

Entanglements

Ignore what candidates say about foreign policy.

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THE IRAQ WAR is the biggest issue of the presidential campaign, and, on the surface, the voters have a clear choice before them. Barack Obama says he'll bring the troops home, and John McCain insists the troops must stay until they have achieved victory. Problem is, neither of the candidates really seems to mean exactly what he says.

One of the key factors in Samantha Power's journey from Obama foreign policy adviser to ex-Obama foreign policy adviser was her casual admission, two months ago, that Obama will take new information into account when formulating his Iraq plan. "You can't make a commitment in March 2008 about what circumstances will be like in January of 2009," she said. "He will, of course, not rely on some plan that he's crafted as a presidential candidate or a U.S. senator. He will rely upon a plan—an operational plan—that he pulls together in consultation with people who are on the ground, to whom he doesn't have daily access now as a result of not being the president."

Hillary Clinton's campaign seized upon this scandalous admission to portray Obama as a phony. But several Clinton advisers told *The New York Sun* that she, too, may not follow through on her withdrawal plans. "I don't know what she would do as president," said Kenneth Pollack. "But all of my experience with her when she was First Lady is that this is a woman who would put our nation's interests first and any campaign promises a distant second." Naturally, Obama's campaign pounced.

Even steadfast, resolute McCain has quietly distanced himself from his gung-ho rhetoric. A few weeks ago, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that, according to Dmitri Simes, president of the Nixon Center, foreign policy "realists" in the Republican Party met with McCain and came away reassured that he is not the die-hard hawk he portrays himself to be.

Obviously, campaign rhetoric of all kinds offers an imperfect guide to how a candidate will govern. But it's particularly true of foreign policy rhetoric. Why is it so hard to vote on foreign policy? A president's foreign policy tends to get driven by new developments overseas. Any number of things could happen

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between now and January that would persuade McCain to pull troops out of Iraq, or persuade Obama to leave them there. But dramatic, mind-changing data about health care or the minimum wage is not likely to pop up.

Domestic policy debates tend to run along well-worn partisan grooves, with entrenched interest groups on each side. Although it has become less so in recent years, foreign policy is far more ideologically fluid. Nobody could have predicted during their candidacies that George W. Bush would embrace nation-building in the Middle East, that Bill Clinton would finish his presidency as an advocate of humanitarian intervention, or that Ronald Reagan would sign a sweeping arms control pact with the Soviet Union.

This particular election seems to have an unusually strong incentive to take hard-and-fast positions, especially on the central issue of Iraq. If any candidates came out and said what they're whispering in private—they'll consider events on the ground in Iraq when they win office and make their judgment accordingly—they'd end up looking ridiculous. Suppose you favored withdrawal when Iraq was disintegrating a year and a half ago, then reconsidered when violence declined, and then edged back toward withdrawal following the recent intra-Shia violence. Analytically, it would make perfect sense. Politically, it would be a disaster.

Four years ago, poor John Kerry tried to explain that he was for the war given what he knew at the time, against it knowing what we know today, but in favor of its continued prosecution given that we were already there. It didn't end well for him. The lesson the candidates have taken away from this episode is that you need a consistent, easy-to-explain position or else you'll come across as a flip-flopper. Foreign policy has become a character issue, with nuance understood as a sign of weakness.

And, so, McCain has crafted an image filled with nationalistic bluster. One of

his advertisements juxtaposes the Arizona senator—"Do not yield. Do not flinch. Stand up. We're Americans. And we'll never surrender. They will"—with Winston Churchill delivering his famous "We shall never surrender" address. Fighting on at any cost is, of course, the proper response when the alternative is occupation by Nazi Germany. I do not mean to minimize the costs of withdrawal from Iraq when I say that they would be considerably less dire than having the United States invaded and occupied by a genocidal totalitarian conqueror.

Indeed, on the subject of his own country's war in Iraq, Churchill struck a less than Churchillian tone. "There is something very sinister to my mind in this mesopotamian entanglement," Churchill wrote in 1920. "Week after week and month after month for a long time we shall have a continuance of this miserable, wasteful, sporadic warfare marked from time to time certainly by minor disasters and cuttings off of troops and agents, and very possibly attended by some very grave occurrence."

Does McCain actually believe we must achieve victory in Iraq at all costs? He certainly didn't believe that about Lebanon in 1983 or Somalia a decade later, forcefully advocating withdrawal in both cases. But "We're Americans. And we'll never surrender" sounds a lot better than "We're Americans. And we rarely surrender, except when the costs of fighting on outweigh the potential for success."

Obama, as Michael Crowley explained in the previous issue, understands that events could change his plans (see "Barack in Iraq," May 7). But he also grasps that the risks of appearing indecisive outweigh the risks of appearing too dovish, which is why he so quickly disowned Power's remarks. Republicans have arrived at the same conclusion. A reliable barometer of the GOP's calculations is the writing of Peter Wehner, who recently left his post in the Bush administration as director of strategic initiatives, a position that roughly translates to "minister of propaganda." In a long *Commentary* article, Wehner detailed Obama's record of statements on Iraq, from opposing the war at the outset, to favoring its prosecution once we were in, to finally favoring withdrawal in the fall of 2006. Wehner sneeringly described this as "a record of problematically ad-hoc judgments at best, calculatingly cynical judgments at worst." My God: He's tailoring his position to fit... changing circumstances! In the Bush administration, this kind of flexibility would never be tolerated. ♦

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