

Why Obama?

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Mainstream politics, now defined by the code words “Washington” or “inside the beltway,” have ensnared the U.S. for the past 40 years. In the bipolar world of the Cold War, and in the unipolar world of its aftermath, this did not have serious consequences for the nation. The Bush administration—which from the sweep of history will be seen as the administration in office in the U.S. when the world transitioned from unipolarity to nonpolarity—led the nation into the war in Iraq at the expense of the ideological or cultural soft power necessary to lead in the world. This has been a serious setback for the U.S.

Politics as usual—Hillary Clinton or John McCain—will not do after Bush if the U.S. is to rise up to the challenges it faces in leading the world. Political scientist Joseph Nye has pointed out that, at the international level, the U.S. plays out its interests on three interconnected chessboards: military power, economic power and ideological or cultural soft power. The U.S. military—present in one form or another in 100 countries around the world—dominates on every front: land, sea, air and space. The U.S. spends more than the next 14 countries combined, accounting for almost 50% of global defense spending. At \$14 trillion, its economy is the world’s largest. It accounts for one-quarter of the world’s output. Its research and development are unmatched, as are its higher-education institutions. It is the world’s most competitive economy, but others are catching up.

New world and regional powers are on the rise. Over the past few decades, countries all over the world have been experiencing rates of economic growth that were once unthinkable. The distribution of power is shifting, moving away from U.S. dominance. Although we are not entering an anti-American world, we are entering into a post-American world, one defined and directed from many places and by many people.

The flawed foreign policies of the Bush administration, which I have criticized in this column from the very beginning, have frittered away the ideological or cultural soft power that the U.S. needed to exercise its leadership in the world disorder that is emerging. This has happened while the world has transitioned into what Council on Foreign Relations President Richard Haass calls the age of nonpolarity. As the 21st century unfolds, the world is being increasingly dominated, not by one or two or even several states, but rather by dozens of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power. Nation-states have lost their monopoly on power. Power is now found in many hands and in many places.

The U.S. must get its political house in order so it can lead within the present world context. The 2008 primaries and the general election will be a watershed in U.S. history. From the wellsprings—values and political will—of American democracy, the American people will have the opportunity to correct the dysfunctional politics that afflict the nation.

The system, as *Newsweek International* Editor Fareed Zakaria notes, has been captured by money, special interests, a sensationalist media and ideological attack groups. The result is ceaseless, virulent debate about trivia—politics as theater—and very little substance, compromise or action. A can-do country is now saddled with a do-nothing political process, designed for partisan battle rather than problem-solving. Progress on any major problem—healthcare, Social Security, tax reform—will require compromise from both sides. It requires a long-term perspective. And that has become politically deadly. The test for the U.S. is political. It rests not just with the U.S. at large, but with Washington in particular.

The U.S. faces a choice, as Zakaria says: It can stabilize the emerging world order by bringing in the new rising nations, ceding some of its own power and perquisites and accepting a world with a diversity of voices and viewpoints; or it can watch as the rise of the rest produces greater nationalism, diffusion and disintegration, which will slowly tear apart the world order the U.S. has built over the past 60 years.

McCain's world view is stuck back in the days of the Cold War, substituting Islamic radicals for Communists as the enemy. Clinton is trapped into not looking weak—a Cold War confrontational mindset. Barack Obama is precisely the type of leader the U.S. needs to guide it in the post-American world. He is free from mindsets of the past and can relate better than any other candidate to those that the U.S. must engage with due respect to bring about a world built on cooperation, not confrontation. He can elicit from the American people in this election the mandate to build such a world.

The world is changing, but it is going the United States' way. The nations that are rising are embracing markets, democratic government (of some form or another) and greater openness and transparency. The U.S. has a window of opportunity to shape and master the changing global landscape, states Fareed Zakaria, but only if it first recognizes the post-American world is a reality and embraces and celebrates that fact.

To seize this opportunity, the U.S. must be led by a new generation free from the ways of doing business in the past, a generation that brings with it the passion for change in strategy and attitude. This is the generation that Obama leads and can bring into government with a mandate for change in specific policies such as energy or climate change.

Business as usual will not do in the unipolar world because the Bush administration has done away with the ideological and cultural soft-power assets the U.S. had. To regain the high ground, just military or economic initiatives will not do. Recapturing ideological and cultural assets takes a longer time, more patience, more prudence and diplomacy. It is a long-term proposition more suitable to the idealism of new generations who will live to enjoy its fruits or suffer its failures than to those who have held power in the past.