

# Opinion

Obama could win  
by a landslide –  
except for one thing

Dick Morris, page 30



## Four big headaches for November's winner

From what to do about Iran to the credit crunch, it matters to the rest of the world who will be in the White House

Anatole  
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A wise continental scholar pointed out to me once that English is the only European language in which three distinct words have evolved from the Greek root *politika*: politics, policy and polity. French, German, Italian, Spanish and Russian all make do with a single word — *politique*, *politik* or *politica* — to describe the personal rivalries that drive the political process, the effects of political action, and the institutional framework within which politics operates. In English, by contrast, we have a vocabulary that encourages people to distinguish between the ideals and action plans represented by competing parties and the skulduggeries and rivalries of individual politicians. In fact, we are lucky enough in English to have even a fourth word for this: politicking.

I don't know whether this linguistic abundance has been a cause or a consequence of the relative stability of democratic institutions in the Anglo-Saxon world. But I do know that the focus of America's presidential election, which has so far been entirely on politicking and politics, will now shift towards policy and polity.

The ideological differences in this election are quite stark. Just because both parties have managed to select nominees who are intelligent,

high-principled and well meaning, it does not follow that a victory for either candidate will be an equally benign outcome for the world and America.

There are at least four policy battles in this election where the rest of the world will have an enormous stake. First and foremost there is national security and the Middle East, specifically the attitude to bombing Iran; secondly, the credit crunch and housing crisis; thirdly, the oil shock, energy independence and climate change; and fourthly, America's role in globalisation and free trade.

Let me begin with the last three economic issues. With regard to housing and the credit crunch, Barack Obama has called for bigger government programmes to buy delinquent mortgages and prevent borrowers from losing their homes through foreclosure. John McCain has stuck firmly to free-market orthodoxy, insisting that irresponsible borrowing should not be underwritten or rewarded by taxpayers and that housing assistance programmes should only be enacted if they are self-financing.

In the short term, Mr McCain's position is likely to prove politically unsustainable and economically misjudged. If housing markets continue to deteriorate, as they almost surely will, more short-term government intervention will be required. This should not be ruled out by a dogmatic faith in market forces that have, in this case, quite obviously failed.

Taking a longer view, however, many voters may be impressed by Mr McCain's fiscal rectitude and will want a free-spending Democratic Congress constrained by a

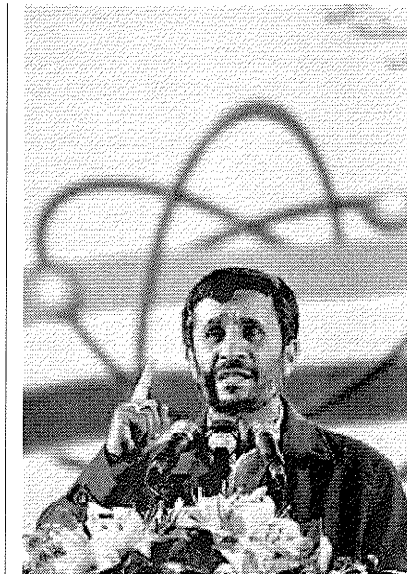
Republican president. If Mr Obama has any sense, he will be very careful not to overdo his rhetoric about recession and the government spending needed to clear up the mess left behind by President Bush.

Trade poses a similar challenge to Mr Obama. The protectionist anti-globalisation rhetoric that he needed for the Democratic nomination may well help to win support in the short term, but it raises some big risks. What the Democratic establishment does not yet seem to have understood is that, as a result of the housing slump and devaluation of the dollar, US growth is now almost entirely export-driven and will continue that way for years to come.

Free trade is now more in the interests of American workers than ever before. Protectionist policies will not just frighten economically sophisticated voters. They will also act against the interests of blue-collar Americans — a point that may not be lost even on the unionised workers at internationally competitive companies such as Caterpillar, Boeing and even, these days, General Motors and US Steel.

On energy and climate change, Mr Obama and Mr McCain do share common objectives, but their contrasting views about government activism and taxes suggest that even in this area, America's future policies will depend critically on who wins the election on November 4.

The biggest issue between the candidates, however, is foreign policy and here the contrast between the candidates is truly stark. So far, most attention has focused on the contrast between their rhetoric about Iraq: at one extreme, Mr McCain's slightly misreported comments about



Extreme contrast: Obama would talk to him; McCain wouldn't

keeping American troops there for 100 years; at the other Mr Obama's hints at unconditional withdrawal within six months. In reality, both candidates would be seriously constrained by events on the ground. The much more serious difference is actually over Iran.

Mr Obama's approach is to try to draw Iran into the community of nations, even if it remains under its present extremist leadership. To try to bring this about, he has expressed his willingness to consider direct negotiations, along the lines of Henry Kissinger's rapprochement with China.

Mr McCain, by contrast, outspokenly supports the Bush Administration's policy of ostracising Iran. He wants, if anything, to

tighten both economic sanctions and reinforce the country's pariah status. Mr McCain has endorsed President Bush's accusation that talking to America's enemies is comparable to the prewar policy of appeasing Hitler. More specifically, Mr McCain has pointedly refused to dissociate himself from threats to bomb Iran if it continues with its nuclear programmes and seems as gung-ho about the persuasive power of US military action as President Bush.

Such is the passion of Mr McCain's anti-Iran rhetoric that some informed observers in Washington believe a bombing campaign against Iran could be the "October surprise" that Republican strategists are planning to swing the election in their favour if polling points to a Democrat victory. The idea would be to present the war hero McCain as the best man to lead America at a time of military danger.

Mr Obama, if he was reluctant in his support of a pre-election bombing, could be presented as a muddle-headed peacenik. And what if he denounced military action? Mr Obama could then stand accused of insufficient patriotism or even outright treason. His campaign would then come crashing down to a McGovern-style landslide defeat.

That is the nightmare scenario for what should be a dream election. But maybe my friends in America who speculate along these lines are taking their cynicism too far. Even in the language of Washington there is, after all, a difference between politics, policy and polity. Let us hope that John McCain's self-evident respect for the American polity transcends the Republican Party's desire to win the game of politics at any cost.