



How to influence people and lose friends

A McCain-Palin administration could mean America becomes more isolated in world affairs, writes **Brendon O'Connor**

IN THE 1970s, as the Vietnam War turned from bad to worse and America's international image slipped precipitously, opportunities arose for Washington's rivals and new dictators.

The Soviets became more openly aggressive in their Third World endeavours and by the end of the decade had invaded Afghanistan. Pol Pot and the Ayatollah Khomeini also came to power. The endorsement of these anti-American fanatics by certain Western intellectuals suggests just how on the nose America was.

Are we living through similar times? It would seem so: American prestige is at an all-time low. Russia is more emboldened than at any time since the end of the Cold War. China is on the march in Africa and Latin America, selling weapons to Zimbabwe and buying oil from Sudan with relative impunity.

Opinion polls constantly show that in the Muslim world America's public standing is abysmal.

Assessing this situation, Senator Barack Obama contended in the second US presidential debate that "strains that have been placed on our alliances around the world and the respect that's been diminished over the past eight years has constrained us being able to act on something like the genocide in Darfur, because we don't have the resources or allies to do everything we should be doing".

Often quoting Ronald Reagan, the Republican presidential team of John McCain and Sarah Palin have been quick to respond that America has a history of emerging victorious. It is true many of the anti-American dictators who emerged in the 1970s imploded. And the Soviet Union did

disintegrate. Washington was fortunate to have such flawed opponents.

Also to America's advantage was the loyalty of its allies in the Cold War. Although there were large protests about the placement of US missiles in Britain and on the Continent, the governments of Western Europe and America's Cold War allies elsewhere largely stayed the course.

Public opinion towards the US in the Western world is now much more negative than even at the height of Reagan's global unpopularity. Despite this, America's allies have largely continued to work closely with the US and, in some cases like Australia, have strengthened relations. However, public patience with this approach has its limits.

A McCain-Palin victory could create an increased surge in anti-Americanism and make alliance management even more difficult. Despite McCain's attempts to distance himself from President George W. Bush, foreigners would tend to see another Republican in the Oval Office as an endorsement of failed economic, foreign and environmental policies. This dismay would be compounded given the tendency of the foreign media to overplay good polls and news about Obama outside of America. Some would blame an Obama loss on lingering US racism, but given the lack of minority leaders in Western nations this response would probably be short-lived. More profound would be the realisation that America is even more conservative and insular than previously realised.

And then there is how people would feel about Palin as vice-president. International newspapers have been full of stories on Governor

Palin. Just as she symbolises the mythical small-town hero who appeals to many Americans, she also fits the stereotype of the know-nothing frontier person. Bush has been so easily and widely scorned because he, too, has fitted this caricature. However, with Bush there was a flip side: his East Coast establishment father, degrees from Yale and Harvard, and elite connections everywhere. Palin appears more genuine and more untainted, but also more ignorant and possibly scarier than Bush to much of the world's population. Palin's lack of knowledge about world affairs undoubtedly is seen by many foreigners as a slap in the face.

If a McCain-Palin administration wants to bomb Iran or support Israel bombing Iran, America could be in for a lonely time. Even getting more NATO or Australian troops to serve in Afghanistan could be problematic.

Australia and Britain have been extremely loyal allies during the past eight years; however, there are clear signs Britons and Australians could well lose their faith in American global leadership. This would particularly be the case if another Republican administration was to make what seemed like rash or unilateral decisions. Out of electoral necessity, governments in these countries would be tepid in their support of the US and over time America's dealings with the world could become much more arduous.

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