national security problem because, at some point, you just don't grow any more, when your debt becomes that.

I mean, look at Japan. They're in their third decade of lost growth. Look at Greece. Look at Italy. So I'd say, aside from that, we've got another deficit in this country. It's called the trust deficit.

People have lost trust in their institutions of power in America. They don't trust Congress. They don't trust the executive branch. They don't trust Wall Street. The list goes on. We've got to fix both those deficits.

As it relates to defense spending, let's be realistic about this. We can't have an intellectually honest conversation about where we go with debt and spending with sacred cows. Everything's got to be on the table. The Defense Department's got to be on the table, for haven't sake. But we need to have a Defense Department and a budget for the Defense Department. If we can't find some savings in the \$650 billion budget, we're not looking closely enough.

But we need spending for the Department of Defense that follows a strategy. And that strategy needs to follow how we best protect the American people now that we're in the second decade of the 21st century.

And I believe our national security strategy and our foreign policy increasingly needs to follow, number one, economic policy.

It used to break my heart sitting in Beijing, the second largest embassy in the world, looking at neighboring Afghanistan. We'd have 100,000 troops there. The Chinese would move in and take the mining concession. And I'd say there's something fundamentally wrong with this picture.

When are we going to get with the program and determine that foreign policy will be driven by economics, that which plays right back to strengthening our core (ph)...

(APPLAUSE)

... and creates jobs here on the home front.

And, second of all, let's face the reality that we have a counterterrorism threat for as far as the eye can see.

Professor Wolfowitz was just up here. I know he's done a lot of work on -- for as far as the eye can see, and that means not only in Afghanistan but every corner of the world. We've got to prepare for the reality that counterterrorism is here to stay. We need friends and allies who are in this fight with us. We need special forces response capability. We need defense spending that will match the realities of where we find ourselves.

BLITZER: Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)

Let me bring in Governor Perry into this conversation.

As you know, the so-called supercommittee failed. And as a result, unless Congress takes action next year -- in an election year, that would be difficult -- there's not going to be any change in that automatic trigger as it's called. That sequestration, \$1.2 trillion cut, including \$600 billion in defense, will go into effect.

Here's the question. If you were president of the United States, would you compromise with Democrats in Congress in order to avoid that Washington gridlock that, if you believe the polls, the American people hate?

PERRY: I don't think anybody is particularly surprised that a supercommittee failed. It was a super-failure. And I think we expected that. We had a president of the United States who is not a leader. He pitched this over to them and said, here, you all figure this out.

I've signed six balanced budgets as the head of the state of Texas. I worked with those legislators on a daily basis, or my staff.

This president has been an absolute failure when it came to this budget process. And the idea -- it was almost reprehensible to me. I've worn the uniform of this country. I've been the commander in chief of the 20-plus-thousand National Guard troops that we have in Texas, Dr. Paul.

But it was reprehensible, for me, for this president to stand in front of Americans and to say that that half a trillion dollars, \$500 million-plus is not going to be on the table and we're just going to have to work our way through it, putting young men and women's life in jeopardy.

And I will tell you, as a commander in chief, as an American citizen, that is totally and absolutely irresponsible. Even his own secretary of defense said it was irresponsible. As a matter of fact, if Leon Panetta is an honorable man, he should resign in protest.

BLITZER: Here's the question, though. Would you compromise -- all of you have said you wouldn't accept any tax increases at all, even if there were 10 -- 10 times as many spending cuts. So would you just let the gridlock continue, Governor Perry, or would you compromise under those circumstances?

PERRY: Listen, I've had to work with Democrats for the 10 years that I've been the governor of the state of Texas.

So the idea that you can't sit down and work with people on both sides of the aisle, but just to, you know, throw us into -- into that briar patch at this particular point in time and say, what would you do -- we would never have gotten into that situation if I were the president of the United States. I'd have been there working day in and day out so that we had a budget that not only -- I've laid out a clear plan to -- flat tax of 20 percent; cut the spending; and put a 20 percent corporate tax rate in. And, as a matter of fact, they ought to make the legislature, the Congress, part-time, and that would make as big an impact in this city as anything I can think of.

BLITZER: Let me bring Senator Santorum into this, because I covered Ronald Reagan's presidency. And, as you know -- and I'll read a quote. He wrote in his autobiography this: "If you got 75 of 80 percent of what you were asking for, I say you take it and fight for the rest later."

If you got 75 percent or 80 percent of what you wanted, would you make a deal with Democrats, increase some taxes in order to move on and fight the next battle the next day?

SANTORUM: It all depends on what the 75 percent and 85 percent is. If the -- if the things that you have to give up make what you're trying to accomplish harder to do -- in other words, reduce the deficit, what the Republicans -- why the Republicans are drawing a line in the sand, rightfully so, it's because what they're -- what the Democrats are attempting to do is increase taxes, which will slow down to the -- this economy, which will increase the deficit, reduce tax revenues, ultimately, and -- and increase government payments.

So you don't work against yourself. You -- you won't -- you -- you take ideas from the other side that you may not find particularly valuable, like spending cuts that you may not want. There are spending cuts that I would like to, you know, I mean there's things that I mentioned before, that I would stand -- stand firm on.

But in a compromise, yes, you do give up some things that you think maybe are critical spending. But you don't undermine the ability of this con -- economy to grow because of politics. This president has poisoned the well. He's campaigned all over this country, trying to divide group from group in order to -- to -- to win, you know, to -- to position himself to win this election and rally his troops. And what he's done is poisoned the well here in Congress.

I've worked together, I've got a long track record of bipartisan accomplishments where I kept to the principles. I use welfare reform as an example. Welfare reform, I stuck to my principles. We cut the welfare budget. We had -- we had time limits. We block granted to the states and we put a work requirement.

Did I compromise on things?

Yes. I compromised on some -- on some child care. I compromised on -- on some transportation.

So I got 75 percent. But it 100 percent changed the welfare system because we...

BLITZER: Thank you.

SANTORUM: -- stuck to our principles.

BLITZER: Let -- but let's stay on this subject, because I know many of you want to weigh in.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: We have another question.

ALEX BRILL: My name is Alex Brill and I'm a research fellow in the economics department at the American Enterprise Institute. Even if the super committee hadn't failed, the savings that they would have proposed would have been a drop in the bucket relative to the \$11 trillion deficit our country may face in the subsequent decade. In the decades after that, without entitlement reform, we'll borrow even more.

To strengthen our economy, to strengthen our country, what entitlement reform proposals would you make to address our long-term structural deficit?

BLITZER: Good question.

Speaker Gingrich?

GINGRICH: It's a great question and it raises the -- the core issue of really large scale change.

Yesterday in Manchester, I outlined a Social Security reform plan based on Chile and based on Galveston, Texas. In Chile, people who have now have the right to a personal Social Security savings account, for 30 years, the government of Chile has promised that if you don't have as much savings as you would get from Social Security, the government would make up the difference.

In 30 years time, they've paid zero dollars, even after '07 and '08 and '09, people slid from three times as much to one-and-a-half times as much, but they didn't go below the Social Security amount. The result is in Chile, for example, 72 percent -- they have 72 percent of the GDP in savings. It has -- it has increased the economy, increased the growth of jobs, increased the amount of wealth and it dramatically solves Social Security without a payment cut and without having to hurt anybody.

So I think you can have a series of entitlement reforms that, frankly, make most of this problem go away without going through the kind of austerity and pain that this city likes.

BLITZER: Let's talk about that, Congresswoman Bachmann.

Social Security, Medicare, health care -- what would you cut first?

What would you tackle if you were president of the United States?

BACHMANN: Let me answer that in the context of the super committee, because I was involved in the middle of that fight as a member of Congress this summer. And my voice said this. I said it's time for us to draw a line in the sand. We have sufficient revenues coming in to pay the interest on the debt.

But the real issue was, were we going to give Congress another \$2.4 billion in borrowing authority?

In other words, another blank check to the president. Because, again, consider the context. A little of four years ago, we were just over \$8 trillion in debt. We are now \$15 trillion in debt in just over four years. Now we're talking about -- if the gentleman is correct -- adding another \$11 trillion in debt over 10 years, or potentially \$8.5 trillion, according to the super committee.

All that they were asked to do is cut back on \$1.2 trillion of that increase in debt. We aren't even talking about the central issue, which is balancing the budget. We need to balance the budget and then chip away at the debt. This isn't Monopoly money.

Because what we need to recognize is that when we are sending interest money over to China, with whom we are highly in hock, we're not just sending our money. We're sending our power.

What will happen is that our national security and our military will decrease and our money will increase China's military. So think about that.

Our money will be used to grow China's military at the expense of the United States military. That should give every American pause.

BLITZER: All right. I want everybody to stand by and all of you are going to weigh in. We've got a lot more to discuss, important issues that we're talking about. Collect your thoughts for a moment.

More tough questions for the candidates including their plans for protecting the border, reducing illegal immigration -- we're live from Constitution Hall here in Washington, D.C. This is the CNN Republican National Security Debate.

(APPLAUSE)

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: Welcome back to the CNN National Security Debate.

The next President of the United States will certainly have to tackle conflicts in the Middle East. You're looking at these live pictures coming in from Cairo's Tahrir Square right now, the middle of the night in Egypt.

Thousands of Egyptians are again protesting their government as the Arab Spring continues into the winter months.

The candidates will weigh in on this and much, much more. We're being seen live, around the world right now. Remember, you can

send in your questions and comments at cnnpolitics.com; at Twitter, remember hash tag #cnndebate.

The Republican National Security Debate -- we'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: Welcome back to the historic Constitution Hall here in Washington, D.C. We're at the CNN Republican National Security Debate. Let's go right to the audience. We have a question. Please, give us your name and your organization. TRULUCK: Thank you. My name is Phil Truluck. I'm executive vice president and chief operating officer of The Heritage Foundation. And I'd like to thank all the candidates for joining us tonight. I know some of you may want to be in other places, but we appreciate you being here and sharing your views with us.

Let's -- I'd like to turn it back a little bit, a little closer to home, and talk about what's going on on the borders, our southern border. As all of you know, the drug-related crimes and violence are getting heavier and heavier in that area.

First, do you consider that to be a national interest threat? And, secondly, what could we be doing with the Mexican government to help stop these drug cartels?

BLITZER: Let's go to Governor Perry. You represent the state with the longest border with Mexico right now. What do you think you should do, if you were President of the United States, as far as using the United States military?

PERRY: Well, let me kind of broaden it out. I think it's time for a 21st century Monroe Doctrine. When you think about what we put in place in the -- in the 1820s, and then we used it again in the 1960s with the Soviet Union. We're seeing countries start to come in and infiltrate. We know that Hamas and Hezbollah are working in Mexico, as well as Iran, with their ploy to come into the United States.

We know that Hugo Chavez and the Iranian government has one of the largest -- I think their largest embassy in the world is in Venezuela. So the idea that we need to have border security with the United States and Mexico is paramount to the entire western hemisphere.

So putting that secure border in place with strategic fencing, with the boots on the ground, with the aviation assets, and then working with Mexico in particular, whether it's putting sanctions against the banks, whether it's working with them on security with Mexico, all of those together can make that country substantially more secure and our borders secure.

As the President of the United States, I will promise you one thing, that within 12 months of the inaugural, that border will be shut down, and it will be secure.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Congressman Paul, you're from Texas. Do you agree with your governor?

PAUL: Not entirely.

(LAUGHTER)

PAUL: No, the drug was mentioned. I think that's another war we ought to cancel, because it's... (APPLAUSE)

PAUL: ... to nobody's benefit. And that's where the violence is coming from. But, yes, we do have a national responsibility for our borders. What I'm, sort of, tired of is all the money spent and lives lost worrying about the borders between Pakistan and Afghanistan and forgetting about our borders between the United States and Mexico. We should think more about, you know, what we do at home.

We need better immigration services, obviously. But, you know, if you subsidize something or give people incentives, you get more of it. So if you give easy road to citizenship, you're going to have more illegals. If you have a weak economy, which is understandable and we should have prevented, that's understandable.

But giving -- mandating to the states and to Texas that we have to provide free medical care and free education, that's a great burden. It's a great burden to California and all the border states.

So I would say eliminate all these benefits and talk about eliminating the welfare state because it's detrimental not only to here but the people that come because that's the incentive to bring their families with them.

BLITZER: But I just want you to clarify. When you say cancel the war on drugs, does that mean legalize all these drugs? PAUL: I think the federal war on drugs is a total failure.

(APPLAUSE)

You can -- you can at least let sick people have marijuana because it's helpful, but compassionate conservatives say, well, we can't do this; we're going to put people who are sick and dying with cancer and they're being helped with marijuana, if they have multiple sclerosis -- the federal government's going in there and overriding state laws and putting people like that in prison.

Why don't we handle the drugs like we handle alcohol? Alcohol is a deadly drug. What about -- the real deadly drugs are the prescription drugs. They kill a lot more people than the illegal drugs.

So the drug war is out of control. I fear the drug war because it undermines our civil liberties. It magnifies our problems on the borders. We spend -- like me, over the last 40 years, \$1 trillion on this war. And believe me, the kids can still get the drugs. It just hasn't worked.

BLITZER: Herman Cain, let me let you...

(APPLAUSE)

... weigh in.

CAIN: Yes. Allow me to answer the gentleman's question. The answer is yes. An insecure border is a national security threat for the following reasons.

Number one, we know that terrorists have come into this country by way of Mexico. Secondly, 40 percent of the people in Mexico, according to a survey, already believe that their country is a failed state. Thirdly, the number of people killed in Mexico last year equals the number of people killed in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

So yes, so let's solve the whole problem. Number one, secure the border for real. Number two, enforce the laws that are already there. We don't need new laws. Number three, promote the current path to citizenship. Clean up the bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. so people can come through the front door instead of sneaking in the side door. And, number four, to deal with the illegals that are

already here, empower the states to do what the federal government is not capable of doing.

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Let's stay on this subject. Go ahead, please.

QUESTION: I have a question about high-skilled immigration. We hear a lot about low-skilled immigration, so I want to ask you about high-skilled immigration.

What would you do to ensure that the United States is as welcoming as possible to the world's skilled immigrants and entrepreneurs?

BLITZER: Senator Santorum?

SANTORUM: Well, as the son of a legal immigrant to this country, I strongly believe in legal immigration and believe we are that shining city on the hill, that our future -- if you look at all of the jobs that are being created in our economy today, a huge percentage of them come from the legal immigrants of this country -- country who have innovated, who created great products, who created great companies and employed lots of people.

That's one of the reasons that -- that I put together my economic plan, was to take all that great innovation that's coming as a result, in part, of legal immigration and make sure that those products that are being created are actually made here in America.

That's part of the problem that -- you know, Reaganomics was criticized as trickle-down. Problem is, we're not seeing that money trickle down to the blue-collar workers in America. And that's why I put forth a four-point economic plan to revitalize manufacturing that begins with zeroing out the corporate tax for manufacturers; also, regulatory reform, repatriation of profits, if invested in this country, to pay no taxes; and finally, energy policy that will explode the energy industry in this country.

We do those things, we'll not only have the innovation, which I support, coming from legal -- legal immigrants, but we'll have that money trickle down to blue-collar workers and we can see that income mobility that a lot of people are right in that is not happening in America.

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich, let me let you broaden out this conversation. Back in the '80s -- and you remember this well. I was covering you then. Ronald Reagan and you -- you voted for legislation that had a pathway to citizenship for illegal immigrants, as you well remember. There were, what, maybe 12 million, 10 million -- 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States right now.

Some called it amnesty then; they still call it amnesty now. What would you do if you were President of the United States, with these millions of illegal immigrants, many of whom have been in this country for a long time?

GINGRICH: Let me start and just say I think that we ought to have an H-1 visa that goes with every graduate degree in math, science and engineering so that people stay here.

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: You know, about five blocks down the street, you'll see a statue of Einstein. Einstein came here as an immigrant. So let's be clear how much the United States has drawn upon the world to be richer, better and more inclusive.

I did vote for the Simpson-Mazzoli Act. Ronald Reagan, in his diary, says he signed it -- and we were supposed to have 300,000 people get amnesty. There were 3 million. But he signed it because we were going to get two things in return. We were going to get control of the border and we were going to get a guest worker program with employer enforcement.

We got neither. So I think you've got to deal with this as a comprehensive approach that starts with controlling the border, as the governor said. I believe ultimately you have to find some system -- once you've put every piece in place, which includes the guest worker program, you need something like a World War II Selective Service Board that, frankly, reviews the people who are here.

If you're here -- if you've come here recently, you have no ties to this country, you ought to go home. period. If you've been here 25 years and you got three kids and two grandkids, you've been paying taxes and obeying the law, you belong to a local church, I don't think we're going to separate you from your family, uproot you forcefully and kick you out.

The Creeble Foundation is a very good red card program that says you get to be legal, but you don't get a pass to citizenship. And so there's a way to ultimately end up with a country where there's no more illegality, but you haven't automatically given amnesty to anyone.

BLITZER: Congresswoman Bachmann, you agree with the speaker?

BACHMANN: Well, I don't agree that you would make 11 million workers legal, because that, in effect, is amnesty. And I also don't agree that you would give the DREAM Act on a federal level. And those are two things that I believe that the speaker had been for, and he can speak for himself.

But those are two areas that I don't agree with. What I do think, though, is what Steve -- what Steve Jobs said to President Obama. He had said to President Obama that he had to move a great deal of his operation over to China because he couldn't find 30,000 engineers to be able to do the work that needed to be done.

That's what we want to do. We do want to have people. And I agree with the speaker, people like chemists and engineers, and people who are highly skilled.

We think about the United States and what's in the best interests of the United States. If we can utilize these workers, like Steve Jobs wanted to, then we need to offer those visas. That will help the United States. But I don't agree that we should make 11 million workers who are here illegally legal.

BLITZER: Let me let the speaker respond to that.

GINGRICH: Well, I mean, two things, first of all, in the DREAM Act, the one part that I like is the one which allows people who came here with their parents to join the U.S. military, which they could have done if they were back home, and if they serve on it with the U.S. military to acquire citizenship, which is something any foreigner can do.

And I don't see any reason to punish somebody who came here at three years of age, but who wants to serve the United States of America. I specifically did not say we'd make the 11 million people legal.

I do suggest if you go back to your district, and you find people who have been here 25 years and have two generations of family and have been paying taxes and are in a local church, as somebody who believes strongly in family, you'll have a hard time explaining why that particular subset is being broken up and forced to leave, given the fact that they've been law-abiding citizens for 25 years.

BLITZER: Congresswoman Bachmann, you want to respond?

(APPLAUSE)

BACHMANN: If I understood correctly, I think the speaker just said that that would make 11 people -- 11 million people who are here illegally now legal. That's really the issue that we're dealing with. And also, it would be the DREAM Act, the federal DREAM Act, which would offer taxpayer-subsidized benefits to illegal aliens. We need to move away from magnets (ph), not offer more.

BLITZER: Let's broaden it out.

Governor Romney, where do you stand? Are you with the speaker, that some of those illegal immigrants -- I think -- he didn't say all -- some of them, if they have roots, they belong to a church, for example, should be allowed to stay in this country? ROMNEY: Look, amnesty is a magnet. What when we have had in the past, programs that have said that if people who come here illegally are going to get to stay illegally for the rest of their life, that's going to only encourage more people to come here illegally.

The right course for our immigration system is to say we welcome people who want to come here legally. We're going to have a system that makes that easier and more transparent. But to make sure we're able to bring in the best and brightest -- and, by the way, I agree with the speaker in terms of -- I'd staple a green card to the diploma of anybody who's got a degree of math, science, a Masters degree, Ph.D.

We want those brains in our country. But in order to bring people in legally we've got to stop illegal immigration. That means turning off the magnets of amnesty, in-state tuition for illegal aliens, employers that knowingly hire people that have come here illegally.

We welcome legal immigration. This is a party, this is a party that loves legal immigration. But we have to stop illegal immigration for all the reasons the questioner raised, which is, it is bringing in people who in some cases can be terrorists, in other cases they become burdens on our society.

And we have to finally have immigration laws that protect our border, secure the border, turn off the magnets, and make sure we have people come to this country legally to build our economy.

BLITZER: Just to precise, and I'll give Speaker Gingrich a chance to respond. Are you saying that what he's proposing, giving amnesty in effect, or allowing some of these illegal immigrants to stay, is a magnet that would entice others to come to this country illegally?

ROMNEY: There's no question. But to say that we're going to say to the people who have come here illegally that now you're all going to get to stay or some large number are going to get to stay and become permanent residents of the United States, that will only encourage more people to do the same thing.

People respond to incentives. And if you can become a permanent resident of the United States by coming here illegally, you'll do so. What I want to do is bring people into this country legally, particularly those that have education and skill that allows us to compete globally. (APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: I do not believe that the people of the United States are going to take people who have been here a quarter century, who have children and grandchildren, who are members of the community, who may have done something 25 years ago, separate them from their families, and expel them.

I do believe if you've been here recently and have no ties to the U.S., we should deport you. I do believe we should control the border. I do believe we should have very severe penalties for employers, but I would urge all of you to look at the Kriebel Foundation Plan.

I don't see how the -- the party that says it's the party of the family is going to adopt an immigration policy which destroys families that have been here a quarter century. And I'm prepared to take the heat for saying, let's be humane in enforcing the law without giving them citizenship but by finding a way to create legality so that they are not separated from their families.

BLITZER: Governor Perry, are you with the speaker or with the governor, Governor Romney?

(APPLAUSE)

PERRY: Here we go again, Mitt. You and I standing by each other again and you used the words about the magnets. And that's one of the things that we obviously have to do is to stop those magnets for individuals to come in here.

But the real issue is securing that border. And this conversation is not ever going to end until we get the border secure. But I do think that there is a way. That after we secure that border that you can have a process in place for individual who are law-abiding citizens who have done only one thing, as Newt says, 25 years ago or whatever that period of time was, that you can put something in place that basically continues to keep those families together.

But the idea that we're having this long and lengthy conversation here, until we have a secure border is just an intellectual exercise. You've got to secure the border first. And I know how to do that. I've been dealing with it for 10 years.

And we have to put the boots on the ground and the aviation assets in place, and secure that border once and for all, and be committed to it.

BLITZER: Let me let Governor Romney respond.

ROMNEY: Yes, I don't disagree with what Governor Perry indicated. Certainly we have to secure the border. And we talk about people who have been here 25 years, that is the extreme exception...

BLITZER: You would let them stay.

ROMNEY: ... not the rule.

BLITZER: You would let them stay?

ROMNEY: I'm not going to start drawing lines here about who gets to stay and who get to go. The principle is that we are not going to have an amnesty system that says that people who come here illegally get to stay for the rest of their life in this country legally.

The answer is we're going to have a system that gives people who come legally a card that identifies them as coming here legally. Employers are going to be expected to inspect that card, see if they're here legally. On that basis we're going to be able to bring you to this country.

The number of people that we need to power our industries, whether that's agriculture or high tech, we welcome people in here with visa programs. We have a whole series of legal programs. But the idea of focusing a Republican debate on amnesty and who we're going to give it to, is a huge mistake.

Secure our border, protect legal immigration, and return to a system that follows the law.

BLITZER: All right. Let's take another...

(APPLAUSE)

... quick break because we have a lot more to -- I want to bring everybody into this conversation. We're also going to broaden the conversation and go to the Middle East and see what's going on in the so-called Arab Spring.

Don't forget, Twitter -- you can weigh in on what's going on, #CNNdebate. Also, go to Facebook, CNNpolitics.com. Much more from historic Constitution Hall, here in the nation's capital, right after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: All right. Welcome back to the CNN Republican national security debate. Let's go right to the audience.

Please give us your name and your organization.

QUESTION: I'm David Addington. I'm a vice president with the Heritage Foundation.

(APPLAUSE)

Serious violence has erupted in Syria between the repressive al- Assad regime and some elements of the people of Syria. Syria borders a major ally of the United States, NATO ally, Turkey, and three other friendly countries, Israel, Jordan and Iraq.

In your view, what are the interests of the United States in this region and what would you do to protect them?

BLITZER: Herman Cain, you may not know this, but today Governor Perry called for a no-fly zone, for the U.S. to participate in a no-fly zone over Syria. Would you go that far? Would you support that?

CAIN: No, I would not. I would work with our allies in the region to put pressure to be able to try and get our allies and other nations to stop buying oil from Syria. That would be one thing that I would do, but I would not support a no-fly zone.

The most effective tools that we have in any of these situations are a strong military, which it is getting weaker, unfortunately, and our own economic strength.

This whole discussion tonight about cutting and compromise, we didn't spend enough time talking about the other part of the problem -- growing this economy, because this administration has failed dismally at growing this economy. We can cut until the cows come home but it still would not solve the problem until we have effective economic growth.

BLITZER: Governor Perry, why would you support a no-fly zone over Syria?

PERRY: Obviously, that's one of a multitude of -- of sanctions and actions that I think work very well from the standpoint of being able to pressure that regime, overt, covert, economic sanctions.

I mean I think there are a number of ways. But when you put the no-fly zone above Syria, it obviously gives those dissidents and gives the military the opportunity to maybe disband, that want to get out of the situation that they're in in Syria, as well.

So I think if we're serious about Iran -- and that's what we're really talking about here. We're talking about Syria is a partner with Iran in exporting terrorism all across that part of the world and -- and around the globe.

So if we're serious about Iran, then we have to be serious about Syria, as well.

So I think a no-fly zone is an option of one of a multitude of options that we should be using. And we should put them in place if we're serious about Iran not getting the nuclear weapon.

BLITZER: Governor Huntsman, let me bring you into this conversation.

We just got a question from Twitter. I'll read it to you.

"So many people view the Arab spring as a good thing. Given the recent violence in Egypt, do you worry this can go bad?"

And we've got some live pictures we're going to show our viewers out there of Tahrir Square in Cairo right now. Thousands of people are protesting the military regime in Egypt right now.

What do you say to this person who sent this -- this -- this Twitter message to us?

HUNTSMAN: His -- history will tell. We missed the Persian spring. The president failed on that front. We go into Libya, where, to my mind, we don't have any definable American interests. We've got Syria now on the horizon, where we do have American interests. It's called Israel. We're a friend and ally. They're a friend and ally. And we need to remind the world what it means to be a friend and ally of the United States.

And we have nuclearization in Iran. Centrifuges spinning. At some point, they're going to have enough in the way of fissile material out of which to make a weapon. That's a certainty.

We had a discussion earlier tonight about sanctions. Everybody commented on sanctions. Sanctions aren't going to work, I hate to break it to you. They're not going to work because the Chinese aren't going to play ball and the Russians aren't going to play ball.

And I believe Iran has already -- the mullahs have already decided they want to go nuclear.

Why?

They have looked at North Korea. They've got a weapon. Nobody touches them. They like at Libya. Libya gave up their weapon in exchange for friendship with the world. Look where they are.

So I say let's let history be our guide. We saw the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1919. We saw the region transform and make itself into something different. We saw changes in 1947.

I think we do our national interests a disservice by jumping in too soon and taking up sides with people we don't fully understand, Islamist groups, pan-Arab groups.

Our interest in the Middle East is Israel. And our interest is to ensure that Israel -- that Iran does not go nuclear.

BLITZER: All right, let's stay in the region.

We have another question from the audience.

KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN: I'm Katherine Zimmerman from the American Enterprise Institute Political Press Project.

The United States adopted a policy of disengagement with Somalia after its retreat following Black Hawk down.

Today, an al Qaeda affiliate, Al Shabab, controls significant territory in that country.

What can the United States do to prevent Al Shabab from posing the same threat that al Qaeda did from Afghanistan 10 years ago?

BLITZER: Congressman Paul?

PAUL: You're talking about al Qaeda, correct?

ZIMMERMAN: Right.

PAUL: You have to understand who the al Qaeda really is. The -- the al Qaeda responds in a very deliberate fashion. As a matter of fact, Paul Wolfowitz explained it very clearly after 9/11.

He said that al Qaeda is inspired by the fact that we had bases in Saudi Arabia. So if you want to inspire al Qaeda, just meddle in -- in that region. That will inspire the al Qaeda. As a matter of fact, he went on to say that that was a good reason for us to remove the base that we had had in 15 years in -- in Saudi Arabia and that we should have done that.

So there is a response. Al Qaeda responds to that and they -- they are quite annoyed with us. So if you drop -- if you have a no-fly zone over Syria, that's an act of war.

What if we had China put a no-fly zone over our territory? I don't think -- I don't think we would like that.

And I think we should practice a policy of good will to other people. What about saying that we don't do anything to any other country that we don't have them do to us? When we have a no-fly zone over Iraq, it was for -- meant to be regime change. And evidently, some want to have regime change.

What is our business? Why should we spend more money and more lives to get involved in another war? That's an -- that is the internal affairs of the other nations and we don't want -- we don't need another nation to start nation building. We have way too many already. So this is just looking for more trouble. I would say why don't we mind our own business?

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: Governor Romney, where do you stand?

ROMNEY: Wolf, that is a foreign policy. It's different than President Obama's, but similar in some respects. President Obama's foreign policy is one of saying, first of all, America's just another nation with a flag.

I believe America is an exceptional and unique nation. President Obama feels that we're going to be a nation which has multipolar balancing militaries. I believe that American military superiority is the right course. President Obama says that we have people throughout the world with common interests. I just don't agree with him. I think there are people in the world that want to oppress other people, that are evil.

President Obama seems to think that we're going to have a global century, an Asian century. I believe we have to have an American century, where America leads the free world and the free world leads the entire world.

President Obama apologizes for America. It is time for us to be strong as a nation. And if we are strong, with a military and economy that are so strong, no one in the world will try and attempt to threaten us or to attack our friends.

BLITZER: Just to be precise, are you with Governor Perry...

(APPLAUSE)

BLITZER: ... on declaring a no-fly zone over Syria? ROMNEY: No, this is not -- this is not the time for a no-fly zone over Syria. This is the time for us to use not only sanctions, but covert actions within Syria to get regime change there. There are people in the military that are shifting over, that are -- that are becoming part of the rebel effort.

We should support those efforts. We need to meet with the Alawites to make sure they understand that they have a future after Assad, that they don't have to link with him. He's getting pressure now from both Turkey as well as Saudi Arabia. They're coming and putting pressure on him. The Arab League is putting pressure on him.

We -- that's the right way to go. And by the way, they have 5,000 tanks in Syria. A no-fly zone wouldn't be the right military action. Maybe a no-drive zone. I mean, this is -- this is a nation -- this is a nation which is not bombing its people, at this point, and the right course is not military.

BLITZER: We're ready to wrap it up. But let me have Governor Perry react.

PERRY: Yes, as I said, I said the no-fly zone is one of the options that we have. But I think you need to leave it on the table to make sure, because this is not just about Syria. This is about Iran, and those two, as a partnership and exporting terrorism around the world. And if we're going to be serious about saving Israel, we better get serious about Syria and Iran, and we better get serious right now.

BLITZER: All right. Let's take another question from the audience. This is last question. Go ahead.

QUESTION: My name is Mark Teese (ph) and I'm a visiting fellow with the American Enterprise Institute. And my question has to do with the unexpected. During the 200 Presidential debates, Governor George W. Bush was never asked about the threat from Al Qaida, yet the battle with Al Qaida dominated his presidency. What national security issue do you worry about that nobody is asking about, either here or in any of the debates so far?

BLITZER: All right. Let's go down the line and start with Senator Santorum. Give us a quick answer. What do you think?

SANTORUM: Well, I've spent a lot of time and concern -- and Rick mentioned this earlier -- about what's going on in Central and South

America. I'm very concerned about the militant socialists and there -- and the radical Islamists joining together, bonding together.

I'm concerned about the spread of socialism and that this administration, with -- time after time, whether it was the delay in moving forward on Colombia's free trade agreement, whether it was turning our back to the Hondurans and standing up for democracy and the -- and the rule of law.

And we took the side with Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro for a corrupt President. We've sent all the wrong signals to Central and South America.

BLITZER: Thank you.

SANTORUM: You know, maybe the first trip I would take to Israel, but my second trip, and third and fourth, would be into Central and South America. We need to build a solid hemisphere and those people -- and the people in south of our border need to know that we are going to...

BLITZER: All right.

SANTORUM: ... solidarity with them and build strong alliances.

BLITZER: Thank you, Senator.

I want to do this quickly, if we can, because we don't have a lot of time.

Congressman?

PAUL: I worry most about overreaction on our part, getting involved in another war when we don't need to, when we have been attacked, and our national security has not been at threat. And I worry a lot about people never have come around to understanding who the Taliban is and why they are motivated.

Taliban doesn't mean they want to come here and kill us. The Taliban means they want to kill us over there because all they want to do is get people who occupy their country out of their country, just like we would if anybody tried to occupy us.

BLITZER: Governor Perry?

(APPLAUSE)

PERRY: I think, obviously, the big issue out there, and we've talked about it before, but I happen to think it's China and how we're -- we're going to deal with China.

And Communist China -- when I think back about Ronald Reagan, and he said that the Soviet Union was destined for the ash heap of history, and he was correct, and I happen to think that Communist China is destined for the ash heap of history because they are not a country of virtues.

When you have 35,000 forced abortions a day in that country; when you have the cybersecurity that the PLA has been involved with, those are great and -- and major issues, both morally and security-wise that we've got to deal with now.

BLITZER: All right. We've got to keep it brief. But, go ahead...

(APPLAUSE)

... Governor Romney. ROMNEY: Rick, in my view, is right with regards to long-term security interests, and that's -- and that's China, although that's very much on our agenda.

Immediately, the most significant threat is, of course, Iran becoming nuclear.

But I happen to think Senator Santorum is right with regards to the issue that doesn't get enough attention. That's the one that may come up that we haven't thought about, which is Latin America. Because, in fact, Congressman, we have been attacked. We were attacked on 9/11. There have been dozens of attacks that have been thwarted by our -- by our security forces. And we have, right now, Hezbollah, which is working throughout Latin America, in Venezuela, in Mexico, throughout Latin America, which poses a very significant and imminent threat to the United States of America.

BLITZER: Thank you, Governor. Mr. Cain?

(APPLAUSE)

CAIN: Having been -- having been a ballistics analyst and a computer scientist early in my career, cyber attacks: that's something that we do not talk enough about, and I happen to believe that that is a national security area that we do need to be concerned about.

BLITZER: Speaker Gingrich?

(APPLAUSE)

GINGRICH: I -- I helped create the Hart-Rudman Commission with President Clinton, and they came back after three years and said the greatest threat to the United States was the weapon of mass destruction in an American city, probably from a terrorist. That was before 9/11.

That's one of the three great threats. The second is an electromagnetic pulse attack which would literally destroy the country's capacity to function.

And the third, as Herman just said, is a cyber attack. All three of those are outside the current capacity of our system to deal with.

BLITZER: Thank you. Congresswoman?

BACHMANN: Well, I would agree with what my colleagues said up here on the stage. And also, we need to remember, we won the peace in Iraq. And now President Obama is intentionally choosing to give that peace away.

This is a significant issue because we're taking the terrorist threat away from the Middle East, bringing it to the United States.

We talked about Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab is real. In my home state of Minnesota, we've just had two convictions of two women that are financing terror with Al-Shabaab. This threat, I believe, now is in the United States and now the threat has come home and that's what we have to deal with.

BLITZER: Governor Huntsman?

HUNTSMAN: I guess I could say China because I know a little bit about the subject matter, but they're in for real trouble ahead.

So I have to say that our biggest problem is right here at home. And you can see it on every street corner. It's called joblessness. It's called lack of opportunity. It's called debt, that has become a national security problem in this country. And it's also called a trust deficit, a Congress that nobody believes in anymore, an executive branch that has no leadership, institutions of power that we no longer believe in.

How can we have any effect on foreign policy abroad when we are so weak at home? We have no choice. We've got to get on our feet here domestically.

BLITZER: Thank you to...

(APPLAUSE)

... all of you. And thanks to all of you as well. We have to leave it right there. We want to thank our partners, the American Enterprise Institute. We want to thank the Heritage Foundation. Thanks very much for watching. I'm Wolf Blitzer here at Constitution Hall.

(APPLAUSE)

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