

## Kerry Faces the World

What would a John Kerry foreign policy look like? In some ways a lot like one the current President's father could endorse

by Joshua Micah Marshall

In early February I sat in a Starbucks in downtown Washington with Dan Feldman, who is helping to organize Senator John Kerry's foreign-policy team. We discussed Kerry's vision of America's role in the world, and the people who might play important roles in his Administration if he is elected President, touching on everything from the crucial issue of Iraq and the simmering crises in North Korea and Iran to NATO and the proper balance between international alliances and the brute force necessary to secure American interests abroad—collectively, the foreign-policy questions that are central to the next election, and to the next four years.

Even before Kerry triumphed in the primaries, foreign policy generally, and Iraq specifically, dominated the campaign—a state of affairs from which he unquestionably benefited, though the benefits may not hold indefinitely. His experience, both as a senator and as a combat veteran, proved instrumental in his victory, and as the situation deteriorates overseas, he and Bush, who was expected to be comfortably ahead, are essentially running neck and neck. At the same time, Kerry has come under constant attack for failing to articulate a clear plan to halt Iraq's slide into anarchy.

As we discussed this, Feldman outlined a course that starkly departed from the one charted by President Bush, yet was equally unlike the approach—characterized by soft multilateralism and fealty to the United Nations—portrayed by Republicans as typical of Democratic foreign policy. Feldman emphasized the need for skilled diplomatic management and a willingness to use force abroad, but also an essential caution. The more he spoke, the more he called to mind the policies of the first Bush Administration.

George H.W. Bush has receded into history. But his Administration's traditional if unimaginative attitude toward foreign relations lives on through his National Security Adviser, Brent Scowcroft, who re-emerged two years ago as one of the most unabashed and difficult-to-dismiss critics of the buildup to war in Iraq. Democrats once viewed Scowcroft as the champion of an amoral and shortsighted foreign policy that sacrificed American values in order to achieve stable relations with great powers and avoid trouble in hot spots like the Balkans (a view, incidentally, shared by many of the neoconservatives who surround the current President). It was Scowcroft who secretly traveled to Beijing shortly after the Tiananmen Square massacre to reassure the Chinese that government-to-government relations needn't suffer despite the bipartisan indignation of the American public. But in 2002, lacking a consistent criticism of the drive toward war, many Democrats eagerly took shelter in Scowcroft's high-profile opposition.

Wondering how he would take it, I said to Feldman, "What you're describing to me sounds a lot like what I'd expect from Brent Scowcroft."

"Yes," he said. "I think a lot of what you'd see from a Kerry Administration might be like that. I think there'd be a lot of similarities." When I later made the same suggestion to Kerry's chief foreign-policy adviser, Rand Beers, he agreed.

John Kerry has yet to flesh out his positions on many key foreign-policy questions. But he has nonetheless provided clues—through his speeches, public statements, and choice of advisers—to how he would govern if elected. What's more, it's not difficult to identify the people he would be likely to rely on in the area of foreign policy—they're a close-knit group, many of them veterans of the Clinton Administration. During the spring I interviewed a wide range of people who are in the running for roles in a Kerry Administration, including such probable candidates for Secretary of State as Senator Joseph Biden and Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, current Kerry advisers such as

Jonathan Winer and Rand Beers, and many of the lower-level bureaucrats and congressional staffers who would fill out the foreign-policy apparatus of a new Democratic Administration.

Last December, Kerry delivered a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations titled “Making America Secure Again,” in which he declared, “Those of us who seek the Democratic presidential nomination owe the American people more than just anger, more than just criticisms of the Bush policy, or even piecemeal solutions. We need to convince America that we Democrats are responsible stewards of our national security and of America’s role in the world.”

As a Democrat trying to unseat a Republican in time of war, Kerry faces a historic challenge. In the period after Vietnam the Democratic Party became a house divided against itself, with an articulate and energetic dovish base battling a diffuse but larger Cold War constituency. This had two effects. First, it created a poisonous dynamic whereby Democratic politicians came to approach national-security policy less in substantive than in tactical terms—searching for the sweet spot of political safety or attempting to dispense with national security as quickly as possible in order to move on to matters with which they were more comfortable. Over the years this habit of reflexively adopting the politically expedient position sent voters a clear message: many Democratic politicians were just not serious about national security. The second effect was to cede the ideological and intellectual battlefield to Republicans. In the post-Cold War era Republicans developed a foreign-policy vision based on the notion that America should aggressively assert itself abroad, and in which the problem of Saddam Hussein became an *idée fixe*.

These twin perceptions—of Democratic feebleness and Republican assuredness—combined to devastating effect in the 2002 elections. Democrats were trounced, and President Bush seemed unstoppable. But as conditions in Iraq have grown steadily worse, the terrain has shifted. What voters once viewed as the President’s steely resolve many now see as stubbornness, which has led to skepticism about his practical know-how and ability to carry out the mission of stabilizing and democratizing Iraq. Against this backdrop Kerry’s foreign policy could prove attractive.

Democratic foreign-policy hands tend to be less ideologically driven than Republican ones. Their strengths lean toward technocratic expertise and procedural competence rather than theories and grand visions. This lack of partisan edge is best illustrated by the fact that two of Kerry’s top advisers served on Bush’s National Security Council staff as recently as last year (Beers as senior director for counterterrorism, and Flynt Leverett as senior director for Middle East initiatives). The team that advised candidate Bush in 1999 and 2000—the so-called “Vulcans”—was practically the mirror opposite of the Kerry team. Though all its members had served at least one stint in government, most had held political appointments rather than working for decades in the security bureaucracy, as Beers did. And whereas Kerry’s team is the embodiment of the nation’s professional national-security apparatus, key members of Bush’s team, such as Richard Perle and Paul Wolfowitz, had spent entire careers trying to overthrow it.

In a telling sign of the parties’ differences on foreign policy, discussion of the next Secretary of State is rampant among Democrats. (The issue of who would run the Pentagon—more of a power base in Republican Administrations, particularly this one—is a subject of much less debate.) Speculation focuses primarily on Richard Holbrooke, Clinton’s former ambassador to the United Nations, who gained fame and no little notoriety for his peacemaking efforts in Bosnia; and Joseph Biden, a former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who remains its senior Democratic member. Both men are stars in the somewhat gray firmament of Democratic foreign policy; both boast outsized personalities and loyal followings; and the two scarcely differ in their approach to the major foreign-policy issues of the moment.

Other key appointments would most likely be filled by the advisers who have surrounded Kerry since he launched his bid for the nomination. Rand Beers is often touted as a Democratic successor to Condoleezza Rice; he functioned as the equivalent of a National Security Adviser to Kerry throughout the primaries, crafting many of his policy positions. Others who figure prominently are Nancy Stetson, the chief foreign-policy adviser on Kerry's Senate staff, and Jonathan Winer, a longtime aide who specialized in international money laundering and terrorist financial networks for Kerry in the 1980s and early 1990s, and later in Clinton's State Department.

A number of former Clinton officials, turned out by Bush's victory, would probably return to fill additional positions in a Kerry Administration. Some likely candidates are Ron Asmus (a State Department veteran and a possible assistant secretary of state for Europe), Jamie Rubin (Madeleine Albright's chief spokesman at the State Department), and several notable veterans of Clinton's National Security Council staff, including James Steinberg, Ivo Daalder, and Kenneth Pollack. Although some divisions exist among them (Daalder was an adviser to Howard Dean, for instance), these veterans tend to take a more hawkish approach to foreign policy than most professional Democrats of the post-Vietnam generation and even many current Democratic voters. Pollack is the author of *The Threatening Storm*, an influential book that argued for regime change in Iraq and was frequently cited by Republicans during the buildup to the invasion. Late last year, when Howard Dean was the front-runner, Pollack, Asmus, and another key Kerry adviser—the former State Department official Greg Craig—signed a manifesto titled “Progressive Internationalism: A Democratic National Security Strategy,” which aimed to put the Democratic foreign-policy establishment on record against Dean's perceived slide toward the party's dovish past.

Over the course of Clinton's presidency, especially during his second term, the President's foreign-policy team crafted a new vision of how America should engage with the post-Cold War world. Because this process got into gear well before 9/11, when the world was less keenly attuned to lofty questions of foreign policy, their vision received far less attention than the high-octane theorizing of Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, and the neocons before and after the attacks. Nevertheless, it offers a road map to the probable overall direction of a Kerry Administration—one that might surprise people familiar with Kerry only through his relentless criticism of Bush on the campaign trail. These ex-Clintonites are quite comfortable with the use of force, and actually agree with the Bush Administration on some key goals—for instance, exporting democracy and political liberalization—though they differ significantly on how they would pursue them. They also differ on the question of where the true threats to America lie and how to combat them. Kerry's advisers focus less exclusively on nation-states like those Bush identified in his infamous “Axis of Evil” speech and more on the host of diffuse dangers that have arisen in the wake of globalization: destabilization, arms smuggling, and terrorism.

As the situation in Iraq has worsened, Kerry has stepped up his criticism of the Bush Administration. In an April 30 speech at Westminster College, Kerry laid out a three-part plan for the occupation and reconstruction of the country. First he would expand and internationalize the security force by seeking the support of the UK, France, Russia, and China, and also NATO, which, he suggested, might take control of the borders and train Iraq's army. Second he would propose an international high commissioner to oversee elections, write a constitution, and organize the reconstruction efforts. Third he would launch a “massive training effort” to expand Iraqi security forces. Taking those steps, Kerry declared, “is the only way to succeed in the mission while ending the sense of an American occupation.” On the surface this may sound like merely a difference of emphasis—as though the only change Kerry proposes is a dash more multilateralism and UN involvement. But beyond specifics, the significance of which

can be misinterpreted, lies a fundamental difference in world view between Democrats and Republicans—a difference in how they see the nature of the threat facing America. This, more than any distinction between hawk and dove, is also the fundamental foreign-policy difference between Bush and Kerry.

From its inception the Bush Administration has viewed states as the key actors on the world stage, and relations among them as the primary concern of U.S. foreign policy. It is a mindset rooted in the realities of the Cold War, which defined U.S. foreign policy at the time when most of the President's key advisers gained their formative experience in government. The fixity of this mindset also explains why the Bush Administration spent its first months so heavily focused on the issue of national missile defense, and seemed so surprised by al-Qaeda's transnational terrorism. The Bush team didn't discount the problem of weapons of mass destruction; it simply expected trouble to come from an ICBM-wielding "rogue state" like Iraq or North Korea, rather than from Islamic terrorist groups.

Viewed through this lens, the Administration's fixation on Iraq after 9/11 becomes somewhat easier to understand. As Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith explained to Nicholas Lemann, of *The New Yorker*, on the eve of the Iraq War, "One of the principal strategic thoughts underlying our strategy in the war on terrorism is the importance of the connection between terrorist organizations and their state sponsors. Terrorist organizations cannot be effective in sustaining themselves over long periods of time to do large-scale operations if they don't have support from states."

To the Democrats in Kerry's orbit, this approach is at best inefficient and at worst akin to fighting fire with gasoline—for example, it has created terrorism in Iraq where little or none previously existed. Last fall, when I asked the presidential candidate General Wesley Clark about Feith's characterization of the threat, he said it was the "principal strategic *mistake* behind the Administration's policy." Clark went on, "If you look at all the states that were named as the principal adversaries, they're on the periphery of international terrorism today."

First as a military negotiator in Bosnia and later as NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during the second Clinton Administration, Clark was one of the figures at the center of the process that shaped current Democratic foreign-policy views. In its early years, rhetoric aside, the Clinton Administration hewed closely to George H.W. Bush's policy of studied non-involvement in the Balkans, even as Yugoslavia slid into chaos. But over time that region became a forcing ground for re-evaluating Democratic beliefs about foreign policy. The Balkans proved that soft-sounding concerns like human-rights abuses, ethnic slaughter, lawlessness, and ideological extremism could quickly mount into first-order geopolitical crises.

By the mid-1990s this had led the Clinton Administration to focus on terrorism, failed states, and weapons proliferation, and as it did, its foreign-policy outlook changed. The key threats to the United States came to be seen less in terms of traditional conflicts between states and more in terms of endemic regional turmoil of the sort found in the Balkans. "The Clinton Administration," says Jonathan Winer, "started out with a very traditional Democratic or even mainstream approach to foreign policy: big-power politics, Russia being in the most important role; a critical relationship with China; European cooperation; and some multilateralism." But over the years, he went on, "they moved much more to a failed-state, global-affairs kind of approach, recognizing that the trends established by globalization required you to think about foreign policy in a more synthetic and integrated fashion than nation-state to nation-state."

As Winer argues, the threats were less from Russia or China, or even from the rogue states, than from the breakdown of sovereignty and authority in a broad geographic arc that stretched from West Africa through the Middle East, down through the lands of Islam, and into Southeast Asia. In this part of the world poverty, disease, ignorance, fanaticism, and autocracy frequently combined in a self-reinforcing tangle, fostering

constant turmoil. Home to many failed or failing states, this area bred money laundering, waves of refugees, drug production, gunrunning, and terrorist networks—the cancers of the twenty-first-century world order.

In the Balkans, Holbrooke, Clark, and other leading figures found themselves confronting problems that required not only American military force but also a careful synthesis of armed power, peacekeeping capacity, international institutions, and non-governmental organizations to stabilize the region and maintain some kind of order. Though the former Yugoslavia has continued to experience strife, the settlement in the Balkans remains the most successful one in recent memory, and offers the model on which a Kerry Administration would probably build. As Holbrooke told me, the Bush Administration's actions in Iraq have shown that the Administration understands only the military component of this model: "Most of them don't have a real understanding of what it takes to do nation-building, which is an important part of the overall democratic process."

A key assumption shared by almost all Democratic foreign-policy hands is that by themselves the violent overthrow of a government and the initiation of radical change from above almost never foster democracy, an expanded civil society, or greater openness. "If you have too much change too quickly," Winer says, "you have violence and repression. We don't want to see violence and repression in [the Middle East]. We want to see a greater zone for civilization—a greater zone for personal and private-sector activity and for governmental activity that is not an enactment of violence." Bush and his advisers have spoken eloquently about democratization. But in the view of their Democratic counterparts, their means of pursuing it are plainly counterproductive. It is here, Holbrooke says, that the Administration's alleged belief in the stabilizing role of liberal democracy and open society collides with its belief in the need to rule by force and, if necessary, violence: "The neoconservatives and the conservatives—and they both exist in uneasy tension within this Administration—shift unpredictably between advocacy of democratization and advocacy of neo-imperialism without any coherent intellectual position, except the importance of the use of force."

Because Afghanistan was the Bush Administration's first order of business following the 9/11 attacks, the results of this policy have advanced the furthest there. And because Kerry is on record as saying he would increase the number of U.S. and allied troops in Afghanistan, it's probably the clearest measure of how a Kerry Administration would differ from Bush's. Afghanistan is a subject that Kerry's advisers and other senior Democrats turn to again and again. When I interviewed Joseph Biden in late March, he recounted a conversation he'd had with Condoleezza Rice in the spring of 2002 about the growing instability that had taken hold after the Taliban was defeated, in late 2001. Biden told Rice he believed that the United States was on the verge of squandering its military victory by allowing the country to slip back into the corruption, tyranny, and chaos that had originally paved the way for Taliban rule. Rice was uncomprehending. "What do you mean?" he remembers her asking. Biden pointed to the re-emergence in western Afghanistan of Ismail Khan, the pre-Taliban warlord in Herat who quickly reclaimed power after the American victory. He told me: "She said, 'Look, al-Qaeda's not there. The Taliban's not there. There's security there.' I said, 'You mean turning it over to the warlords?' She said, 'Yeah, it's always been that way.'"

Biden was seeking to illustrate the blind spot that Democratic foreign-policy types see in Bush officials like Rice, who believe that if a rogue state has been rid of its hostile government (in this case the Taliban), its threat has therefore been neutralized. Democrats see Afghanistan as an affirmation of their own view of modern terrorism. As Fareed Zakaria noted recently in *Newsweek*, the Taliban regime was not so much a state sponsoring and directing a terrorist organization (the Republican view) as a terrorist organization sponsoring, guiding, and even hijacking a state (the Democratic view). Overthrowing regimes like that is at best only the first step in denying safe haven

to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Equally important is creating the institutional bases of stability and liberalization that will prevent another descent into lawlessness and terror—in a word, nation-building.

This marriage of power and values is the essence of the foreign-policy vision espoused by leading Democratic thinkers. Out of political caution Kerry's campaign advisers still tend to seek the safety of a Scowcroftian middle ground, but the foreign-policy advisers who would serve President Kerry have quite a different vision—much more ambitious and expansive than anything pursued by the first Bush Administration. In my interviews with the people around Kerry, it became clear how this Democratic world view would apply to some of the major problem areas in the world. For example, Kerry Democrats do not believe that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the cause of Middle East instability and extremism. But they do believe that almost nothing the United States does to liberalize and pacify the region can have much chance of success so long as the standoff on the West Bank remains unresolved.

This is another area of disagreement between Bush and Kerry. Before the war Bush Administration hawks said that the road to Middle East peace ran through Baghdad. They meant that deposing Saddam Hussein would ease negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This claim was based on three beliefs: that ousting Saddam would remove a threat to the Israelis, making them more willing to accommodate; that regime change in Iraq would deprive Palestinians of a potential ally; and that building a modern democracy in the heart of the Middle East would blunt persistent doubts about U.S. intentions—doubts that had hampered previous efforts. Today that vision looks increasingly improbable, and Kerry's team believes it is deeply misguided.

The Kerry team's plan for handling the looming crises in North Korea and Iran is similarly distinct from the Bush Administration's, principally in its willingness to seek a negotiated settlement in each case. Whether such settlements can be achieved is debatable. But the approach is a marked departure from that of the Bush Administration, which has been unwilling to negotiate with the North Koreans but equally unwilling to risk using force—the only serious alternative to some sort of agreement.

On Iraq, Kerry's policy is more obscure, in part because, as his advisers point out, they simply don't know what the country will look like next January—and the possibilities are becoming ever more limited in light of the worsening state of affairs there. But Kerry's top advisers make clear that their main priorities would be internationalizing the occupation and adopting a broader regional approach to stabilizing the country. As the situation deteriorated throughout the spring, Bush grudgingly embraced several policy alternatives long advocated by his critics, including Kerry—such as increasing the number of troops in the country and creating a substantially larger role for the United Nations. But Kerry's advisers argue that the Bush team is simply too invested in ideology and too compromised by its mistakes in Iraq ever to truly make the right decisions. Some allies simply distrust the Administration too much to lend a hand. Only a new Administration, they argue, can make the clean break that America needs in Iraq.

Polls show that the public's faith in Bush's ability to manage foreign policy has dropped precipitously over the past year, and that more voters now oppose his Iraq policy than support it. With the economy stuck in an ambiguous middle ground, it seems likelier than ever that this election will turn on whether Kerry can convince voters that he offers a credible foreign-policy alternative.