

The U.S. Presidential Campaign – Round 1

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For

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At last, the final phase of the U.S. presidential campaign has begun. Early this year, the Democratic Party held primary elections in individual states so that the voters could select a single candidate. Next came each political party's national convention. These transferred political allegiance from local "daimyo" to the national party's candidate or "shogun." Now, at last, Republican President George Bush and Democrat Senator John Kerry must now compete to become the next president of the United States.

This final phase began on September 30 with the first of three debates between the candidates. In these debates, the two candidates must stand alone before the American people to be judged about their past decisions and future intentions. Many American voters have by this time already made up their minds about which candidate they favor. Yet the three debates often have been decisive in determining the election's final outcome. Our purpose here is not to decide who won the debate or may win the election. Instead, the intent is to interpret and analyze the meaning behind what the candidates said in their first debate.

The debate revealed each candidate to be a sincere American patriot, but at the same time to represent very different and distinct tradition in American political culture. Both men agree that the president's foremost foreign policy goal must be sustaining the nation's security. Beyond this, however, they disagree intensely over how to fulfill this responsibility.

President Bush is an idealist. He believes that his Christian values and God guide him as he makes decisions about foreign policy, particularly national security. He views himself as a man of principle whom God has ordained to lead and to protect the American people. President Bush firmly believes that his will is aligned with that of God and the American people. This places him above politics and the whim of popular opinion. Consistent adherence to God's will and Christian values, Bush firmly believes, will enable him to prevail over the evil that threatens the United States. Such views have some similarity with *kokutai*, the 19th Century school of thought in Tokugawa Japan that assigned divinity and infallibility to the emperor.

Bush's Christian idealism enables him to polarize the world into "good" and "evil." The United States represents good because it champions freedom and democracy. Evil in today's world exists in the form of terrorism and tyranny. "Good" originates in the United States and is shared with its allies and friends. As Bush has said repeatedly regarding the war on terrorism, "Either you are with us or against us." In other words, nations who align themselves with the United States are good, but those who do not are

“evil” “Evil” thus originates among foreigners like Osama Ben Laden, Saddam Hussein, and Kim Jong Il, or among nations Bush relegated to the “axis of evil.”

President Bush’s idealism places the United States and its president in a position of moral superiority. In his view, this justifies the United States’ right to unilateral and “pre-emptive” attack on any and all enemies. For example, once he had designated Saddam Hussein to be “evil,” President Bush felt justified in invading Iraq and toppling its government, regardless of the United Nation’s preferences and world opinion.

Senator Kerry, however, is a realist and a pragmatist. He recognizes that the United States’ position in the world is a consequence of its military might and economic prowess. Sustaining this power is dependent both on US ability and earning the respect and cooperation of the international community. He prefers pragmatism over principled idealism, multilateral collaboration and deliberation rather than decisive unilateral action. Paradoxically, Kerry’s preferences make him the greater advocate of democracy compared to Bush whose relative impatience and principled positions give him authoritarian tendencies.

For most foreigners, the subtleness of the first US presidential debate masked the profound differences in the two candidate’s views regarding international affairs. Much of the discussion seemed to revolve around particular situations such as Iraq, North Korea, nuclear proliferation and international terrorism. But actually, Bush and Kerry were advocating almost opposite approaches to dealing with the same international problems. The American people may favor Bush’s approach because it assigns the United States a position of moral supremacy in the world. Also, the trauma of the “9/11” terrorist attacks still infect most Americans with a keen sense of insecurity. Kerry’s view is prone to appeal to Americans who favor collective security arrangements that link United States’ security to that of other nations. Kerry has yet to convince the majority of American people that his pragmatic internationalism will make them as secure as Bush’s unilateral assertiveness.

The American people’s preference will not become clear until election day in November. Before then, American voters still must assess the candidates’ stances on domestic issues. This will take place in the forthcoming debates. Stay tuned. Both candidates still have ample opportunity to win or lose the presidential election.