Rogues’ Gallery
Who Advises Bush and Gore on the Middle East?

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Aside from support for sanctions on Iraq and moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush have made only sparse public comments on Middle East policy. But much can be inferred from their choice of advisers. On Middle East policy, the differences between Bush and Gore promise to be differences in degree and not in kind.

The right-wing American Enterprise Institute (AEI)—home to Newt Gingrich, Charles Murray and Dinesh D’Souza—would certainly prefer a Republican presidential candidate who could be distinguished on foreign policy from his Democratic counterpart. But roundtable discussions hosted by the Institute on June 14 and June 22 found that George W. Bush and Al Gore read from basically the same script. What contrasts the panelists did manage to find were not between Bush and Gore but rather between the two candidates and Bill Clinton.

According to the collection of present and former administration officials and media pundits convened for the occasion, both Bush and Gore would be far more aggressive enforcers of US power abroad than President Clinton. Reagan administration veteran Robert Kagan called Bush “an average guy” who sees the world in terms of “good guys/bad guys [and] democracy/tyranny. And that’s a simpler world.” The separate Gore discussion assessed the Democratic candidate as a hawk in the Clinton White House. As Doyle McManus of the Los Angeles Times was quick to point out, Gore has the track record to prove it. “[Gore] has been readier to consider and support military intervention, from Grenada in 1983, which was not the universal consensus among Democrats, to the Gulf War, to Bosnia in 1993. He is not a prisoner of the Vietnam syndrome.”

AEI’s panelists also saw the candidates as far less willing than President Clinton to support humanitarian and UN missions. All agreed with former assistant secretary of defense Richard Perle’s evaluation that the Clinton administration had been “great at dealing with Kofi Annan and appalling when it comes to dealing with some dangerous leaders that do not wish us well.” There was consensus among the panelists that Bush would only intervene where vital national interests were at stake. The Gore panelists credited the vice president with a similarly skeptical view of US international responsibility: “Unlike President Clinton, you won’t find Al Gore talking about that kind of broad commitment...to humanitarian intervention,” concluded McManus.

Bush’s Team of “Vulcans”

What visions might these two men have for the Middle East? On the biggest issues, they are indistinguishable. Both have publicly expressed support for moving the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Neither shows the least inclination to lift the economic sanctions on Iraq. Gore recently laughed at an anti-sanctions activist from Voices in the Wilderness who asked him at a public appearance to define his position on the issue; Bush’s security arrested the group’s members before they could enter the building. Though Gore and Bush have made only sparse public comments on specific policies, much can be in-
ferred from their choice of advisers, a rogues’ gallery of unreformed cold warriors and interventionists. On Middle East policy, the differences between Bush and Gore promise to be differences in degree and not in kind.

Foreign policy is clearly Bush’s Achilles’ heel. Unlike his father, Bush is a relative neophyte who lacks the experience of having been ambassador to Peking, ambassador to the United Nations, head of the CIA, and vice president before running for president. Furthermore, his well-publicized gaffes—confusing Slovakia with Slovenia, referring to Greeks as “Grecians” and failing a pop quiz on the names of four foreign leaders—have raised real concerns. “His foreign policy team will be critically important to determining what his policies are,” remarked Kagan. “He’ll have to listen a lot more to his advisers for grand thinking than Reagan did.”

Headed by Soviet specialist and former Stanford University provost Condoleeza Rice, Bush’s foreign policy team goes by the name of the “Vulcans,” a name referring to the ancient god of metal-working. (Rice’s hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, headquarters of Birmingham Steel, features a statue of the god.) Selection of the Bush team began in August 1998, at a meeting arranged by former President Bush in Kennebunkport, Maine, between his son and Rice. Within months, Rice was helping Governor Bush assemble a group that even conservative columnist Robert Novak describes as a nest of hawks.

A Struggle for Dubya’s Soul

Perhaps the most telling decision in the selection process was picking Paul Wolfowitz over Richard Haass. “It [was] a fight for the soul of George W. Bush on foreign policy in general but also Middle East policy specifically,” commented AEI’s Middle East analyst, David Wurmser. Haass is a Middle East specialist who served under President Bush as senior director for Near East and South Asian Affairs on the National Security Council and currently directs foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institute. He comes from the branch of the Republican Party most closely identified with President Bush and James Baker, a wing which opted against continued pursuit of Saddam Hussein’s forces in 1991 and which also clashed with the pro-Israel lobby over loan guarantees in 1992. This side of the party, more closely tied to big business, and oil companies in particular, has tended to prefer multilateralism and diplomatic engagement over simple military confrontation. On Iraq, for example, Haass has argued against arming the Iraqi National Congress for fear that it would trigger “a region-wide war with Syria, Iran and Turkey.” He has also advocated for a “more nuanced policy with Iran” and taking a firmer stand with Israel.

Wolfowitz, on the other hand, is a preeminent hard-liner from the Reaganite side of the party which advocates an aggressive US policy of rolling back perceived threats. He is dean of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies and former undersecretary of defense. “Wolfowitz is one of the best representatives of the classical neo-conservative Reagan Republicans. He believes very strongly that power can be used very effectively to create more power,” Wurmser told The Forward of New York. For years Wolfowitz has been pushing hard to arm the Iraqi National Congress, complaining to the House International Relations Committee in February 1997:
“For all the talk about supporting the opposition, the United States has yet to deliver a single rifle.” More recently, Wolfowitz has advocated the use of US ground troops to carve out pieces of Iraqi territory, telling The New Republic in December: “It will take American forces to create a protected area in which opposition forces can organize and to which units from Saddam’s army can defect.” Gen. Anthony Zinni, commander of American forces in the Persian Gulf, called such plans “a Bay of Goats” scenario.

Butressing Wolfowitz on the far right is Richard Perle, another Vulcan cold warrior and a former assistant Secretary of Defense. Within the Reagan administration, Perle earned the nickname “The Prince of Darkness” for being so hard-line. He is credited with bringing to the Pentagon a number of staunchly pro-Israel activists who dramatically increased weapons sales to Israel. In 1996, Perle gained the distinction of simultaneously advising both the Dole campaign in the United States and the Netanyahu campaign in Israel. He was the principal author of “A Clean Break,” a widely circulated policy paper published by the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (Jerusalem) that advised Netanyahu to cancel the Oslo accords concluded with the Palestinians. During the recent Camp David negotiations, Perle came under serious fire for advising the Israeli delegation to prepare to walk out, lest it become a pawn of Vice President Gore’s campaign. Perle’s statements drew a harsh rebuke from the White House, which criticized him for injecting politics into international diplomacy. The Bush camp quickly disavowed the remarks, claiming that Perle had been “speaking for himself.” For Wolfowitz and Perle, US might is best asserted with an iron fist, without the velvet glove usually donned by the Baker-Haass wing.

Choosing Cheney

The initial, somewhat bemused reaction to Bush’s choice of his father’s defense secretary, Dick Cheney, as his running mate on July 26 speculated that he might moderate foreign policy in a Bush, Jr. White House. “The irony with Dick Cheney is that despite having perhaps the single most conservative voting history in the modern era, he may actually serve as a tempering effect on the rest of Bush’s foreign policy team when it comes to the Middle East,” remarked William Hartung, senior fellow at the World Policy Institute. “Cheney will be a corporate globalist among Republican isolationists. Where they see menaces, he sees markets.” Indeed, as CEO of Halliburton, the world’s largest oil services provider, Cheney firmly denounced economic sanctions in Iran, citing them as missed financial opportunities.

But Cheney’s record indicates that he will be right at home with the Vulcans. “Make no mistake about it, the man is an imperialist of the most traditional kind,” commented Pratap Chatterjee, policy adviser to Project Underground, an oil industry watchdog group. “He may be willing to consider ending sanctions, but certainly not out of any sympathy for Iranians. Cheney would be the first to prop up a bloody dictator in these countries in order to keep the oil spigots flowing in our direction.” As Secretary of Defense, Cheney’s motto for dealing with the Middle East was “Arms for our friends, arms control for our enemies,” and during the Persian Gulf War, he was one of the few insiders pushing for a full ground invasion. At Halliburton, Cheney said he refused even to attend any conferences where the Iraqis were present. Though he did scale back the military during his tenure at the Pentagon, the bulk of the reductions came not...
from real decreases in US military operations abroad, but rather from increased outsourcing of these operations to large private contractors. Clearly, this process didn’t hinder Cheney’s transition from government to the business world.  

**Gore’s One-Man Team**

Gore has assembled a 25-person advisory group on foreign affairs, most of whom are veterans of the early Clinton administration. During his tenure under President Clinton, Gore occasionally turned for foreign policy advice to Sandy Berger, the White House national security adviser and Richard Holbrooke, the United Nations ambassador, whom many consider the leading candidate for secretary of state in a Gore administration.

But at present, only one man, Leon Fuerth, seems to exert real influence on Gore’s decisions. Fuerth, a one-time foreign service officer and current Cabinet-level foreign policy adviser, prides himself on being a master of discretion. He has described his proper comportment as “nameless, faceless and odorless,” since his ideas “belong to the vice president.” Fuerth is expected to be national security director if Gore is elected president, and the two men enjoy an unusually close relationship. During President Clinton’s cabinet meetings their habit of passing advisory notes to each other become so distracting that protocol was abandoned to let Fuerth sit at the vice president’s immediate right. Known for his gruffness, Fuerth has earned in State Department circles the nickname “Darth Vader.”

Over the years, Fuerth has consistently encouraged Gore in taking aggressive stands on foreign policy. Fuerth’s toughest positions have been with Israel, Iran and North Korea, places he has privately described as “giant zits on various parts of the body.” Fuerth remains firmly unmoved by Iran’s attempts at reform, for example. He lobbied fervently for the controversial and expensive plan to transport Caspian Sea oil and gas via a route that will avoid Russia and Iran. In 1998, Fuerth fought unsuccessfully to convince President Clinton to impose sanctions against three foreign companies that were big investors in Iran’s energy sector, arguing that to block investment in Iran was worth offending the European Union.

During Gore’s run for the nomination in 1988, Fuerth helped him formulate a strongly pro-Israel line. At that time, Gore criticized the Reagan administration for attempting to push Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir into withdrawing from land it occupied in 1967 in exchange for peace with its Arab neighbors. In 1990, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Fuerth produced a three-inch-thick binder explaining why Gore should break with other Senate Democrats and vote in favor of going to war. Senator Gore was one of six Democrats to support the war. Fuerth was also a strong advocate for early military strikes against Serbian forces.

Fuerth’s outlook on Iraq differs little from that of Bush’s advisors. In a recent interview billed as a “gentlemanly discussion,” Fuerth clashed on Iraq with Bush adviser Robert Zoellick, former assistant Secretary of State. Their real disagreement, however, was not over whether to use force, but over whose fault—President Clinton’s or President Bush’s—it was that Saddam Hussein was not already dead. The route of diplomacy was not discussed, nor was the option of rigorous military sanctions and enhanced border inspections. Nor did either man mention lifting the economic sanctions that by UNICEF estimates are killing 250 Iraqi civilians a day. Whereas Zoellick has joined his fellow Vulcans in advocating the seizure of Iraqi territory using US air and/or ground forces, Fuerth remains more coy. “Ultimately Saddam Hussein is going to make a mistake that plays into our hands. [T]hat mistake will confer on us the legitimate right to deal with him,” remarked Fuerth, adding that such a US response may or may not be coordinated with the Iraqi opposition.

Gore’s choice of Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) as his running mate, while made for domestic reasons, gives even clearer indication of his likely foreign policy orientation. Lieberman joined Gore among the six Democrats to vote for the 1990-1 Gulf war, and since then has strongly advocated continued sanctions and backing for the Iraqi opposition. Lieberman supports Star Wars and has consistently voted against any reductions in the Pentagon’s budget. He is one of the largest recipients of AIPAC money and has harshly criticized the Clinton-Gore Middle East policy for being too easy on the Palestinians. In 1997, he wrote Clinton: “Our government’s Mideast policy of evenhandedness, in contradiction with reality, continues. It is wrong. Evenhandedness has not been earned.” The letter stressed that “no more concessions” be made to Yasir Arafat, “the villain who is unwilling to stop the terror.” A Gore-Lieberman administration would likely be an even less honest broker in the Oslo “peace process” than the compromised Clinton administration has been.

This electoral season, candidates Bush and Gore are even less distinguishable on foreign policy than on domestic policy. Judging by the Middle East “experts” who surround them, US policy on the Middle East is unlikely to move in a progressive direction whichever candidate is elected.

### Endnotes

1. Other oil company CEOs are on record opposing sanctions against Iran and even Iraq, on the grounds that they disadvantage American companies competing with French and Russian firms. As Mobil CEO Lucio Noto told an audience at Georgetown University on March 30, 1998, sanctions are “a classic lose-lose policy.” Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, CCAS Newsletter (Spring 1998).


3. Gore continued this line at the annual AIPAC policy dinner on May 23, recounting the famous story of the meeting between Israel’s first prime minister David Ben-Gurion and US Ambassador Ogden Reid. When Reid arrived to find Ben-Gurion standing on his head practicing yoga, Reid quickly followed suit so the men could begin their discussions. For Gore the moral of the story was clear: “Even if the world is turned upside down, the United States and Israel will see eye to eye.” The transcript of the speech can be found at http://www.algore2000.com.

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