

The Great Debate of 2008

by Jerry W. Sanders via reed - The Nation *Saturday, Nov 3 2007, 10:49pm*

international / imperialism / other press

If ever the time was right for a Great Debate on America's purpose and place in the world, that time is now. But if early auditions leading up to primary season are any indication, the top contenders are either not up to the task or unwilling to take on the challenge of correcting the current course of failure in US foreign policy. Despite America's dire standing in the world and the President's record low approval ratings at home, leading Republican candidates have made it clear that they will deviate little from the geopolitics of fear and fantasy that have marked the Bush years. And while Democratic front-runners are quick to denounce the folly of the war in Iraq--at least in its execution--they appear reluctant to take on the worldview and logic from which it was manufactured and continues to be sold in anticipation of yet new adventures. So far, in shades too reminiscent of 2004, Democrats act as if the White House is theirs for the taking if only they can avoid missteps and duck charges of "weakness."

Should this continue to be Democratic strategy, it will be recorded as a miscalculation of enormous magnitude and a golden opportunity squandered. Public opinion polls since the antiwar election of 2006 have consistently demonstrated an appetite for a thoroughgoing repudiation of Bush-era foreign policy, reflecting the views of no small number of disenchanted Republicans.

At the same time, this emphatic rejection does not translate into support for retreat behind US borders, as throwback conservatives would have it. To the contrary, the majority of Americans favor something between these two extremist positions--a "responsible globalism" based on partnership with, rather than rule over or withdrawal from, the world and its peoples. Instead of succumbing to a contest of faux toughness that they cannot win, Democrats must be imaginative enough to stake out new ground and confident enough to defend it by reframing the terms of strength and weakness, security and power, for the world of the twenty-first century.

The Great Debate must confront the harsh realities that the Bush Administration will leave as its legacy. The peculiarly twisted neoconservative version of power-centered realism and democratic idealism cobbled up in pursuit of empire has placed the United States in an untenable position, both overextended in the world the White House pretends to lead and isolated within it. Through their stubborn fixation on remaking the Middle East and their defiance of international law and world opinion for the better part of a decade, the Bushites have managed to shrink American power, in its hard and soft forms, while wringing "democracy" of meaning. The more the United States has acted alone or only on its own insistent terms, the more out of step it has become. While the rest of the world moves forward on the implementation of an International Criminal Court and a climate change accord, the United States stands aloof, registering objections. Networks of state and nonstate actors join forces behind the Millennium Development Goals and continue to make progress toward a "responsibility to protect" ethic as a standard for peacekeeping, while the United States drags its feet on these and other "new security" issues. Nevertheless, judged by Republican campaign speeches and the circle of policy advisers surrounding the candidates, the bluff and bravado of neoconservative doctrine will continue to be a force in the 2008 election, despite its abject failure as a framework for foreign policy.

This may seem to be good news for Democrats, but their complacency and their caution thus far suggest otherwise--and could prove their undoing. If they have been quick to denounce neoconservative fantasies of empire for having alienated much of the world, their nostalgia for a return to the hegemony of the Truman--or perhaps Kennedy, or even Clinton era--is itself a prescription for a world, and a United States, that no longer exists. True, the Democrats wish to reinvigorate diplomacy and lessen dependence on military force. They also spin out visions of a grand alliance of democracies and offer a nod to multilateralism, promising to consult with those they insist must once again fall dutifully behind America's rightful lead.

While the distinction between neoconservative claims to empire and liberal hegemony may be appreciated by academic theorists and policy wonks, the difference of these two approaches may escape a world grown deeply distrustful of US intentions and an American public impatient to chart a new course, not merely tinker with the old one. The world has not stood in place during the past decade waiting for the Democrats to retake the White House and reassert their own brand of dominance. What might have seemed plausible in the 1990s is no longer viable. The world has moved on, and so has the American public.

Despite the absence of leadership or even media attention on the subject, the American people have somehow grasped the deeper meaning of a rapidly globalizing world and the lessons this new context holds for the pursuit of national interest and security, as well as the place of democracy in the conduct of foreign policy. Americans, at least those beyond the Beltway, acknowledge the low opinion of the world for the United States, and they attribute this precipitous slide to a Bush foreign policy that causes others to view the United States as a military threat--even "a bully," according to 67 percent in a Public Agenda poll--a perception they believe undermines national security and furthers America's isolation. In a January 2007 poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), Republicans and Democrats alike found America's diminished standing troubling, with 62 percent of the former and 81 percent of the latter in disagreement with the proposition that the United States is so powerful "we should go our own way in international matters."

If the American people understand that the United States cannot withdraw from a world interconnected by globalization, they also realize that it cannot expect to reign over it either, rejecting both empire and hegemony as strategies for a global era. The belief that the "US is playing the role of world policeman more than it should be" again enjoys strong bipartisan support in the PIPA survey, with 66 percent of Republicans and 85 percent of Democrats in agreement on this issue. In a Chicago Council on Global Affairs poll, only 10 percent subscribed to the idea that "as the sole remaining superpower, the US should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems." Multilateral cooperation is by far the preferred approach; an overwhelming number (75 percent) endorsed the view that the "US should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries" and, in a PIPA poll, should "think in terms of being a good neighbor" (79 percent) rather than insisting on a leadership role. Surprisingly perhaps, Republican support is only slightly less than Democratic, 85 percent versus 76 percent.

The multilateral preference is quite consistent and varies little whether the issue is terrorism or the looming crisis with Iran. When World Public Opinion asked, "Which do you think is the most important lesson of September 11?" 70 percent of Republicans and 79 percent of Democrats answered that "the US needs to work more closely with other countries to fight terrorism." There is bipartisan support for a fundamental change in the means to that end as well, with 52 percent of Republicans joining 77 percent of Democrats calling for "more emphasis on diplomatic and economic methods," rather than military might to combat terrorism. Moreover, a Chicago Council poll records a resounding 87 percent in support of "working through the UN to strengthen international laws

against terrorism and to make sure UN members enforce them," with 82 percent wishing to see the "trial of suspected terrorists in the ICC."

Similarly, in the case of Iran, a Public Agenda poll conducted this past spring found only 5 percent in favor of threatening military action and 8 percent in support of taking such action. When asked how the United States should deal with Iran, a solid 72 percent favored international diplomacy or international economic sanctions. These decidedly antimilitarist views were endorsed by 68 percent of Republicans and 78 percent of Democrats.

If the public has undergone a substantial rethinking of the relationship between security and power, it has also come to an understanding of democratization that breaks sharply with neoconservative dogma. A majority are skeptical of sweeping visions that portray the movement toward democracy as inexorable and desired by all people, and even more are skeptical of the notion that this trend can be hastened by exporting "democracy through the barrel of a gun," as former Wall Street Journal editor and neocon luminary Max Boot once infelicitously urged. Quite to the contrary, in a Third Way survey in March, an overwhelming 83 percent of Americans were found to hold the view that democracy cannot be successfully instituted by force.

At the same time, the public does believe that the United States can help create a more conducive international environment for democracy to take hold, naming support for human rights and development as key factors. In a Gallup survey fully 70 percent considered "building democracy in other nations" an important foreign policy goal, with 31 percent deeming it very important. Consistent with the public's views on security issues, multilateral cooperation is the favored approach in the promotion of democracy. A large majority (68 percent in a PIPA/Chicago Council poll) held that by working through the United Nations "such efforts will be seen as more legitimate" and therefore more effective.

Anyone following the early stages of the 2008 campaign will not be surprised to learn that there is a considerable gap between the views of policy elites and the average citizen, even a lack of awareness on the part of elites that the gap exists. A Chicago Council poll reports that "leaders do not realize that the public favors participation in the International Criminal Court, the Kyoto agreement on global warming, and UN international peacekeeping forces. They are also not aware that the public favors accepting collective decisions within the UN...as well as giving the UN the authority to tax such things as the international sale of arms and oil."

It is surprising, though, that these majority views are ignored by those seeking the Oval Office. It is not as if the current course is at all sustainable and that there is a more clever way smarter people can get it right. The more the United States projects power out over the world, the more distrusting and resentful the world becomes, as America itself becomes dangerously overextended from the effort. Faced with capability and credibility gaps of the Bush years, the mythic strain of American exceptionalism, which insists that the United States by destiny and necessity must be the leader of the world--by one formula or another--over those who do not need or wish to be led, is a conceit the United States can ill afford.

Not only is hegemony unsustainable as a strategy of global governance, it is also unnecessary for electoral success. When a Third Way poll queried the public on its opinion of the exceptionalist narrative, a majority (58 percent) of Americans agreed that "It is a dangerous illusion to believe America is superior to other nations [and therefore] we should not be attempting to reshape other nations in light of our values." Only 36 percent agreed with what seems to be a bipartisan consensus among the presidential front-runners that "America is an exceptional nation with superior political institutions and ideals and a unique destiny to shape the world." The public grasps the paradox of

power today in ways elites have not, defying the conventional wisdom that holds that when it comes to foreign policy the former is provincial and the latter cosmopolitan in their views. Today the reverse is true.

America's standing in the world cannot be restored by dusting off old strategies from the past for reuse in a new century. The times require more, and the public deserves better. The presidential candidate who says as much and begins to chart the cartography of "responsible globalism" fitted for the demands of a global era will find a welcoming audience abroad and a receptive constituency at home. He or she will, of course, have to buck the politics of fear and attacks from the peddlers of crisis, as well as the predictable counsels of caution from assorted policy elites and advisers. But this is where real leadership will be sorted out in 2008, and why we are in desperate need of a Great Debate to find it.

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