

Barack Obama and the New Internationalism

Will Marshall

Democrats need to spell out clearly the convictions that underlie their vision of American leadership in the post-9/11 world. Fortunately, in President-elect Barack Obama they have a supremely articulate messenger who is intellectually up to the task.

Voters continue to harbor doubts about Democrats on security. One poll this fall, just as the financial crisis was breaking, gave Republicans a 14-point advantage on questions of terrorism and security. It found that voters were increasingly likely to view Democrats as indecisive in facing threats and reluctant to use force; as insufficiently supportive of the military, and as following public opinion 'rather than adhering to a consistent, principled view of the country's best interests.'

So, among the big challenges Mr. Obama faces heading into the White House is to close the national security confidence gap. At the same time, the Bush administration's reckless disregard for settled principles of U.S. foreign policy has given Mr. Obama and the Democrats an opening to reclaim their liberal internationalist tradition and bring it into the 21st century.

The president-elect already has made significant headway on the first challenge by assembling what observers are calling a centrist Dream Team on national security. In persuading Defense Secretary Robert Gates to stay on for another year, Mr. Obama not only has signalled his determination to ensure a smooth transfer of presidential power during wartime, but also has disarmed Republican critics who have typecast him as a liberal dove. In addition, Gates has underscored the limits of military power and called for beefing up U.S instruments of 'soft power' – the foreign service, public diplomacy, development aid and stabilisation or 'nation building' skills. It will be hard for conservatives to caricature the Democrats' foreign policy as 'social work' with Gates laying down covering fire from the Pentagon.

Tapping Hilary Clinton as Secretary of State was an equally bold stroke that underscores the President-elect's enormous self-confidence, as well as his hard-won respect for his erstwhile rival's toughness and experience. His National Security

MARSHALL | Barack Obama and the New Internationalism

Advisor is James Jones, a former Marine Commandant and NATO Commander who supported John McCain in the presidential contest.

These choices have triggered much wailing and gnashing among anti-war activists and left-wing bloggers, who see in the top three a veritable pantheon of the 'Washington insiders' Mr. Obama railed against during the primaries. But they reassure the moderate majority in America that the President-elect is serious about transcending strident partisanship at home and demonstrating American continuity and resolve abroad. This much is already certain: President Obama won't adopt his own version of George W. Bush's churlish 'ABC' (anything but Clinton) syndrome, which led to a reflexive and wholesale rejection of his predecessor's policies.

This crew of security heavyweights will help President Obama accomplish his immediate task of managing competently the three active conflicts he will inherit from Bush: an Iraq war that is winding down, an Afghanistan campaign that is heating up, and an intensifying effort to root al-Qaeda out of its haven in Pakistan. At the same time, however, Obama must begin to articulate the case for a new internationalism aimed at restoring America's moral authority and leadership in the world.

In this, Mr. Obama would be preaching to a national choir. Americans may be Jacksonians when attacked, but they are also instinctive internationalists. They understand that alliances don't tie America's hands so much as extend our global reach and make our actions more legitimate in the eyes of the global public. Polls have consistently shown overwhelming support for Mr. Obama's call to rebuild America's strategic alliances. His global popularity will certainly make that job easier, and it gives him a fund of goodwill he can tap as he tries to persuade our allies to do difficult things, like staying in Afghanistan and stiffening sanctions on Iran.

While conservatives perennially fret about eroding U.S. sovereignty, Americans for more than a half-century have embraced the wisdom of embedding U.S. power in networks of global institutions that promote global cooperation in solving common problems. In today's increasingly interdependent world, no nation is strong enough to go it alone. We need other countries' help to solve problems of the global commons like today's financial crisis, terrorism, climate change, the depletion of natural resources, pandemics, drug trafficking, piracy and poverty.

The problem is, the international institutions that emerged in the aftermath of

World War II no longer fit a multipolar world whose center of gravity has been moving steadily eastwards. Obama thus faces a Trumanesque moment – a time the world needs inspired American leadership to reinvent the old international system and create new institutions of global governance.

The new internationalism should recapture the spirit of tough liberalism exemplified by Presidents Harry S. Truman and John F. Kennedy. As Kennedy famously said, Cold War liberals did not fear to negotiate, but they understood that U.S. diplomacy is most effective when backed by the credible threat of force. So they kept U.S. military forces strong, stood up to totalitarian aggression and organised regional security alliances to defend democratic societies against their enemies.

Speaking of resolve, it took Russian President Dmitry Medvedev just two days to confirm Joe Biden's famous prediction that Mr. Obama would be 'tested' by foreign adversaries. As other foreign leaders congratulated the President-elect on his victory, Mr. Medvedev threatened to deploy short-range missiles near Poland unless Mr. Obama abandons the Bush administration's plan to deploy missile defences there. Cool reason and quiet diplomacy may yet head off an early confrontation with Russia, but Mr. Obama must stand firm against such blatant attempts at intimidation.

During the fall campaign, Mr. Obama made it clear that his staunchly antiwar stance on Iraq should not be mistaken for a general disposition to avoid the use of force. On the contrary, he called for sending additional combat brigades to Afghanistan as well as military strikes on al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan. And in his second debate with John McCain, he seemed to back the logic of liberal interventionism, citing the examples of Rwanda and Darfur in arguing that pious noninterventionism also entails high human costs and moral hazards: 'So when genocide is happening, when ethnic cleansing is happening somewhere around the world and we stand idly by, that diminishes us. And so I do believe that we have to consider it as part of our interests, our national interests, in intervening where possible.' Mr. Obama has also raised hackles among foreign-policy 'realists' by suggesting that he would mobilise the international community to set up a no-fly zone in Darfur.

In fact, Mr. Obama faces a striking opportunity to reinvigorate the concept of collective security. The United Nations Security Council and other world bodies like the International Monetary Fund must be expanded to reflect today's world

MARSHALL | Barack Obama and the New Internationalism

rather than that of 1945. It's also time for more creative thinking about the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's future.

Today the vital interests of America and Europe are literally everywhere, from the melting ice of the Arctic to the killing fields of Sudan. Should NATO remain an exclusively regional alliance, or be expanded to include other stable democracies such as Japan, Australia and India? And who better to ask that question than a president who embodies America's diversity and inclusiveness? In the coming multipolar world, it also makes sense to strengthen the Community of Democracies, which the Clinton administration helped to organise as a forum for fostering solidarity and political consensus among the world's liberal states.

Mr. Obama also needs to reorient U.S. policy toward the Middle East. President Bush's unfortunate conflation of the Iraq war with his 'freedom agenda' for the Middle East convinced many Muslims that U.S. rhetoric about spreading democracy masks a desire to dominate rather than liberate. The Administration has since overcorrected for that mistake, returning to the myopic U.S. policy of siding with corrupt and autocratic regimes on the grounds that they constitute a 'moderate' bulwark against Islamist fundamentalists.

Democrats should reject this morally and strategically bankrupt policy, which has manifestly failed to promote peace and stability in the Middle East. Instead, the Obama Administration should redouble efforts to help indigenous Muslim reformers build civic institutions that promote civil liberties, human rights, womens' equality and the rule of law. And the United States ought to encourage Islamic parties to participate in electoral politics as long as they reject violence.

A more immediate strategic priority for the United States and Europe, however, should be to spur economic opportunity and reform throughout the Muslim world. The world's 57 Islamic countries are outliers in the global economy, receiving about the same amount of foreign investment as Singapore or Sweden. The resulting combination of economic stagnation (outside of oil revenues, which wax and wane) and the region's explosive population growth create a climate of thwarted ambitions and economic injustice that feeds extremism.

Mr. Obama could confront this syndrome by adopting the Progressive Policy Institute's proposal for a Middle East Prosperity Plan – a sweeping tariff-reduction initiative designed to spur Western trade and investment and integrate Muslim

Democratiya 15 | Winter 2008

countries into the world trading system. This idea embodies another key tenet of liberal internationalism that has been obscured by an anti-globalisation backlash – that spreading economic opportunity is essential to the success of democracy around the world.

Finally, in renewing their internationalist outlook, Mr. Obama and the Democrats should pay special attention to closing a yawning cultural-political gap with the U.S. military. Since the advent of the all-volunteer force, self-selection has given the military a strongly conservative cast. Only 15 percent of officers identify themselves as Democrats, and just 7 percent as liberal. It's time that Democrats acted to end this estrangement from a cherished American institution.

Democrats have proposed expanding the Army and Marine Corps to relieve the strains of repeated deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have also showed their support for the troops by voting to expand their benefits, including a generous new GI Bill. Such steps are important, but they don't go to the heart of the matter. What our men and women in uniform want even more than benefits is honor and respect. Fortunately, America's next president understands that.

At a September 11 summit on national service at Columbia University, Mr. Obama chided his alma mater for barring ROTC from campus during the Vietnam War. As America's next commander in chief, Mr. Obama should take that message to other elite universities, and to places like the Marine Recruiting office in Berkeley, Calif., whose mayor, Tom Bates, earlier this year called the Marines an 'uninvited and unwelcome guest.' Such gestures would go a long way toward allaying suspicions that the Democratic Party harbours anti-military attitudes.

By offering new ideas and healing old wounds, Barack Obama can demonstrate that today's Democrats are determined at last to reassert their party's proud tradition of strong leadership on national security.

Will Marshall is President of the *Progressive Policy Institute*, a think tank affiliated with the Democratic Leadership Council. This is an expanded and updated version of an article that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* on November 7.