

America's place in world key question for election



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that have occurred since 9/11, it is fitting that the American people should select a leader whose vision on these questions most closely reflects national attitudes.

Yet it would be a disservice to the country if our national debate emphasized the presence (or lack thereof) of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq — just as it would be a shame if Bush's opponent, Massachusetts Democrat John Kerry, let bumper-sticker slogans characterize his positions on these questions. Although these are not insignificant matters, the way the Bush team has handled the War on Terror or how a Kerry administration would be different is less important than the principles upon which America justifies its actions on the global stage.

Seven interrelated questions seem to be at the heart of the dispute over America's role in the world.

First, where does responsibility for the defense of the United States actually inhere? If other countries object to extraterritorial acts that American leaders consider defensive, does the United States have an obligation to consider these complaints?

Second, is military unilateralism ever justifiable? Under what circumstances can (or should) the U.S. military engage in hostile action without international support?

Third, is the doctrine of pre-emptive strikes appropriate in today's international political climate? Is there a legitimate political or moral claim to stopping a perceived act of aggression with a pre-emptive strike or invasion?

It's already clear from the Democratic Party's national convention that questions of war and international diplomacy will occupy a significant part of the national debate going into this fall's presidential elections. Without question, this is a good thing; because of the changes to the sociopolitical landscape

Fourth, what degree of certainty about intelligence reports must the political leadership possess before questions of force can even be entertained?

Fifth, is there really such a thing as "international law," and if so, to what degree are individual countries obligated to follow it? Must a state honor international convention even at the expense of its own perceived interests?

Sixth, to what extent should Americans care about America's public image worldwide? Does it matter whether the French consider us arrogant or the Germans think us stupid? Should domestic and defense policy in the United States be linked in any way with America's image abroad?

Seventh, what sort of "national interests" are, if threatened, legitimate justifiers of military action? Can such ephemeral values as "human rights" be necessary or sufficient considerations when deciding whether to exercise power — political, military or economic — in foreign lands?

These are not easy questions, and any person — whether he be a candidate for office or a university professor or just the guy next door — who professes simple answers probably doesn't understand what's really at issue.

The November election is significant. The decision of the American people will set, at least for a time, the tone of international relations for years to come. The temptation to reduce these complex philosophical matters to sound bites, or to deliberately distort the truth for partisan gain (in the same way as liberal Michael Moore or conservative Michael Savage) will be great. Widespread demonization of those with whom various members of the chattering class disagree will undoubtedly poison the national discourse.

The challenge to the American people, however, is to look through the smoke and mirrors of the political season and reflect soberly on these matters, so that on Election Day, we might cast our ballots with a more perfect understanding of what's at stake, and why.

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