

# Bush spikes some of McCain's guns

**H**igh flying adored, So young... A beautiful thing, of all the talents, A cross between a fantasy ... and a saint... Where do you go from here?" So Che Guevara asked Evita in the hit musical. Barack Obama's campaign team think they have the answer when it comes to their candidate after his European tour: straight to the White House.

They have reason. Some pollsters say that Obama's "European bounce" gives him an eight-point lead over John McCain, the biggest edge the Illinois senator has ever enjoyed. The *Washington Post* calls the trip "a clear success"; the candidate told the press: "The value to me of this trip is, hopefully [sic], it gives voters a sense that I can in fact – and do – operate effectively on the international stage."

He might, only might, be right. There is little question that the candidate was a hit in Europe. But, then, he was adored in Paris, Berlin, London and throughout Western Europe before he flew in, wrapped in presidential trappings. The real question is whether those Americans who are not sure that they want their next president to be loved in countries that do not share America's sense of danger from terrorists are wildly outnumbered by those who find it comforting that the Democratic candidate can win the hearts and minds of foreigners who have made clear how much they detest American policies.

Economists like to say that correlation does not prove causation: that even if Obama's trip was followed by a bump in the polls (which some pollsters deny), it does not mean that the former caused the latter. For the world did not stand still while Obama flitted across Europe.

First, the McCain campaign's attempt to offset the media love-in with Obama by staging counter-events was, to put it mildly, a study in ineptitude. A trip to an offshore oil rig was cancelled because of a storm in the Gulf of Mexico; visits to coffee shops in Berlin, Pennsylvania, and London, Ohio, seemed churlish and amateurish. After all, it was McCain who had repeatedly urged Obama to visit Iraq and Afghanistan and other points abroad, and was now complaining that the Democrat had taken him up on the challenge.

More important, while Obama was away, the war-hero Senator from Arizona was attacked by the newly formed campaign team of George W Bush, and Iraq's prime minister, Nouri Al-Maliki. On the domestic front, Bush signed onto bills that promised billions in federal money to help distressed homeowners, and extended government regulation to parts of the financial services industry that had been only very lightly supervised. So much for McCain's attack on Obama as a high-spending regulator.

On the foreign-policy front, the President pulled the rug out from under McCain's most important edge: 72 per cent of Americans,



*The Republican candidate is looking like the odd man out as the President moves closer to Obama's positions on Iraq and Iran, says Irwin Stelzer*

including a majority of Democrats, who agree that he would make a fine commander-in-chief, and most believe Obama would not. Supporters of McCain lay the blame at the feet of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who they say has too much influence over the President, and is overly influenced by the trimmers in her State Department.

McCain has made much of what he considers Obama's reckless promise to call in the generals on his first day in the Oval Office and order them to devise a plan for ending the war within 16 months.

McCain has ridiculed such a timetable, calling it a surrender to the forces of al-Qaeda, a notice to the bad guys that all they have to do is sit around for 16 months and then take over the country, probably with the Iranians' help. Although Obama has left himself wriggle room – some troops to be left to train the Iraqis and stamp out a terrorist revival, or genocide, or instability – there is clear blue water between the candidates, and for a while McCain had the more plausible story.

Along comes George W. Bush to bail out Obama by accepting Al-Maliki's call for a "general time horizon" for the withdrawal of troops, generally understood to be two years or less. The difference between Obama's timetable, and the President's "general time horizon", if there is one, is lost on most voters. They see McCain as wanting to keep troops in harm's way longer than his opponent, his President, and Iraq's prime minister. Perhaps even more important, on Monday General Petraeus announced that it might be possible to turn the maintenance of security in all of Iraq over to Iraqi forces next year. McCain will say this proves he was right – the "surge" worked, but voters might see the need for a strong commander-in-chief a less urgent priority.

There is worse. McCain has been ridiculing Obama for offering to meet Iranian representatives with no pre-conditions. That's not very presidential they argued. Besides, the American position and that of

our allies has been that there will be no negotiations unless the Iranians abandon their uranium enrichment programme.

Then Bush decided to send America's third-highest ranking diplomat to a meeting with the Iranians to discuss the goodies the West is offering in return for an end to Iran's development of a nuclear weapon. Our diplomat didn't say a word, says Condi Rice. And don't read too much into our plans to establish a diplomatic presence in Tehran, she might have added.

This diplomatic flurry is under way even though the Iranians remain unwilling to accept the preconditions President Bush set and McCain supported. Voters can be forgiven for thinking that the President has come around to Obama's point of view, on what the Democratic candidate called in Israel "our single most important threat, both to Israel but also to the United States".

Of course the differences between Obama-Bush-Rice and McCain are not all that stark. McCain would probably withdraw troops as the situation continues to improve in Iraq; Obama would probably leave some forces there to prevent renewed instability.

But that's a subtlety for political savants. To voters it looks as if McCain is the odd man out. Which might have as much to do with Obama's "bump" in the polls as those swooning Europeans.

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