

The Pitfalls of Forecasting Foreign Policy

By Leon Hadar

After close to eight years during which the relationship between the United States and much of the international community has been dominated by tensions over foreign policy, many wonder what a new administration will hold. Some hope there will be a new U.S. approach to the rest of the world—especially to the Middle East—that will be a dramatic foreign policy U-turn. Others hope for a president who maintains similar versions of current policies.

It is powerfully tempting to try to predict U.S. foreign policy under this or that president by means of deconstructing his or her statements and campaign speeches; in election months, such predictions flow nonstop from the news media and pundits. But such an exercise is likely to produce misleading, unreliable conclusions, and a look at history and the candidates' backgrounds suggests that predicting future policy is anything but clear-cut.

For example, in their reelection campaigns, both Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Delano Roosevelt said they wanted to keep the United States out of World War I and World War II, respectively. However, both Democrats later led the country into direct military involvement. It is also illuminating to remember not only Richard Nixon's opening to China and his policy of détente with the Soviet Union and Ronald Reagan's historic nuclear arms control agreement with Moscow, but also that both presidents ran on staunch anticommunist platforms.

More recently, recall the way presidential candidate Bill Clinton bashed then-President George H.W. Bush for "coddling" the "tyrants" in Beijing and then, after he won office, promoted a normalized trade relationship with China and its accession to the World Trade Organization. Nor should one overlook the fact that during a televised debate with Al Gore, presidential candidate George W. Bush scoffed at the notion that "nation-building" should be an integral part of U.S. foreign policy.

Clearly, throughout history and across the political spectrum, presidents have frequently acted contrary to the attitudes they expressed on the campaign trail. Yet this has not been a particularly big deal; voters recognize that the president has to react to unpredictable global situations as they arise. As an indicator of future policy, it is clear that campaign promises are a truly faulty measure.

Though policy is poorly predicted by what is said on the stump, a close look at the candidates' basic foreign policy approaches can provide insights. In his influential book *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*, historian Walter Russell Mead distinguishes between four schools of U.S. foreign policy: Hamiltonian, Jeffersonian, Jacksonian, and Wilsonian. Under this rubric, Hamiltonians view foreign policy as a tool to improve the U.S. marketplace; Jeffersonians are "nationalists" who revere homegrown democratic institutions and prioritize domestic policy above others; Jacksonians are also nationalistic but do not fear becoming militarily engaged in order to promote U.S. interests abroad; Wilsonians also believe in international military engagements, but for pursuit of purposes broader than U.S. interests alone. By applying this typology to the current candidates, one might better understand the direction U.S. foreign policy could take.

The views of Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) seem to correspond to a sub-genre of the diplomatic, internationalist Wilsonian perspective that is more dovish than the hawkish Wilsonian approach promoted by the neoconservatives. What would this sort of Wilsonian at the helm spell for U.S. policy? Not unlike former President Jimmy Carter, Obama seems primed to use U.S. diplomatic and economic power to expand cooperation among members of the international

community through the influence of interdependency and the force of globalization. A Wilsonian like Obama might use limited military power to prevent genocide, for example, but not to promote broad strategic and economic U.S. interests. In the context of the Middle East, a Carter/Obama type of Wilsonian approach would probably predispose one to embracing and implementing the recommendations of the Iraq Study Group, which in addition to bringing Syria, Iran, and other regional players into the negotiations on the future of Iraq, could lead to a new emphasis on resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. An Obama-style Wilsonian would be likely to reach out to Iran through international venues to resolve the nuclear situation.

On the other hand, forecasting an Obama foreign policy is complicated by his less-than-extensive policy record and fears that he has generated among some supporters of Israel. These concerns have been driven in part by the views of some of his advisers, including Zbigniew Brzezinski and former Clinton administration Middle East aide Robert Malley, who have occasionally criticized Israeli policies. Obama is also viewed—unlike Hillary Clinton—as an unknown quantity when it comes to Israel. Thus, while he might seem predisposed to reassess some aspects of U.S.-Israel relations, Obama may go out of his way to allay the concerns of the pro-Israel lobby once in office, which could have a significant impact on his overall Mideast agenda.

Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) has made semi-Wilsonian speeches along the presidential campaign trail. Yet his views correspond more closely to Mead's Hamiltonian school of thought, which favors an activist U.S. foreign policy that makes the world safe not necessarily for democracy, but for U.S. geo-economic interests. Hamiltonians see the United States integrated in the global system in favorable terms through multilateral institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank, through free-trade accords, and through balance of power strategy that helps maintain U.S. status. A Hamiltonian would want to ensure that any exit from Iraq would not harm U.S. access to the oil resources in the Persian Gulf or weaken U.S. position vis-à-vis other great powers. And a Hamiltonian would wonder why Iran wants nuclear energy, when it has vast oil reserves.

It is also important to remember that McCain was never a full-fledged member of the neoconservative movement, though his comments sometimes are neoconservative. Alongside campaign advisers like [Robert Kagan](#), McCain has also employed several leading members of the Realpolitik wing of the Republican party, including Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, Brent Scowcroft, and Henry Kissinger, all of whom have been either opposed to or skeptical about the decision to invade Iraq. They have also, like Brzezinski, been more supportive of the United States pressing Israel to make concessions as part of a U.S.-led Mideast peace process. Thus, while many neoconservatives are concerned that Obama would turn into another Carter, they should also consider the prospect of McCain emerging as another realist-inclined leader in the mold of George H.W. Bush.

Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) has what could perhaps be called a combined approach under Mead's system, hewing to a mixed Wilsonian-Hamiltonian mind-set. Such an approach is fundamentally internationalist at its core. A leader hewing to this approach could be expected to engage more thoroughly on all international fronts, especially in the promotion of democracy. Under a Wilsonian-Hamiltonian, Middle East negotiations would likely come to the foreground. Yet it would not be unexpected for the United States to remain broadly militarily engaged under such a perspective. A Hamiltonian would not hesitate to confront Iran militarily in order to protect U.S. security, but if tempered with the Wilsonian perspective that wants to do what's best for the global community, a direct confrontation is less likely. Not unlike the first President Clinton, one should not expect major or dramatic foreign policy changes under a second President Clinton: A withdrawal from Iraq, a dialogue with Iran, or a re-energizing of the Israel-Palestine peace process would only take place if and when Senator Clinton concludes that she has been able to secure the support of the bureaucracy, Congress, and the powerful interest groups for such

moves. This suggests that she would probably embrace a gradual foreign policy process in general, and in the Middle East in particular.

Obama could prove to also be more hesitant in dealing with the Middle East as he responds to political pressure in Washington, or paradoxically, he could be more inclined to move in a dramatic way if he concludes that, as a “transformational president,” he could take more risks in dealing with the Middle East. McCain could also deliver surprises. The perception of McCain as a tough “hawk” could provide him with the political cover he would need to, say, open a dialogue with Iran á la Nixon-goes-to-China, to start withdrawing from Iraq, or to pressure Israel to make concessions for peace.

Ultimately, even though a nuanced view of the candidates’ approaches to foreign policy, as seen through the lens of Mead’s typology, can provide some insights, the lesson from history is that there will be unexpected turns. Such surprises were less common during the Cold War, when the international system enjoyed a certain level of stability under the bipolarity provided by the U.S.-Soviet nuclear stalemate. But as 9/11 and the Iraq War have demonstrated, surprises are inevitable at a time when, under the emerging multipolar system, foreign policy crises seem to become the norm rather than the exception. But we should not be surprised if the next president fails to create the foundations of a grand, coherent U.S. global strategy, yet succeeds in providing the world a new catch-phrase to describe his or her mix of ad hoc responses to global crisis, adding to the lexicon that includes Bush Senior’s “New World Order,” Bill Clinton’s “Globalization,” and George W. Bush’s “war on terrorism.”

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¹Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001).

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