

# The National Security Election

Given the current state of world affairs, it is a wonder that anyone would want to be the next president of the United States. Consider what the future Oval Office occupant has to look forward to: mounting worries over the apparently relentless nuclear ambitions in Iran and lingering questions about North Korea; a resurgent Russia and rising China, both of which are throwing their diplomatic weight around; deep concern about the future of the nearly 180,000 U.S. troops engaged in conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, neither of which seem to be getting any better; fears about political disintegration in Pakistan; fresh allegations of brutal U.S. government techniques of prisoner interrogation that look suspiciously like torture; new revelations about the erosion of personal privacy in the face of high-technology government surveillance; and a new round of public opinion polls tracking the plummeting U.S. stock around the globe.

These are just some of the reasons why it is inspiring, and just a little surprising, that so many talented Americans aspire to become the next commander in chief. Lesser candidates might be expected to shy away from such a long list of woes. Yet, as one veteran political commentator observed, “[b]oth parties are blessed with a multitude of contenders with attractive personalities and impressive resumes—people [that are] easy to imagine in the White House.”<sup>1</sup>

All too often, the course and content of political campaigns fail to rise to the level of the seriousness of what is at stake, and in some instances, this

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one is no exception. So far, pundits have pondered the price of haircuts and whether a candidate laughs too much. Yet, in terms of the effort and sustained intensity to discuss the national security challenges facing the country demonstrated this early in the electoral calendar, this campaign may well turn out to be a welcome break from the past.

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Perhaps more than any presidential contest since 1980 or even as far back as 1968, 2008 will be a national security election. In the three national elections after the collapse of communism, foreign policy took a back seat as domestic issues played the dominant role in public debates. Being perceived as a “foreign policy president” was seen as a liability in 1992, and the 1996 contest was waged around gauzy themes such as “building bridges to the twenty-first century.” In the 2000 election, the United

States’ role in the world was barely discussed, which is ironic given how global affairs now defines the careers of the two candidates: global climate change for Al Gore, the “global war on terror” for President George W. Bush. In the last campaign, the first election after the September 11 attacks, the foreign policy debate was fierce but not dominant, as the debate centered more on character than substance. By contrast, the 2008 election feels more like a Cold War–era election, when the Soviets were still a strategic rival.

The next president of the United States, no matter his or her political party or particular worldview, will confront a stark set of global challenges that defy easy characterization or remedy, with much of the country feeling somewhat weakened and vulnerable, worried about failure in Iraq, and anxiously bracing themselves for another terrorist attack at home. As former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage often notes, “[S]ince 9/11, our principal export to the world has been our fear.” The totality of this global inheritance—coping with an unfriendly environment of international frictions, waging hot wars in two countries, and facing financial limits due to previous flights of fiscal foolhardiness—is nearly overwhelming.

In part, this emphasis on national security can be measured by the time and attention that the candidates are giving to the topic. Already, with still nearly a year to go until Election Day, the major contenders in each party have attempted to outline distinct visions, although some offer few concrete specifics, of how they see the critical security issues and the role they play in a larger American purpose in the world. National security themes play prominently in all of their stump speeches, and a flurry of major policy addresses and policy articles have displayed some of the key contenders’ respective foreign policy visions.<sup>2</sup> During the seemingly countless debates and candidate joint appearances, questions about foreign policy and national security have received ample attention.

## On the Campaign Trail

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To be sure, such policy discussions are often overshadowed by the realities of what it actually takes to run for office: the requisite fundraising, attracting the right senior political consultants and building an organization, the relentless pace, the tireless campaigning, the intense begging and cajoling for endorsements, and the endless string of rubber-chicken dinners and town hall meetings. The modern presidential campaign combines the length and endurance of a marathon, the utter exertion of an Olympic sprint, the intensity and concentration of a world-class chess match, and the luck of the Irish. Given these challenges, the seemingly Herculean tasks of policymaking ahead seem almost welcome.

In terms of policy substance, the overriding foreign policy focus of all of the candidates so far has been Iraq, with good reason. The future role of U.S. military forces in Iraq will be the most anticipated and consequential decision that the next president will make. Much as the invasion of Iraq will define the Bush presidency, the next president will be defined by how and when he or she decides that U.S. forces should get out and by the implications of that decision. So far, the discussion has been one of careful jockeying, with Republicans testing campaign themes centering on the concept of never surrendering and winning at any cost, whereas Democrats are unanimous about the need to exit, with time lines ranging from immediate to indefinite.

The other issue garnering a lot of attention is the future of Iran's nuclear weapons program. Part of this is a function of breaking events. With each new round of speculation about a possible U.S. military strike against Iran, candidates are forced to respond. Yet, this discussion also reflects a reality that the would-be presidents understand: the question about what to do about Iran's goals and about the regime in Tehran will be one of the toughest they would face in the Oval Office.

Yet, beyond Iraq and Iran, many important issues warrant still more attention and debate. For example, there has been no significant discussion of the implications of China's rise for the United States other than how it relates to trade, of Russia's reemergence as a difficult partner or outright spoiler, or of Europe's growing distance, Latin America's alienation, or Africa's woes. Likewise, there is much anxiety about the matter of energy insecurity but few clear policy recommendations.

As it is often said that military strategists always fight the last war, political consultants often plan to execute campaign strategies based on the experienc-

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es of the last election. So far, this campaign is no exception. For Democrats, the 2004 election served as a searing and painful reminder of how Republicans have effectively capitalized on their long-standing advantages in terms of public trust when it comes to national security and keeping the nation safe from looming threats. Republicans aggressively castigated Democrats for having a “pre-9/11 worldview” insufficiently vigilant to the onerous task of protecting

the nation from terrorist threats and rogue nations. This line of attack turned out to be devastatingly successful. According to exit polls, 86 percent of voters who cited terrorism as the top issue facing the country in 2004 voted for Bush.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the last campaign, it sometimes seemed that the Democratic Party had still not recovered from the awkward image of Michael Dukakis getting into that tank in 1988.

Yet significantly, no longer do Democrats consider national security issues as merely boxes to be checked in order to allow them to move on to more familiar and, some believe, more friendly political terrain, such as education and health care. The Democratic candidates have already given more major foreign policy addresses that they did during the 2004 primary campaign and have already set up advisory committees of outside experts, designed to help feed advice to the candidates. They are not ceding any ground on national security to their Republican opponents. For example, in a recent television advertisement for her campaign, Senator Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) used an image of herself at Ground Zero in the days after the September 11 attacks, which many interpreted as a clear signal that she would not shirk from defending her national security credentials or allow the Republicans to try to own the terrorism debate.<sup>4</sup>

In gearing up for 2008, Republicans are also talking a lot about foreign policy in speeches and on the campaign stump. They seem to be sticking to the playbook that worked well in the 2004 campaign, painting the Democrats as weak on the core issues of national security. GOP contenders continue to play on the theme that Democrats are weak and too willing to give up in places such as Iraq. For example, they characterize Democratic plans on Iraq as “cutting and running” and castigate them for denying that there is a “war on terror.” “In four Democratic debates, not a single Democratic candidate said the words ‘Islamic terrorism,’” former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani argued in a recent Republican debate. “Now, that is taking political correctness to extremes.... The reality is that you do not achieve peace through weakness and appeasement.”<sup>5</sup> In this sense, Republicans are like the Green Bay Packers football teams of the 1960s who telegraphed their running plays, daring their opponents to stop them.

The Bush administration's shadow looms large over every corner of this campaign's foreign policy debate. The Democratic contenders' critiques of the administration and its policies are now well refined. Republicans, meanwhile, have tended to treat the Bush administration as if they are carrying a particularly virulent disease with a very high rate of political mortality. "For any Republican to have any chance in the general," one Republican strategist said recently, "the race has to be about the next four years, not the last eight. Each of the Republican candidates is trying to figure out how to do that."<sup>6</sup> As former Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich argued, "The average Republican is sitting out there saying, 'This ain't working.'"<sup>7</sup> For a measure of the impact that Bush will have on the campaign, consider how much more often Democrats refer to him than the Republicans do. The GOP contenders would prefer to skip a generation in political memory, harkening back to the halcyon days of the Reagan administration and avoiding public reflection about the more recent Bush years. In one of the primary debates, the Republican contenders mentioned President Ronald Reagan 19 times and Bush just once.<sup>8</sup>

The ultimate general-campaign war plan is not very secret after all. Democrats will attempt to link the Republican candidate clearly to the outgoing Bush administration. Republicans will strive to make sure that their contender is seen in his own right and not simply as a continuation of the current, relatively unpopular regime in Washington.

### **The Campaigns within the Parties**

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Not surprisingly, some of the most interesting tensions are playing out inside the political parties rather than between them. The essential drama playing out in Democratic circles is a struggle between change and experience, and much of this debate is being fought on national security terrain, if not always amplified by specifics. Democratic contenders agree that the United States has to reengage with the world but sometimes differ on how to do so. For example, Clinton and Senator Barack Obama (D-Ill.) recently agreed that the United States should seek discussions with the leaders of countries such as Iran and North Korea. Yet, Obama stated that he would be willing to meet them without precondition, whereas Clinton argued that she would first use envoys to test the waters. The disagreement quickly escalated into bitter exchanges between the campaigns, with Obama being charged with naïveté and Clinton being accused of remaining trapped in the past. The dispute over these details masked their fundamental agreement, that if either became president in January 2009, either would seek ways to engage in dialogue with such countries (the same can be said of the other major Democratic candidates).<sup>9</sup>

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The biggest underlying rifts within the Democratic Party right now, however, probably center on issues of economics or globalization. The three pillars of “Rubinism,” named after Clinton-era secretary of the treasury Robert Rubin, are a belief in the essential promise of globalization, the importance of expanding trade, and the need for fiscal prudence. These principals have come under some strain, not just with the party’s rank and file but also

increasingly among some elites. There is an anxious recognition of some of the downsides and discontents of globalization, worries that other countries are getting the better of the United States in a complex global trading regime, and concerns that Democrats received very little credit for their spendthrift ways in the 1990s, after which a Republican president and a Republican-led Congress simply spent with abandon. Although some of these issues are not openly debated, tensions churn

just beneath the surface in Democratic camps.

The Republicans also have areas of internal friction, such as immigration and how best to campaign around and cope with an unpopular president. Among the major candidates, however, there has been noticeably little recognition of whether the United States needs to change course on the global scene. Instead, there have been muscular rhetorical displays about who could be trusted to confront potential terrorists the earliest and with the greatest force, even including the use of nuclear weapons. The only exception has been the surprising candidacy of Representative Ron Paul (R-Tex.), who has surpassed expectations in fundraising, with sums nearing those of some of the more well-known contenders, and has become a minor sensation on the internet. Paul articulates a classic, isolationist “America First” platform in the tradition of Robert A. Taft in the 1950s and Patrick Buchanan in the 1990s. Mostly, however, Republicans have stuck to the tried and true when it comes to basic themes: the need for a larger military and a smaller government.

There are also the inevitable primary struggles in both parties between ideology and pragmatism. Conventional wisdom in U.S. politics holds that the primary process gathers the most ideological wings of both parties. Candidates must first appeal to these highly motivated voters before moving back to the center and generating broader national appeal during the general election. This is certainly how the early days of the primary have tended to play out, with activists on the Democratic side pressing for their candidates to adopt ironclad pledges to end the war in Iraq while Republican activists articulate clear preferences for conservative positions on terrorism—some

Republican candidates have even argued that the United States should enlarge the terrorist detention center at Guantanamo Bay—as well as a range of social issues.

Yet, there are some early signs that these highly motivated “base” voters on either side may be more pragmatic than the campaign pundits and strategists anticipated. For example, after initially jockeying for the distinction of who would bring U.S. forces home the fastest from Iraq, most Democratic contenders have subsequently adopted more nuanced positions for how best to wind down the U.S. presence. For example, only one major Democratic contender, Governor Bill Richardson (N.M.), has pledged to have all U.S. troops out of Iraq regardless of the consequences, whereas the three front-runners in the polls (Clinton, Obama, and former senator John Edwards [N.C.]) have refused to pledge that all U.S. forces would be out by the end of their first term in office, in 2013.

### **A New Consensus?**

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The differences between the two parties on issues such as trade, immigration, nuclear weapons, and most principally the contours of the U.S. presence in Iraq are on clear display. Yet, the basic areas of convergence among the major candidates should be viewed on some level as reassuring: a strong bipartisan consensus on the need for a continued strong U.S. involvement in the world, the determination to maintain a powerful U.S. military, and, even with a full recognition of the problems to be inherited, an enduring sense of optimism about the possibilities for U.S. leadership in the world.

In fact, one unexpected legacy of Iraq could be to provide some measure of equilibrium and establish a new basis for U.S. foreign policy in the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of whether the next president is a Republican or Democrat, there is bound to be some deep suspicion of ideological crusades in the wake of Iraq and perhaps a greater appreciation for the role of international institutions and the importance of gaining legitimacy for U.S. actions. Even the loudest neoconservative champions of the Iraq war now recognize this and call for a stronger United Nations or the creation of new institutions, such as an Alliance of Democracies, to provide greater international capacity and legitimacy.<sup>11</sup>

One might also expect a better balance between Congress and the executive branch in foreign policymaking, with greater legislative oversight and a healthy skepticism of presidential saber rattling, as already illustrated by congressional warnings about unilateral military action against Iran. When the United States does use force again, there will be higher expectations for postconflict planning and greater public awareness of its importance. In addi-

tion, there is greater political will to develop the other tools in the U.S. foreign policy toolbox, such as building greater civilian capacity for stabilization missions, strengthening the diplomatic corps, and reforming foreign development assistance. Of course, the differences are in the details, but at least there

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are some broad areas of philosophical convergence articulated in campaign rhetoric to allow hope for a return to the broad and traditional contours of international engagement in U.S. foreign policy.

The campaign still has a long way to go, and given the crush of events and the 24-hour news cycle, a few weeks can seem like a lifetime. In that sense, it is still too early to predict with any clarity how these foreign policy and national security issues will impact the upcoming primaries and the general election. Yet, judging by the richness of the

debate so far, it seems clear that the various contenders have a deep appreciation about the importance of national security issues. Just as importantly, this is a debate that the American people want to have.

## Notes

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