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OPINION

The Foreign Policy Difference

By **FOUAD AJAMI**
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The candidacy of Barack Obama seems to have lost some of its luster of late, and I suspect this has something to do with large questions many Americans still harbor about his view of the dangerous world around us. Those questions were not stilled by the choice of Joe Biden as his running mate.



Martin Kozlowski

To be sure, the Delaware senator is a man of unfailing decency and deep legislative experience; and his foreign policy preferences are reflective of the liberal internationalist outlook that once prevailed in the Democratic Party. To his honor and good name, Sen. Biden took a leading role in pushing for the use of American military power in the Balkans when the Muslims of Bosnia were faced with grave dangers a dozen years ago. Patriotism does not embarrass this man in the way it does so many in the liberal elite. But as Bob Woodward is the latest to

remind us, it is presidents, not their understudies, who shape the destiny of nations.

So the Obama candidacy must be judged on its own merits, and it can be reckoned as the sharpest break yet with the national consensus over American foreign policy after World War II. This is not only a matter of Sen. Obama's own sensibility; the break with the consensus over American exceptionalism and America's claims and burdens abroad is the choice of the activists and elites of the Democratic Party who propelled Mr. Obama's rise.

Though the staging in Denver was the obligatory attempt to present the Obama Democrats as men and women of the political center, the Illinois senator and his devotees are disaffected with American power. In their view, we can make our way in the world without the encumbrance of "hard" power. We would offer other nations apologies for the way we carried ourselves in the aftermath of 9/11, and the foreign world would be glad for a reprieve from the time of American certitude.

The starkness of the choice now before the country is fully understood when compared to that other allegedly seminal election of 1960. But the legend of Camelot and of the New Frontier

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exaggerates the differences between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy. A bare difference of four years separated the two men (Nixon had been born in 1913, Kennedy in 1917). Both men had seen service in the Navy in World War II. Both were avowed Cold Warriors. After all, Kennedy had campaigned on the missile gap -- in other words the challenger had promised a tougher stance against the Soviet Union. (Never mind the irony: There was a missile gap; the U.S. had 2,000 missiles, the Soviet Union a mere 67.)

The national consensus on America's role abroad, and on the great threats facing it, was firmly implanted. No great cultural gaps had opened in it, arugula was not on the menu, and the elites partook of the dominant culture of the land; the universities were then at one with the dominant national ethos. The "disuniting of America" was years away. American liberalism was still unabashedly tethered to American nationalism.

We are at a great remove from that time and place. Globalization worked its way through the land, postmodernism took hold of the country's intellectual life. The belief in America's "differentness" began to give way, and American liberalism set itself free from the call of nationalism. American identity itself began to mutate.

The celebrated political scientist Samuel Huntington, in "Who Are We?," a controversial book that took up this delicate question of American identity, put forth three big conceptions of America: national, imperial and cosmopolitan. In the first, America remains America. In the second, America remakes the world. In the third, the world remakes America. Back and forth, America oscillated between the nationalist and imperial callings. The standoff between these two ideas now yields to the strength and the claims of cosmopolitanism. It is out of this new conception of America that the Obama phenomenon emerges.

The "aloofness" of Mr. Obama that has become part of the commentary about him is born of this cultural matrix. Mr. Obama did not misspeak when he described union households and poorer Americans as people clinging to their guns and religion; he was overheard sharing these thoughts with a like-minded audience in San Francisco.

Nor was it an accident that, in a speech at Wesleyan University, he spoke of public service but excluded service in the military. The military does not figure prominently in his world and that of his peers. In his acceptance speech at the Democratic Party convention, as was the case on the campaign trail, he spoke of his maternal grandfather's service in Patton's army. But that experience had not been part of his own upbringing.

When we elect a president, we elect a commander in chief. This remains an imperial republic with military obligations and a military calling. That is why Eisenhower overwhelmed Stevenson, Reagan's swagger swept Carter out of office, Bush senior defeated Dukakis, etc.

The exception was Bill Clinton, with his twin victories over two veterans of World War II. We had taken a holiday from history -- but 9/11 awakened us to history's complications. Is it any wonder that Hillary Clinton feigned the posture of a muscular American warrior, and carried the working class with her?

The warrior's garb sits uneasily on Barack Obama's shoulders: Mr. Obama seeks to reassure

Americans that he and his supporters are heirs of Roosevelt and Kennedy; that he, too, could order soldiers to war, stand up to autocracies and rogue regimes. But the widespread skepticism about his ability to do so is warranted.

The crowds in Berlin and Paris that took to him knew their man. He had once presented his willingness to negotiate with Iran as the mark of his diplomacy, the break with the Bush years and the Bush style. But he stepped back from that pledge, and in a blatant echo of President Bush's mantra on Iran, he was to say that "no options would be off the table" when dealing with Iran. The change came on a visit to Israel, the conversion transparent and not particularly convincing.

Mr. Obama truly believes that he can offer the world beyond America's shores his biography, his sympathies with strangers. In the great debate over anti-Americanism and its sources, the two candidates couldn't be more different. Mr. Obama proceeds from the notion of American guilt: We called up the furies, he believes. Our war on terror and our war in Iraq triggered more animus. He proposes to repair for that, and offers himself (again, the biography) as a bridge to the world.

Mr. McCain, well, he's not particularly articulate on this question. But he shares the widespread attitude of broad swaths of the country that are not consumed with worries about America's standing in foreign lands. Mr. McCain is not eager to be loved by foreigners. In November, the country will have a choice between a Republican candidate forged in the verities of the 1950s, and a Democratic rival who walks out of the 1990s.

For Mr. McCain, the race seems a matter of duty and obligation. He is a man taking up this quest after a life of military and public service, the presidency as a capstone of a long career. Mr. McCain could speak with more nuance about the great issues upon us. When it comes to the Islamic world, for example, it's not enough merely to evoke the threat of radical Islamism as the pre-eminent security challenge of our time. But his approach and demeanor have proven their electoral appeal before.

For Mr. Obama, the race is about the claims of modernism. There is "cool," and the confidence of the meritocracy in him. The Obama way is glib: It glides over the world without really taking it in. It has to it that fluency with political and economic matters that can be acquired in a hurry, an impatience with great moral and political complications. The lightning overseas trip, the quick briefing, and above all a breezy knowingness. Mr. Obama's way is the way of his peers among the liberal, professional elite.

Once every four years, ordinary Americans go out and choose the standard-bearer of their nationalism. Liberalism has run away with elite culture. Nationalism may be out of fashion in Silicon Valley. But the state -- and its citadel, the presidency -- is an altogether different calling.

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