

By George Friedman

John McCain is the Republican candidate for president. This means he is embedded in the Republican tradition. That tradition has two roots, which are somewhat at odds with each other: One root is found in Theodore Roosevelt's variety of internationalism, and the other in Henry Cabot Lodge's opposition to the League of Nations. Those roots still exist in the Republican Party. But accommodations to the reality the Democrats created after World War II — and that Eisenhower, Nixon and, to some extent, Reagan followed — have overlain them. In many ways, the Republican tradition of foreign policy is therefore more complex than the Democratic tradition.

Roosevelt and the United States as Great Power

More than any other person, Roosevelt introduced the United States to the idea that it had become a great power. During the Spanish-American War, in which he had enthusiastically participated, the United States took control of the remnants of the Spanish empire. During his presidency a few years later, Roosevelt authorized the first global tour by a U.S. fleet, which was designed to announce the arrival of the United States with authority. The fleet was both impressive and surprising to many great powers, which at the time tended to dismiss the United States.

For Roosevelt, having the United States take its place among the great powers served two purposes. First, it protected American maritime interests. The United States was a major trading power, so control of the seas was a practical imperative. But there was also an element of deep pride — to the point of ideology. Roosevelt saw the emergence of the United States as a validation of the American experiment with democracy and a testament to America as an exceptional country and regime. Realistic protection of national interest joined forces with an ideology of entitlement. The Panama Canal, which was begun in Roosevelt's administration, served both interests.

The Panama Canal highlights the fact that for Roosevelt — heavily influenced by theories of sea power — the Pacific Ocean was at least as important as the Atlantic. The most important imperial U.S. holding at the time was the Pacific territory of the Philippines, which U.S. policy focused on protecting. Also reflecting Roosevelt's interest in the Pacific, he brokered the peace treaty ending the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 and increased U.S. interests in China. (Overall, the Democratic Party focused on Europe, while the Republican Party showed a greater interest in Asia.)

The second strand of Republicanism emerged after World War I, when Lodge, a Republican senator, defeated President Woodrow Wilson's plan for U.S. entry into the League of Nations. Lodge had supported the Spanish-American War and U.S. involvement in World War I, but he opposed league membership because he felt it would compel the United States to undertake obligations it should not commit to. Moreover, he had a deep distrust of the Europeans, whom

he believed would drag the United States into another war.

The foundations of Republican foreign policy early in the 20th century therefore consisted of three elements:

A willingness to engage in foreign policy and foreign wars when this serves U.S. interests.

An unwillingness to enter into multilateral organizations or alliances, as this would deprive the United States of the right to act unilaterally and would commit it to fight on behalf of regimes it might have no interest in defending.

A deep suspicion of the diplomacy of European states grounded on a sense that they were too duplicitous and unstable to trust and that treaties with them would result in burdens on — but not benefits for — the United States.

Isolationism

This gave rise to what has been called the "isolationist" strand in the Republican Party, although the term "isolation" is not by itself proper. The isolationists opposed involvement in the diplomacy and politics of Europe. In their view, the U.S. intervention in World War I had achieved little. The Europeans needed to achieve some stable outcome on their own, and the United States did not have the power to impose — or an interest in — that outcome. Underlying this was a belief that, as hostile as the Germans and Soviets were, the French and British were not decidedly better.

Opposition to involvement in a European war did not translate to indifference to the outcome in the Pacific. The isolationists regarded Japan with deep suspicion, and saw China as a potential ally and counterweight to Japan. They were prepared to support the Chinese and even have some military force present, just as they were prepared to garrison the Philippines.

There was a consistent position here. First, adherents of this strand believed that waging war on the mainland of Eurasia, either in China or in Europe, was beyond U.S. means and was dangerous. Second, they believed heavily in sea power, and that control of the sea would protect the United States against aggression and protect U.S. maritime trade. This made them suspicious of other maritime powers, including Japan and the United Kingdom. Third, and last, the isolationists deeply opposed alliances that committed the United States to any involvement in war. They felt that the decision to make war should depend on time and place — not a general commitment. Therefore, the broader any proposed alliance involving the United States, the more vigorously the isolationists opposed it.

Republican foreign policy — a product of the realist and isolationist strands — thus rejected the idea that the United States had a moral responsibility to police the world, while accepting the idea that the United States was morally exceptional. It was prepared to engage in global politics but only when it affected the direct interests of the United States. It regarded the primary interest of the United States to be protecting itself from the wars raging in the world and saw naval supremacy as the means toward that end. It regarded alliances as a potential trap and, in particular, saw the Europeans as dangerous and potentially irresponsible after World War I — and wanted to protect the United States from the consequences of European conflict. In foreign policy, Republicans were realists first, moralists a distant second.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war on the United States in 1941, the realist strand in Republican foreign policy appeared to be replaced with a new strand. World War II, and Franklin D. Roosevelt's approach to waging it, created a new reality. Republican isolationists were discredited politically; their realism was seen as a failure to grasp global realities. Moreover, the war was fought within an alliance structure. Parts of that alliance structure were retained, and supplemented grandly, after the war. The United States joined the United Nations, and the means chosen to contain the Soviet Union was an alliance system, with NATO — and hence the Europeans — as the centerpiece.

Moralism vs. Realism

The Republicans were torn between two wings after the war. On the one hand, there was Robert Taft, who spoke for the prewar isolationist foreign policy. On the other hand, there was Eisenhower, who had commanded the European coalition and had an utterly different view of alliances and of the Europeans. In the struggle between Taft and Eisenhower for the nomination in 1952, Eisenhower won decisively. The Republican Party reoriented itself fundamentally, or so it appeared.

The Republicans' move toward alliances and precommitments was coupled with a shift in moral emphasis. From the unwillingness to take moral responsibility for the world, the Republicans moved toward a moral opposition to the Soviet Union and communism. Both Republicans and Democrats objected morally to the communists. But for the Republicans, moral revulsion justified a sea change in their core foreign policy; anti-communism became a passion that justified changing lesser principles.

Yet the old Republican realism wasn't quite dead. At root, Eisenhower was never a moralist. His anti-communism represented a strategic fear of the Soviet Union more than a moral crusade. Indeed, the Republican right condemned him for this. As his presidency progressed, the old realism re-emerged, now in the context of alliance systems.

But there was a key difference in Eisenhower's approach to alliances and multilateral institutions: He supported them when they enabled the United States to achieve its strategic ends; he did not support them as ends in themselves. Whereas Eleanor Roosevelt, for example, saw the United Nations as a way to avoid war, Eisenhower saw it as a forum for pursuing American interests. Eisenhower didn't doubt the idea of American exceptionalism, but his obsession was with the national interest. Thus, when the right wanted him to be more aggressive and liberate Eastern Europe, he was content to contain the Soviets and leave the Eastern Europeans to deal with their own problems.

The realist version of Republican foreign policy showed itself even more clearly in the Nixon presidency and in Henry Kissinger's execution of it. The single act that defined this was Nixon's decision to visit China, meet Mao Zedong, and form what was, in effect, an alliance with Communist China against the Soviet Union. The Vietnam War weakened the United States and strengthened the Soviet Union; China and the United States shared a common interest in containing the Soviet Union. An alliance was in the interests of both Beijing and Washington, and ideology was irrelevant. (The alliance with China also revived the old Republican interest in Asia.)

With that single action, Nixon and Kissinger reaffirmed the principle that U.S. foreign policy was not about moralism — of keeping the peace or fighting communism — but about pursuing the national interest. Alliances might be necessary, but they did not need to have a moral component.

While the Democrats were torn between the traditionalists and the anti-war movement, the Republicans became divided between realists who traced their tradition back to the beginning of the century and moralists whose passionate anti-communism began in earnest after World War II. Balancing the idea of foreign policy as a moral mission fighting evil and the idea of foreign policy as the pursuit of national interest and security defined the fault line within the Republican Party.

Reagan and the Post-Cold War World

Ronald Reagan tried to straddle this fault line. Very much rooted in the moral tradition of his party, he defined the Soviet Union as an "evil empire." At the same time, he recognized that moralism was insufficient. Foreign policy ends had to be coupled with extremely flexible means. Thus, Reagan maintained the relationship with China. He also played a complex game of negotiation, manipulation and intimidation with the Soviets. To fund the Contras — guerrillas fighting the Marxist government of Nicaragua — his administration was prepared to sell weapons to Iran, which at that time was fighting a war with Iraq. In other words, Reagan embedded the anti-communism of the Republicans of the 1950s with the realism of Nixon and Kissinger. To this, he added a hearty disdain for Europe, where in return he was reviled as a cowboy. The antecedents of this distrust of the Europeans, particularly the French, went back to the World War I era.

The collapse of communism left the Republicans with a dilemma. The moral mission was gone; realism was all that was left. This was the dilemma that George H. W. Bush had to deal with. Bush was a realist to the core, yet he seemed incapable of articulating that as a principle. Instead, he announced the "New World Order," which really was a call for multilateral institutions and the transformation of the anti-communist alliance structure into an all-inclusive family of democratic nations. In short, at the close of the Cold War, the first President Bush adopted the essence of Democratic foreign policy. This helps explain Ross Perot's run for the presidency and Bush's loss to Bill Clinton. Perot took away the faction of the Republican Party that retained the traditional aversion to multilateralism — in the form of NAFTA, for example.

It was never clear what form George W. Bush's foreign policy would have taken without 9/11. After Sept. 11, 2001, Bush tried to re-create Reagan's foreign policy. Rather than defining the war as a battle against jihadists, he defined it as a battle against terrorism, as if this were the ideological equivalent of communism. He defined an "Axis of Evil" redolent of Reagan's "Evil Empire." Within the confines of this moral mission, he attempted to execute a systematic war designed to combat terrorism.

It is important to bear in mind the complexity of George W. Bush's foreign policy compared to the simplicity of its stated moral mission, which first was defined as fighting terrorism and later as bringing democracy to the Middle East. In the war in Afghanistan, Bush initially sought and received Russian and Iranian assistance. In Iraq, he ultimately reached an agreement with the

Sunni insurgents whom he had formerly fought. In between was a complex array of covert operations, alliances and betrayals, and wars large and small throughout the region. Bush faced a far more complex situation than Reagan did — a situation that, in many instances, lacked solutions by available means.

McCain: Moralism or Realism?

Which brings us to McCain and the most important questions he would have to answer in his presidency: To what extent would he adopt an overriding moral mission, and how would he apply available resources to that mission? Would McCain tend toward the Nixon-Kissinger model of a realist Republican president, or to the more moralist Reagan-Bush model?

Though the answers to these questions will not emerge during campaign season, a President McCain would have to answer them almost immediately. For example, in dealing with the Afghan situation, one of the options will be a deal with the Taliban paralleling the U.S. deal with the Iraqi Sunni insurgents. Would McCain be prepared to take this step in the Reagan-Bush tradition, or would he reject it on rigid moral principles? And would McCain be prepared to recognize a sphere of influence for Russia in the former Soviet Union, or would he reject the concept as violating moral principles of national sovereignty and rights?

McCain has said the United States should maintain a presence in Iraq for as long as necessary to stabilize the country, although he clearly believes that, with the situation stabilizing, the drawdown of troops can be more rapid. In discussing Afghanistan, it is clear that he sees the need for more troops. But his real focus is on Pakistan, about which he said in July: "We must strengthen local tribes in the border areas who are willing to fight the foreign terrorists there. We must also empower the new civilian government of Pakistan to defeat radicalism with greater support for development, health, and education."

McCain understands that the key to dealing with Afghanistan lies in Pakistan, and he implies that solving the problem in Pakistan requires forming a closer relationship with tribes in the Afghan-Pakistani border region. What McCain has not said — and what he cannot say for political and strategic reasons — is how far he would go in making agreements with the Pashtun tribes in the area that have been close collaborators with al Qaeda.

A similar question comes up in the context of Russia and its relations with other parts of the former Soviet Union. Shortly after the Russian invasion of Georgia, McCain said, "The implications of Russian actions go beyond their threat to the territorial integrity and independence of a democratic Georgia. Russia is using violence against Georgia, in part, to intimidate other neighbors such as Ukraine for choosing to associate with the West and adhering to Western political and economic values. As such, the fate of Georgia should be of grave concern to Americans and all people who welcomed the end of a divided Europe, and the independence of former Soviet republics. The international response to this crisis will determine how Russia manages its relationships with other neighbors."

McCain has presented Russia's actions in moral terms. He also has said international diplomatic action must be taken to deal with Russia, and he has supported NATO expansion. So he has combined a moral approach with a coalition approach built around the Europeans. In

short, his public statements draw from moral and multilateral sources. What is not clear is the degree to which he will adhere to realist principles in pursuing these ends. He clearly will not be a Nixon.

Whether he will be like Reagan, or more like George W. Bush — that is, Reagan without Reagan's craft — or a rigid moralist indifferent to consequences remains in question.

It is difficult to believe McCain would adopt the third option. He takes a strong moral stance, but is capable of calibrating his tactics. This is particularly clear when you consider his position on working with the Europeans. In 1999 — quite a ways back in foreign policy terms — McCain said of NATO, "As we approach the 50th anniversary of NATO, the Atlantic Alliance is in pretty bad shape. Our allies are spending far too little on their own defense to maintain the alliance as an effective military force."

Since then, Europe's defense spending has not soared, to say the least. McCain's August 2008 statement that "NATO's North Atlantic Council should convene in emergency session to demand a cease-fire and begin discussions on both the deployment of an international peacekeeping force to South Ossetia" must be viewed in this context.

In this statement, McCain called for a NATO peacekeeping force to South Ossetia. A decade before, he was decrying NATO's lack of military preparedness, which few dispute is still an extremely significant issue.

But remember that presidential campaigns are not where forthright strategic thinking should be expected, and moral goals must be subordinate to the realities of power. While McCain would need to define the mix of moralism and realism in his foreign policy, he made his evaluation of NATO's weakness clear in 1999. Insofar as he believes this evaluation still holds true, he would not have to face the first issue that Barack Obama likely would — namely, what to do when the Europeans fail to cooperate. McCain already believes that they will not (or cannot).

Instead, McCain would have to answer another question, which ultimately is the same as Obama's question: Where will the resources come from to keep forces in Iraq, manage the war in Afghanistan, involve Pakistanis in that conflict and contain Russia? In some sense, McCain has created a tougher political position for himself by casting all these issues in a moral light. But, in the Reagan tradition, a moral position has value only if it can be pursued, and pursuing those actions requires both moral commitment and Machiavellian virtue.

Therefore, McCain will be pulled in two directions. First, like Obama, he would not be able to pursue his ends without a substantial budget increase or abandoning one or more theaters of operation. The rubber band just won't stretch without reinforcements. Second, while those reinforcements are mustered — or in lieu of reinforcements — he will have to execute a complex series of tactical operations. This will involve holding the line in Iraq, creating a political framework for settlement in Afghanistan and scraping enough forces together to provide some pause to the Russians as they pressure their periphery.

McCain's foreign policy — like Obama's — would devolve into complex tactics, where the devil

is in the details, and the details will require constant attention.

The Global Landscape and the Next President

Ultimately, it is the global landscape that determines a president's foreign policy choices, and the traditions presidents come from can guide them only so far. Whoever becomes president in January 2009 will face the same landscape and limited choices. The winner will require substantial virtue, and neither candidate should be judged on what he says now, since no one can anticipate either the details the winner will confront or the surprises the world will throw at him.

We can describe the world. We can seek to divine the candidates' intentions by looking at their political traditions. We can understand the intellectual and moral tensions they face. But in the end, we know no more about the virtue of these two men than anyone else. We do know that, given the current limits of U.S. power and the breadth of U.S. commitments, it will take a very clever and devious president to pursue the national interest, however that is defined.

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