

From Campaigning to Governing: What Really Matters on the Stump

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On September 21, 2008, Jackson Diehl and Jeffrey Goldberg addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Diehl is deputy editorial page editor of the Washington Post. Jeffrey Goldberg is a national correspondent for the Atlantic.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Jackson Diehl

Foreign policy statements made during political campaigns are usually poor indicators of what presidential candidates will do in office -- and that's a good thing. History tells us that voters do not usually take offense at such policy reversals; after all, much of every president's actual foreign policy work consists of reacting to crises and other unexpected events. In those situations, we want our presidents to be pragmatic, not dogmatic. But if campaign rhetoric is so unreliable, how can we determine what candidates will really do once in office? Putting each candidate through four tests can help answer this question.

The Practice Test. When Russia invaded Georgia last month, Barack Obama produced one statement the first day that seemed to divide responsibility for the war between Georgia and Russia. The next day, however, he shifted his position toward much tougher criticism of Moscow -- likely a reflection of the reportedly heated debate among his many advisors on the issue. In contrast was the quick, direct, and somewhat emotional statement from John McCain, who has a much smaller, more informal circle of advisors: "We are all Georgians." Would that mean defending Tbilisi as we defended Berlin during the Cold War, with military force and even a nuclear deterrent? We already know that McCain tends to speak out quickly and sometimes impulsively, without much input from advisors. Would that carry over to his presidency?

The Dogma Test. Obama, for example, has softened some of his rhetoric on Iraq and now admits that the troop surge was a success. At the same time, he has maintained his central theory about the war -- that the withdrawal of U.S. troops will force Iraqis to come to a political settlement. There is growing evidence that just the opposite may be true, however, and Obama does not seem to have absorbed how the situation has changed from two years ago, when he first articulated his theory. This should cause our dogma detectors to flash yellow.

On Iran, Obama famously favors direct and unconditional negotiations on the nuclear issue. If this commitment to

direct diplomacy has hardened into dogma, he may be inclined to ignore such difficult realities as an obstinate Iran or a Syria with hegemonic aspirations in Lebanon, causing him to waste time on fruitless diplomacy even as the Iranians continue their race for nuclear weapons.

For his part, John McCain has been warning for years about Russia's authoritarian drift and imperial ambitions. But if this healthy distrust of Russia hardens into a dogma of hostility, he will have trouble striking the difficult balance between resisting Russia's aggression in Europe and extracting the necessary cooperation from Moscow to stop the Iranian nuclear program.

The Anxiety-of-Influence Test. This describes the tendency to reject out of hand any policies associated with the previous administration. For example, at least one key aspect of the Bush Doctrine is at risk: the push for greater political freedom, especially in the Arab Middle East. The authoritarian regimes that govern countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia are both highly unstable and highly unreliable as U.S. allies, and it is an American national security interest to press for change. Yet, that is the policy most closely tied to Bush, so the next president is likely to shun it, especially if he is Obama.

The Seeing-Eye Test. This is the most important test of all: will the next president be smart and agile enough to quickly perceive unexpected challenges that might prove to be the most crucial issues of his presidency? We are looking for someone who will not make categorical statements or inflexible commitments in the upcoming debates, who is quick in making decisions while still producing results that remain effective a month or two later, who does not let his rhetoric harden into dogma that prevents him from taking in new information, and who does not reflexively oppose solutions that the current administration has arrived at after painful trial and error.

Jeffrey Goldberg

John McCain sees the Arab-Israeli peace process as something to be engaged in only after the defeat of terrorism. He does not agree with the position that peacemaking will help us end terrorism. In this regard, he is like former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, who believed in the power of military force to solve political problems. This is not to say that McCain is an unreconstructed or oversimplistic militarist, but he does believe that many political problems -- and certainly the problem of terrorism -- have military solutions. In any case, he seems not to have a sense of urgency regarding the peace process, and he is unlikely to make it a priority.

McCain also echoes Sharon in his unpredictability. Because of this characteristic, it is ultimately fruitless to analyze in great detail how his stump speech policies might play out in the White House. He is a man who makes many decisions with his gut rather than his head.

Another striking fact about McCain is his relative lack of knowledge about the Middle East: He has had difficulty sometimes distinguishing various terrorist groups or figuring out who is doing what, where, and when. He also seems somewhat incurious about Islam, which does not speak well for any presidential candidate at this point in history.

In contrast, Barack Obama is actually quite curious about the Middle East, but he is also deeply inexperienced on regional issues. In a May 2008 interview, he referred to the Arab-Israeli conflict as a "constant sore" that infects all of U.S. foreign policy. The general impression he gave in the interview is his belief that hard work on the Israeli-Palestinian track is key to bettering America's strategic position and reputation in the Middle East, as well as addressing the problem of terrorism.

On Iraq, it is doubtful that Obama actually believes his own implications that the country is not a central front in the war on terror; statements to that effect are mainly for his political base, which needs to hear repeatedly that the Iraq war has been a mistake. One could reasonably argue that Iraq was not a central terrorism front in 2002 or early 2003, but Obama seems too smart to believe that now, in 2008, Iraq is not crucial in the fight against al-Qaeda.

Ultimately, it is difficult to discern what the candidates actually think on every issue of import. The exigencies of campaigning are such that the less the candidates talk about certain issues, the better off they are. Both candidates have remained surprisingly quiet about two of the most important issues we face: the threat of nuclear terrorism on American soil, and the Pakistan dilemma. On the first, Obama puts great faith in a program that he says will control or account for all of the fissile material in the world within the next four years; McCain does not talk about this issue much at all. Regarding Pakistan, the campaigns cannot be blamed for their lack of concrete plans -- few people, even the experts, claim to know what should be done on that front.

All in all, it seems that we will not know fully or clearly what these two candidates think until after the election. ❖

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