

Obama and McCain offer a choice, not an echo

This presidential race will be the first real Right v. Left contest in a long time, says **Irwin Stelzer**. On free trade, healthcare, tax and pariah regimes, the two men are worlds apart

In the Republican corner it is to be John Sidney McCain III, white, age 71. In the Democratic corner we have Barack Hussein Obama, black, age 46. No American election battle since the days of Franklin Roosevelt has attracted so much worldwide attention. A recent visitor to North Korea, a nation supposedly hermetically sealed from the rest of the world, tells me that the first question his 'minder' asked was: 'Who will win the American elections?' His concern is unsurprising: a President McCain would favour continuing existing multilateral pressure on North Korea to eliminate its nuclear weapons, and might even give some meaning to the phrase 'or else'. President Obama would meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to talk things over, no preconditions.

The rest of the world has broader reasons than does North Korea for its interest in the American elections. Two, in fact. The first is Barack Obama. The Illinois senator is the first African-American who will represent a major party in a presidential election. As if that is not enough, he is tall, handsome, articulate, telegenic and charismatic — an example of the personal becoming the political. For those Obama supporters who don't remember that Jack Kennedy sent troops into Vietnam, and tempted Nikita Khrushchev to put missiles in Cuba by appearing weak at a no-preconditions summit, forcing a showdown that took the nation to the brink of nuclear war, Obama represents a return to the glorious days of Camelot, when a handsome couple occupied the White House, university professors dined there on French cuisine at a table arranged by Jackie Kennedy, and Texas boots sullied Vice-President Lyndon Johnson's residence but not the Oval Office.

Equally important is David Miliband's observation that none of the world's problems can be solved without the co-operation of the United States. Whether it is a war in the Balkans, global warming, the world trading system, or the maintenance of world order — if the USA does not get involved, nothing good is likely to happen. This is conceded even by people who wish America would not get involved in quite the way it sometimes does. They probably remember Winston Churchill's remark that America always does the right thing, after exhausting all of the alternatives.

Indeed, American policy has so great an effect on non-Americans that some of my friends in Britain and elsewhere suggest they should have a vote in our elections. After all,

the next American President will help decide how cool or hot their planet will be, whether foreign terrorists are to be accommodated or pursued, how the world trading system will adjust to the presence of China and India, and a host of other things that will determine the quality of their lives.

That is not to be. Indeed, it took a special resolution of Congress to confirm that John McCain, who had been born in the Panama Canal Zone when it was US territory, met the constitutional requirement that presidential candidates be born in America. He does, which means that he will oppose Barack Obama in an election that promises to be the first Right v. Left battle in a long time.

The candidates do differ on foreign policy, with Obama favouring a quicker and more certain exit from Iraq than does John McCain. They differ, too, on the attitude to take towards regimes hostile to the United States, with Obama proposing talks with the leaders of Iran, Venezuela, North Korea and Cuba with no pre-conditions, and McCain insisting, for example, that Iran first agree to abandon its nuclear weapons programme, and that Raúl Castro first free political prisoners. Obama's promise to meet the world's dictators face to face is a reversal of current policy that involves co-operating with multilateral efforts to persuade North Korea and Iran to abandon their nuclear weapons programmes, and therefore contradicts Obama's other pledge to abandon the unilateralism of which he accuses George W. Bush. Never mind: consistency is the hobgoblin of politicians' minds.

In the domestic arena, the policy differences between the contenders for the job of leader of the free world are even more pronounced. Obama favours a healthcare programme that involves a significantly enhanced role for the government, while McCain seeks a solution to rising healthcare costs by stimulating competition in the private sector. Obama promises to raise taxes on high earners — families with incomes in excess of something like \$200,000 — on capital gains and on dividends, while McCain has promised to extend the Bush tax cuts. Obama's position responds to a growing unhappiness with the rising inequality with which income is distributed, but would adversely affect the living standard of a husband-and-wife team of, say, a cop and a teacher and have little impact on the wallets of his numerous supporters in the private equity, hedge fund and investment banking commu-

nity. Along with millions of small contributors, these upper-income-givers will have contributed something like \$400 million to Obama's primary campaign by the time he is officially declared the winner sometime next month.

It is no secret that most British, European and other voters would cast their ballots for the Illinois senator, given the chance. This despite that fact that he has signed on to the protectionist programme of the trade unions in response to the now-widespread feeling in the USA that free trade is the cause of job losses and the general 'de-industrialising' of America. He is opposed to new trade-opening agreements and wants to review and renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta). McCain, meanwhile, is a free-trader to his fingertips, not a popular position in America these days. Or in France or Italy, for that matter. If Obama makes it to the White House, Australia and Great Britain might be the last men standing in the fight over trade policy.

Then there is the question of race. Obama claims that in his person — white mother, black father — and in his politics he is the first post-racial candidate. With some reason: he has abandoned the strident 'we are victims' politics of Jesse Jackson and the older generation of black politicians who reached their political manhood in the days of Martin Luther King and the battle for civil rights. His wife, however, has not: this Princeton graduate and successful corporate lawyer claims to have had no liking for America until the nation showed it would accept her husband's candidacy. Nor has his pastor of 20 years, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, a man who preaches against white America (the government unleashed an Aids epidemic on the black community, so 'God damn America'), and believes that there are important differences between the brains of whites and blacks.

More important, the voters don't believe that race has become irrelevant, although things aren't as the Americans-are-racist crowd in Europe believes. Large numbers of white voters, especially upper-income, highly educated, professional groups — upscale voters — supported Obama in state after state. But virtually no blacks voted for Hillary Clinton in the primaries — some 90 per cent cast their ballots for Barack Obama. Their pride in the first black candidate is understandable, but if 90 per cent of white voters had opted for Hillary Clinton, charges of racism would undoubtedly have filled the pages of the predominantly pro-Obama media.

In the 1964 election, Barry Goldwater's supporters promised Americans a choice, not an echo. Voters here will have just such an election in November, a real choice between candidates with different views of America's role in the world, and the government's role in the lives of its citizens. Non-voting residents in other countries, although likely to be affected by the outcome, will have to be content with the role of observers.

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