

Obama & McCain

The Upstart or the Maverick

Who Will Make the Wiser Foreign Policy President?

by Charles Strohmer

For most Europeans and people in the Middle East, the good news surrounding the U.S. presidential election on November 4 is that neither Barack Obama nor John McCain is George W. Bush. Both presidential candidates are perceived as representing a U.S. foreign policy agenda that would be a vast improvement over the eight-year Bush tenure. But which of the two candidates would make the wiser foreign policy president?

Although both candidates profess Christianity, the world is unlikely to see much from either candidate that resembles what, in Jesus and Politics, political theorist Alan Storkey calls the power of resurrection politics, with its shocking redemptivity. We might hope to feel confident that either president's foreign policies will at least arise from wisdom-based norms ? norms rooted not in political ideologies but in the common ground interests and values shared by the human family as a whole before any distinctions are made about religion or about who is religious and who is not. If there is anything like an ideal described in the Bible for the practice of international relations in this world, this would be the one. It is unlikely, however, that either a McCain or an Obama foreign policy will be organized around it. Either man as president will be strongly ?encouraged? at home to adhere to foreign policy choices rooted in American exceptionalism

The reason? Either man as president will be strongly ?encouraged? at home to adhere to foreign policy choices rooted in American exceptionalism ? the two-hundred-year-old belief of Americans that their country was specially founded by God to be a city on a hill, a light shining in the darkness. This ultimate religious belief has both religious and secular outlets. The former, in the perennial debate about whether America is a Christian nation, albeit with a mission to the world like that of ancient Israel. The latter, in what critics call civil religion, in which even people who don't believe in God, or who don't want a religious state, nevertheless have a ?faith? for believing in, and for expressing the political interests of, American ?exceptionalism.? There is much ongoing, often heated, public debate in these areas from both Christians and others.

But whatever the competing arguments, it will be geopolitically impossible for either president to ignore the interests of this demanding ideological orientation without committing political suicide at home. Of course, some of those interests are good for the world, and are so recognized and welcomed. A problem arises, however, when absolutized interests of American exceptionalism drive Washington's foreign policy decision making. You will see this played out, sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly, whenever America's national interests become the alpha and omega of Washington's engagement with any other capital.

To get a realistic sense of what in fact may be informing the two candidates' speeches about ?reinvigorating diplomacy? or ?relaunching multilateralism,? and what we could expect internationally after the January 20 inauguration, we need to get past the election punditry and media sound-bites to each candidates views on some core issues. And perhaps just as tellingly, examine who is advising them behind the scenes.

John McCain, maverick Republican

Let's start with the former Navy pilot and acclaimed Vietnam War hero, who spent five unimaginably horrible years as a POW after being shot down over North Vietnam. He turned 72 on August 29 and has been a U.S. senator from Arizona since 1987. His handlers enthusiastically praise the Republican senator's decades-long experience in foreign affairs. ?McCain knows how to make diplomacy work,? says John Lehmann, a McCain national security advisor. ?His approach is going to be much more international, and that's a huge difference from the Bush administration.? McCain has been a harsh critic of the Bush administration's policies on the use of torture, Guantanamo Bay, and its handling of Iraq and Afghanistan

If a McCain presidency will be ?much more international,? does it necessarily follow that it will also be ?a huge difference? from the past eight years? That's certainly the image his handlers are projecting, and with McCain being known as something of a maverick, it's caught on, and not only because he once even considered switching parties to become a Democrat. He catches flack from fellow Republicans, but receives praise from green groups, for some environmental policies he supports; he has been decried by nearly

everyone for advocating Russia's removal from the G8; his eight year political relationship with President Bush has been called entangled, bitter, and awkward; and he has been a harsh critic of the Bush administration's policies on the use of torture, Guantanamo Bay, and its handling of Iraq and Afghanistan. Why, then, is there a joke going around here in the States that McCain is merely running for Bush's third term?

The joke hinges on just how much different he could be, for his team of national security and foreign policy advisors reads like a Who's Who of Neoconservatism. Although McCain refers to himself as a 'realistic idealist,' and though he receives ad hoc advice from political realists such as Henry Kissinger and Richard Armitage, his advisors include Robert Kagan, William Kristol, and Randy Scheunemann, three heavy-weight neoconservative intellectuals with considerable policy clout in Washington. (Yes, the death of neoconservatism has been greatly exaggerated.) One of McCain's Middle East advisors, Peter Rodman, once a protégé of Kissinger's, and although still reckoned a realist, leans toward neoconservative political philosophy, as does R. James Woolsey. Although Woolsey is numbered among McCain's environment advisors, the former CIA director (under Bill Clinton) is considered a 'green neoconservative' by some analysts.

Another revealing clue comes from McCain's strong support for a League of Democracies. This proposed new international body, to be created and led by the United States, is the brainchild of leading Americans across the political spectrum who have learned many hard lessons about democracy promotion via Bush unilateralism and militarism, but who nevertheless believe that democracy promotion around the world by the United States must continue. The idea first received serious public airing in a May 2004 Washington Post op-ed piece by Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, who called it an Alliance of Democracies. Two years later, in long, thoughtful article, 'Democracies of the World Unite,' Daalder and Lindsay recast their vision as a Concert of Democracies, noting that critics had found the word 'alliance' too heavily freighted with military connotations. Never mind. In a short yet vigorous Washington Post op-ed piece (Aug. 6, 2007) that Daalder co-authored with Robert Kagan, titled 'The Next Intervention,' the martial aspect of the 'concert' was front and center.

Variations on the theme abound, but advocates agree on several core issues, such as that the league should emphasize common interests and shared values, better U.S. collaboration in decision-making for shaping global policies, reforming (not dismantling) the UN (but going around it when it fails), and renewed commitment to basic principles such as the rule of law and individual rights. American exceptionalism bleeds through the worldview, which clear implications for the international community

Although none of its variations quite lose sight of the 'military option,' the non-martial aspects are being made to sound quite plausible in public by its adherents, such as when articulated by G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, who co-directed the influential, three-year Princeton Project on U.S. national security for the twenty-first century. The Project, in part, heralds widespread, high-level bipartisan political support in Washington for 'a global Concert of Democracies.' In their lengthy final report, however, though you've got to carefully read deep into it to see it, American exceptionalism bleeds through the worldview, which clear implications for the international community. Ikenberry and Slaughter write: '[W]e are far better off if American power is exercised within an international framework of cooperation, where others have a voice - though not a veto - and nations endeavor to work in concert toward common ends. Such a world is one in which other nations bandwagon with the United States rather than balance against us, and where they seek to facilitate American goals, not to inhibit them. This is the world we must rebuild today.' ('Forging a World Of Liberty Under Law,' September 27, 2006.)

McCain himself has situated the league squarely within American exceptionalism since at least May 1, 2007, when, in a speech to The Hoover Institution on U.S. Foreign Policy, he favorably quoted former U.S. President Harry Truman, who at the start of the Cold War era said: 'God has created and brought us to our present position of power and strength for some great purpose.'

Critics such as Thomas Carothers, however, have offered ample arguments and evidence of the foolishness of any League of Democracies in the foreseeable future. Carothers, who is vice president for studies of international politics at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said on-record in Washington, May 29, 2008: '[T]he world has absolutely no interest or appetite for a U.S.-led ideologically-based multilateral initiative. It was hard enough in 2000 at a much better period.... I think that pushing a league would not seem like relaunched democracy promotion and relaunched multilateralism, but rather a failure to listen, a failure to understand the most basic outlook of other nations. Many people in the world are ready to work with the United

States in existing multinational institutions, but they do not want the United States going around those. I was in Europe last week for a fairly large conference at the Hague on promoting democratic governance attended mostly by senior European officials. While I was there, I went around to people from Norway, Germany, Great Britain, The Netherlands, and elsewhere, and I talked with them.... I could not detect or stir up a trace of interest for [the league].?

Question. If the league is a non-starter for America's biggest allies, why has McCain said that one of the first things he will do if elected is call for a summit of the world's democracies to start the process of creating it? And what kind of message would 'sorry, but you're not included' send to countries such as Russia, China, and most of the Middle East, from whom America needs a huge amount of international cooperation?

Barack Obama, upstart Democrat

Could we expect a wiser foreign policy agenda from a young liberal Democrat as president of the United States after January 20? Europeans seem to think it. Polls this summer showed, for instance, that Obama would win a presidency in Germany over McCain with 70% of the vote, and polls in Britain showed Obama with a five-to-one rating over McCain.

So what's the appeal? It's both professional and personal. Regarding the former, Obama graduated with honors from Harvard Law School (constitutional law), and he has worked (primarily in Chicago) as a business consultant, community organizer, and civil rights lawyer. He served as an Illinois state senator for seven years before being elected to the U.S. Senate, November 2, 2004. Although he has had no military service, he serves on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs and the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He has promised an international agenda that prioritizes initiatives such as renewed American diplomacy and strengthened partnership with Europe, presidential engagement with Iran, progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, U.S. combat troops out of Iraq by summer 2010, increasing troop levels in Afghanistan, restoring U.S. leadership on the climate change, and strengthening NATO and the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. Obama became a Christian while struggling with life's 'big questions' during his college years

That he is both black and the son of Muslim, however, makes Barack Hussein Obama a double anomaly in a U.S. presidential race, one that has become personally appealing both at home and overseas. His mother, a white American from the Midwest, was an anthropologist, and his father was a Kenyan. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama writes that his father 'had been raised a Muslim, [but] by the time he met my mother he was a confirmed atheist.' It was his father who gave Barack his middle name, but the couple divorced when he was two. His mother married an Indonesian when Barack was six, and the family lived in Jakarta, where the young Barack 'was sent first to a neighborhood Catholic school and then to a predominately Muslim school.' His mother, however, was no fan of organized religions, and his stepfather was 'a man who saw religion as not particularly useful in the practical business of making one's way in the world.' His mother was more concerned that he learn about grammar and the multiplication tables than religion, Obama writes, while noting that she did provide him with an experiential knowledge of the world's great religions. He was sent to Honolulu to live with his grandparents when he was ten. He writes that he became a Christian while struggling with life's 'big questions' during his college years. He was baptized in the early-1990s at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago.

This unusual multiethnic, interfaith, and secular rearing plays well enough in the States and has not detracted from the 47-year old senator's rock star status in Europe and the Middle East, where he was warmly received during his high-profile trip in July. But personal appeal and amped-up international stages do not a foreign policy make. Obama has been calling for 'new direction' in international relations

Obama's brain trust '300 advisors divided into two dozen groups, each with its purview for the candidate' is sans neoconservatives. His top national security and foreign policy advisors include five figures from President Clinton's administration: Anthony Lake, a National Security Advisor during several of Clinton's foreign policy crises; Richard Danzig, former Navy Secretary; Susan Rice, a former Assistant Secretary of State; Gregory Craig, an aide under Clinton's Secretary of State Madeleine Albright; and Sarah Sewall, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense. According to Joanna Klonsky of the Council on Foreign Relations, 'those advisors tend to be more independent of party orthodoxy.' It is upon advice from this crowd that candidate Obama has been calling for 'new direction' in international relations and, in both substance and style, represents himself as a clear break from the Bush years.

Although his emphasis on multilateralism through reinvigorated diplomacy resonates with the desire of Europeans to see the

trans-Atlantic rift healed, Obama has made clear that his foreign policy will not be a de-militarized one. During his speech in Berlin, for instance, Obama let it be known that America and Europe "cannot shrink from our responsibility to combat terrorism," and that in the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda, "the Afghan people need our troops and your troops." And though he has promised to start talking directly with Damascus and Tehran, he talks tough about Iran's nuclear ambitions, and he has repeatedly said that he would order attacks on al Qaeda operatives along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border if intelligence was convincing.

Regarding Iran, an Obama presidency may have something going for it (and the world) that a McCain presidency cannot. What's in a name? Evidently quite a lot, according to Iran expert Karim Sadjapour, who sees much intrigue in Iran for Obama because his middle name is Hussein, the paramount figure in Shiite history. Because of this, Sadjapour told Foreign Policy magazine, "If Obama were to win, it would be much more difficult for Iran to constantly paint the United States as this grand oppressor. [It] would tremendously change the dynamics in U.S.-Iranian relations." But this kind of relaxing of tensions, if not an opening up of relations, would be strongly resisted, Sadjapour believes, by "a small but powerful minority [in Tehran] who survive in isolation, much like Fidel Castro in Cuba. They see Iran opening up to the world as a threat to their interests, and I'm sure they would much prefer John McCain to be president."

On Israel and the Palestinians, Obama, like McCain, has spoken to key Jewish lobbies, promising his strong support. And although he also promises "to make progress on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict a key diplomatic priority," it will unlikely that an Obama administration, due to powerful domestic ideological constraints, would be as even-handed in ending the conflict as justice warrants. His schedule during his July trip symbolized the imbalance. During a 24-hour period, he spent just an hour with Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, and Salam Fayyad, the prime minister. The rest of the time was spent in meetings with high-level Israeli officials, where the purpose seems to have been to leave unquestioned back home a firm commitment to Israel. "The most important idea for me to reaffirm," Obama said, "is the historic and special relationship between the United States and Israel. [It] cannot be broken [and it will] not only continue but actually strengthen under an Obama administration." How wise this position would be in an Obama White House seeking an equitable end for the trauma of '48 begs many questions.

Also, some analysts have seen in Obama more of a drift toward foreign policy realism than his liberal internationalist colleagues and supporters would like. For instance, he speaks of his "enormous sympathy" for the foreign policy of the first president Bush, and he admires people like Dean Acheson, George Kennan, and Reinhold Niebuhr, "all of whom," writes Fareed Zakaria, of Newsweek International, "were imbued with a sense of the limits of idealism and American power to transform the world." What the world may get in an Obama presidency, Zakaria muses, is not so much the foreign policy of a typical liberal but something closer to that of a traditional realist. Perhaps. But it seems unlikely to me. I suspect it speaks more about Obama's openness to learn wisdom from wherever he can on political compass, rather than letting himself get pinned down as a realist.

After the inauguration?

The heated public quarrel between McCain and Obama on Iran may provide the best forensics about their divergent approaches. Obama has taken to heart Moshe Dayan's advice: "If you want to make peace, you don't talk to your friends. You talk to your enemies." If McCain could get this piece of wisdom worked into his bloodstream, he could find any number of seasoned, high-level advisors to assist him in articulating and developing a foreign policy sans neoconservatism. If he remains a fan of the League of Democracies, however, don't bet on it. This would be the start of an international polarization between "democracies" and "the rest."

Obama, at least to the time of this writing, has been curiously silent about the league; but Anthony Lake was honorary co-chair of the Ikenberry and Slaughter report and co-author of its Foreword. If Obama eventually signs off on the league, then his administration, like McCain's and perhaps many administrations to come, would by default largely run its foreign policy agenda through that paradigm. This would be the start of an international polarization between "democracies" and "the rest." It would have potential to make the bipolar Cold War era seem sane by comparison. It would, I believe, inflame, rather than wisely seek to undo, conditions for what international relations theorist Samuel Huntington has provocatively called a looming "clash of civilizations."

Even if Obama rejects creation of the league, a negative choice has no power to prevent his White House from making foolish decisions about U.S. international relations, and the fact remains, as it does for any U.S. president, that he will be forced time and again to conform his overseas policies to the absolutized ideological interests of American exceptionalism. How either man as president will control, or be controlled by, this controlling principle will help determine how wise or foolish his international agenda

will be. And for American Christians? The crucial question will be to what faith are they ultimately responding?

Note: Since this article was written (July 2008), the first presidential debate has occurred (Sept. 26, 2008). Its primary theme was foreign policy. In the debate, McCain made a very brief comment in support of a league of democracies, but offered no backing argument. The presenter, Jim Lehrer, failed to ask Obama where he stood on such a league. Obama did not mention the league. But his response immediately after McCain's brief mention of the league, when he said that both Russia and China were essential in helping the U.S. in the Middle East, could be taken to indicate that he (Obama) is no fan of the league. (As far as I am aware at this time, end of Sept. 2008, Obama has made no public statements about the league, per se.)

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