

Michael Fullilove
Military might is right, whoever is elected
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At first glance, the two candidates for president of the United States could hardly be more different.

As a young man, George Bush was a towel-snapping frat boy; John Kerry was an earnest debater and student politician. Bush had travelled overseas only occasionally before his election in 2000; Kerry attended boarding school in Switzerland and speaks three foreign languages.

In politics, Bush was a late bloomer, Kerry a lifer. When they look at issues, Bush sees their simplicity and Kerry revels in their complexity.

The two men appear to be a study in contrasts, and there has been much campaign rhetoric about the starkness of the choice on offer – particularly in the realm of foreign policy.

In some respects, there is a clear choice. President Bush has pursued an audacious grand strategy, featuring the inter-related concepts of unilateralism, pre-emption and regime change through the use of force. The approach has been tested in the Iraq war and found wanting: the initial military operation was a remarkable success but the occupation is in serious trouble.

In several areas, John Kerry has opened up blue water between his opponent and himself. He has hardened his position on Iraq, which he now calls a “profound diversion from the war on terrorism.” He is optimistic on the subjects of diplomacy, allies and international organisations. He appears less gung-ho than President Bush regarding the use of military force, especially in pre-emptive form. He is chary of the Wilsonian impulse to export American values, in particular democracy.

However, the similarities between the policies they would implement are as striking as the differences, for four reasons. First, regardless of who wins, the twin challenges of the war against terrorism and the Iraq war will condition and help determine US strategy. There is hardly a cigarette paper between the Iraq policies of the two candidates: both want to internationalise the war, bring in multinational troops and train Iraqi ones, and neither is looking to leave any time soon.

Second, America’s primacy in the international system shapes the way its policy makers look at the world. Partiality to coercive measures and wariness of international law is not purely a personal predilection of George Bush’s. It is shared by many Democratic foreign policy intellectuals, most of whom supported the decision to remove Saddam Hussein.

Third, in the event of a Bush victory, the fact that foreign policy adventurism, especially in the form of regime change, was tried and failed in Bush’s first term makes it less likely to recur in his second term. Indeed, the experience in Iraq has already chastened US policy, as shown by Washington’s recent multilateral approaches to both Iran and North Korea. The countervailing view to this argument is that if the Bush Administration wins re-election under such difficult circumstances, it will be emboldened rather than subdued. However, the signs are that Republicans are cognisant of their mistakes and will move to correct them, not repeat them.

Finally, there would also be pressures on a President Kerry to pursue a centrist strategy, including the likelihood of a Republican-controlled Senate.

What is at stake for Australia? The fundamentals of the US-Australia relationship are excellent, and regardless of which combination of the Rubik's Cube clicks into place next week – whether the personal relationship is Bush-Howard or Kerry-Howard – the alliance will endure.

However, the identity of the president will surely affect the temperature of the relationship. John Kerry is known to esteem Australia highly, but our support in Iraq would not have the same resonance for him that it has for Bush. Given the task Kerry has set himself of strengthening links with the UN and other allied capitals, the alliance with Canberra would likely be less of a priority. On the other hand, it can be uncomfortable for a middle power such as Australia to be very close to a great power. In light of the animus felt towards the current Administration, other aspects of our diplomatic life would be made easier by a new face in Washington.

Robert Kagan famously wrote that “Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus.” His point was that unlike other parts of the world, the US relies on military might rather than international rules in order to maintain its security and promote a liberal order. In these terms, John Kerry is as much of a Martian as George Bush.

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