

## **Hawk vs talk: America's foreign policy choice**

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Financial Times  
7 August 2008  
P. 9

The big question to which foreign policy commentators are starting to turn their typewriters is this: how much exactly is at stake in this presidential election?

Experts tend to do badly at this question.

In the 2000 race between Al Gore and George Bush, the received wisdom was that the foreign policy differences between the candidates were minimal.

On the Democratic side, it was presumed that a President Gore would continue the centrist international approach of the Clinton Administration, in which he had been such an important player. Meanwhile, the Republican team hosed down expectations that a President Bush would pursue a more muscular strategy. Condoleezza Rice tut-tutted that 'We don't need to have the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten' and the candidate himself promised a 'humble' foreign policy.

All this led Robert Kagan to publish an op-ed in The Washington Post titled 'Vive what difference?', in which he asked glumly: 'When it comes to international affairs, is there really any difference between Bush and Gore?'

It turns out that Mr Kagan need not have worried (though the rest of us should have). From his first days in office, President Bush was the Charles Atlas of international relations, kicking sand in the face of puny Europeans and ripping up every multilateral agreement he could get his hands on.

After 9/11, Mr Bush opted not just to invade Afghanistan – a country which had given succour to America's attackers – but to keep marching right to Baghdad. Would Mr Gore have invaded Iraq? Virtual history is always speculative. However, Iraq was a war of choice and it seems very likely, judging from his contemporaneous comments and general worldview, that Mr Gore would have chosen differently. But for Mr Bush's election victory, then, the Iraq war – with all the attendant costs in blood, treasure and prestige – probably would not have occurred.

If 2000 posed a real choice without seeming to, 2004 was the exact opposite.

In 2004, most analysts agreed with The New York Times' David Brooks that 'this election is not just a conflict of two men, but is a comprehensive conflict of visions.' Democratic commentators predicted that Mr Bush's second term would be just like his first term, except worse, because Colin Powell would no longer be around to apply the handbrake. Joe Cirincione, for instance, warned that the neocons would be emboldened by a victory, seeing it as 'a vindication of their policies and a mandate to continue'.

On the other side of the fence, Republicans forecast that a President John Kerry would convene a European-style multilateralist love-in. House Speaker Tom DeLay introduced his speeches with: 'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen – or as John Kerry would say, bonjour.'

In fact, the foreign policy differences between the candidates were smaller than they appeared. By mid-2004, the early failures of the Iraq war had already undermined the ideologues and

chastened US foreign policy. Washington was already taking a more multilateral approach to the problems posed by the two remaining members of the axis of evil, Iran and North Korea.

That movement accelerated after Mr Bush's re-election. In its second term, to the disgust of ultracons, the Bush Administration has run an orthodox foreign policy relying on multilateral approaches to its most difficult challenges – which was what Mr Kerry's foreign policy would have looked like. A Kerry first term would have differed from Mr Bush's second term in some important instances, including climate change policy and the troop surge in Iraq: but there was less blue water between the two men than it seemed at the time.

What about this year? The orthodoxy has not yet crystallised, but some are already predicting that international circumstances – in particular the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – will so restrict the policy options available to the next president that Washington's global strategy will not turn on the election result.

If the menu of options available to the next president will be limited by Mr Bush's legacy, however, the two candidates would choose very differently from that menu.

Their foreign policy instincts are entirely at odds: John McCain has a quarter-century of hawkishness behind him; Barack Obama opposed the Iraq war when most senior Democrats supported it and has signalled a preparedness to talk with America's adversaries. One sees jihadist terrorism as a transcendent threat; the other looks at the world through the lens of globalisation. Temperamentally, one is fiery and the other is cool.

And although the election of either man would shift international perceptions of America, Mr Obama would shift them further – not only in Europe, but in the poorest parts of the world, where threats coalesce. Which other presidential candidate in history could reminisce, as Mr Obama does when describing his childhood years in Indonesia, about 'the feel of packed mud under bare feet as I wander through paddy fields'?

These contrasts are even more significant than the stated policy differences on issues such as Iraq.

In the 2008 election, Americans face a foreign policy choice – and not a marginal, VHS vs Beta kind of choice, either.

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