

Can Any Candidate End the Persistence of America's Tragic Diplomacy?

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While scandals, failed military interventions, and public cynicism can characterize the terms of several Presidents in American history, few will stand out more than the two terms of George W. Bush. After September 11th 2001, the President quickly went from a public approval rating of less than 50% to nearly 90%. No other president – except for his father – had experienced such a manic shift in the pendulum of public support. Because of this, some historians began to make the claim that Bush would go down in history as one of America's greatest Presidents. However, these historians (not to mention politicians) caught up in the emotion of the time overlooked the confrontational rhetoric and naïve idealism of the President and his close advisors. In Classical Greek tragedies, the main character (usually an influential public figure) experiences a downfall as a result of hubris. This single word can sum up the two terms of the 43rd President.

“We're in a lot of trouble!” said Peter Finch's character, Howard Beale, in the 1976 film “Network.” And certainly, Americans aren't the only ones who are “as mad as hell.” As an American currently living abroad, it is easy for me to see the growing cynicism toward the United States and its policies around the world. This is the byproduct of the last eight years, which have been the low point of our tragic diplomacy. There were many missed opportunities following the events of September 11th, including a failure to renew President Clinton's peace process initiative, and to maintain close relationships with those who were sympathetic.

However, the exact opposite occurred, and now we are faced with two failed wars, an unstable Middle East, an empowered Iran, and no even-handed approach to the Israel-Palestinian conflict (perhaps America's most key issue to regaining global respect). As a result of these failed policies, the President has managed to destroy the confidence of our allies and, equally importantly, raised the level of mistrust in the Arab and Muslim world to an all-time high. It is frightening to imagine that our position in the world could get any worse.

The question is: Which candidate will get us out of these quagmires, and, more importantly, will engage in proper and smart diplomacy by taking a departure from the current model of military force and regain lost support from abroad? After having closely analyzed the speeches of the three 2008 presidential candidates, the future does not look too bright. Here is why.

John McCain

McCain's fiery speeches make statements of the necessity for more than just a strategic bond between Israel and the United States, but also a "moral one." In a speech before United Christians for Israel, he called for American support to "intensify – to include providing military equipment and technology and ensuring that Israel maintains its qualitative military edge," and to isolate Hamas.¹ With regards to Iran, he maintains that diplomacy should be the first measure; however he has also made it clear that a nuclear Iran will not be accepted.

He is committed to finishing the job in Iraq, which is no doubt sincere, but realistically doesn't seem possible to accomplish without help from the international community. Also, McCain's approach to national security includes expanding the military, modernizing weapons systems, and developing and deploying missile defenses. Clearly, McCain's foreign policy will be a mere continuation of Bush's, and that certainly won't put the United States on a better standing with the world.

Hillary Clinton

Clinton has made it one of her top issues to bring American troops home as soon as possible. This message seems rather irresponsible. While a majority of Americans are dissatisfied with the war, it would not be wise to make a rash decision to bring American troops home with little dialogue, just as it was not wise to rush into the war with little dialogue.

It has been made clear that Clinton would continue to give unconditional support to Israel. An interesting fact is that on her website there is barely any attention given to the issue. It is difficult to draw conclusions from this, but one thing for sure is that she has not demonstrated an even-handed vision during the debates and her speeches.

However, Clinton can be praised for her strong favorability towards diplomatic engagement with Iran. She has stated that this is the most pragmatic way to finding a solution. During the June 3rd debate, she made the point that "all during the Cold War, we always talked with the Soviet Union..." and continued to say that the U.S. should still engage in diplomacy with Iran, despite its status as an enemy.² Her stance on Iran is much different from her counterpart McCain, who makes outright references to conflict with Iran. But her 2007 vote to declare Iran's revolutionary guard as a terrorist organization was either simply counterproductive to future diplomacy or a crass attempt to shore up her image as a tough leader for the 2008 general election.

¹ Available at: <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/News/Speeches/df96a751-be4f-4275-8d28-2c38ad036983.htm>, 18 July 2007.

² Available at: http://www.ontheissues.org/2008/Hillary_Clinton_War+_Peace.htm "Iran having a nuclear weapon is absolutely unacceptable." 3 July 2007

While she would be less confrontational and therefore might do better than McCain, she still does not possess a clear plan to heal the wounds created by our tragic diplomacy.

Barack Obama

Regarding Iraq, Obama has a similar stance to that of Clinton. He also stresses an aggressive attempt to engage in regional diplomacy with both Syria and Iran. He resembles both of his opponents in the belief that the United States' primary role in the Middle East must be to ensure the security of Israel. However, a speech to Jewish community leaders in Cleveland offered a rare opportunity for new dialogue on the issue U.S. and Israeli relations. He stated,

I think there is a strain within the pro-Israel community that says unless you adopt an unwavering pro-Likud approach to Israel that you're anti-Israel, and that can't be the measure of our friendship with Israel. If we cannot have an honest dialogue about how we achieve these goals, then we're not going to make progress. And frankly, some of the commentary that I've seen which suggests guilt by association, or the notion that unless we are never ever going to ask any difficult questions about how we move peace forward or secure an Israel that is non-military or non-belligerent or doesn't talk about just crushing the opposition, that that somehow is being soft or anti-Israel, I think we're going to have problems moving forward. And that, I think, is something we have to have an honest dialogue about.³

Such a comment is rare in American politics and should be surprising because of his past statements from various speeches and debates. However, it demonstrates that Obama has the capability to envision an even-handed approach to the issue. This could be due to his background: being the son of an African immigrant and having lived abroad in Indonesia, Obama is likely to have a more global view than his opponents. This asset is something necessary for the future of American diplomacy. Right now, the only hope for better a better foreign policy under the leadership of Obama is seen by his promise to communicate closely with allies, and the above recent remark made in Cleveland. However, that is still not enough.

Conclusion

The reality is that so much can change between now and election day, including the foreign policy stances of McCain, Clinton, and Obama. However, one thing for sure is that the winner in 2008 will begin their presidency with a number of issues that are among the biggest challenges of the last few

³ Available at: http://blog.washingtonpost.com/the-trail/2008/02/26/obamas_ohio_grilling.html 24 February 2008.

decades. But with well-informed decisions, a departure from the current model of confrontation, and a stronger emphasis on soft power, the U.S. can begin to improve its image, all the while preserving its influence. This can only be done by engaging and listening to allies (for example, on how to deal with Iraq, since it is in the interest of all), and enforcing an even-handed policy with Israel and Palestine, which is in the interest of all three players. Equally as important, recklessly pulling out of Iraq without sufficient dialogue and careful planning, and engaging in confrontational rhetoric with Iran, will only continue the tragic history of American diplomacy, a sure path to a whole new set of major issues.

Finally, special attention should be given to the most recent failed attempt at a peace process in Annapolis. During the Forum 2000 meetings in Prague in October 2007, Kishore Mahbubani, a prominent author and scholar, stated that if there is one issue America should focus all of its attention on, it is the “silver bullet issue” of Israel and Palestine. Also, during an interview between the Al-Jazeera correspondent Mark Levine and a senior Hamas leader, Levine asked the anonymous leader about whether violence works or not. He replied “We know the violence doesn’t work, but we don’t know how to stop.”⁴ This reality is all the more reason why the next administration should dedicate a great deal of its focus to tempering its tendency to tip too far towards Israel, and playing more of a just, rational, and diplomatically aggressive role in creating a two-state solution that is not influenced by certain interest groups in Washington.

Unfortunately, none of the candidates has proved that they have the capability of doing this.

An International Conspiracy Against the Republic: The First Post-War Political Show Trials in Czechoslovakia

Marie Homerová

When civilizations or systems undergo extensive change, one replacing another wholesale, those responsible for instituting the new system often feel it necessary to eradicate as many aspects of the old system as possible. This is done in order to secure the new order. Scholars are only now able to study in

⁴ Available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/BB1E373A-50F9-403A-9263-98D09D584A31.htm> 9 March 2008.