

Tuesday, July 22, 2008

America's Image: How to Electrify the World

By Stanley A. Weiss

LONDON—Despite their differences, Barack Obama and John McCain agree on one thing. Obama tells Americans he will "restore our standing in the world." McCain says he'll ensure "the credibility and the moral standing of America in the world."

But how?

To find out, I asked nearly 100 opinion leaders from around the world—all non-Americans: diplomats, parliamentarians, business leaders, military officials, journalists—for the advice they'd give the next U.S. president on repairing America's tarnished global image. Their answers offer a small yet revealing window into the hopes of the six billion people around the world with a stake—but not a vote—in the election, as well as a possible guide for the next occupant of the Oval Office.

There were familiar appeals: Don't attack Iran; improve relations with Russia and reduce nuclear weapons; embrace China and India as true partners; reform the United Nations with a more inclusive Security Council.

Many called for a smarter approach to terrorism, like Dr. Zulkieflimansyah, an Indonesian parliamentarian (who, like many Indonesians, uses one name and is more commonly known as Zul). He said the next president should build a "bridge of reason and understanding with the Islamic world."

One person suggested a presidential visit to a mosque outside the U.S. "He should use speeches and visits to emphasize the values that Muslims and Americans have in common," said Bijan Khajepour, a Tehran-based analyst, "especially compassion, a core value in Islam."

There were the expected calls for a U.S. exit from Iraq, which Obama supports and McCain opposes, suggesting a McCain presidency could have a harder time burnishing America's image. Likewise, many urged the next president to meet foreign adversaries, as Obama has expressed a willingness to do. "If Nixon could go to China and Reagan to the Soviet Union," a European diplomat asked, "why can't the American president go to Iran?"

Others called for a more aggressive push for Arab-Israeli peace, including a more "even-handed" approach by Washington and stronger opposition to expanded Israeli settlements.

But the one piece of advice offered most often was something more basic: a return to multilateral diplomacy, including a new attitude by the president himself.

"The next president should take more account of the sentiments of other people, not just Americans," said Masaki Orita, a former Japanese diplomat, echoing the sentiments of many.

"Restore global trust and confidence by working with and listening to others," said Gurdist Chansrichawla, a Thai venture capitalist, "and everything else will follow."

In other words, the next president will give America a public relations boost simply by not being George W. Bush. Beyond that, the leaders I surveyed highlighted several areas where American action could win back hearts and minds.

Human rights. No U.S. president is likely to "cease support for all dictators," as urged by Syed Abida Hussain of the Pakistan Peoples Party. But closing the military prison at Guantánamo Bay and forswearing torture would generate enormous international goodwill. America would again be seen as the "shield of freedoms, not their masked trampler," said Carlos Fuentes, the Mexican novelist.

The environment and energy. With Americans consuming more oil, and spewing more greenhouse gases, than any other nation, U.S. leadership on energy and climate change is seen as indispensable. A European-style cap-and-trade system to reduce carbon emissions—which both Obama and McCain favor—would be a start, as would embracing the conventions of the Kyoto protocol. Shyam Saran, India's special envoy for climate change, suggests going further with "an American-led global effort on renewable energy along the lines of the 1950s Atoms for Peace program" to share new technologies with other countries.

Poverty and Hunger. From Latin America to Africa to Asia, America's foreign aid budget—currently less than one percent of the federal budget—is seen as a potential life-saver for the billion people living on less than a dollar a day and who now suffer from soaring food prices. "By doing something concrete and measurable on this issue," said a media executive in the Persian Gulf, "the U.S. could create enormous goodwill."

Welcome the world, not fear it. Strict visa and customs regulations and fingerprinting foreigners entering the U.S. may be a post-9/11 reality. But driving away foreign tourists, students and academics weakens the world's economic and emotional links with America. The next president should launch a major review to ensure that these visitors are treated like welcomed guests, not—as I was told repeatedly—"like criminals."

Those who shared their advice for the next president are not naïve. They understand that his options will be limited by geopolitical realities and domestic constraints. But still, they hope. "By making some moves in these areas," said Narendra Singh Sarila, a former Indian diplomat, "the next American president could electrify the world."

The author is founding chairman of Business Executives for National Security, a nonpartisan organization based in Washington. This is a personal comment.