

No radical change, just a different face

You might expect the candidates in this presidential election to want to lead the nation in radically new foreign policy directions. The incumbent, after all, is widely perceived to have driven the country off a cliff. You might expect a retreat to humility and pragmatism after George Bush's wildly ambitious, and thus far stymied, freedom agenda.

You might also think that the two parties would offer programs differing radically from each other. And you might figure that, if anyone is positioned to strike out in such new directions, it would be Democrat Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney, neither of whom is burdened by much foreign policy history on the national stage.

Now those two candidates have laid out their foreign policy visions in parallel articles, released last week prior to publication in the July/August issue of *Foreign Affairs*. And after you cut through some of their campaign rhetoric, here's what you find:

1. The two candidates' programs are strikingly similar to each other.
2. Both are strikingly similar to Bush administration policy.
3. Both, far from retreating to isolationism in the face of Iraq and other challenges, set forth their own wildly ambitious calls for American leadership and the promotion of American values.

Obama begins: "After Iraq, we may be tempted to turn inward. That would be a mistake. The American moment is not over, but it must be seized anew."

Romney writes: "In the aftermath of World War II and with the coming of the Cold War, members of the 'greatest generation' united America and the free world around shared values and actions that changed history. ... Our times call for equally bold leadership."

The two differ in some respects, of course. Romney puts more emphasis on combating radical Islam and less on promoting freedom. Obama dwells on Bush's failures and the value of diplomacy and endorses a "phased withdrawal" of U.S. troops from Iraq. But even there, Obama would maintain in Iraq enough troops "to

protect American personnel and facilities, continue training Iraqi security forces, and root out al-Qaida." Both want bigger, not smaller, armed forces.

Obama calls for a doubling of foreign aid; Romney wants a Marshall Plan-like "Partnership for Prosperity and Progress" that would support schools, microcredit, the rule of law, human rights, health care and the free market in Islamic states.

Romney says that "the jihadist threat is the defining challenge of our generation," as real as the threat that was posed by Nazi Germany, and he promises an appropriately sized response. Obama, albeit using slightly different terms, agrees: "To defeat al-Qaida, I will build a twenty-first-century military and twenty-first-century partnerships as strong as the anticommunist alliance that won the Cold War to stay on the offense everywhere from Djibouti to Kandahar."

Both want to revamp domestic bureaucracies, intelligence agencies and institutions far beyond post-Sept. 11 reforms.

Strikingly, both want to reinvigorate existing multilateral alliances and to create new ones. Both point to flaws in the United Nations but say the United States should work to cure them rather than pull out. Both want renewed attention to securing loose nukes around the world.

Each of their calls for change carries criticism of the Bush administration, implicit in Romney's case, explicit and eloquent in Obama's. The United States cannot promote its values abroad unless it lives by them at home, Obama says, pledging an end to secret prisons and other abuse of detainees.

In both cases, the criticism is not that Bush took on too much but that he accomplished too little. "We are a unique nation, and there is no substitute for our leadership," says Romney. Agrees Obama: "We can be this America again. ... (A)n America that battles immediate evils, promotes an ultimate good and leads the world once more."

If Iraq-weary voters are looking for someone who will call on America to "come home," they won't find that candidate here.

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