

***Toward a Post-Partisan Foreign Policy:  
What Is Possible in the Current Media Climate?***

January 13, 2009

**DAVID CORN**  
Washington Bureau Chief,  
*Mother Jones*

**STEVEN CLEMONS**  
Senior Fellow and Director,  
American Strategy Program,  
New America Foundation;  
Publisher, *The Washington Note*

**ELIZABETH BECKER**  
Journalist; Author;  
Former Correspondent,  
*The New York Times* and  
*The Washington Post*

**Forum Description**

Jim Hoagland of *The Washington Post* said at our November CPRF forum that "Asking a journalist to talk about bipartisanship is a little like asking him or her to argue against his or her own interests, because so much of journalism is founded on the attractiveness of conflict, the battles between individuals and parties." This third forum in a series on bi-partisanship explored the ramifications of this statement, and looked at how the current media climate might or might not impact a more bi- or post-partisan approach in foreign policy.

**Forum Quotes**

**Elizabeth Becker**

I am going to challenge the assumption that there was not bipartisanship during the Bush Administration. I think there was true bipartisanship on the foreign policy side. I think that by saying there was not, you are confusing tone with substance.

The reason why we thought there was so much partisanship was not that there was any true disagreement on the fundamentals of foreign policy, it was that people were acting as if there was.

There is no question that [Obama] will set a change in tone, a more solid obvious demonstration [of bipartisanship]. I am not convinced that this will lead to a real debate on foreign policy and conflict resolution and that is what journalists will be required to document.

Although fewer media organizations [are covering foreign policy issues], but coverage that is done by a few select media organizations is becoming more complex and richer. Part of the reason is because the Iraq War was so paralyzing and there has been a lot of introspection.

**Steven Clemons**

I think that it is easier to be bipartisan or post-partisan when there are existential threats.

I believe that the partisanship divide is a falsehood... If you are driven more by a militant concern or the application of democratic values, you may find that the Neoconservatives, mainly from the Republican side, draw inspiration from that and a significant part of the Democratic party drawing inspiration from that—liberal interventionists or the global justice community. There are a lot of commonalities between those two groups. The real division, frankly, is sometimes not between Republicans and Democrats but rather between different policy tribes.

What is a post-partisan approach to these issues? You see some semblance of that in what Obama is trying to do. It becomes process more than substance. Process means people at the table, and a judicious, respectful process of working through options.

What Obama is doing can be highly paralyzing when looking at the table because we don't know how decisions will be made.

There is machinery of political parties that is relatively easy to hijack and take it over. The Republican Party that we see today is not the Republican Party we saw twenty years ago... When parties are so pliable and flexible, it raises that question of why any one of them would want to work to the middle anyway.

We replaced the housing bubble in the United States with Obama bubble.

Barack Obama has been bringing teams of rivals together—not only ideological rivals, but people who have clusters of the same job. So you are going to have power battles over responsibilities and policy-making. He has confused many of the people who supported him.

The most important person Obama could learn from in the Bush Administration is Dick Cheney. In the last administration, no one knew how George W. Bush made a decision. He was inconsistent; he flipped this way and that... Lots of people knew how Dick Cheney approached the world. Cheney-ism is understandable and deployable in a policy sense.

The next big battle that Obama is blind to is Afghanistan. Depicting Iraq as the bad war and Afghanistan as the good war is already dividing his team and it will divide the Democrats and a good chunk of the Republicans.

### **David Corn**

Foreign policy comes into the headlines and appears particularly on TV when something is exploding.

The elite media has—until recently—felt a public service desire or need, a function, a mission to go beyond what they think the audience can absorb want. The financial demands and financial pressures of the mainstream media from the competition of the Internet are making it harder and harder to abide by that public service mission.

The good news is that what has brought pressure to bear on the mainstream media does allow for a new type of media that maybe can compensate. The cost of entry to publishing and doing foreign correspondent work has dropped a lot. Anybody with a camera now in Iraq or Afghanistan can shoot video, post it... We are seeing bloggers acting as reporters overseas filing dispatchers. So there is that generation of content happening and it is going to continue. I am hoping that some of the bigger places are going to figure out ways of finding people like that and promoting that content and making it wider and more accessible.

There is a cultural value within much of the media called objectivity, which I call the cult of objectivity, which is: “we don't make news, we report on what is happening.” Often that can be confining.

If Obama is smart, he will pick a few of these issues that are very symbolic that are also real and show them moving ahead in a bipartisan way and the media will have no choice but to cover it.