

A Conservative's Dilemma

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I've long considered myself a conservative, but it has become harder and harder to identify with Republicans. The mind-boggling spending and international entanglements of neo-conservatism have been subject, I think, to enough excoriation by liberals and conservatives alike—and I will spare the reader a re-run of such criticism. Conservatism, by its nature, is not 'neo' and we conservatives are notorious for our idealization of the past. This idealization is why many wistfully long for an America that treasures family values, prizes manly men, and prefers to obliterate, rather than negotiate, with societies that threaten it, be they communists or—in a phrase exemplifying my point—Islamofacists. John McCain is a throwback to this imaginary era. Barack Obama, by contrast, is a multi-racial, internationally-raised, technologically savvy Ivy-leaguer with a smooth jump-shot and smoother demeanor. This complete package of 21st Century qualities has an understandable appeal for those who believe America's potential lies in its future; it is equally upsetting, however, for those who think America's greatness is rooted in its past.

John McCain's family tree includes veterans of every American War (now including his son the Marine), Robert the Bruce (of Braveheart fame), and Charlemagne (yes, that Charlemagne). As a result of being shot down in Vietnam, he suffered two broken arms and a broken leg, with a few bayonet wounds at the hands of the Vietnamese who found him. When offered an early release because of his Admiral father's rank and prominence, he refused and faced five years of torture instead. Whenever I mention these facts, I am invariably asked what possible bearing it has on the man's executive qualifications. The fact is, none of this narrative has anything to do with the policies he will follow as President, with the possible exceptions of ending torture and closing the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay. Instead, it adds to the lionization of our leaders that American conservatives have engaged in since we invented George Washington's cherry tree. We like the way McCain talks tough on Russia, even though it has been passé to do so for twenty years. We like his bluntness; conservative concepts tend to resonate better as screen-printed t-shirts than peer-edited theses anyway. We don't mind that he has more houses than he can keep track of. What 72 year old man with a wealthy wife, a government salary, and a military pension wouldn't have a few retirement homes? We even kind of like his boring speeches and white comb-over; he looks like he belongs in the 44th oval on the presidential posters we all had in our elementary school classrooms.

Barack Obama, meanwhile, exists in a very different historical context and would most certainly encourage kids staring at those school posters to play rousing games of 'which one of these things is not like the other?' Where John McCain sees good and evil, Obama sees divergent interests in a multi-polar world. Where McCain proposes muscular commitment, Obama prescribes multilateral cooperation. When John McCain declares, "We're Americans. We'll never surrender. They [the terrorists] will," Obama warns that "the one thing that I think is very important is for to us have some humility in how we approach the issue of confronting evil, because a lot of evil's been perpetrated

based on the claim that we were trying to confront evil.¹” Humility in the face of evil, or rather a perception of it, may seem to Obama like prudence and caution; to those less inclined to moral shades of grey, such a stance smacks of cowardice. For people who empathize with Samuel Huntington’s American Creed or C.S. Lewis’ muscular Christianity, John McCain feels right, feels satisfying, feels comfortable.

But comfort level doesn’t equal common sense. I am one of those people who do think there’s something truly exceptional about a country founded on the idea that all men (and women) are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights. I believe that this idea is precious; not only is it worth defending, but it requires defending because it threatens everything genocidal leaders, human traffickers, and violent terrorists want to achieve. That said, if we really want to counter these sorts of people, maybe there are better ways besides those comfortable for conservatives. International Relations scholar Mohammed Ayoob posits that the governments of the Third World are inherently insecure and that this insecurity drives actions that the West finds confusing, frustrating, and even threatening. If this is true, then threatening already insecure countries might push them to continue enriching uranium, funding terrorist groups, and playing pipeline politics with our energy supply. Given our current state of relations with Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, and, I would include, Russia, it seems like Ayoob makes a strong point. Satisfying as it might be to talk tough to Russia—and conservatives sure did like it when Reagan did—the world is different than it was in the Gipper’s day. In an election that has beaten the dead horse of change into glue, maybe, just maybe, the ones who need to change are we conservatives.

The world is convulsing. Globalized economics and liberalized politics are presenting new challenges on a daily basis. New technology has opened opportunities and Pandora’s boxes. It is tempting, in the face of such uncertainty, to reach back to a familiar past. John McCain’s honor, grandfatherly appearance, and all-American credentials have a powerful pull that Obama’s core constituencies—college students, Whole Foods shoppers, and the city of Berlin—do not seem to understand. It’s not that conservatives don’t see that anything is wrong with America. It’s that what wrongs we see seem new, and if new is bad, the past seems better. Those on the left with more revisionist instincts see these wrongs as deeply rooted in an existing order founded in that past. No wonder America’s two political poles selected such different candidates; we expected them to solve different problems.

Genocide is not new, nor is religious violence or even economic globalization—see Martin Wolf’s account of the world in 1910 for evidence of that last cyclical trend. What is new is the shared stake of humanity in these pervasive troubles. Obama seems to understand that America’s global role needs more nuance than knee-jerk. Then again, maybe conservatives, so steeped in history, are better able to grasp the need for hardened resolve in the face of threats and turmoil. To those of you who have supported Obama all along, thank you for plucking him out from under the Clinton machine’s tank treads and forcing America to engage him. To those of you who pulled the McCain campaign back from the brink (as a donor of his in August 2007, I’m shamelessly congratulating myself here too), thank you for choosing a man of indisputable honor,

¹ Obama, Barack. “Full Transcript: Saddleback Presidential Forum.” *ClipsandComment.org*. 17 August 2008. <<http://www.clipsandcomment.com/2008/08/17/full-transcript-saddleback-presidential-forum-sen-barack-obama-john-mccain-moderated-by-rick-warren>> Accessed on 24 September 2008.

decency, and patriotism. I can't say for sure, when I'm alone in the voting booth with just my gut, graduate education, and God, who I will vote for—and that uncertainty is a pretty big deal for us objective moral order types. Either way, it will make a hell of a classroom poster.

Suggested Further Readings:

Ayoob, Mohammed. "The Third World Security Predicament." Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers: Boulder, 1995/

James Lebovic , "Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11," New York: Routledge, 2007.

McCain, John. "Faith of My Fathers." New York: Perennial, 1999.

Wolf, Martin. "Will the Nation-State Survive Globalization?" *Foreign Affairs*. Jan/Feb 2001.

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