

US ELECTIONS: THE DAY AFTER AND THE SEARCH FOR A CREDIBLE AND RESPONSIBLE FOREIGN POLICY

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The 2008 presidential campaign was the longest in American history, costing over a billion dollars, over a two year period. Its length can be explained by the absence of an incumbent running for re-election and the absence of a real front runner in the early part of the primary season in either major party. It was also an important indicator of the evolution of American society given the dynamic contest in the Democratic Party between a female and an African American candidate.

The length of the campaign and unanticipated events, like the global economic meltdown, shaped the issues that influenced the outcome of this election. Candidates of both parties framed their campaign with the slogan of "change". This was natural for the Democrats in view of years of failed Republican policies. Even, John McCain adopted the same slogan as the Bush record and his low public opinion ratings became a burden on McCain's campaign. His attempt to present himself as a "maverick" failed, given his consistent support of Bush domestic and foreign policies.

At first, the campaign was dominated by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the search for an exit strategy that would not harm American interests. McCain, capitalizing on his Viet Nam war record, accused Obama of "surrender" and lack of experience in national security policy, thus being unfit to be "commander in chief". This forced Obama and the other candidates to tout their national executive experience; to adopt hard line positions on Iran, Israel, Russia and Afghanistan; and to frame the call for an exit from Iraq in a "responsible manner", indicating the difficulty of extricating the U.S. from the Iraq quagmire.

Late in the summer, the campaign debate suddenly shifted to the economic meltdown at home and abroad, to the causes of the meltdown and what can be done about it.

The economic crisis also sidelined the conservative Christian social agenda which was incorporated in the Republican platform and has been used to attract support from the Christian Right. Bush used, and McCain promised to use the federal courts to promote that social agenda. The Obama victory will help restore integrity to the federal judiciary.

The question is whether in view of the global economic crisis, the Obama administration will usher a new era of retrenchment in US foreign policy. The history of US foreign policy shows cyclical tendencies of involvement and expansion on the one hand and retrenchment and isolationism on the other. Obama is likely to choose the middle course, a policy of cautious multilateral engagement in view of global threats and opportunities for cooperation, as well as the expectation of US leadership. This is why reviving the US and the global economy will be priority number one for the new president.

The period from the fall of the Berlin Wall (11/9/89) to 9/11 ushered an unprecedented period of US power in an essentially unipolar system. The collapse of the USSR was an unanticipated cosmic event. While the American public at first turned inward seeking a peace dividend and reduced commitments, policy makers grappled with questions like the US role in this new world, how to respond to issues like globalization, loss of jobs, weak and failing states, terrorism, the rise of new actors and how to balance domestic needs and foreign problems. The early conclusion was that the US could do it all, with the expectation that the world would follow the American lead. This may have been one of the unfortunate consequences of the first Iraq war and the early crises in the Balkans.

Successive post-Cold War administrations fumbled with bumper sticker slogans to explain, to motivate and engage the American public in this new environment. George W. H. Bush spoke of the "new world order", Bill Clinton

spoke of “democratic enlargement and globalization”, while George W. Bush spoke of “democratization” and later of the “war on terror”. Conservative theoreticians like Frances Fukuyama spoke of the “end of history”. None of these slogans captured the public imagination or provided an explanatory framework to policy makers, especially in the context of the destabilizing consequences of the collapse of the Soviet bloc, of Yugoslavia and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent US response shook up the American public from its post-Cold War slumber. Unilateral and preemptive actions; the “us versus them” division of the international community; broad definitions of the war on terror and expanded presidential powers may have mobilized a reluctant public but did not secure long term public support or define a role for the US in this brave new world.

A war of choice in Iraq may have fulfilled one of the priorities of the neo-conservative agenda, but it was no substitute for a coherent long term strategy. Foreign and national security policy was captured by a neo-conservative cabal directed out of the Vice President’s office whose expanded jurisdiction altered the balance of constitutional power. The Republican majority in the House and the Senate willingly surrendered its constitutionally mandated role of checks and balances by only acting to legitimize the Bush domestic and national security agenda. Nearly eight years later, with unprecedented loss of life and the economic cost of the two wars nearing \$1 trillion, the new president inherits an unprecedented economic and political chaos thanks to the unregulated globalization and the arrogance of American power.

This is why the Republican campaign was marked by the selective adoration of the Reagan period attributing to it the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War; allegations of weak Democratic credentials in the area of national security; and a deliberate attempt by Republican candidates to distance themselves from the Bush administration and its failed policies. In the process, the Republicans forced the Democrats to adopt hard line positions on issues

like Georgia, Russia, Iran and Israel. Seasoned observers of the American political scene recommend taking all this rhetoric with a grain of salt. I agree. What candidates say during the heat of a campaign is not always an exact guide of what they will do once in office. There are too many unanticipated and overlooked variables that shape presidential policy, even if this means having to explain contradictions between campaign promises and actual policies.

The US will need more than a new idea to formulate policies for the post-Bush era. To be effective the new president will need to go beyond the bumper sticker slogans of his predecessors. To do so, Obama will need to go beyond the old guard of the Democratic and Republican parties in staffing his foreign policy and national security policy team.

Many of you may have read Paul Kennedy's classic work The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers. The US will not go away despite its many problems. This is even more so in the absence of a European Union common foreign and defense policy, or another country able to influence the course of the international system. Do not jump into conclusions about the fall of the US or the end of globalization. The new era requires a reordering of priorities and must account for the rise of Asian powers like India and China, and the re-emergence of Russia. However, the global economic crisis showed that many of these emerging powers may be giants with clay feet. As the US caught a serious virus, the rest of the world was also infected and is now fighting deadly pneumonia. As much as US leadership is criticized by many, and it should be, it is expected by most of the international community. This is one of the ironies of international politics. While the US hyperpower hegemony may have ended, make no mistake, it has not ended the US dominance of the international system. As Richard Holbrooke said recently, the US is not a helpless giant tossed in the seas of history. The new president will inherit the global mess left behind by George Bush. He will inherit a wounded, but also, a most powerful nation on earth.

What does the new president need to do? First, at home:

- (1) Learn from the Truman presidency and realize the importance of highly qualified cabinet members and advisors to guide the president, even at the risk of outshining him.
- (2) Restore US economic strength. This is the key priority if the US is to continue its leadership in a globalized world, and manage its many domestic problems.
- (3) Rebuild executive-legislative relations and restore the constitutional balance that was abused by Cheney and his neo-conservatives.
- (4) Restore government and market accountability with previously successful regulatory mechanisms taken apart by the Reagan-Gingrich-Bush free marketers.
- (5) Be honest with the American public about achievable policy goals reflecting enduring American values like the rule of law, human rights and democracy.
- (6) Address the issue of energy independence and the environment.
- (7) Restore judicial integrity in the federal courts by moving away from judicial appointments based on the agenda of the Christian conservatives, AND
- (8) Continue the defense of the homeland against terrorism without the excesses of 2001-08 that subverted civil liberties, created Guantanamo, extraordinary renditions and torture. The threat of domestic and foreign terrorism is real but cannot be addressed with the destruction of civil liberties and wars of choice.

In foreign policy, the president Obama must:

- (1) Rebuild relations with traditional friends and allies, return to Euro-Atlantic cooperative politics, and abandon Bush/Cheney's unilateralism.
- (2) Work with traditional allies to address common economic and security challenges such as the economy, terrorism, climate change, energy and the transfer of wealth to third countries, nuclear proliferation, and weapons of mass destruction. These problems

cannot be solved by the US alone. There is no time for recriminations as to who is at fault. We need cooperative solutions to explosive problems as those in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the future of the Palestinian state, and the reforms needed to diffuse the sources of radicalism in the Islamic world.

- (3) Restore the US reputation in the world. Start by renouncing torture, stop illegal renditions and close Guantanamo.
- (4) Offer a coherent vision of the world and of our alliances based on enduring common values and a realistic assessment of capabilities and interests, AND
- (5) In our relations with Russia there is no place for a new Cold War. Rely on diplomacy. Avoid provocations like the expansion of NATO to Russia's door step, and the placement of the missile defense system in Eastern Europe.

What to expect from an Obama /Biden administration:

- (1) Move away from the failed Bush policies and bring to a responsible end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These policies indirectly contributed to the growth of organizations like Al Quaida and Hezbollah in Iraq, Lebanon and elsewhere where they had no operational bases in the past.
- (2) The campaign showed the profound differences between McCain and Obama over the role of diplomacy in international relations. Obama must return to traditional American foreign policy principles. A recent CNN discussion with six former Secretaries of State that served both Republican and Democratic presidents confirms that diplomacy is not appeasement as implied by McCain. This is the only reasonable way to deal with countries like Syria, Iran, Russia, etc.
- (3) Set limits with allies like Turkey and Israel who copied Bush' unilateralism to further their objectives in the region.
- (4) Encourage democratization, human rights, the rule of law, a pluralist culture and economic and social reform. These values cannot be

imposed by the force of arms and are undermined when the US supports dictators and tolerates violations of human rights.

What does all this mean for Cyprus?

The media spoke of Obama's ties to Chicago Greek-American activists while Biden is well known for his connections to the Greek-American community. In contrast McCain was supported by Greek-Americans that supported Bush and did not react either to his support of the Annan Plan or his recognition of FYROM by its constitutional name. Despite optimistic expectations about Obama, remember that issues affecting Cyprus and Greek-Turkish relations are minor compared to the problems facing the US today. Cyprus is a routine problem handled by the traditional bureaucracy whose philosophy and outlook has not changed despite the election. This is why we should seek new faces at the operational levels of the Department of State and in the NSC. We have enough experience from electoral promises not kept by Carter and Clinton, along with the failure of the Greek-American community to keep presidential and other public officials accountable for their electoral promises. This is why before we expect a fundamental change of American policy towards Cyprus we should demand a fundamental change in the conduct of the Greek-American lobby whose glory days of 1974-80 are now political history. In addition, consistent and firm policies are required on the part of Cyprus and Greece on the issues affecting their existence.

Obama's election ushers a new era for the US at home and abroad in the midst of unprecedented global problems. It is therefore reasonable to ask "who wants to inherit the problems left behind by George Bush" and be president of the US? I do not envy Obama or Biden. With optimism, clear and balanced policies and a commitment to multilateralism, Obama's administration can succeed in tackling the problems left behind by Bush. Obama's promise of leading America to a better future remains true despite the storm clouds in today's horizon.

Thank you.

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