

ECONOMIC NEWS UPDATE

Irwin Stelzer

27 July 2008

McCain forgot to watch his back

It's been a tough few weeks for John McCain. And not only because Barack Obama dominated the press with Presidential-style appearances from the Middle East to Europe. The Senator from Arizona has been attacked by the newly formed campaign team of Barack Obama and George W. Bush, with Iraq prime minister Nuri Maliki throwing his weight behind the new duo.

McCain is in trouble not only because he is lumbered with the unpopularity of his President and fellow-Republican -- unfairly, since McCain has been a thorn in the President's side on many issues, calling for the firing of Donald Rumsfeld and, most notably, criticizing Bush's initial failure to

give his generals enough troops to turn the tide against the terrorist fanatics in Iraq.

More important is that the President seems to be busily at work pulling the rug out from under McCain's most important edge in his effort to counter the appeal of Obama's leftish domestic agenda and what Politico bloggers call his "pop star" appeal, especially potent when aimed at the fawning media. Polls show that although Obama is drawing wildly enthusiastic crowds, he is only slightly in the lead -- so slightly as to be irrelevant, especially since candidates ahead in July more often than not lose the November election. The reason McCain might yet win it all is that, although

the great majority of Americans think the Iraq war that McCain defends as necessary to defeat terrorism was a mistake, 72 percent say he would make a good commander-in-chief of the world's only military superpower. And that includes a majority of Democrats. Fewer than half of those polled trust Obama to perform that role satisfactorily.

Unfortunately for McCain, it is that very strength in the area of foreign policy that Bush is undermining. The Republican candidate's supporters attribute Bush's reversal of his Iraq, North Korean and Iranian policies to the influence of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who they argue is overly influenced by the trimmers in her State Department.

Whatever, as Bob Dole, a McCain ally was wont to say in order to end interviews with the press during his own run for the presidency in 1996, a campaign in which the candidate's wicked sense of humor could not overcome his unskilled public appearances and the charisma of Bill Clinton. I mention this only because, like McCain, Dole was a distinguished senator and a war hero, seriously wounded during World War II. He would have been 73 years old on taking office. The analogy being drawn between the Dole and McCain campaigns is

not the top of the Arizona senator's list of favorite subjects.

Nor is the question of a timetable for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Obama has promised that on the very first day of his presidency he will call in the generals and order them to devise a plan for ending the war within sixteen months. If they object to such a timetable, he plans to remind them that policy is for the president, implementation is for the military.

McCain has ridiculed such a timetable, and called 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 sixteen months and then take over the country, probably with the help of the Iranians. Although Obama has left himself some 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 awhile McCain had the more plausible story.

Along comes George W. Bush to bail out Obama by accepting Maliki's demand for a "general time horizon" for the withdrawal of troops, a period generally understood to be two years or less. The difference between Obama's withdrawal time table, and the Presidential-Maliki

“general time horizon” will be lost on most voters, who now see McCain as wanting to keep US troops in harm’s way longer than his opponent and his President deem necessary.

There is worse. First Hillary Clinton and then McCain ridiculed Obama for offering to meet with 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 program. That, says Iran’s President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, will never happen. Whether he will change his mind as the US and the EU certainly, and the UN possibly, ramp up sanctions, and if internal opponents of his extremist positions gain traction, no one can predict. But no halt to enrichment, no talks, has been the administration’s position, leaving Obama a lone voice calling for a no-conditions meeting.

So far, so good for McCain. Until Bush decided to send America’s third-highest ranking diplomat to a meeting with the Iranians to discuss the goodies the West is offering Iran in return for an end to that country’s development of a nuclear weapon. Our diplomat didn’t say a word,

Condi Rice told a hastily called press conference. And don’t read too much into our plans to establish a diplomatic presence in Teheran, she might have added.

Meanwhile, this US 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, and that McCain is the odd man out on what Obama called in Israel “our single most important threat, both to Israel but also to the United States”. Bush has made it seem that he and Obama prefer jaw, jaw to the war, war both McCain and Obama include as one of the options to be considered should Iran pursue its present course.

Of course the differences between Obama-Bush-Rice and McCain are not as stark as I have described them. McCain would probably withdraw troops as the situation continues to improve on the ground in Iraq; Obama would probably leave some forces there beyond sixteen months to prevent renewed instability. McCain would pursue every diplomatic means to persuade Iran to shed its pariah status, and Obama’s advisers -- he reportedly has some 300 on the foreign policy side -- would

certainly not allow him to stroll into a meeting with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as unprepared as Jack Kennedy was for his first disastrous encounter with Nikita Khrushchev.

But until Bush abandoned his opposition to a withdrawal schedule, or timetable, or “general time horizon” for getting the troops home, and until Bush abandoned his insistence on pre-conditions for

negotiations with Iran, McCain only had to watch for frontal assaults by his opponent. Unfortunately, he forgot to protect his back from a surprise attack by the White House.

A version of this Update appeared in
The Sunday Times (London)