

## THE LESSONS OF 9/11 BARACK OBAMA V. JOHN MCCAIN

*TODAY's joint visit to Ground Zero may give the impression that John McCain and Barack Obama share a common analysis of the causes of 9/11 and how to deal with its legacy. They don't. The divide starts with the question: Why was America attacked?*

McCain's answer is simple (or, as Obama might suggest, simplistic): The United States was attacked because a resurgent Islam has produced a radicalism that dreams of world conquest and sees America as the enemy.

In different shapes and sizes and under a range of labels, that radical streak of Islam has waged war on America since 1979, when Khomeinists seized the US embassy in Tehran and held its diplomats hostage for 444 days.

The killing of 241 Marines in Beirut in 1983, the first World Trade Center attack in 1993 and a host of other operations that claimed more American lives were episodes in a war - the reality of which the United States faced only after 9/11.

McCain doesn't hesitate to acknowledge that his country is engaged in a Global War on Terror. He doesn't believe that 9/11 might've been prompted by some wrong America did to others. To him, the nation was an innocent victim of "Islamic terrorism."

McCain asserts, "America faces a dedicated, focused and intelligent foe in the War on Terrorism. This enemy will probe to find America's weaknesses and strike against them. The United States cannot afford to be complacent about the threat, naive about terrorist intentions, unrealistic about their capabilities, or ignorant to our national vulnerabilities."

He'd pursue and fight these "enemies" wherever they are - including, especially, in Iraq. "If we run away," he says, "they are going to follow us home."

OBAMA, by contrast, doesn't use terms such as "the Global War on Terror" or "Islamic terrorism." Nor does he claim that America was simply an innocent victim.

In one speech, he used the image of a US helicopter flying over the poor countries in Africa and Asia, where it's seen as a symbol of oppression. He says his objective is to turn that helicopter into a symbol of American aid to the downtrodden.

For Obama, the threat comes not from terrorists but from "extremists" and their "program of hate." He never uses such terms as "jihadist," judging them hurtful to Muslims. He speaks of "violent extremists who are a small minority of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims."

In one speech, he claimed that the Islamists aim only at "creating a repressive caliphate." He seemingly hasn't heard of jihadist movements whose declared aim is to destroy the United States in the name of Islam.

For McCain, the War on Terror is a "just war" in which Americans fight for their security and their allies'. Obama rejects the concept of "just war." He dismisses the Iraq war as both "unnecessary and unjust" - though the struggle in Afghanistan is "a necessary war."

ONE constant Obama theme is the claim that poverty and economic factors breed terrorism; this echoes the analysis of Jimmy Carter back in the '70s. Strengthening that impression is Obama's pick of Sen. Joseph Biden as running mate.

Biden denies there's a War on Terror in the first place or that the United States even knows whom it's fighting. He has declared that "terrorism is a means, not an end, and very different groups and countries are using it toward very different goals. If we can't even identify the enemy or describe the war we're fighting, it's difficult to see how we will win."

While McCain puts the emphasis on hard power - that is, on meeting and defeating the enemy on the battlefield - Obama, echoing Carter and Bill Clinton, promises a greater use of soft power.

He plans to double US foreign aid to \$50 billion a year, allocate a further \$20 billion to offering "alternatives to *madrassa* education" in Muslim countries, provide Afghanistan with another \$1 billion a year in support and spend \$5 billion on a "Shared Security Partnership Program" with foreign governments.

And he promises to "bolster our ability to speak different languages and understand different cultures" - as if America's unique cultural spectrum didn't already include large numbers of speakers of every living language, with

millions of immigrants each year. Sorry: The nation was *not* attacked because Americans don't speak Arabic or don't understand Saudi or Egyptian cultures.

Obama also says he'll open "America Houses" in Muslim capitals. These would be community centers with libraries, Internet cafes and English-language classes. Has he considered the possibility that these might become prime targets for terrorists?

Plus, he'd set up an "America's Voice Corps," which would recruit and train thousands of young Americans to go to Muslim countries to explain "American values" and, in return, "listen to Islamic voices."

More important, perhaps, Obama promises to attend "a significant Islamic forum" (presumably, the summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference) within his first 100 days in the White House. He believes that the magic of his eloquence might do what America's hard power has failed to achieve. In an early version of this idea, Obama wanted to invite all Muslim heads of state to a Washington summit. He doesn't realize that this would endorse the claim that Islam merits a special treatment even in international relations.

ONE might expect Obama to be more convincing on Afghanistan, his pet war. Yet all we get is a promise to increase aid - despite the fact that the Afghan economy hasn't been able to absorb the \$20 billion pledged since 2002. He would also send in two more combat brigades - precisely the number that other NATO allies were supposed to supply by next January. (President Bush just announced that, from now until January, he'll be sending an even larger reinforcement to Afghanistan.)

The Democratic platform's section on foreign policy contains several references to "restoring American leadership." When it comes to tough issues, however, we're told that "the world must do" this or that.

An example: "The world must prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons." What if that abstract entity, "the world," of which Obama once claimed to be a citizen, fails to do so? Obama's answer is "tougher sanctions and aggressive, principled and direct high-level diplomacy without preconditions."

He promises to talk to all the "bad guys," including the Khomeinist leaders in Tehran. He ignores the fact that successive US administrations, from Carter to George W. Bush, have talked to the mullahs - so far to no avail. He also forgets that then-Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Syria and was rewarded with a series of political murders of US friends in Lebanon.

The platform's Middle East section promises to "stand with allies and pursue diplomacy." Apart from Israel, however, we're never told who those "allies" are.

While Bush fixed the creation of two states, a Palestinian one besides Israel, as the aim of his strategy, Obama takes a step back by claiming merely that the US should "lead the efforts to build the road to a secure and lasting peace."

HE also abandons Bush's message of democratization in the Middle East as the long-term weapon against terrorism and strengthens the fiction that the Palestinian issue is the region's main, if not the sole, problem.

In fact, despotism may be the more important issue. Yet Obama sneers at the elections held in Iraq, Afghanistan and several other Muslim nations thanks to US encouragement and pressure. He would leave America without a core message in the Middle East.

McCain believes that America is at war; Obama doesn't. McCain believes the United States can win on the battlefield; Obama doesn't.

For Obama, the problem is one of effective law enforcement. His model is the way Clinton handled the first attack on World Trade Center in 1993. Obama says: "We are able to arrest those responsible, put them on trial." This means the United States reacting *after* being attacked.

McCain, however, doesn't fear the politically incorrect term "pre-emption" - hitting the enemy before he hits you.

WHEN all is said and done, this election may well have only one big issue: the existential threat that Islamist terrorism poses to America's safety. Since McCain and Obama offer radically different policies for facing that threat, American voters *do* have a real choice.

1. Demonstrate evidence of a close reading.
2. With which man do you agree the most? Explain why:
3. In your writer's notebook, write a one-page reflection about this article.