

Republicans and Our Enemies

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By Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

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On Wednesday, Joe Lieberman wrote on this page that the Democratic Party he and I grew up in has drifted far from the foreign policy espoused by Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman and John Kennedy.

In fact, it is the policies that President George W. Bush has pursued, and that John McCain would continue, that are divorced from that great tradition – and from the legacy of Republican presidents like Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.

Sen. Lieberman is right: 9/11 was a pivotal moment. History will judge Mr. Bush's reaction less for the mistakes he made than for the opportunities he squandered.

The president had a historic opportunity to unite Americans and the world in common cause. Instead – by exploiting the politics of fear, instigating an optional war in Iraq before finishing a necessary war in Afghanistan, and instituting policies on torture, detainees and domestic surveillance that fly in the face of our values and interests – Mr. Bush divided Americans from each other and from the world.

At the heart of this failure is an obsession with the "war on terrorism" that ignores larger forces shaping the world: the emergence of China, India, Russia and Europe; the spread of lethal weapons and dangerous diseases; uncertain supplies of energy, food and water; the persistence of poverty; ethnic animosities and state failures; a rapidly warming planet; the challenge to nation states from above and below.

Instead, Mr. Bush has turned a small number of radical groups that hate America into a 10-foot tall existential monster that dictates every move we make.

The intersection of al Qaeda with the world's most lethal weapons is a deadly serious problem. Al Qaeda must be destroyed. But to compare terrorism with an all-encompassing ideology like communism and fascism is evidence of profound confusion.

Terrorism is a means, not an end, and very different groups and countries are using it toward very different goals. Messrs. Bush and McCain lump together, as a single threat, extremist groups and states more at odds with each other than with us: Sunnis and Shiites, Persians and Arabs, Iraq and Iran, al Qaeda and Shiite militias. If they can't identify the enemy or describe the war we're fighting, it's difficult to see how we will win.

The results speak for themselves.

On George Bush's watch, Iran, not freedom, has been on the march: Iran is much closer to the bomb; its influence in Iraq is expanding; its terrorist proxy Hezbollah is ascendant in Lebanon and that country is on the brink of civil war.

Beyond Iran, al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan – the people who actually attacked us on 9/11 – are stronger now than at any time since 9/11. Radical recruitment is on the rise. Hamas controls Gaza and launches rockets at Israel every day. Some 140,000 American troops remain stuck in Iraq with no end in sight.

Because of the policies Mr. Bush has pursued and Mr. McCain would continue, the entire Middle East is more dangerous. The United States and our allies, including Israel, are less secure.

The election in November is a vital opportunity for America to start anew. That will require more than a great soldier. It will require a wise leader.

Here, the controversy over engaging Iran is especially instructive.

Last week, John McCain was very clear. He ruled out talking to Iran. He said that Barack Obama was "naïve and inexperienced" for advocating engagement; "What is it he wants to talk about?" he asked.

Well, for a start, Iran's nuclear program, its support for Shiite militias in Iraq, and its patronage of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

Beyond bluster, how would Mr. McCain actually deal with these dangers? You either talk, you maintain the status quo, or you go to war. If Mr. McCain has ruled out talking, we're stuck with an ineffectual policy or military strikes that could quickly spiral out of control.

Sen. Obama is right that the U.S. should be willing to engage Iran on its nuclear program without "preconditions" – i.e. without insisting that Iran first freeze the program, which is the very subject of any negotiations. He has been clear that he would not become personally involved until the necessary preparations had been made and unless he was convinced his engagement would advance our interests.

President Nixon didn't demand that China end military support to the Vietnamese killing Americans before meeting with Mao. President Reagan didn't insist that the Soviets freeze their nuclear arsenal before sitting down with Mikhail Gorbachev. Even George W. Bush – whose initial disengagement allowed dangers to proliferate – didn't demand that Libya relinquish its nuclear program, that North Korea give up its plutonium, or even that Iran stop aiding those attacking our soldiers in Iraq before authorizing talks.

The net effect of demanding preconditions that Iran rejects is this: We get no results and Iran gets closer to the bomb.

Equally unwise is the Bush-McCain fixation on regime change. The regime is abhorrent, but their logic defies comprehension: renounce the bomb – and when you do, we're still going to take you down. The result is that Iran accelerated its efforts to produce fissile material.

Instead of regime change, we should focus on conduct change. We should make it very clear to Iran what it risks in terms of isolation if it continues to pursue a dangerous nuclear program but also what it stands to gain if it does the right thing. That will require keeping our allies in Europe, as well as Russia and China, on the same page as we ratchet up pressure.

It also requires a much more sophisticated understanding than Mr. Bush or Mr. McCain seem to possess that by publicly engaging Iran – including through direct talks – we can exploit cracks within the ruling elite, and between Iran's rulers and its people, who are struggling economically and stifled politically.

Iran's people need to know that their government, not the U.S., is choosing confrontation over cooperation. Our allies and partners need to know that the U.S. will go the extra diplomatic mile – if we do, they are much more likely to stand with us if diplomacy fails and force proves necessary.

The Bush-McCain saber rattling is the most self-defeating policy imaginable. It achieves nothing. But it forces Iranians who despise the regime to rally behind their leaders. And it spurs instability in the Middle East, which adds to the price of oil, with the proceeds going right from American wallets into Tehran's pockets.

The worst nightmare for a regime that thrives on tension with America is an America ready, willing and able to engage. Since when has talking removed the word "no" from our vocabulary?

It's amazing how little faith George Bush, Joe Lieberman and John McCain have in themselves – and in America.

Mr. Biden, a Democratic senator from Delaware, is chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.