

# Policy Analysis

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## *Two Kinds of Change* *Comparing the Candidates on Foreign Policy*

by Justin Logan

### Executive Summary

Few U.S. presidential elections have been decided on the basis of foreign policy. For the first time in decades, however, both parties have fielded candidates who have chosen to emphasize their foreign policy views.

With many Americans regretting the consequences of the Bush administration's foreign policy, a relatively large number of voters are expressing interest in the topic. Accordingly, it is worth examining the candidates' views on the subject to attempt to determine what their foreign policies would look like.

Republican John McCain, with his long stint in national politics, has attempted to frame the foreign policy issue around the question of experience. But evaluating McCain's foreign policy positions reveals a candidate consistently dedi-

cated to confrontation, threats, and the use of military power.

Democrat Barack Obama, a new face on the national scene, has chosen to emphasize the need for change in the way in which U.S. foreign policy is conducted. Obama has called for more focus on diplomacy, less on military action, and an end to the "politics of fear." However, an examination of Obama's advisers and policy ideas makes it clear that Obama is anything but a noninterventionist.

In the end, both candidates have significant flaws in their foreign policy ideas. Yet McCain's approach seems likely to amplify and repeat the errors of the Bush administration. A President McCain would promise more provocation, more intervention, and more strain on the military, the budget, and the country.

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## **Introduction**

Historically, few U.S. presidential elections have been decided on the basis of foreign policy. However, seven years into the struggle against terrorism and five and a half years into the war in Iraq, voters have indicated a growing frustration with the failures of the Bush administration's foreign policies. The Democratic candidate, Sen. Barack Obama, has made his opposition to the Iraq war and broad denunciations of the Bush foreign policy a key theme of his campaign.

Sen. John McCain, the Republican nominee, has vacillated between two positions on the Bush foreign policy. Before announcing his campaign, McCain made clear that he broadly endorsed the administration's approach to terrorism and Iraq. At the same time—and this theme has reemerged in the campaign—McCain criticized the Bush policy for being too timid. According to McCain, Bush had not sent enough troops to Iraq, and he had acted rashly in foreclosing the military option on North Korea. In speeches on the campaign trail, McCain has attempted to distance himself from the Bush legacy, highlighting his criticism of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and his willingness to criticize aspects of the Iraq occupation.

The next U.S. president will inherit a host of foreign policy challenges, some, though not all of them created by the Bush administration. How the next president will handle those problems will do a great deal to determine the prospects for peace and the future of U.S. national security. Accordingly, it is worth examining the foreign policy stances of each candidate.

Although there is peril in trying to figure out how a political candidate would govern, there is enough information to try to determine which candidate would be more likely to move the United States in the direction of peace and away from the neoconservative and liberal interventionist influence that has helped yield the state of affairs in which we find ourselves today. For reasons of space and

focus, not every foreign policy issue can be examined in one study. This paper attempts to cover the issues wherein either (1) the candidate's view represents a significant break from recent U.S. foreign policy or (2) the likely implications of the candidate's views would be either positive or negative for U.S. national security.

Admittedly, this approach has shortcomings. Issues of extremely high importance, such as U.S.-China relations, U.S.-Europe relations, and nonproliferation efforts are downplayed at the expense of issues such as the future political arrangements in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> But given that recent U.S. foreign policy has been focused so disproportionately on matters such as the Middle East, it is necessary to examine the areas in which significant change in one direction or another is likely to take place.

## **John McCain: The Second Coming of Teddy Roosevelt?**

John McCain has assiduously—and successfully—cultivated an image of himself as a maverick, willing to defy Republican orthodoxy on a range of issues. One area in which McCain is no moderate is foreign affairs. Long a favorite of the war-friendly *Weekly Standard* magazine (from whose masthead many of his foreign policy advisers are drawn), McCain has admired and identified with war hawks like the bellicose Teddy Roosevelt. In an interview with the *New York Times*, McCain described Roosevelt as his “conservative model,” pointing out to the interviewers Roosevelt's instincts “as a fellow reformer and environmentalist” and highlighting Roosevelt's “assertive foreign policy.”<sup>2</sup>

McCain once wrote that Roosevelt “believed fighting was essential to a happy life. I know what he meant.”<sup>3</sup> Instead of pursuing a career in the boxing industry, however, McCain has chosen the arena of national politics. One thing is certain: if for McCain more fighting means more happiness, the implications of his stated ideas on foreign affairs will make him very happy.<sup>4</sup>

Matt Welch, author of *McCain: The Myth of a Maverick* writes that “John McCain envisions a more militaristic foreign policy than any U.S. president in a century.”<sup>5</sup> While it is impossible to divine from a candidate’s stated foreign policy ideas what his actual approach to foreign policy would look like (recall the disparity between candidate George W. Bush and President George W. Bush, for example), John McCain has advanced a consistent and laudably transparent message for any possible adversaries: Watch Out, You Might Be Next.

McCain believes that the foreign policy choices available to the United States are limited to the extremes of serving as world policeman or retreating behind the walls of “Fortress America,” and without global American military dominance—and the willingness to use force—the world would collapse into widespread conflict, and freedom would be destroyed by the forces of tyranny. As McCain put it in his defense of the first Gulf War, if America failed to act, “there will be inevitably a succession of dictators” that would present “a threat to the stability of this entire globe.”<sup>6</sup> The *New York Times*’ Matt Bai interviewed McCain in 2008 and concluded that “while most politicians looked at injustice in a foreign land and asked, ‘Why intervene?’ McCain seemed to look at that same injustice and ask himself, ‘Why not?’”<sup>7</sup>

In his 1999 Landon Lecture at Kansas State University, McCain explained his criticisms of the Clinton administration’s foreign policy. The roots of Clinton’s failings, according to McCain, were “strategic incoherence and self-doubt.” It is ironic that in the very same speech, McCain invoked and endorsed Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s “indispensable nation” description of the United States. Describing one’s own nation in such a way positively bristles with arrogance and self-assurance—the furthest thing from self-doubt one could imagine.<sup>8</sup> But McCain took the self-congratulation a step further, noting that the reason America is the indispensable nation is because the country is “the greatest force for good in human history.”

The actions of a country that represents

such goodness could rarely be destructive or pernicious. Although he allowed in the Landon Lecture that “we have made our share of mistakes in the past,” McCain could not bring himself to mention even one, warning instead that there was a danger that confronting our errors too candidly could lead us “to confer on others the primary responsibility for protecting our interests and values.” In keeping with this thinking, throughout the 1990s, McCain was one of the most vocal supporters of foreign military interventions, favoring the Gulf War and the Somalia intervention (after the Black Hawk Down incident, McCain supported cutting off funding for the troops in the field, later ruing this position as having been an endorsement of “a retreat in the face of aggression from an inferior foe”<sup>9</sup>); strongly opposing and then strongly supporting the Bosnia intervention; and proposing an expansion of the Kosovo war to introduce U.S. ground troops into Serbia.<sup>10</sup> McCain’s 2007 call to expand the active duty Army and Marine Corps from the already-inflated level of 750,000 to 900,000 should serve as an indication of McCain’s views on the role of the military in the coming years.<sup>11</sup>

Senator McCain has repeatedly explained his thinking on the centrality of American foreign-policy activism to the prosperity and livability of the globe. In a 2006 interview with *Playboy* magazine, McCain revealed that “fundamentally I agree with the so-called neoconservatives because I believe we can do a better job of helping people achieve democracy and freedom, and we should exercise this influence for good. But not by launching preemptive strikes and unseating people and doing bad things. By doing good things.”<sup>12</sup>

But what Senator McCain is eliding here is that he and his neoconservative confreres frequently conflate “doing good things” with “launching preemptive strikes and unseating people.” As *Time* columnist Joe Klein has observed, the neoconservative approach to foreign policy can be described as “unilateral bellicosity cloaked in the utopian rhetoric of freedom and democracy.”<sup>13</sup> To see the conflation of the two concepts, one can examine Senator McCain’s boosting of Iraqi charlatan Ahmed Chalabi.

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### **A Dubious Past: McCain, the INC, and the Iraq Liberation Act**

John McCain's long relationship with the Iraqi National Congress, its head, Ahmed Chalabi, and the efforts to oust Saddam Hussein show the problems inherent in "doing good things" in pursuit of expansive foreign policy goals. Chalabi was, since the early 1990s, one of the leading proponents of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Renowned for his powers of persuasion and Western affect, Chalabi became a central player in pre-war Washington, arguing to any audience who would listen that Hussein was in league with al Qaeda, and that he possessed both the capability and intention to use weapons of mass destruction against the United States. Chalabi simultaneously held himself out as a potential leader of post-war Iraq.

The Chalabi experience, of course, ended badly, with the U.S. intelligence community raiding a Chalabi compound in Iraq after it suspected that he had notified Iranian intelligence that U.S. agencies had broken their code and had been intercepting their communications. Shortly thereafter, the fact that Chalabi's faction failed to win even one seat in parliament in the December 2005 elections made clear how naïve Chalabi's supporters in Washington had been.

Randy Scheunemann, McCain's chief foreign policy adviser and a former lobbyist for Chalabi, recently protested that although Senator McCain did lead the charge to use Iraqi exiles to help oust Saddam Hussein, he "wasn't pushing one [exile] group over another."<sup>14</sup> But the facts show that McCain had a uniquely close relationship with Chalabi, and was considered one of his foremost champions in Washington.

In the 1990s, Chalabi began a determined campaign of lobbying in Washington, particularly on Capitol Hill. McCain got in on the ground floor, acting as a forceful proponent of Chalabi beginning in 1991.<sup>15</sup> In a January 1999 hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee, McCain berated Gen. Anthony Zinni for disparaging the Iraqi opposition and the Iraq Liberation Act, which McCain had co-spon-

sored.<sup>16</sup> During the same hearing, McCain chastised Gen. Zinni at length for not attacking Iraqi airfields that were beyond the no-fly zones—and therefore beyond the scope of the mission crafted by policymakers and given to CENTCOM. McCain closed the exchange with a terse statement to Gen. Zinni that "if you want to sit and insult my intelligence and that of other members of the committee, that's fine with me."<sup>17</sup>

Although the State Department had largely stymied the efforts in the 1990s—led by Senator McCain—to ensure that funds allocated for the INC were disbursed, Chalabi's friends in Washington saw a new opportunity after September 11.<sup>18</sup> In December 2001, a group of nine legislators sent a letter to President Bush, urging that not only was it "imperative that we plan to eliminate the threat from Iraq," but that the president begin "immediately to assist the Iraqi opposition on the ground inside Iraq by providing them money and assistance already authorized and appropriated."<sup>19</sup> The letter included both a lengthy defense of the INC and John McCain's signature.

McCain made a long, impassioned speech on the floor of the Senate on October 2, 2002, defending the resolution that started the Iraq war. Read today, the speech is a baleful reminder of the twin afflictions that characterized the charge to war: false certitude about Saddam Hussein's future capabilities and intentions and wild-eyed optimism about the postwar environment. McCain falsely portrayed the option of avoiding war as one that would cause "our people to live in fear behind walls that have already been breached, as our enemies plan our defeat in the time we have given them to do it." He warned darkly of collusion between Hussein and al Qaeda ("whether or not it has happened, the odds favor it"). The senator spoke with near-religious certitude about Saddam Hussein's nuclear program (and his "inevitable" acquisition of nuclear weapons should the United States decline to invade) as well as about the outlook for postwar Iraq ("it's a safe assumption that Iraqis will be grateful to whoever is responsible for securing their freedom").<sup>20</sup> As it turned out, McCain was wrong on nearly every count.

All of this certainty came from a man who had declined even to read the National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq.<sup>21</sup>

All the while, McCain maintained close ties with Chalabi. During a March 2002 *60 Minutes* profile of Chalabi, Lesley Stahl accompanied him on a visit to McCain's office. The segment showed Senator McCain greeting Chalabi warmly and by name, assuring him that he hoped the efforts to get Chalabi's group funded would "turn into some significant help for you." Stahl reported that in "touching base with pro-Chalabi members of Congress, like Senator John McCain . . . [Chalabi] and a group of his INC colleagues got the expected warm reception."<sup>22</sup> McCain would continue to pro-test that Chalabi was not receiving support after the war had started, signing a letter with four Republican colleagues in April 2003 complaining that Chalabi was not being adequately funded, and grousing on "Good Morning America" that we should be "bringing in Chalabi and the Iraqi National Congress as soon as possible."<sup>23</sup>

McCain doesn't seem to have learned much from the Chalabi experience. Even after all that transpired, he chose Randy Scheunemann to be his chief foreign policy adviser although Scheunemann is a former lobbyist for Chalabi and was a key figure in helping pass the Iraq Liberation Act when he worked for Senator Trent Lott in 1998. After Chalabi was revealed to have provided bad information to the United States about Iraq during the run-up to the war ("constantly shoving crap at us" was how DIA analyst Mark Garlasco memorably characterized the INC's role),<sup>24</sup> McCain evidently saw no reason why Chalabi's chief booster in the United States shouldn't be put in charge of his foreign policy team.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, starting in the 1990s, Charlie Black, the senior political adviser to the campaign, collected hundreds of thousands of dollars as a lobbyist promoting Ahmed Chalabi and his INC.<sup>26</sup> Having chosen neoconservative advisers such as Scheunemann and Chalabi PR men like Black, McCain's campaign team represents a reunion of the various activists who helped start the Iraq war.

McCain's sources of information on Iraq led him to conclude repeatedly and erroneously that the United States would have an easy time of it, and once the occupation started, McCain was a regular defender of the position that the United States was "winning." For example, McCain told CNN in September 2002, during the peak of the debate over invading, "I believe that the success will be fairly easy," following up with an appearance in which he told CNN viewers that "I don't think it's, quote, 'easy,' but I believe that we can win an overwhelming victory in a very short period of time."<sup>27</sup>

McCain greeted the now-infamous elections of January 2005 by ignoring the Sunni boycott, which wound up helping set the stage for the sectarian violence that would follow. Instead, McCain glowed: "I feel wonderful. I feel that the Iraqi people, by going to the polls in the numbers that they did, authenticated what the president said in his inaugural speech: that all people seek freedom and democracy and want to govern themselves."<sup>28</sup>

### **A Dangerous Present: "There Will Be Other Wars"**

Senator McCain has focused his campaign on foreign policy, and has laid out an admirably broad, straightforward list of positions on a number of issues. McCain has made detailed statements on topics ranging from the nature and duration of the U.S. military presence in Iraq to his policy to stop Iran's nuclear program, and has advocated several new initiatives including: the formation of a "League of Democracies" that would join the world's democracies and exclude Russia and China; attempting to oust a "revanchist" Russia from the G-8 and expanding NATO to include Ukraine, Georgia, and "all democracies committed to the defense of freedom"; attempting to work in cooperation with Russia on reducing nuclear arsenals; and a much harder line on North Korea than the Bush administration has taken. It is worth briefly analyzing the senator's position on each of these issues.

#### **Iraq**

Senator McCain believes that the stakes in

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Iraq are very high. Before an audience at the American Enterprise Institute in 2007, he proclaimed that leaving Iraq would create a real prospect for “a fundamental change in the world where radical Islamic extremism dominates the entire world.”<sup>29</sup> McCain repeated this thinking in June 2008 when he responded to a question from Fortune magazine asking “Senator, what do you see as the gravest long-term threat to the U.S. economy?” by saying “I would think that the absolute gravest threat is the struggle that we’re in against radical Islamic extremism, which can affect, if they prevail, our very existence.”<sup>30</sup>

Senator McCain was a leading critic of the Bush administration’s implementation of the war, criticizing especially the number of U.S. troops in the country starting in 2003.<sup>31</sup> In 2003, McCain called for “at least another full division” to be deployed to Iraq.<sup>32</sup> By 2004, McCain was praising the decision to raise troop levels from 115,000 to 135,000, noting that “I’d like to believe it was my comments [calling for more troops that promoted the change], but in fact it’s the realities on the ground.”<sup>33</sup> In 2005, McCain told Meet the Press that the number of U.S. troops on the ground in Iraq was “probably enough,”<sup>34</sup> but 135,000 troops turned out not to be a barrier against civil war, so McCain ultimately called for still more, supporting the 2007 decision to send 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Iraq.

Strangely, though, at times McCain appeared to be an ardent supporter of the Bush approach and even of current *bête noire* Donald Rumsfeld, telling Fox News in May 2004, after the abu Ghraib scandal and with the Iraq insurgency raging, that Rumsfeld had “done a fine job.”<sup>35</sup> By December 2005 McCain was reassuring Americans that “progress is being made in a lot of Iraq. Overall, I think a year from now, we will have made a fair amount of progress if we stay the course. If I thought we weren’t making progress, I’d be despondent.”<sup>36</sup>

By 2006, however, McCain had begun chastising the administration and its supporters for having promised the American people that the Iraq war would be “some kind of day at the beach.”<sup>37</sup> But as seen above, McCain’s track

record of predicting results in Iraq demonstrates that he was one of the most errant analysts of what was transpiring.

For Senator McCain, every positive development in Iraq has represented a watershed. Every setback has been little more than a test of America’s will. This is a dangerous view of the world, particularly in the context of counterinsurgency. Will is an inadequate tool for unraveling indigenous resistance to foreign occupation. Military occupations are costly and time-consuming endeavors, but they frequently fall victim to the paradox that dedicating large numbers of resources for a long period of time elicits resistance to the occupation in the target country as well as at home. Such endeavors have a high failure rate, and in any case, presidential doggedness ranks low on the list of determinants of success.<sup>38</sup> If a President McCain continued to believe that the combination of will and more troops is a tonic for dissolving foreign resistance to occupation, the United States could find itself in 2013—or 2018—still patrolling the streets of Baghdad.

### **Iran**

The struggle with Iran over its nuclear program will likely be the most dangerous foreign policy challenge of the next president’s tenure. On the Iran issue, Senator McCain has taken an uncompromising stand that both makes the prospect of a diplomatic resolution remote and all but commits the United States to going to war again in the absence of such a diplomatic solution.

Senator McCain’s public comments on Iran have included his singing “bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb-bomb Iran” on the campaign trail to the tune of the Beach Boys’ “Barbara Ann,” as well as his jovial response to a question regarding increased cigarette sales to Iran, saying “maybe that’s a way of killing them.”<sup>39</sup> Publicly joking about killing foreigners and starting wars is a significant concern. The diplomatic context with Iran is frail enough without this sort of off-the-cuff statement. One might consider how a candidate for the presidency in Iran joking about killing Americans would be received here.

This repeated tendency of McCain's seems to indicate a casual disregard for the most fundamental principles of diplomacy. Although McCain's statements have garnered the majority of the media coverage of his views on Iran, however, the senator's campaign has given much more detailed and substantive positions on technical questions.

In response to a two-question questionnaire sent to the candidates by the Institute for Science and International Security, McCain indicated that "there can be no such thing as an adequately controlled nuclear fuel cycle in Iran." He went on to propose that Iran rely on foreign sources of fuel, and claimed that "There is no circumstance under which the international community could be confident that uranium enrichment or plutonium production activities undertaken by the current government of Iran are purely for peaceful purposes."<sup>40</sup>

The problem with that position is that the Iranian government has stated that it views enrichment on its territory as its sovereign right under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and that it has no intention of ceding this right.<sup>41</sup> While there are differing interpretations of the NPT that do not support Iran's view, the fact remains that Iran views enrichment as a sovereign right and has repeatedly expressed its unwillingness to look outside its borders for fuel. McCain's position, combined with his insistence that Iran suspend uranium enrichment before negotiations could take place (a demand Iran has also repeatedly rejected) means that in all likelihood the clock will continue to run out until Iran reaches the precipice of possessing a nuclear capability.

And John McCain has made abundantly clear that he would prefer a war with Iran to deterring and containing a nuclear Iran. While many scholars have made the case that the United States could live with a nuclear Iran, McCain simply disagrees, citing danger to the United States and to Israel.<sup>42</sup> Although Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni has argued that a nuclear Iran would not present an existential threat even to Israel, McCain told the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in

June 2008 that a nuclear Iran would present such an existential threat.<sup>43</sup> Absent a significant policy reversal on McCain's part, Iran will move toward acquiring a nuclear capability, and the United States would ultimately be confronted with the prospect of either a nuclear Iran or starting a war with Iran.<sup>44</sup>

Between these two options, Senator McCain has made clear that he would choose war. Given the American people's significant buyer's remorse over the Iraq war, they should be very wary of McCain's position on Iran. A war with Iran would waste American and Iranian lives, billions of taxpayer dollars, bog the United States down further in the Middle East when it should be trying to disentangle itself, and throw gasoline on the Islamist fire by engaging in a third war with a Muslim country in the span of less than a decade.

### **The "League of Democracies"**

The most creative initiative of McCain's foreign policy agenda can be found in his proposal to create a "League of Democracies" that would

act when the UN fails—to relieve human suffering in places such as Darfur, combat HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, fashion better policies to confront environmental crises, provide unimpeded market access to those who endorse economic and political freedom, and take other measures unattainable by existing regional or universal-membership systems.<sup>45</sup>

McCain replies to the major objection to this initiative by insisting that "[t]his League of Democracies would not supplant the UN or other international organizations but complement them by harnessing the political and moral advantages offered by united democratic action."<sup>46</sup> But this does injustice to the weight of the arguments against the idea.

First, there is ample reason to believe that McCain sees the League as a venue for what international relations scholars have called "forum shopping"; that is to say, the use of oth-

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er multilateral institutions to grant the veneer of legitimacy to ad hoc interventions, including military intervention. In a 2007 speech to the Hoover Institution, McCain described how one of the benefits of the League would be that it could take coercive action “with or without Moscow’s and Beijing’s approval.”<sup>47</sup>

This sort of forum shopping could make it more likely the United States would be able to start more destructive wars. To take one specific example, McCain cites Darfur as one place the League would be active. But in 2006 McCain was writing that his preferred approach would include NATO “establish[ing] and enforc[ing] a no-fly zone over Darfur to ensure that Khartoum ends its offensive military flights and bombing raids,” as well as American pressure to “push the United Nations to draw up firm plans for the entrance of a robust force into Darfur and contingency plans for the force to enter without Sudanese consent.”<sup>48</sup> How a more pliant League of Democracies would fit into McCain’s force-friendly strategy for Sudan is not hard to imagine.

At bottom, the most meaningful deficiency of the League of Democracies idea is that it takes as a given that democracies agree about approaches to foreign policy. That assumption is a grossly oversimplified version of democratic peace theory, which has flaws of its own.<sup>49</sup> Democratic peace theory holds that there is something inherent in democratic governance that precludes democracies from going to war with other democracies. But McCain carries that further, believing that democracies will agree broadly on how to address the world’s most vexing problems. That sort of thinking should have been cast aside after the majority of the world’s leading democracies opposed the United States’ plunge into Iraq, for example, but McCain continues to believe it holds explanatory power.<sup>50</sup>

The League of Democracies would be little more than an arena in which a President McCain could forum-shop future wars. It also brings the prospect of dividing the globe, pressing together two of the most significant global powers, Russia and China, on the other side. It stands out among McCain’s foreign

policy ideas for being innocuous on its face, but having significant dangers in the details.

**NATO Expansion and Policy toward a “Revanchist Russia”**

The plan for a League of Democracies holds the distinct possibility of drawing a line across the world and indicating to Russia and China, among others, that the United States views them as on the wrong side of the planet’s divide between friend and foe. McCain favors not only excluding Russia from the League of Democracies, but also trying to remove the country from the G-8.<sup>51</sup> Making such a statement publicly is a pointless gesture, given that consensus would be required within the G-8 to actually remove Russia. Making the statement while knowing there was little to no chance of actually ousting Russia would reap all the costs and none of the (dubious) benefits of casting Russia out. Even after the Georgia-Russia war in the summer of 2008, there is little sign that the other G-8 powers would press for Russia’s ouster.

Even with these provocative stances as a backdrop, McCain simultaneously views a new, path-breaking accord on nuclear weapons as an option with Russia. In a May 2008 speech at the University of Denver, McCain announced that “Russia and the United States are no longer mortal enemies” and proposed that the two nations work together more closely on preventing the proliferation of nuclear materials and weapons.<sup>52</sup>

But Russia will judge the United States more by its actions than by rhetorical assurances. And foreign countries—particularly foreign countries that are much weaker than the United States—should be expected to react negatively to President McCain’s efforts to oust them from the G-8 and exclude them from the League of Democracies. To marry a confrontational policy on certain issues with a request for significant cooperation on a new nonproliferation initiative indicates that Senator McCain either has not grasped the conflict between the approaches or considers it irrelevant. Still, if McCain expects Russia’s cooperation on proliferation while we are busy attempting to oust



her from international organizations and transforming countries with which Russia has rocky relations into security protectorates, he is likely to be disappointed with the results.

McCain explained his thinking on Russia in a 2007 op-ed for the *Financial Times*. In the short article, McCain accused Russian president Vladimir Putin of governing with a “blend of cynicism and Napoleonic delusion,” and presented a laundry list of issues on which we must “be firm” with Moscow, including nuclear targeting; Kosovo; the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty; the extradition of Andrei Lugovoi (suspected of involvement in the murder of Kremlin critic Aleksandr Litvenenko); the mysterious deaths of journalists in Russia; state-ownership of media organs in Russia; state seizure of assets; Moscow’s response to Estonia’s treatment of a Soviet war memorial; Russia’s handling of energy resources; and Russian policy in Ukraine, Georgia, Iran, and Sudan.<sup>53</sup> But even if Russia were to obey U.S. demands on these matters, McCain offered nothing in return, nor even a basic architecture for relations with Russia. McCain’s view—that diplomacy amounts to issuing lists of demands and then waiting for them to be fulfilled—holds little promise of advancing American interests.

To the contrary, instead of offering benefits to Russia in exchange for potentially meeting American demands, McCain expects Russia to meet these requests while Washington presses to humiliate Russia by ousting it from the G-8 and expanding NATO to include every country on Russia’s western border except Belarus.<sup>54</sup> McCain told the Los Angeles World Affairs Council in March 2008 that he would favor NATO expansion to include “all democracies committed to the defense of freedom.”<sup>55</sup> In addition, McCain wants to “increase our programs supporting freedom and the rule of law in Russia,” meaning programs like those of the U.S. government-funded International Republican Institute—of which McCain is chairman of the board—and other quasi-governmental organizations at which Russia has lashed out, and, in some cases, banned.<sup>56</sup>

At a time when U.S. policy on a number of issues from North Korea to Iran and beyond

depends on unity of effort and coordination with other powers like Russia, McCain’s confrontational policy threatens to ensure Russian obstructionism on all of those other fronts. Further compromising the prospects for a functional relationship with Russia is the fact that McCain’s chief foreign policy adviser, Randy Scheunemann, has been a key lobbyist in the multiple drives to expand NATO. Scheunemann lobbied on behalf of the Baltic states during their campaign for membership in the alliance, and later was paid by the Georgian government to campaign for Georgian NATO membership, even acting as a paid lobbyist for Georgia at the same time he was on staff as senior adviser to the McCain for President campaign.<sup>57</sup>

Scheunemann described McCain’s views on U.S.-Georgia relations to a Georgian interviewer thus:

It’s really about shared values, and it’s something that Senator McCain feels particularly deeply. He’s been to Georgia, I think, three or four times and witnessed the legendary Georgian hospitality on those occasions, and it had a deep and lasting impact on him that will continue.<sup>58</sup>

When Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili plunged into Russian-occupied South Ossetia in August, providing an opening for Russia to invade Georgia, McCain was in close contact with Saakashvili and expanded his tough rhetorical line against Russia. Saakashvili, a personal friend of McCain’s, reported to the *Washington Post* that he was speaking to McCain about the situation in his country “several times a day.”<sup>59</sup>

McCain offered Saakashvili strong support, stating that the crisis should be “of grave concern to Americans” and pledging to support NATO membership for Georgia, even though significant chunks of Georgian territory were occupied by Russian troops. McCain offered talking points on behalf of Georgia highlighting attributes ranging from its Christianity, to its hosting of an oil pipeline, to

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**McCain's proposals on North Korea need to be taken in light of the implications of a war on the Korean peninsula.**

its democratic status.<sup>60</sup> McCain took his support to new heights by declaring on the *Wall Street Journal's* op-ed page that “we are all Georgians.”<sup>61</sup>

From McCain's stated policy views to the fact that his chief foreign policy adviser is a longtime lobbyist for NATO expansion, U.S.-Russia relations in a McCain administration could be expected to deteriorate significantly. There are already strong signs that the Russians are preparing themselves for confrontation with a President McCain. In July, a senior Russian diplomat took the step of responding to McCain's statements on Russia policy, threatening to cut off relations with any country confronting Russia, and noting that “we could reach a moment when we could afford to stop discussing the issues that the Americans are interested in.”<sup>62</sup> More deterioration along these lines can be expected if McCain should emerge victorious in November.

**McCain on North Korea: War Is Always an Option**

Senator McCain has held very hawkish views on North Korea for more than a decade. Since his scalding criticism of the Clinton administration's 1994 Agreed Framework, McCain has supported keeping the military option on the table, and at times he has hinted that the military option should perhaps be used. Although the Bush administration's policy on North Korea has been moving in a diplomatic direction of late, and certainly away from the prospect of war since the North tested a nuclear device in October 2006, it is worth examining McCain's position on the issue.

In 1994, in a speech on the Senate floor, McCain succinctly explained his views on North Korea (and on other matters related to foreign nations): “To get a mule to move, you must show it the carrot and hit it with the stick at the same time.” In accordance with this thinking, McCain proposed hitting North Korea harder with the stick, and grabbing a club in case the stick didn't work: McCain warned that although “the United States must consider taking stronger measures should we further fail to persuade

North Korea to end this crisis . . . I do not believe that we should resort to offensive military actions immediately. . . . But we should not exclude it from consideration. It should be considered very carefully.”<sup>63</sup>

In acknowledging the risks inherent in the military option, McCain protested that risks could be “minimized to the greatest extent possible.” One of the steps McCain recommended in 1994 to raise the pressure and presumably deter North Korean reprisals was his March 16 proposal that the United States “announce that it intends to return tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula unless North Korea permits all inspections of its nuclear facilities . . . as required under the terms of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.”<sup>64</sup> Reintroducing nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula would have increased the preexisting impulses for numerous foreign nations to develop nuclear weapons—as would, obviously, a massive and catastrophic war there. Although U.S. policymakers have hoped that such forceful measures would deter foreign nations from seeking nuclear deterrents, there is ample information that countries are drawing the opposite lesson: that they had best acquire their own deterrent quickly so as to avoid becoming the target of such policies.<sup>65</sup>

McCain's proposals on North Korea need to be taken in light of the implications of a war on the Korean peninsula. Pyongyang has long threatened to turn Seoul into a “sea of fire” should the United States attack. In 1994, the commander of U.S. forces in Korea, Gen. Gary Luck, concluded that even a conventional war on the Korean peninsula would cost roughly 1 million human lives—including 80,000–100,000 U.S. soldiers—and roughly \$1 trillion in damage to the global economy. Luck summed up the results by admitting that “unbelievable hardships would occur.”<sup>66</sup>

Clearly the United States did not achieve its goal of preventing advances in North Korea's nuclear capabilities. But by 2003, when much more was known about the implications of war with North Korea, McCain still did not blanch at the gravity of the prospect. Instead, McCain hectored the Clinton administration

for allowing the problem to fester, and declared that the solution was “rogue state roll-back”:

The use of military force to defend vital American security interests must always be a last resort, as it is in this crisis. But if we fail to achieve the international cooperation necessary to end this threat, then the countries in the region should know with certainty that while they may risk their own populations, the United States will do whatever it must to guarantee the security of the American people. And spare us the usual lectures about American unilateralism. We would prefer the company of North Korea’s neighbors, but we will make do without it if we must.<sup>67</sup>

This type of thinking makes Senator McCain’s 2007 promise to “seek to rebuild our frayed partnership with South Korea” all the stranger.<sup>68</sup> The South Koreans have made abundantly clear that they oppose war with the North, so McCain’s policy statements could fray the partnership to the breaking point.

The world would be a better place if North Korea had not joined the nuclear club.<sup>69</sup> But it is far from clear that the world would be a better place if North Korea had been prevented from joining the club as a result of the United States starting a war that killed a million people and cost a trillion dollars. The global implications of such a conflict would be profound, yet they seem not to have affected Senator McCain’s position in the slightest. As late as 2006, McCain was likening past U.S. policy on Korea to British prime minister Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement policy in the 1930s and warning that there was a real possibility that the North could attempt to use nuclear weapons.<sup>70</sup>

As in so many other instances, Senator McCain believes that determination, will, and the use of the American military can produce a beneficial outcome. But it is difficult to conclude that life in the United States since

October 9, 2006 (the day North Korea conducted a nuclear test), has been worse than it would have been if we had suffered the ghastly consequences of a war with North Korea.

### **Barack Obama: Anti-Warrior or Liberal Interventionist?**

Compared with John McCain, Barack Obama has a short national political profile, and consequently a shorter record of foreign policy positions and legislative accomplishments. Still, it is worth limning Senator Obama’s track record, from the foreign policy intellectuals who have influenced his thinking to his diagnosis and prescription for the range of foreign policy problems he would inherit as president.

Despite his brief national political tenure, a significant factor in Obama’s rise to prominence is the fact that he was a vocal and clear critic of the Iraq war before it started, which endeared him to both the anti-war Democratic base and the majority of Americans overall, who view the war as a mistake. Senator Obama has also been a vocal advocate of direct diplomacy with America’s adversaries, another stand that is well-received with the American people, but one that causes discomfort among many members of the Beltway foreign policy establishment.

But beyond the matter of his opposition to the failed foreign policies of the Bush administration, it is less clear what Senator Obama’s positive views are on foreign policy questions, and more importantly, how those views would translate into an actual approach to the world. The journalist Spencer Ackerman interviewed numerous members of the Obama foreign policy team and encapsulated the senator’s views as advancing

a doctrine that first ends the politics of fear and then moves beyond a hollow, sloganeering “democracy promotion” agenda in favor of “dignity promotion,” to fix the conditions of misery that

**A significant factor in Obama’s rise to prominence is the fact that he was a vocal and clear critic of the Iraq war before it started.**

**Obama's foreign policy advisory team draws heavily from the hawkish wing of the Democratic Party as well as from the younger faction.**

breed anti-Americanism and prevent liberty, justice, and prosperity from taking root.<sup>71</sup>

Thus the Obama foreign policy is focused not on restraint, but rather on advancing living standards abroad in pursuit of security at home. Obama even made the striking suggestion to the *New York Times's* David Brooks that U.S. policy in Lebanon, for example, should be focused on finding ways to compete with Hezbollah by developing "a mechanism whereby the disaffected have an effective outlet for their grievances, which assures them they are getting social services."<sup>72</sup>

Surveying an Obama speech on the campaign trail, journalist David Rieff found himself wondering "is the Democratic idea of nationalism and of America's role in the world really that different from that of the Bush administration?"<sup>73</sup> It is worth examining the Obama agenda to attempt to find out.

**Obama the Anti-Warrior . . . on Iraq**

Though the media has made much of then state senator Obama's 2002 speech in opposition to the Iraq war, its content has not been scrutinized nearly so closely. Viewed in the context of the time, when the media and foreign policy establishments were braying for war with almost no dissent, Obama's opposition looks bold and prescient. Although Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was indeed a vile tyrant, Obama was certain that

in concert with the international community he can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history. I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a US occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruit-

ment arm of Al Qaeda. I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars.<sup>74</sup>

A few points are worth considering. First, the efforts to "contain" Saddam Hussein wrought inadvertent but enormous harm on the Iraqi people, harm that featured in al Qaeda's recruiting efforts and caused animus toward the United States in the Islamic world.<sup>75</sup> Secondly, one can see a clear parallel between Obama's certainty that "all petty dictators" would "fall away into the dustbin of history" and Condoleezza Rice's right-realist statement of 2000 that "[t]hese regimes are living on borrowed time, so there need be no sense of panic about them."<sup>76</sup> That one can see such an ideological lineage speaks favorably of Obama's instincts and poorly of the wayward Wilsonianism of the current-day Republican Party.

Obama's further diagnosis of the problems with the Iraq war appeared in his 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article. Obama criticized the Bush administration for having "responded to the unconventional attacks of 9/11 with conventional thinking of the past, largely viewing problems as state-based and principally amenable to military solutions."<sup>77</sup> This thinking indicates that Obama does not just recognize that the war was an error, but also *why* it was an error.

Still, the degree of difference between Obama's thinking and that of the Bush administration is unclear. Obama has kept murky his plans on withdrawing from the war that he labels an error, and his foreign policy advisory team draws heavily from the Clintonian, hawkish wing of the Democratic Party as well as from the younger faction of the Democratic establishment that is more wary of military adventurism than either the Republicans or the center-left holdovers from the Clinton administration.

There is ample cause for concern that Obama hews to the interventionist consensus. Again, attempting to piece together disparate information to form a dispositive profile is impossible, but from the senator's thinking on the implications of "state failure" on American security to his views on force

structure, Senator Obama may be less of a maverick than he has been made out to be.

### **Monsters under Every Bed**

Senator Obama was right to oppose the Iraq project, a war that has cost more than 4,000 American lives, split up many more American families, and has already cost more than \$650 billion.<sup>78</sup> But Obama appears not to have grasped a truth that must be confronted before the United States can fully shed the reflexive, counterproductive interventionism that has characterized U.S. grand strategy since (at least) the end of the Cold War: Terrorism notwithstanding, the United States is remarkably secure. The United States still enjoys geographic isolation, courtesy of two oceans and two friendly border nations, and has an economy of more than \$13 trillion. Current U.S. defense expenditures are roughly equivalent to that of the rest of the world combined. America possesses a massive deterrent of thousands of nuclear weapons capable of annihilating any country on earth.

Terrorism does represent a new and challenging threat to the United States. But judged against other threats to the lives and livelihoods of American citizens, the terrorist threat is real, but not worth radically restructuring our government and wasting American blood and treasure in pursuit of grandiose plans to remake the Middle East. In 2001, the year of the most destructive terrorist attack against the United States in its history, more than 10 times as many Americans died from the flu as they did from terrorism.<sup>79</sup> Even so, few have proposed radically altering the structure of the American government and society to fight influenza. A realistic assessment of the nature of the terrorist threat should be accompanied by the recognition that the measures that have been proposed to combat it have proved not just extraordinarily costly, but also remarkably ineffective and, in many cases, counterproductive.

Despite his repeated disparagement of the “politics of fear,” Senator Obama has not grasped, or at least has not publicly stated, this fundamental reality. Rather, he points to

a range of other threats, starting most plausibly along the Afghanistan/Pakistan border but ranging to his flawed assertion that “extremely poor societies and weak states provide optimal breeding grounds for disease, terrorism, and conflict, [and] the United States has a direct national security interest in dramatically reducing global poverty and joining with our allies in sharing more of our riches to help those most in need.”<sup>80</sup>

In identifying a range of other threats he would like to fight, Obama is falling victim to the long-standing Democratic assumption that for a Democrat to oppose one foreign policy debacle means that that Democrat must propose myriad other interventions to prove his “toughness.” The politics of this assumption are open to debate, but the merits ought not to be. Attempting to triage “failed states” or doubling down on efforts to eradicate poverty through the failed policies of development aid will merely add different errors to the foreign policy ledger.

The inherent contradiction at the heart of Obama’s grand strategy can be seen in his vision of what should be done with U.S. ground forces, which President George W. Bush has already expanded. Obama believes we should “expand our ground forces by adding 65,000 soldiers to the army and 27,000 marines.”<sup>81</sup> If, under an Obama presidency, we will not be conducting the sorts of military adventures that the Bush administration has concocted, and if Obama sincerely intends to end the war in Iraq, the most proximate cause of the strain on the force, why would we need to expand the ground forces by 92,000 troops? What will those troops be used for?

A clue to Obama’s thinking on these matters may be found in his reliance on Samantha Power, a scholar whom Obama has argued has “terrific expertise” on issues like Darfur.<sup>82</sup> According to Power, “my criterion for military intervention. . . is an immediate threat of large-scale loss of life.”<sup>83</sup> One could imagine, of course, the immediate threat of large-scale loss of life in Darfur, in Zimbabwe, and elsewhere. Is there reason to believe that a President Obama would use his extra 92,000 troops to pursue “dignity

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promotion” in Western Sudan or to fend off Robert Mugabe’s goons outside Harare? It’s a question the senator hasn’t been clear on.

There is anecdotal information that indicates Obama is no dove: Power reported that in an early meeting with Obama, she was struck by the fact that “he doesn’t get weighted down by the limits of American power, but he sees you have to grasp those limits in order to transcend them.”<sup>84</sup> While that may seem incoherent or even vacuous, absent a longer record of policymaking it is cause for concern that Obama may be hardly less inclined to intervention than his predecessors.

In fact, two of Obama’s closest foreign policy advisers published an article in 2006 arguing for military intervention in Sudan. Susan E. Rice and Anthony Lake, both Obama advisers, argued along with Rep. Donald Payne (D-N.J.) that the United States should threaten and potentially take military action to force Khartoum to halt the ongoing persecution in Darfur. Hinting that the reason for a decision not to intervene would have to do with the victims’ race, Rice, Lake, and Payne argued that the United States should flout the United Nations if necessary, relying on legitimacy granted by NATO or some other source.<sup>85</sup>

With all of the foregoing as a backdrop, it is worth noting that ur-neoconservative and McCain adviser Robert Kagan reviewed a 2007 Obama speech and concluded that what he was hearing was “Obama the Interventionist”: “To Obama, everything and everyone everywhere is of strategic concern to the United States.” The only difference, according to Kagan, between Obama and the preceding administration was that “Obama believes the world yearns to follow us, if only we restore our worthiness to lead. Personally, I like it.”<sup>86</sup> Coming from one of the leading thinkers behind the war in Iraq, that is enough to raise concerns.

#### **Direct Diplomacy with Adversaries: Realism or Appeasement?**

Kagan’s brush with admiration for Obama has not been echoed by the interventionist mainstream. Instead, many hawkish analysts have focused on Obama’s willingness to nego-

tiate directly with adversarial regimes, charging that Senator Obama may cut deals that would endanger the security of the United States. Obama’s willingness to engage in normal diplomacy with “rogue states” represents a prudent break with the Bush administration, and, accordingly, it, too, deserves examination.

According to Senator Obama, “Our policy of issuing threats and relying on intermediaries to curb Iran’s nuclear program, sponsorship of terrorism, and regional aggression is failing.” Instead, Obama proposes that with Iran and other adversarial states, “[t]ough-minded diplomacy, backed by the whole range of instruments of American power—political, economic, and military—could bring success even when dealing with long-standing adversaries such as Iran and Syria.”<sup>87</sup> Expanding on that theme, Obama’s campaign website advertises that the candidate believes that “not talking doesn’t make us look tough—it makes us look arrogant, it denies us opportunities to make progress, and it makes it harder for America to rally international support for our leadership.”<sup>88</sup>

On the issue of preconditions and whether to negotiate with America’s adversaries, Obama represents a genuine change that gets beyond the schoolyard approach that has characterized the general attitude of the Bush administration toward diplomacy. Underpinning the premise that the United States should not negotiate with countries over disagreements is the idea that doing so would unduly grant legitimacy to the governments in question, dampening or discouraging domestic opposition to the government.

But this is a pernicious idea. There is little evidence that refusing to negotiate with any given government has ever decreased its legitimacy such that domestic opposition has toppled it. Moreover, if the larger, stronger party to negotiations is looking for opportunities to change the regime in the weaker country, it is unlikely that that regime will view any deal as offered in good faith. Neoconservatives will object that the Reagan administration was seeking ways to unravel

the Soviet regime while negotiating with it, but in fact the example proves the opposite. There is a difference between exploiting the deficiencies in an opposing regime and the sort of slipshod “regime change” that neo-conservatives favor.

The Reagan administration is the best historical example of two dueling instincts in the American diplomatic tradition: hubris and humility. Throughout the Reagan administration, neoconservatives and other hawkish analysts fretted that President Reagan was recklessly engaging in diplomacy with a stronger, savvier Soviet Union that would inevitably trick the less-competent Reagan into making bad deals that would harm the national security of the United States. The shrillest criticism of Reagan was perhaps neoconservative thinker Norman Podhoretz’s lament that the president was “following a strategy of helping the Soviet Union stabilize its empire, rather than . . . encouraging the breakdown of that empire from within.” Less than 10 years later, of course, the Soviet Union had finished breaking down from within.<sup>89</sup>

The lesson in all of this is that normal diplomacy is not appeasement. Bad deals and good deals are made in the course of diplomacy, but neither result should damn or exalt the enterprise in general. Instead, diplomacy must be judged against the other possible approaches to foreign nations. When compared to a policy that issues demands that will almost certainly go unfulfilled, backed up by the threat of preventive military action (as things stand with the Iran example), diplomacy deserves at least to be tried before truculence and eventual invasion is presented as a responsible alternative.

Still, Senator Obama’s remarks leave open the alarming possibility that he views diplomacy as a panacea; that talking with adversaries will necessarily work, without examining the prospect of what he thinks we should do if diplomacy fails. There are obviously domestic and international political reasons for keeping his views on these matters unknown, but his remarks about Iran, for example, indicate that Obama largely agrees

with McCain’s view of the threat.

For example, during Obama’s July 2008 visit to Israel, Obama stated that “a nuclear Iran would pose a grave threat and the world must prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.”<sup>90</sup> Obama then returned from the trip to the Middle East and met with congressional Democrats, reportedly telling them that “if the Iranians don’t accept a deal now because they think they’re going to get a better deal from the next administration, they’re mistaken.”<sup>91</sup>

There are several problems with these statements. First, it is irresponsible for a U.S. presidential candidate to travel to Israel and indulge the narrative that the Israeli right and American neoconservatives have been advancing: namely, that a nuclear Iran would present an existential threat because Iran would supposedly launch nuclear weapons at Israel unprovoked. There is, simply put, no evidence to support that assertion, but it is, unsurprisingly, enough to cause extreme distress in Tel Aviv. American leaders need to reinforce reality on the subject of Iran, not check boxes to satisfy various constituencies at home or abroad. A nuclear Iran would pose different—but serious—problems for Israel and the United States.<sup>92</sup> This fact can be acknowledged between the two allies without destroying the relationship.

Secondly, the current strategy is almost certain to fail. Obama has indicated he would drop the Bush administration’s insistence on preconditions to negotiations, which increases the chances that serious talks could take place. At the same time, keeping Iran nonnuclear should be a high enough priority that Obama should be willing to make additional concessions if they were required for achieving that goal. If Obama is stating that he would enter the negotiations with the position that he is unwilling to sweeten the deal the Bush administration has offered, then the United States is likely going to have to decide between a war with Iran and a nuclear or near-nuclear Iran. It would be preferable for the United States to maintain flexibility on the exact contours of its position since

**Senator Obama’s remarks on Iran leave open the alarming possibility that he views diplomacy as a panacea.**

**Obama's statement that the world "must" prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon does not leave much wiggle room for an Obama administration should diplomacy fail.**

changes could be necessary to come up with a deal that would prevent Iran's acquisition of a nuclear capability.

Finally, Obama's statement that the world "must" prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon does not leave much wiggle room for an Obama administration should diplomacy fail. That statement easily would be used by political opposition to brand Obama as a flip-flopper and appeaser should he decide that the United States could, in fact, live with a nuclear Iran. The danger is that so much hope is invested in diplomacy that the candidate and his advisers have not adequately considered their options if diplomacy were to fail. The prospect of diplomatic failure is real. Senator McCain has been clear that he would start a war to try to prevent a nuclear Iran. Parsing Senator Obama's statements on the subject, it looks ominously uncertain whether he would do the same.

#### **Crossing the Rubicon into Pakistan: Pursuing al Qaeda or Destabilizing Pakistan?**

One of the few areas in which Senator Obama has been criticized as being too hawkish was his August 2007 remark—in a prepared speech, not an off-the-cuff answer to a question—that "if we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets [in Pakistan] and President Musharraf won't act, we will."<sup>95</sup> Senator McCain criticized this remark, calling Obama "naïve" and noting that "You don't broadcast that you are going to bomb a country that is a sovereign nation and that you are dependent on . . . in the struggle against (the) Taliban and the sanctuaries which they hold."<sup>94</sup>

McCain raises a fair point, but obscures the policy question with a question of rhetoric. It is important to note that openly threatening to violate the sovereignty of a nuclear-armed Islamic country is imprudent and, at best, extraordinarily poor public diplomacy. The remark elicited predictable outrage among citizens and government officials in Pakistan.<sup>95</sup> There was no reason to stir the pot of anti-Americanism with such a remark, other than

perhaps the inchoate feeling among Democrats that Americans will not elect a president who does not make some number of hawkish remarks about various foreign countries.

But the larger policy question—whether to attack high-value al Qaeda targets in Pakistan on the basis of "actionable intelligence"—is one in which Senator Obama's thinking is hardly strange. It is standing policy of the United States that U.S. forces would pursue such leads, and they have done so more than once in the past.

In June 2004, for example, a missile strike in South Waziristan killed Nek Mohammed, a pro-Taliban militant, and a number of his associates. Locals on the scene offered what they said was evidence of U.S. involvement, but Pakistani officials repeatedly denied this, stating that the attack was an operation of the Pakistani security forces. Although a PBS *Frontline* investigation would later conclude that Mohammed was hit by a Hellfire missile fired from a U.S. Predator drone over Pakistan, the Pakistani government to this day attempts to obscure the American character of the raid. Other raids occurred as recently as September 2008, where U.S. Special Operations forces chased militants into South Waziristan and an unmanned aerial vehicle launched a strike that killed 23 people.<sup>96</sup>

So on the policy question, Senator Obama's thinking is in line with established American policy—President Bush's established policy. Senator McCain has said little to explicitly support or oppose President Bush's incursions into Pakistan, but observers ought not to judge Obama's proposal as being bizarre or erratic. Still, the policy question is an open one: is it worth possibly destabilizing Pakistan by eroding governmental authority in flagrantly violating its sovereignty to pursue terrorists across the border? That would be a valuable debate to have, but unfortunately too much of the discussion has focused on the semantic aspects of whether Obama advocated "bombing Pakistan" or pressing "hot pursuit" into Pakistan.



## Strategic Hypochondria: An Ailment Shared by Both Candidates

Though there are significant differences between the two candidates, it is important not to overstate the degree of disagreement. There are many important issues on which the candidates agree. As Cindy Williams of MIT observed in surveying McCain's, Obama's, and Hillary Clinton's essays in *Foreign Affairs*:

All three see terrorism, non-state actors, and weak or failed states as threats to the United States. All are concerned about rising powers. All insist on the need for U.S. leadership. All believe in the use of force to prevent atrocities abroad. All strongly support NATO, though they all want it to do more. Obama and Clinton note that they subscribe to the unilateral use of force; McCain is silent on the matter in the article, but he surely concurs. All rate nuclear proliferation as a very serious problem; all agree Iran must be prevented from getting nuclear weapons; all are open to a military solution to Iran's nuclear programs.<sup>97</sup>

There are differences between the two candidates on a range of issues. But neither candidate is likely to transform the foundations of American foreign policy.

Both candidates, for example, responded to the fraudulent March 2008 elections in Zimbabwe by calling for Zimbabwean dictator Robert Mugabe's removal from power.<sup>98</sup> Although Obama was characteristically less confrontational than McCain, both candidates think the United States should be attempting to find ways to oust the Zimbabwean dictator. They further think that bluster from Washington can help the process along. And both of them fail to see how counterproductive American heckling can be to the democratic opposition, and how perilous blanket condemnations of governments can be in terms of American foreign policy. No doubt President Clinton had not the faintest idea

upon signing the Iraq Liberation Act into law and making "regime change" the official policy of the United States in 1998 that the United States would be patrolling the streets of Sadr City a decade later. The "humility" that George W. Bush called for in American foreign policy in 2000 remains as elusive as ever.

Obama's agreement with John McCain on Georgia is but the most recent piece of evidence indicating that Obama is hardly as much of a change agent as some have suggested. Obama released a statement on August 11, with Russian troops across Georgian territory, highlighting his call for a "deeper [Georgian] relationship" with NATO and the United States, and reiterated his support for a Membership Action Plan toward NATO accession for Georgia.<sup>99</sup> Offering a security guarantee to a country with two separatist regions backed (and occupied) by Russia represents a lack of seriousness on the part of Senator Obama. It is truly audacious for Senator Obama to support NATO membership for Georgia and expect robust Russian cooperation on important American objectives like securing loose nuclear materials.

## The Choice

As mentioned in the introduction, attempting to ascertain what a candidate would do with U.S. foreign policy if he should be elected president is an uncertain endeavor. Anyone trying to do so in 2000 would likely have judged candidate George W. Bush entirely wrongly. If anything, Bush's conduct as president was as direct a repudiation of his views on the campaign trail that one could imagine.

Analysts who have attempted to determine the foreign policy style of John McCain have grappled with his history of being willing to buck Republican Party orthodoxy. The *New Republic's* John Judis, who wrote an article in 2006 arguing that there was reason to believe that a President McCain would govern more realistically than the rhetoric of Candidate McCain would lead one to believe, circled back to the issue in 2008 only to conclude that this was "wishful thinking":

**An offer of a security guarantee to Georgia, a country with two separatist regions backed (and occupied) by Russia, shows a lack of seriousness on the parts of both Obama and McCain.**

## A President McCain would expand on the errors of the Bush doctrine.

McCain continues to rely on the same neoconservative advisers; he still thinks U.S. foreign policy should focus on transforming rogue states and autocracies into democracies that live under the shadow of American power; and he no longer tells credulous reporters that he consults [former National Security Adviser Brent] Scowcroft. . . . If John McCain's foreign policy is changing, it is only becoming more combustible, not less.<sup>100</sup>

Given available evidence, this judgment is unassailable. Senator McCain believes in a near-limitless capacity of American power, he continues to hold close the same neoconservative advisers that led him into a relationship with Ahmed Chalabi and to promote forced regime change in Iraq, and he looks to have learned little from the enterprise in Iraq beyond "the surge is working."

There is now, as there was with Bush in 2000, the chance that McCain could become president and govern in a manner significantly different from his rhetoric as a candidate. But one cannot judge candidates on suppositions about unknown futures. Although McCain's early years in Congress fit much less neatly into any one foreign policy vision, for at least the past decade, Senator McCain has made clear that President McCain would expand on the errors of the Bush doctrine, and deepen the United States' militarized, counterproductive approach to the rest of the world on issues related to terrorism and beyond. In the words of *Time* columnist Joe Klein, "McCain would place a higher priority on finding new enemies than cultivating new friends."<sup>101</sup>

Senator Obama, by contrast, is less known. His opposition to the Iraq war and support for normal diplomacy with various adversaries represents a positive change for American foreign policy. But he remains surrounded by a group of advisers some of whom have proposed attacking Sudan and North Korea, and who broadly endorse the principles of ad hoc humanitarian intervention.<sup>102</sup> Obama misdiagnoses the cause of our terrorism problem,

promising to fight terrorism by attempting to "roll back the tide of hopelessness that gives rise to hate."<sup>103</sup>

The best case that can be made for Senator Obama's foreign policy is the fact that the alternative to his approach is Senator McCain's. There are a number of other issues on which the candidates differ,<sup>104</sup> but Senator McCain's views on foreign policy and military issues are frequently stated, strongly held, and deeply misguided. A President McCain would promise more provocation, more intervention, and more strain on the military, the budget, and the country.

## Notes

1. In recent years, a number of analysts have pointed out that, taken in a global context, the Middle East—and the driving concerns of oil and Israel—is less urgent and less amenable to productive American intervention than a number of other regions and issues. For arguments that the Middle East is a relative irrelevancy in terms of U.S. foreign policy, see Philip E. Auerswald, "The Irrelevance of the Middle East," *The American Interest*, May-June 2007, pp. 19–27; Edward Luttwak, "The Middle of Nowhere," *Prospect*, May 2007, pp. 26–29; and Eugene Gholtz and Daryl G. Press, "Energy Alarmism: The Myths That Make Americans Worry about Oil," Cato Policy Analysis no. 589, April 5, 2007.
2. Quoted in Adam Nagourney and Michael Cooper, "McCain's Conservative Model? Roosevelt (Theodore, That Is)," *New York Times*, July 13, 2008. McCain's son told the *New York Times's* Nicholas Kristof that Napoleon had been a childhood hero of McCain. See Nicholas D. Kristof, "P.O.W. to Power Broker, A Chapter Most Telling," *New York Times*, February 27, 2007.
3. John McCain with Mark Salter, *Worth the Fighting For: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 320.
4. During a speech in Polk City, Florida, before the Florida primary, McCain told the audience, "There's going to be other wars, I'm sorry to tell you. There's going to be other wars. We will never surrender but there will be other wars." CNN Newsroom, aired January 27, 2008, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0801/27/cnr.01.html>.
5. Matt Welch, *McCain: The Myth of a Maverick* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2007), p. 154.

6. Quoted in Matthew Yglesias, "The Militarist," *American Prospect*, May 2008.
7. Matt Bai, "The McCain Doctrines," *New York Times Magazine*, May 18, 2008.
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