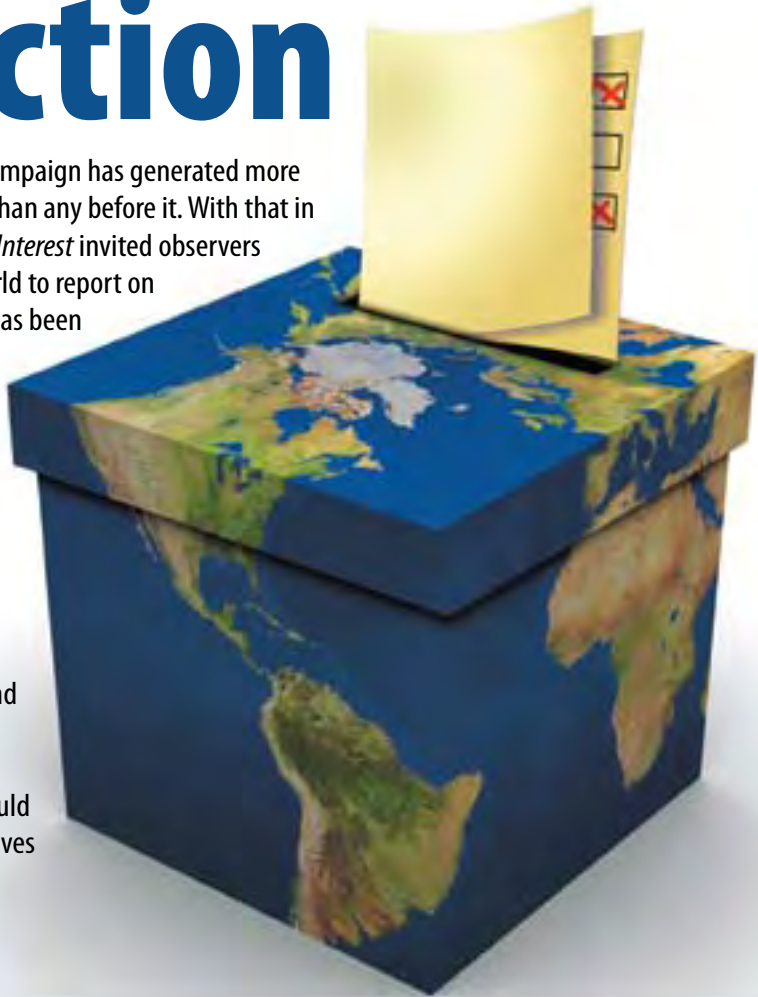


# the Global Election

AS OTHERS  
SEE US

The 2008 election campaign has generated more interest worldwide than any before it. With that in mind, *The American Interest* invited observers from around the world to report on how the campaign has been perceived in their countries. While we Americans alone will choose our next president, we can nevertheless gain critically useful self-knowledge by paying attention to what others think and say. As Robert Burns famously put it, "Oh, that God the gift would give us, to see ourselves as others see us."



## Josef Joffe

So Barack Obama pulls 200,000 Berliners to the Victory Column, which celebrates Prussia's victories over Danes, Austrians and French. But that—a mere 6 percent of Berlin's population—is nothing compared to the



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polls telling us that nearly three-quarters of all Germans (74 percent) would cast their ballot for Obama, if they could. However bizarre in its excessiveness, this figure corresponds to similar majorities in other West European countries. Of course, if Germans, Britons, French and other Europeans actually did have a say, if they had to elect *their* president and live with the consequences, the tallies would be more normal. But make-believe or not, these numbers are so astounding that they must be explained in religious rather than rational terms.

Every once in a while, people in the otherwise secular West are ready for a savior. Last time around it was JFK, and it is no accident, as the Soviets used to say, that Obama mimics the man from Camelot down to the tilt of his head and the inflection of his voice. Why Kennedy back then? Why were the Euros so smitten with him? Undoubtedly because they saw him, this most American of heroes, as one of their own, what with the kind-of-French wife, the haute couture and the aristocratic demeanor. And so with Obama. For foreigners, there is something “non-American” about him, with the Kenyan father and the non-accented English that betrays no local, i.e. deeply American roots. Above all, Obama is not George W.—he is not “Texas”, and hence not an insult to the refined, urbane secularism that is Europe. And if there is one thing that unites a majority of Europeans from Madrid to Munich (but not farther east), it is the conviction that W. has been a one-man axis of evil.

I say “evil” deliberately because of its religious connotation. No evil, no redeemer; no Bush, no Obama. Of course, pure projection is at work here. Just as the West Europeans imbue W. with everything they fear and loathe about America, they invest Obama with the opposite.

W. represents power and power liberally used: a country that went to war twice, reminding the Europeans that their days as great powers (and conquerors) are over; a power that divided the world into the Children of Light and of Darkness (“You are either with us or against us”) and so rubbed up against the postmodern European consensus according to which all conflicts are just constructs and hence amenable to compromise.

Draping Obama in the robe of the redeemer makes sense only against the Bushist/Republican backdrop. But it helps, too, that his leftish voting record enables him to almost pass as a European Social Democrat. He seems to be everything Europe wants to be, and from which it draws its sense of cultural-moral superiority over America. He is doe-eyed and soft spoken. He is religious, but discreetly so. Raised across the divides of color, faith and culture, he can't possibly be like those white macho brutes Cheney, Rumsfeld and Bush, or like their Evangelical legions. A man of the mellifluous word, he would never start a war at the drop of an IED. Nor would he rile the Russians or Iranians and thus force us Europeans into choices we want to avoid. In short, he will not flaunt America's vast power, thus rubbing Europe's own self-inflicted weakness.

Once this psychiatric interpretation of the infatuation with Obama is accepted, then one must accept, too, that vast disappointment is bound to follow if he is elected. This 44<sup>th</sup> President would never be what the Europeans read into him. He would still be the President of a superpower, hence of a country that is in harm's way everywhere and gifted, alone among the nations, with the means to defend against harm everywhere. He would still be an *American* President, hence acting from a very different *Weltanschauung* than M. Sarkozy or Frau Merkel. He will not propitiate the post-Georgia Russians as so many West Europeans are willing to do. He will keep America's powder dry in the Pacific. He will accept offshore drilling and new nuclear power plants, and he may displease the Europeans greatly if he actually executes the trade protectionism he has limned in the campaign. Under Obama's tutelage, America will remain a close ally of Israel and build containment coalitions around Iran, neither of which



AFP/Getty Images

### Obama at the Victory Column, Berlin, July 24, 2008

will endear him to those many Europeans who would rather trade than tangle with Tehran.

The point here can be clad in one well-worn sentence: Where you stand depends on where you sit. If you sit in the penthouse of global power, you will behave differently from Germans, Italians and Swedes. Your interests will be global, and your means will run from diplomacy to bombs, especially since your country still boasts a warrior culture, whereas Europe, the fountainhead of nearly every significant war since the Greeks wiped out Troy, has become as aggressive as a sloth. And never, ever will the Continentals understand baseball, the truest entry into the American soul.

Hence, few Europeans understand that the American political game is about statistics. Those who kept political score over the

decades will recall that Republicans (sans W.) have had a better batting average in Europe than Democrats. Europeans got along nicely with Eisenhower, whereas Kennedy, hardly ensconced in office, managed to rankle both De Gaulle and Adenauer, pushing them into an anti-American twosome. Then, escalating in Vietnam, LBJ tried to extract tribute money from the West Europeans, toppling a German Chancellor in the process. On the other hand, Richard Nixon, the Republican, ended the war and pleased the Europeans by plying a *détentist* line toward the Soviet Union. Helmut Schmidt loved Gerald Ford because he could lecture him on the basics of *Weltpolitik*. When the Democrats returned to the White House under Jimmy Carter, so did the bad vibes, with the Euros ridiculing him for his piety and fickleness. Ronald Reagan reaped as much contempt initially as did W., but Europeans today fondly recall him as the father of Pershing and cruise missile disarmament and as author of those wondrous words: “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” They positively loved George H.W. Bush for killing the Soviet empire softly and for reunifying the Continent. Clinton? He had good marks for a Democrat, but the 1990s were not a very demanding decade.

The Tens will be more “interesting”, what with power politics and resource rivalries returning. In terms of batting average, the Europeans ought to prefer a Republican. But they have usually pined for a Democrat because “Democrat” is halfway to “Social Democrat.” Obama appears, at least, to embody Europe’s reigning *étatiste* ideology; which unites Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and parties farther left. JFK, LBJ, Carter and Clinton were lots of things, but Swedish or German Social Democrats like Olof Palme or Willy Brandt they were not. Neither will be Barack Obama if he is anointed No. 44. 🇺🇸

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