

Behind Obama and Clinton: Who's whispering in their ears says a lot

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Voters on the progressive wing of the Democratic Party are rightly disappointed by the similarity of the foreign policy positions of the two remaining Democratic Party presidential candidates, Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama. However, there are still some real discernable differences to be taken into account. Indeed, given the power the United States has in the world, even minimal differences in policies can have a major difference in the lives of millions of people.

As a result, the kind of people the next president appoints to top positions in national defense, intelligence, and foreign affairs is critical. Such officials usually emerge from among a presidential candidate's team of foreign policy advisors. So, analyzing who these two finalists for the Democratic presidential nomination have brought in to advise them on international affairs can be an important barometer for determining what kind of foreign policies they would pursue as president. For instance, in the case of the Bush administration, officials like Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, and Richard Perle played a major role in the fateful decision to invade Iraq by convincing the president that Saddam Hussein was an imminent threat and that American forces would be treated as liberators.

The leading Republican candidates have surrounded themselves with people likely to encourage the next president to follow down a similarly disastrous path. But what about Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton? Who have they picked to help them deal with Iraq war and the other immensely difficult foreign policy decisions that they'll be likely to face as president?

Contrasting Teams

Senator Clinton's foreign policy advisors tend to be veterans of President Bill Clinton's administration, most notably former secretary of state Madeleine Albright and former National Security Adviser Sandy Berger. Her most influential advisor - and her likely choice for Secretary of State - is Richard Holbrooke. Holbrooke served in a number of key roles in her husband's administration, including U.S. ambassador to the UN and member of the cabinet, special emissary to the Balkans, assistant secretary of state for European and Canadian affairs, and U.S. ambassador to Germany. He also served as President Jimmy Carter's assistant secretary of state for East Asia in propping up Marcos in the Philippines, supporting Suharto's repression in East Timor, and backing the generals behind the Kwangju massacre in South Korea.

Senator Barack Obama's foreign policy advisers, who on average tend to be younger than those of the former first lady, include mainstream strategic analysts who have worked with

previous Democratic administrations, such as former national security advisors Zbigniew Brzezinski and Anthony Lake, former assistant secretary of state Susan Rice, and former navy secretary Richard Danzig. They have also included some of the more enlightened and creative members of the Democratic Party establishment, such as Joseph Cirincione and Lawrence Korb of the Center for American Progress, and former counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke. His team also includes the noted human rights scholar and international law advocate Samantha Power – author of a recent New Yorker article on U.S. manipulation of the UN in post-invasion Iraq – and other liberal academics. Some of his advisors, however, have particularly poor records on human rights and international law, such as retired General Merrill McPeak, a backer of Indonesia’s occupation of East Timor, and Dennis Ross, a supporter of Israel’s occupation of the West Bank.

Contrasting Issues

While some of Obama’s key advisors, like Larry Korb, have expressed concern at the enormous waste from excess military spending, Clinton’s advisors have been strong supporters of increased resources for the military.

While Obama advisors Susan Rice and Samantha Power have stressed the importance of U.S. multilateral engagement, Albright allies herself with the jingoism of the Bush administration, taking the attitude that “If we have to use force, it is because we are America! We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall, and we see further into the future.”

While Susan Rice has emphasized how globalization has led to uneven development that has contributed to destabilization and extremism and has stressed the importance of bottom-up anti-poverty programs, Berger and Albright have been outspoken supporters of globalization on the current top-down neo-liberal lines.

Obama advisors like Joseph Cirincione have emphasized a policy toward Iraq based on containment and engagement and have downplayed the supposed threat from Iran. Clinton advisor Holbrooke, meanwhile, insists that “the Iranians are an enormous threat to the United States,” the country is “the most pressing problem nation,” and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is like Hitler.

Iraq as Key Indicator

Perhaps the most important difference between the two foreign policy teams concerns Iraq. Given the similarities in the proposed Iraq policies of Senator Hillary Clinton and Senator Barack Obama, Obama’s supporters have emphasized that their candidate had the better judgment in opposing the invasion beforehand. Indeed, in the critical months prior to the launch of the war in 2003, Obama openly challenged the Bush administration’s exaggerated claims of an Iraqi threat and presciently warned that a war would lead to an increase in Islamic extremism, terrorism, and regional instability, as well as a decline in America’s standing in the world.

Senator Clinton, meanwhile, was repeating as fact the administration’s false claims of an imminent Iraqi threat. She voted to authorize President Bush to invade that oil-rich country at the time and circumstances of his own choosing and confidently predicted success. Despite this record and Clinton’s refusal to apologize for her war authorization vote, however, her supporters argue that it no longer relevant and voters need to focus on the

present and future.

Indeed, whatever choices the next president makes with regard to Iraq are going to be problematic, and there are no clear answers at this point. Yet one's position regarding the invasion of Iraq at that time says a lot about how a future president would address such questions as the use of force, international law, relations with allies, and the use of intelligence information.

As a result, it may be significant that Senator Clinton's foreign policy advisors, many of whom are veterans of her husband's administration, were virtually all strong supporters of President George W. Bush's call for a U.S. invasion of Iraq. By contrast, almost every one of Senator Obama's foreign policy team was opposed to a U.S. invasion.

Pre-War Positions

During the lead-up to the war, Obama's advisors were suspicious of the Bush administration's claims that Iraq somehow threatened U.S. national security to the extent that it required a U.S. invasion and occupation of that country. For example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor in the Carter administration, argued that public support for war "should not be generated by fear-mongering or demagoguery."

By contrast, Clinton's top advisor and her likely pick for secretary of state, Richard Holbrooke, insisted that Iraq remained "a clear and present danger at all times."

Brzezinski warned that the international community would view the invasion of a country that was no threat to the United States as an illegitimate act of aggression. Noting that it would also threaten America's leadership, Brzezinski said that "without a respected and legitimate law-enforcer, global security could be in serious jeopardy." Holbrooke, rejecting the broad international legal consensus against offensive wars, insisted that it was perfectly legitimate for the United States to invade Iraq and that the European governments and anti-war demonstrators who objected "undoubtedly encouraged" Saddam Hussein.

Another key Obama advisor, Joseph Cirincione of the Carnegie Endowment, argued that the goal of containing the potential threat from Iraq had been achieved, noting that "Saddam Hussein is effectively incarcerated and under watch by a force that could respond immediately and devastatingly to any aggression. Inside Iraq, the inspection teams preclude any significant advance in WMD capabilities. The status quo is safe for the American people."

By contrast, Clinton advisor Sandy Berger, who served as her husband's national security advisor, insisted that "even a contained Saddam" was "harmful to stability and to positive change in the region," and therefore the United States had to engage in "regime change" in order to "fight terror, avert regional conflict, promote peace, and protect the security of our friends and allies."

Meanwhile, other future Obama advisors, such as Larry Korb, raised concerns about the human and material costs of invading and occupying a heavily populated country in the Middle East and the risks of chaos and a lengthy counter-insurgency war.

And other top advisors to Senator Clinton - such as her husband's former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright - confidently predicted that American military power could easily suppress any opposition to a U.S. takeover of Iraq. Such confidence in the ability of the

United States to impose its will through force is reflected to this day in the strong support for President Bush's troop surge among such Clinton advisors (and original invasion advocates) as Jack Keane, Kenneth Pollack, and Michael O'Hanlon. Perhaps that was one reason that, during the recent State of the Union address, when Bush proclaimed that the Iraqi surge was working, Clinton stood and cheered while Obama remained seated and silent.

These differences in the key circles of foreign policy specialists surrounding these two candidates are consistent with their diametrically opposed views in the lead-up to the war.

National Security

Not every one of Clinton's foreign policy advisors is a hawk. Her team also includes some centrist opponents of the war, including retired General Wesley Clark and former Ambassador Joseph Wilson.

On balance, it appears likely that a Hillary Clinton administration, like Bush's, would be more likely to embrace exaggerated and alarmist reports regarding potential national security threats, to ignore international law and the advice of allies, and to launch offensive wars. By contrast, a Barack Obama administration would be more prone to examine the actual evidence of potential threats before reacting, to work more closely with America's allies to maintain peace and security, to respect the country's international legal obligations, and to use military force only as a last resort.

Progressive Democrats do have reason to be disappointed with Obama's foreign policy agenda. At the same time, as *The Nation* magazine noted, members of Obama's foreign policy team are "more likely to stress 'soft power' issues like human rights, global development and the dangers of failed states." As a result, "Obama may be more open to challenging old Washington assumptions and crafting new approaches."

And new approaches are definitely needed.

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