

SYMPOSIUM

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One is black, one is white. One is young, one is old. One is tall, one is short. Such are the differences between Barack Obama and John McCain. Commentators seem to think that the two candidates hold very, very different views of the world. Yet they are one and the same. Their choice of words and their party affiliations distinguish them, but their foreign policies do not. Obama wants to combat “global terrorism,” McCain to win “the war on terror.” This is a matter of style, not content.

What orders their priorities is continuity with their predecessors (despite Obama’s insistence that he wants to “end the mindset that got us into war”) and the simple fact of a world where America is the dominant power. This, in turn, means that whoever wins the election will choose from a much narrower range of options than his campaign speeches might suggest. If there is a crisis that directly threatens American interests and this requires military intervention, then either candidate will intervene. In 1991, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, energy flows into the American economy were imperiled, and so there was military intervention. By contrast, there is no military intervention in Sudan to save the people of Darfur because no direct threat or vital interest presents itself.

Short of that, Obama wants to boost the defense budget and so does McCain. Both view the war against terror as an urgent priority (although they refer to it by different names). Both see an America in crisis, its economy in peril at

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home, its global power tested by China and Russia abroad. Both wish to distance themselves from the policies of the Bush administration. Of course, one always inherits the disastrous policies of one's predecessor. The question, then, is how one deals with this. Obama says that he will withdraw from Iraq "responsibly," but a responsible withdrawal seems to be McCain's goal as well.

Even their rhetoric tends to be nearly indistinguishable. The candidate who summons America to "lead the world in battling immediate evils and promoting the ultimate good" and says the U.S. military should "stay on the offense, from Djibouti to Kandahar" is not John McCain. It is Barack Obama. The candidate who would "combat HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, fashion better policies to confront environmental crises"—this is McCain. The candidate who would provide weak states with "what they need to reduce poverty, build healthy and educated communities," and combat disease—that, again, is Obama.

Obama wants the United States to be the leader of the world; he wants to defend the energy and security interests of the United States; he wants to combat terrorism. All of this adds up to an interventionist agenda. But the most ardent isolationist would also end up in the same place. For what choice does he have? Can America get out of the Middle East? Yes. Can it do so without compromising its access to oil? No. If America gets out, China and Russia will go in. America is an empire, with all the responsibilities this implies. This is the reality. Americans may wish to stay out of other people's business and withdraw from the world. But the facts of the world around us will not permit them such a withdrawal.

Now, this hardly means that *nothing* distinguishes the two candidates. The differences, however, concern particulars, not essential worldviews. For example, the decision-making model that Obama seems to favor is an incremental one: be deliberate, proceed with care, engage all points of view. The model works well in periods of stability, less so in times of crisis. In such times, the question becomes, as Hillary Clinton famously put it, "What happens if the telephone rings at 3 a.m.?" Or, more exactly, what if talking to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad fails? What if America's allies waiver? What will Obama do then? He will wait until the last moment. But, in the end and like McCain, he will resort to force.

Although they eventually will arrive at the same conclusions, McCain seems likely to approach them from a different direction. Both will end up intervening abroad but McCain says so, and very clearly, in advance. When the carrot fails, McCain says, I *am* going to use the stick. That said, were McCain to wage war

against every unsavory regime and every human rights violator, he would quickly put American national security at risk. And, as with Obama, the first question McCain—and any other president—will ask himself is, what are the national security interests of the United States? After the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, it bears pointing out, America may define those interests somewhat differently.

Here, we confront the all-important question of what is desirable and what is attainable. I find it desirable that America monitors humanitarian crises before and as they develop, tries to prevent them, and intervenes as necessary to minimize the loss of life. But is this ideal attainable, especially after seven years of war

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in Afghanistan and Iraq? America can no longer afford to insert itself into every conflict around the globe. I would much prefer a strong America that prevents humanitar-

ian crises early on to an America that haphazardly intervenes in different countries. Conversely, when America’s vital national interests, and especially its security interests, come under threat, then it becomes both desirable *and* attainable for Washington to act.

About the most vital interest of the day, however, one hears virtually nothing from either candidate. Neither mentions radical Islam. Thus, they do not define the ideology of terrorism. Instead, they maintain the vocabulary of the Bush administration: “terror” is the enemy; Islam is a “religion of peace.” But terror is a tactic, and you cannot wage war against a tactic. Political Islam must be addressed as an ideology, as a set of ideas that can be countered only with another set of ideas, much as Communism was contested during the Cold War. This will be the most important task for the next president, and for the American people. In this struggle the United States has numerous assets it can deploy. The emancipation of Muslim women, human rights in countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt, not coddling regimes that provide the resources for this ideology (the Saudis, first and foremost)—although both candidates avoid the subject of Islam, promoting these goals would be a start. Whether it is Obama or McCain who squares off against radical Islam, neither will escape it. Or any other challenge that requires an American response. ●