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Human Rights and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

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Human Rights and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

Abstract

There has been a vivid tendency this year by the conventional keepers of Washington wisdom to explicate the two presidential candidates' foreign policy views using old frameworks of "hawk" and "dove." Not only is this binary wrong, it fundamentally obscures some rather ironic potentials for how each candidate, if elected president, will focus upon human rights in their foreign policy. McCain's neoconservative view of the world is founded upon the Wilsonian call for democratization-culminating in what he terms a "League of Democracies." To use a concept that Arnold Wolfers first coined, and one which Joshua Muravchik has proffered as well, McCain has at heart "milleu" goals for the world. The U.S.'s prominent position as a great power can not only secure American national interests in anarchy, it can change that notion of anarchy altogether - a world constituted by liberal democracies is one which will be radically more peaceful than one where rogue states reside.

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Human rights, United States foreign policy, National security, Economy

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Human Rights and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

by Brent J. Steele

There has been a vivid tendency this year by the conventional keepers of Washington wisdom to explicate the two presidential candidates' foreign policy views using old frameworks of "hawk" and "dove." Not only is this binary wrong, it fundamentally obscures some rather ironic potentials for how each candidate, if elected president, will focus upon human rights in their foreign policy. McCain's neoconservative view of the world is founded upon the Wilsonian call for democratization-culminating in what he terms a "League of Democracies." To use a concept that Arnold Wolfers [first coined](#), and one which Joshua Muravchik [has proffered](#) as well, McCain has at heart "milleu" goals for the world. The U.S.'s prominent position as a great power can not only secure American national interests in anarchy, it can change that notion of anarchy altogether - a world constituted by liberal democracies is one which will be radically more peaceful than one where rogue states reside.

Obama, despite all of the grandiose rhetoric, and despite having liberal internationalist advisors such as Anthony Lake and Ivo Daalder, has emphasized and even championed realist principles of prudence, self-limitation, restraint and caution, which explicates his stated admiration for a variety of realist icons such as Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan, and Dean Acheson, (see Larissa MacFarquhar's [profile of him](#) from May of 2007 in this regard). This also elucidates why he has been supported, either tacitly or explicitly, by realist Republicans such as Dick Lugar, Chuck Hagel and Colin Powell. It is the realist emphases on diplomacy, "soft power" and the U.S. national interest, which pulse Obama's position on dialogue with adversaries such as Iran , rather than some cosmopolitan notion that he is trying to get us all to "get along."

How will these policies impact human rights in the world? For starters, both men will move away from the current administration's embrace of coercive interrogation techniques in combating terrorism. Arguably, there has been no darker turn in U.S. foreign policy than this, and it looks very likely the use of such techniques will end. Admittedly, there are differences on this issue between the two-such as McCain's support for, versus Obama's opposition to the 2006 Military Commissions Act which, among other provisions, will make it more difficult for either man as president to prosecute government officials for criminal misconduct in regards to interrogation. But overall either Obama or McCain would be, and have been as senators, more forceful in their condemnation of such techniques. And as constructivist scholars of International Relations would point out, both men have justified this condemnation with powerful references to U.S. identity: Obama repeatedly asserts his opposition to torture with the words "That is not who we are," and McCain has [mentioned on several occasions](#) that regardless of who the enemies are (even terrorists), "We are Americans, and we hold ourselves to humane standards of treatment of people no matter how evil or terrible they may be." For those who care about human rights, on this issue there is hope for optimism.

When it comes to other practices which implicate human rights, make no mistake that if Obama is elected, his Iraq withdrawal plan will inevitably entail some instability in Iraq such as a return of sectarian fighting between the Shia and Sunnis in Baghdad and surrounding areas. McCain's stated goal to keep troops in Iraq would most likely in the short-term serve to continue the fragile peace between contentious factions there (I say "most likely" since it's not entirely clear that the

increased U.S. presence there via the "surge" is solely responsible for this fragile stability), but in the long term it may constrain the U.S.'s ability to deploy forces to stem humanitarian crises elsewhere in the world.

On the issue of genocide, those who see Obama as an "idealist" advocate of humanitarian interventions throughout the world are, I believe, going to be sorely disappointed if he is elected. Admittedly, he has had advisors such as Anthony Lake and Samantha Power who have articulately argued that genocide is an important U.S. national security threat. But the principles of realism that Obama supports-caution and prudence, for example-are not conducive to interventionist policies. Realist-influenced administrations, such as that of George H.W. Bush (a president for whose foreign policies Obama has on more than one occasion expressed admiration), have been extremely reticent to deploy force for humanitarian purposes, although they did, in rare occasions (such as Somalia). But if Obama were to support action in Darfur, for example, it would likely be done with the knowledge that U.S. material resources are finite, and accordingly U.S. actions to assist the humanitarian efforts there would need to be cheap and limited, as he intuited in his [second debate with Senator McCain in early October](#), Obama's approach would more likely emphasize long-term tactics designed to alleviate global poverty and the raising of individual's living standards-purposes which would presumably reduce the need for interventions in the first place.

Senator McCain's neoconservative leanings would lead one to tentatively conclude that he would be more supportive of intervention than Obama. But as Matthew Bai found out in [an interview he conducted with the Senator](#), McCain has a very nuanced view of intervention that reflects a more sophisticated understanding of the situations where U.S. soldiers could stop humanitarian disaster, versus others (such as Zimbabwe) where they may exacerbate more than mediate humanitarian crises.

Finally, I must take a bit of issue with the 10 th "debunked" myth in *The Nation* article. The [article](#) asserts that "much of the rest of the world is more skeptical, if not outright resistant, to Washington 's global leadership than at any time since the end of World War II." This may be true, but in my brief interactions outside of this country in the past couple of years, I am amazed at how captivated some citizens of "the world" are with this U.S. presidential election. Many view it as an historic opportunity for the U.S. to re-enter the world community, and whether the individuals in these countries informed me of their preference (Obama, McCain, or, at the time of my travels, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton), they were all intensely interested in this election. While it may not be the case that the "world *needs*" U.S. leadership, certain areas may not resist it. This is especially the case if either of these men-Obama or McCain-can quickly regain the trust of the world community through a set of policies which approach global problems with honest assessments and earnest commitments. I am fairly optimistic that even if much of the world remains skeptical regarding U.S. leadership after what has transpired over the last eight years, Barack Obama and John McCain each possess the capacity to restore some semblance of the moral authority that the U.S. possessed in many pockets of the world community not so long ago.

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