

Are They Experienced?

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Wesley Clark's recent comments about the relevance of John McCain's experience seem to have generated enough controversy that the broader point raised by his comments, that of what kind of foreign policy experience we should look for in a president, seem to have been lost. This question is particularly relevant this year as. Due largely to Obama being a relatively new figure on the national stage, the experience question has gotten a lot of attention during the election so far. It is unlikely it will go away between now and Election Day.

Clearly, the criteria that a candidate for president have held executive power in the military, as could be inferred from Clark's comments, is somewhat extreme as most candidates do not have that experience; and implicit in the notion of civilian control of the military is that the commander-in-chief does not need to come from a position of executive military power. However, while McCain's POW experience is a testament to his strength, character, patriotism and discipline, it should not be controversial, to assert, as Clark did, that it is not immediately clear how this can be construed as relevant foreign policy experience for a presidential candidate.

It seems obvious that in the post-war era, we have elected presidents with a range of foreign policy experience. Former governors such as Reagan, Carter, Clinton and George W. Bush brought very little foreign policy experience to the White House. Others such as Eisenhower, Nixon and George H.W. Bush had a range of military, executive and diplomatic experience. Kennedy and Johnson had spent time in the senate where they had wrestled with foreign policy questions.

Obama, at first glance looks a lot more like Carter or Reagan than Nixon or Eisenhower with regards to foreign policy experience, while McCain looks to be on the higher end of senate foreign policy experience but without the breadth of experiences of either Eisenhower or George H. W. Bush. Therefore, Obama supporters cannot be too concerned or surprised by the fact that experience became an issue during the primary or the general election. Nor is it reasonable to get too upset by patently silly advertisements like the 3AM phone call spot run by Hillary Clinton or the arguments the McCain camp will continue to make about Obama's relative lack of experience in the senate and complete lack of experience serving in the military.

The question of how we define foreign policy experience, however, is worth examining a little more closely. Currently foreign policy experience is defined far too narrowly with credit being awarded for only a few conventional accomplishments. Understanding how the US government makes decisions about foreign policy and having detailed knowledge about the perspectives of people outside the US are both valuable components of foreign policy experience, but the former is usually the criteria used for measuring foreign policy experience. The latter, however, for the most part, cannot be gained once somebody is elected to the senate or holds high office in the American government. Congressional delegations, for example, can be used by participants to

gain a deeper understanding of a foreign policy issue, or how the leadership of a particular government thinks, but they are not the same as spending time working or living in a foreign country. This kind of experience is best gained before a candidate becomes a famous public figure.

Part of the generational change represented by Obama is that his candidacy brings a new set of international experiences, and perhaps credentials, to presidential politics. Implicit in Obama's foreign policy profile is that having family on three continents, lived as a child in Asia and built ties to his father's family in Kenya, Obama has an understanding of the world and America's role in it that is unlike that of any recent presidential candidate, and that this knowledge and understanding is a valuable foreign policy asset. The knowledge, experience and perspective that Obama has is increasingly important giving the security challenges which the US faces now and is likely to continue to confront for the near future.

Obama's personal story is unusual, and not something which can be expected of all future presidential candidates. However, it is very possible that future candidates will have knowledge of the rest of the world that is based not necessarily on personal and family ties but on NGO experience, travel experience, the peace corps or other international projects which allow them to see the world through prisms beyond those of military and diplomacy which is how many previous presidents got first-hand knowledge of the world beyond the US. Running an NGO in Africa, teaching in Asia or living and working in the former Soviet Union, are all the kinds of activities which should be viewed as valuable foreign policy experience in the future. While these are clearly not comparable in terms of either risk or sacrifice to serving in the military, the perspectives and understanding they bring may be more relevant and useful for policy making.

Knowing how the military, state department, intelligence community or other arms of US foreign policy work is valuable for a president, but few president's come into office with this kind of expertise. Successful presidents appoint people to key positions in their administration who understand how the foreign policy bureaucracy works and have the skills and background to implement the their president's policies. Vision, judgment and understanding of the world outside the US are precisely what cannot be learned in the White House or on a senate committee or, dare I say it, in a POW camp, but it is the foreign policy background for which voters should look when choosing a president.