

More democratic folly?

Suggested issues for the upcoming US presidential debates

Though the war in Iraq is, and should be, an important issue in the upcoming presidential debates, one can only hope that the debates themselves will be more enlightening than much of the discussion that has led up to them.

For example, what does USAmerica's collective memory of a war that ended more than 20 years ago have to do with the recent political careers of two prominent US politicians? The recent petty attempts at character assassination have been truly lamentable tactics. Besides, more important than either of the two candidates soiled military records, is the political machinery over which each candidate could or has already presided. Can either party effectively extinguish the fires that are forever ignited by Osama bin Laden and his world network of terror. Can either party successfully steer the United States clear of another overseas civil war? History tells us that no matter what decisions are made by the man or woman at the helm, it is the political and bureaucratic machinery that surrounds him and the general political climate of the day that make all the difference in the outcomes of his decisions. Thus, we should be focusing on the performance of the current administration in the Middle East and Central Asia and the likelihood of either party to effectuate a different and hopefully better outcome than what we have already witnessed.

Clearly the overseas record of the current president is anything but illustrious, this despite certain grand moments that were highlighted at the Republican National Convention in New York. Have the Democrats distinguished themselves in a more positive way, however? Would it not be better for the two presidential contenders to focus their attention on domestic issues that are closer to home and about which most voters are likely better informed and can more easily judge with clarity and wisdom. If foreign policy planning and execution are what is truly to be debated, however, then let us consider the following.

Motivation for the war in Iraq - Weapons, their delivery, friends, and energy

Was the war in Iraq necessary and what were the true motivations for invasion?

What we do not need to hear in this regard is more of the ongoing debate about poor US intelligence. Obviously the US intelligence community needs to be overhauled, but this is a domestic issue despite its foreign policy implications. What does need to be clarified is whether the President's foreign policy decision-making machinery and Congress made wise choices based on the information they were provided.

Weapons of mass destruction are a hideous tool in anyone's hands, and the United States government probably has the best arsenal of WMDs in the world.

Thus, the presumed existence or nonexistence of WMDs in Iraq is a non-issue -- this, despite a UN prohibition against them.¹ What needs to be examined is whether Saddam Hussein and those closest to him had the means and motivation to deliver the presumed weapons and who would have been the likely targets, if Saddam Hussein had truly possessed them.

If, for example, the only reasonable target within Saddam's reach had been Israel, then it should have been demonstrated that Israel was not capable of defending itself. Clearly Israel has shown itself capable in the past. Also, prior to the invasion both Great Britain and the United States were flying regular patrols over Iraqi air space. So why all the fuss? Already there was an iron lid over Hussein's head. If other of Iraq's neighbors were at risk, then is it not likely that US oil interests were the more likely motivation for invasion. If so, then why were two of USAmerica's closest European allies adamantly opposed to the invasion?

- Not only did Europe import 5 percent more of the world's oil than did the United States in 2002, but it imported 85 percent more of it from the Middle East and North Africa. The story does not end here.
- Whereas the US pipes natural gas only from Canada and Mexico, Europe pipes it directly from Turkmenistan, Iran, and Algeria. In 2002 fifty percent of Europe's pipeline total originated in Turkmenistan -- probably Central Asia's most dictatorial government.
- Liquefied natural gas (LNG) differs from pipeline gas only in the way that it is transported and distributed. The Middle East is the single largest source of LNG to the United States and Europe. European imports from this region are more than 5 times as large as those to the United States.²

So, whose energy supply was threatened more in the Middle East? So why did the United States need to act and not Europe? It is one thing to attack an enemy; it is quite another to jeopardize long standing friendships.

New York City and Baghdad are continents and oceans apart! Moreover, the link between *al Qaeda* and Iraq was never strong. Only after the invasion in the midst of total chaos was *al Qaeda* able to assert itself and begin playing an active role against the US. Before Saddam Hussein's fall from power, he and Osama bin Laden were competitors for attention in the Arab world -- not collaborators. Ironically, North Korea is presently a far greater threat to the United States than Saddam Hussein ever was, but the US is currently withdrawing troops from South Korea.³

¹ The arms inspections approved by the UN were still underway when the United States delivered its ultimatum to Saddam Hussein.

² British Petroleum (BP). 2003. Statistical review of world energy 2003 [online document - pdf format]

<http://www.bp.com/liveassets/bp_internet/globalbp/STAGING/global_assets/downloads/B/BP_statistical_review_of_world_energy_2003_print_version.pdf> (15 October 2003)
Reports and publications/Statistical review - downloads/Full report and history series.
EARTH's EXCEL copy is available on request.

³ For more on this issue see R. A. Stegemann. 2003. Paying the bully: What can the US hope to achieve in Northeast Asia? (January 8) [online document]

<<http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/earth/viewpoint/showdown.pdf>>.

The Israeli/Jewish Divide

The United States and Europe are Israel's most important trade partners.⁴ Until al Qaeda bombed New York's Twin Towers and the US Pentagon, and before the current administration decided to invade Iraq, East-West relations in the Arab world were focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Withdrawing US troops from Iraq would certainly take the United States out of the limelight with respect to Iraq, but it would not bring an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the high-profile the United States maintains in the Middle East. Strong US support of Israel is an important source of friction between the United States and the Islamic world. It is also an important source of fuel for further terrorist activity against the United States and its closest allies. Al Qaeda does not recruit its members from Arab governmental staff who support the US, rather among the Islamic general public who is largely sympathetic with the Palestinian cause.

Israel is clearly the unlawful aggressor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the United States intransigent support of Israeli aggression has made a mockery of the United Nations and political democracy the world over.⁵ The Bush administration admonished the UN for allowing Saddam Hussein to ignore UN resolutions. Later it utilized this admonishment as partial justification for its near unilateral invasion of Iraq, even before UN approved arms inspections had been completed -- inspections to which the Iraqi government had agreed and were being carried out!

In his speech before the 58th Session of the UN General Assembly in the fall of 2003 never once did the current US President address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict directly.⁶ Which political party will have the courage to force the Israeli government to stand-down in Palestine? Which political party will have the courage to draw a firm line between things Jewish and things Israeli and thus remove the barrier that stands between the US American people and the Palestinian cause?

World War II was fought in part over discrimination against the Jews. The state of Israel did not even exist at the time. How Jews are treated in the world at large, and what is going on in Israel and Palestine today are two very different matters.

⁴ R. A. Stegemann. 2003. Israel's external trade pattern 2003. [online document - pie charts] <<http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/earth/mideast/israel/trade/exim.html#imports>> EARTH's Viewpoint.

⁵ R. A. Stegemann. 2003. It is not what you say, rather what you do not say that counts. The US-Israeli quagmire (September 28). EARTH's Viewpoint. [online document - pdf format 80KB] <<http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/earth/viewpoint/unsaid.pdf>>.

⁶ Ibid.

Those who control the means and the means to control them

Behind the many veils of civil and military propriety and the inspiring rhetoric of government officials and public celebrities countless crimes are committed that are never discovered or only revealed after the damage has occurred and the criminals are no longer within the public's reach. We live in a vicious world in which it is often easier to suffer our nicks and bruises rather than to resist the source of our injuries. When the day finally arrives and someone goes after the source, we take offense -- not with the established machinery of the criminals whose activity we have learned to accommodate, rather with those who have dared to destroy that from which we ourselves have so often run. And why? Because our own lives are further disrupted.

Surely the bitterness with which al Qaeda's anti-heroes have awakened our social folly and political cowardliness is both disgusting and deplorable, but so too are the conditions of those in whose names they commit their heinous acts. I do not for a moment condone these acts, but neither do I wish to support a complacent democratic world that continues to provide reasonable justification to those who support, give refuge, and applaud terrorist activities. We are no longer participating in the Cold War of the Reagan and prior political eras, and the *We-They, Us-Them* attitude of decades past is simply no longer appropriate, if it ever was. Terrorism strikes at the heart of democracy, because it reminds each of us that beyond the children who are sometimes, perhaps often, sacrificed by acts of terror and governmental retaliation, there are no innocent and defenseless victims.

As Yasir Arafat clearly taught us before becoming President of the Palestinian Authority, organized terror can sometimes be an effective tool for gaining entry into the legal and political apparatus required to achieve political goals otherwise unacknowledged by an insensitive and complacent established world order. In brief, the political democracies of today's world were founded on centuries of colonial exploitation and imperial aggression. This history is still with us, and it often blinds us from perceiving reality as it truly is.

In 2002 the average per capita income of 84% of the world's population was US\$ 1,170. The average per capita income of people living in the Middle East and North Africa was somewhat better at US\$2,250. Oil does make a difference! In contrast the average per capita incomes of the United States, Japan, and EU were US dollars 35,400, 34,101, and 20,320, respectively.⁷ Nearly half of the more than four fifths of the world's population that are considered low to middle income world residents were living on annual incomes of about US\$400. There is little reason to believe that a large number of this latter group are not living in the Muslim world. In effect, we are looking at differences of income between 50 to 90 fold.

Average USAmerican, Japanese, and European voters who compare these differences with the wealthy of their own countries and argue, "So what's the big deal. I work hard for my income, and there are plenty of people far richer than myself!", have missed the boat. Should we be grateful to the wealthy of our

⁷ World Bank. 2002. Data Query. Series: Per capita income and population. US, Japan, European Monetary Union, Low and middle income countries, and Middle East and North Africa countries. 1999-2003. [online data base] (30 September 2004) <<http://www.worldbank.org/data/onlinebases/onlinebases.html>>.

world for their intelligence, diligence, and entrepreneurship? Certainly their success and good fortune is no reason to go around terrorizing all of modern society. So what is at issue here? Obviously it is not mere differences in personal disposable income. Rather it is the differences in the social, biological, and work environments in which the children of the world's poor are raised and nurtured, and the lack of solid educational and work opportunities available to them as a result.

World trade and investment, the means by which the destitute conditions of the world's poor can be eliminated, are the very things that are being attacked by Osama bin Laden and his followers, however. There is obviously a mammoth perceptual gap about what the world truly needs to overcome the conflict and misery in which so many people find themselves today.

Those of the modern world, who claim they are helpless to bring about the changes necessary to correct the situation, are at best misinformed or dissimulating, self-righteous hypocrites well-deserving of more terrorist attacks. For it is they who elect the government officials who spend the tens of billions of dollars annually on sophisticated conventional weaponry necessary to subdue those who perceive solutions to the world's problems differently than those who negotiate, write, formulate, and enforce the energy, agricultural, trade, and financial policies that perpetrate the inequity which brings about the perceptual gap in the first place.

As the world's largest producer and seller of arms to the industrially less advanced nations of our world, the United States could do far more toward relieving the current situation by negotiating with the governments of other major arms producers and overseas sellers of military equipment. If gun control is an important issue domestically, it is an issue of critical importance overseas. Reducing the level of arms supplied by major arms producers to developing countries would be a great step forward in the reduction of political and social tension the world over. Those who engage in terrorist activity may not be among the most impoverished of the world, but those who provide these demons of destruction with the refuge and the applause that permit their existence and feed their venomous egos most certainly are.

Presidential candidates require money and organization to win elections. Where that money and organization arises is crucial to the agendas that our nation's leaders later pursue having once found their way into office.

In just two years the current administration took the United States national budget from a US\$334 billion surplus to a US\$455 billion deficit. It had taken many years to finally stop the flow of red ink. It was simply unconscionable of the current administration to reopen the stop gap. Neither the war in Iraq, nor Osama bin Laden can be held responsible for this blatant act of fiscal irresponsibility.⁸ Neither are the Republican Party and the very rich who supported this folly solely responsible, however. The current Congress is fairly evenly divided, and the Democratic party was obviously sitting on its hands when this budget was passed.

Between 1999 and 2002 the world economy grew at an average annual rate of

⁸ R. A. Stegemann. 2003. Bad Bush go. EARTH's Viewpoint. (August 8) [online document - pdf 16KB] <<http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/earth/viewpoint/badbushgo.pdf>>.

about 2.5 percent. The US and Israeli economies *grew* at about 2.6 and 2.1 percent respectively. The West Bank and Gaza economy *sank* at an annual average rate of -7.25 percent per year.⁹ This tragic economic outcome is the result of the Israeli occupation. In 2002 the United States government guaranteed more than US\$12 billion dollars in foreign loans to the State of Israel -- nearly 50% of all money raised by Israel in that year.¹⁰ This support is not merely presidential in nature. The US Congress has repeatedly endorsed Israel's aggression to the dismay of the Palestinian people.

Terror is the excuse used by the Israeli government for further land encroachment and West Bank consolidation. In contrast the Palestinian people live in a constant state of fear of Israeli troops. Saddam Hussein was clearly a vicious dictator, who regularly terrorized Iraqi citizens, but at least the source of fear was known and somewhat predictable. Terror and WMDs were the excuse given by the Bush administration for invading Iraq. No WMDs were found, and the source of terror is no longer clear and difficult to avoid. Just about anyone who favors stability and economic growth in Iraq has become a potential target.

Between 1999 and 2002 the economies of the Middle East and North Africa actually grew about 25% faster than the world's economy. In contrast, the population of this region grew faster than the world average -- nearly twice as fast as did the Middle East and North African economies.¹¹ Are living conditions in this part of the world not likely to worsen before they get better?

The next President of the United States must confront these tragedies clearly and openly, if peace in the Middle East is ever to be achieved and the motivation and justification for terrorist activity removed.

Conclusion

So far neither candidate nor party has offered the vision necessary to free the United States from the throes of Middle East and Central Asian conflict. The question remains does either candidate have the ability to come clean before the USAmerican people and USAmerica's many distant observers.

Osama bin Laden is alive and free somewhere along the Afghan-Pakistani border, while Yasir Arafat remains under house-arrest in Ramallah, Palestine. Abu Musab al Zarqawi runs free in the vicinity of Baghdad, while Saddam Hussein sits captive in a tiny jail cell hidden from public view in Iraq. Someone has missed his target, but should anyone be very surprised?

⁹ World Bank. 2002. Data Query. Series: GDP growth. The world, US, Israel, and West Bank and Gaza. 1999-2003. [online data base] (30 September 2004) <<http://www.worldbank.org/data/onlinedatabases/onlinedatabases.html>>.

¹⁰ EARTH's Viewpoint. Israeli collaborators. Financing Israel's trade and national deficits. Israeli external debt by type of financial instrument - 2002. [online document - pie chart] <<http://homepage.mac.com/moogoonghwa/earth/mideast/israel/finance/graph3a.html#graph>> (30 September 2004).

¹¹ World Bank. 2000. Data Query. Series: GDP and population growth rates. The world and Middle East and North Africa. 1999-2003. [online data base] (30 September 2004). <<http://www.worldbank.org/data/onlinedatabases/onlinedatabases.html>>

Well, Senator Kerry, it is up to you to set things straight, but in all honesty I do not think that either you or your party have got what it takes. Hopefully you will prove me wrong.

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