A Changing Universe:
Foreign Policy and U.S. Presidential Elections

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DOES FOREIGN POLICY MATTER IN U.S. presidential elections? The conventional wisdom says no. Voters are more concerned about pocket book issues. "Foreign policy begins at home." Yet the Financial Times confidently announced that "this year's will be the most sustained and serious foreign policy debate in any election year since Vietnam."[1] The accompanying article carefully avoided saying that such a debate would determine the election's outcome. Help to shape it, yes; be the conclusive factor, no.

The conventional wisdom also states that presidential elections are essentially "a referendum on the incumbent." By this standard, 9/11, Iraq, and the economy will be the key issues voters consider as they make their decisions. Education, health care, and jobs still constitute the sacred trinity on the Democrats' national agenda. Understandably, after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, they are unwilling to accept the Republicans' alleged superiority on "national security." Whatever the outcome in November, pundits will have a field day sorting out the complicated reasons behind it. How much did the report of the 9/11 Commission matter? How much did the publication of several popular books revealing the day to day operations of the Bush administration from the terrorist attacks through the first year of the Iraq war matter?[2] How much did the fervor that substituted for planning matter later in the wake of unintended but predictable consequences?

For scholars, as the presidential election cycle moves into higher gear, the most interesting question is what aspects of the conventional wisdom may have staying power, and what should be discarded. Put more directly: has conventional wisdom lost its credibility in a globalized international system? For at least a decade, American politi-

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cal scientists of various theoretical persuasions have explained that in today's world, the lines between domestic and foreign policy have eroded, if not completely disappeared. Of course, such assertions take time to be tested and work their way into voting behavior. Will 2004 mark the election that certifies this transition?

The evidence suggests that this might be the case, but I would argue that the foreign policy issues that ultimately resonate will do so if and when political leaders, incumbents and challengers alike, are able to translate such issues into domestic ones where voters traditionally sort out their preferences and prejudices. I assume that most voters are unlikely to worry about whether the United States is still a republic or has become an empire, a charge roiling many academics recently.[3] Instead, the voting public is more likely to see security issues like Iraq or economic issues like trade through the lens of potential impacts on their daily life rather than through the broader prism of America's role in the world. They are less apt to be moved by assertions of a Washington constructed "Greater Middle East Initiative" than by worries about rising gasoline prices. They are less apt to be anxious about "why they hate us" as a matter of ideology and more concerned about the practical matter of whether such enemies are in a position to attack us again. This is the initial step in the larger project of educating the public about the disappearing distinction between "foreign" and "domestic," a task for subsequent elections, if not the one in 2004.

Of course, U.S. presidential candidates tend to speak in codes, both to energize their supporters and to attract undecided voters. Thus, President George W. Bush will stress his leadership role after 9/11, rather than the recent confirmation of prior intelligence failures. He will emphasize the necessity of the Iraq war, even though the absence of weapons of mass destruction clearly reveals that the war was one of choice. He will insist that America is safer after the war, despite its muddled political dimension and the diversion from the war on terror. In turn, Senator John F. Kerry will insist on the need to reinvigorate relationships with allies and the UN, both denigrated in the run-up to the war, for which he nevertheless voted. He will also praise the Clinton administration's economic record and its record surplus, as well as its erstwhile multilateralism. He will promise to halt the outsourcing of U.S. manufacturing jobs, and he will raise the alarm on the neglect of homeland security issues. He will decry the Bush administration's penchant for secrecy and its obsession with executive privilege.

Much of the content of the policy debate therefore is obvious. What is more interesting are the competing world views of the two candidates and the likely consequences of each for U.S. foreign policy.

The Bush view, as articulated and already implemented, is built on the superiority of American military power as the fundamental basis for a tolerable world order, which allows for American values to be adopted in every region of the globe. It is not a

subtle view; it downgrades other cultures even as it promises freedom and democracy for all. It is also a view that accepts as natural some glaring inequities at home as well as abroad. The Kerry view accords a higher place to economic and diplomatic instruments of foreign policy and appears to recognize the need for alliances and international organizations to provide legitimacy for America's policies. Yet, its underlying assumption is also the retention of supreme military capacity globally as the United States confronts a world of threats from both state and non-state actors. It hopes for reduced gaps between rich and poor, but has no special program to do so, beyond traditional foreign aid. Kerry's personal heroism in the Vietnam War burnishes his national security credentials, especially when Iraq is compared to Vietnam by his respected political supporters like Senator Edward Kennedy, even though the analogy may be overdone, or even false.[4]

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Even when so broadly sketched, the world views of U.S. presidents and their appointees have impacts on the rest of the world. Indeed, citizens of other countries often state their wish that they could vote in a U.S. presidential election, since they believe the outcome affects their fates as well. Responses to U.S. strategies are important indicators of how the American role in the world is constituted and negotiated overseas and in Washington.

Seen from abroad, it is clear that reactions to the Bush world view, especially its avowedly Manichean vocabulary of good and evil, have been mixed at best. For many observers, the most notable reaction to American power as recently displayed has been fear—fear of American arrogance and unilateralism. Nevertheless, this world view has clear antecedents in Republican foreign policy during the Cold War, when attention was squarely focused on the Soviet-American contest and the military strength arguably needed for the United States to prevail. Similarly, Kerry's world view, while admittedly more nuanced, derives in large part from the competing strands of Democratic presidents Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter as well as Bill Clinton.

What many commentators miss is that both world views, not just that of the Democrats, are beleaguered by images of Somalia and Vietnam. Both world views demonstrate that structural as well as psychological blinders are at the heart of U.S. foreign policy. The principal difference is that the Kerry world view, at least in its declaratory stage, suggests that respect, not fear, is the likely response. Much will depend, not just on the election outcome, of course, but on whether the prevailing world view of either party allows for the pulling and hauling, the intricate bargaining with

others that so often has irritated the Bush administration. The crucial example was the unwillingness of the United States to invest time and energy into attaining a second Security Council resolution before launching the Iraq war, despite the success of its first effort, Resolution 1441.[5]

Equally important, since theory and practice generally inform each other, both world views are essentially compatible with the basic tenets of realist international relations theory, as hallowed in American scholarship. Neither is rich in attention to the ideational foundation of international relations as delineated by constructivist theorists. To be sure, the Democrats are probably more attuned to the liberal internationalist imperatives than the Republicans, although this made little difference in Rwanda, for example. In fact, once in office, Democratic presidents select their options from roughly the same set of choices that Republicans do. The difference may lie in whether and when individual obsessions, say with particular foreign leaders, come into play. After all, ten American presidents, (of both parties) have railed and schemed against Fidel Castro. The personal beliefs of individual leaders, such as the religious creed of President Bush, also play a part. One potential differentiating factor is where U.S. presidents look for legitimacy beyond Congress, public opinion, and domestic politics. Perhaps in Europe? Perhaps in the UN? What happens when the world view is brutally challenged on the ground? This is where the issue of Iraq is salient well after November 2004.

Already it is clear that when definitive histories of that troubled U.S. war are written, the gap between the grandiosity of the announced U.S. goals of ending the declared nexus between terror, proliferation of nuclear weapons and "rogue states," and the narrower U.S. objectives of a secure oil supply and an Iraqi secular leadership capable of instituting democracy, will dominate the narrative. Equally significant, especially in retrospect, will be the recounting of Washington's inevitable turn to others when crises arose; to the Europeans, previously described as either naïve or venal, and to the UN, previously labeled irrelevant. Clearly, the tortured search for U.S. legitimacy will be one of the main themes of post-Iraq historiography.[6]

The U.S. presidential election will take place before such narratives are written. Of more immediate concern is the already developing fall-out from Iraq. The sequellae, in other words. Obeying the laws of the U.S. electoral calendar, President Bush has insisted on the transfer of "sovereignty" to Iraq on 30 June 2004, despite the assertions of L. Paul Bremer, the American "viceroy" in Baghdad, that there is no local institution in the country to whom control may be passed from the Coalition Provisional Authority, and that local Iraqi forces are incapable of assuring security by that date. The U.S. difficulty in providing electrical power has become a significant symbol of failure, especially when combined with the glacial pace of reconstruction spending and the paucity

of public works projects, any or all of which might help to counter the rising insurgency of both Shi'ite and Sunni groups.

Ironically, the Bush administration is now relying upon the UN to specify and implement a transition plan for Iraq that will allow the war to be portrayed as a success by November 2004. At first glance, this development looks like a defeat for the Bush world view, but considerable effort will be made to rationalize these events in time to focus on the economy as the election nears. Significantly, should President Bush win a second term, the Bush administration agenda could enlarge and possibly revert to the pragmatic goals and means that were more characteristic of the George H. W. Bush era. It is likely that the public will hear less about the "axis of evil" and more about the importance of China and Russia, India and Pakistan, and how great powers must work together to deal with the world's problems, and not just with terrorism. Mistakes, if made, will not be acknowledged, at least by the president.

Should the Democrats win? Their agenda will be a mixture of the party's past and present, perhaps updated to focus on means as well as ends.[7] There will be less bluster, a more sobering analysis of realities on the ground, and a more articulate awareness of the interaction between domestic and foreign policy, so that scapegoating of foreign countries for America's changing economic fortunes may lessen. Such an outcome would validate the idea that the neo-conservative "moment" is now over and that U.S. diplomats must now repair the damage from the rhetoric and behavior that undercut the hard won achievements of America's Cold War victory.[8] Yet just as the recent relapse into hubris occurred some twenty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, errors of such magnitude could still recur in later generations.

The real, if unspoken, challenges after November 2004, will be of a more existential nature. First, it will be necessary for both the U.S. public and its leaders to contemplate the costs of continuing to "operationalize" their sense of American exceptionalism.[9] To argue after Iraq that America is exempt from historical trends that have limited the ambitions of others throughout the centuries of the Westphalian international system will be less convincing now than before the war. Second, it will be mandatory for both the U.S. public and its leaders to ask themselves whether the familiar tenets of the American story—the narrative of the "city on the hill," with the flattering self-image it contains—is still accurate at home, and still believed abroad.[10] In this sense, the 2004 U.S. presidential election is truly the first of the millennium.

Notes

1. Gerard Baker, "U.S. Election 2004," *Financial Times of London*, 12 March 2004.

2. See for example, Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

3. For example, Chalmers Johnson, *The Sorrows of Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2004).

4. Niall Ferguson, "The Last Iraqi Insurgency," New York Times, 18 April 2004.

5. James Rubin, "Stumbling into War," *Foreign Affairs* 82 (September-October 2003): 46-66.

6. For example, the concerns of Robert Kagan, "A Decent Regard," *Washington Post*, 2 March 2004.

7. For example, Samuel R. Berger, "Foreign Policy for a Democratic President," *Foreign Affairs* 83, (May/June2004): 47- 63.

8. G. John Ikenberry, "The End of the Neo-Conservative Moment," *Survival* 46, (Spring 2004): 7-22.

9. This concern continues to animate the work of Stanley Hoffmann. See the discussion in Linda B. Miller, "America and the World: Still a Work in Progress?" *Review of International Studies*, (forthcoming July 2004).

10. William Pfaff, "The American Mission," *New York Review of Books*, 10 March 2004, 24-28.