

US Elections: National Security will be back in the spotlight in the 2008 Campaign

by Marcin Zaborowski

'It's rough out there' warns the front cover of a recent issue of *The Economist*, and it is not talking about nuclear threats, Iraq or the growth of China's military power, but rather about the economy. Economic news from the US has been consistently bad for some time: the dollar has been rapidly losing value against all international currencies, the budget and trade deficits have ballooned, while oil prices have been at record high levels. Then, the US was hit by the subprime mortgage crisis and downturn in the housing market, and in January 2008 the stock market became highly volatile. In short, at the start of 2008 the economic climate in the US is deeply worrying and the electorate is visibly alarmed, as reflected in falling consumer confidence that recently declined to its lowest level in six years.

This changing climate is naturally reflected in the evolving dynamics of the Presidential race. Last December Iraq still topped the list of the electorate's concerns, but with one in three Americans now worried about their money, we are back to 'it's the economy, stupid' – or are we?

According to opinion polls, there is no doubt that the state of the economy is now the nation's top concern. Candidates from both parties, although less so on the Republican side, have responded by focusing on health care, social security and the economic stimulus package proposed by President Bush to avert the crisis. All leading candidates have naturally proposed their own alternative measures, with the Republicans advocating tax cuts and Democrats emphasising fiscal discipline. In the meantime, Iraq and other foreign policy issues have slipped down the list of campaign themes.

On the Republican side this focus on the economy strongly favours Mitt Romney – a successful businessman and a former Governor of Massachusetts. In this respect Romney outperforms his Republican rivals by a considerable margin, especially his main competitor for the nomination, John McCain, who admitted once that 'he had no grasp of economic issues'. More importantly, a focus on the economy has traditionally favoured Democrats on General Election day, as demonstrated by Bill Clinton's victory in 1992. In those elections Clinton, then a little known Governor of provincial Arkansas, beat George H. Bush who only had just emerged from the successful campaign against Saddam Hussein and had gained credit for his excellent management of the end of the Cold War.

History is, however, unlikely to repeat itself in this case, not least because unlike his father, George W. Bush will be leaving behind a legacy of foreign policy failures. The next President will be taking office with the US engaged in two full-scale military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq; on top of that he or she will have to deal with a resurgent Iran, an increasingly authoritarian and anti-western Russia and China's relentless march towards superpower status. In 1992 the electorate felt that the US could take a holiday from world affairs; they are unlikely to feel the same way in November 2008.

The Republicans will, of course, also make sure that national security returns to the campaign. This was already evident during the debate ahead of the Florida Republican primary on 25 January 2008. While the Republican candidates were unusually civil to each other, they ganged up on Hillary Clinton, attacking her especially for her criticism of the Iraq war. Since the Vietnam War, the Republicans have traditionally commanded more trust than the Democrats on the issue of national security. True, this has recently changed with the Democrats closing the gap on the issue for the first time in decades. Still, however, the Republicans feel on safer ground fighting the Democrats on this issue than on any other territory and especially the economy. The recently improving situation in Iraq is also a powerful factor in favour of bringing the issue back into the spotlight. As acknowledged by some experts linked to the Democrats, the ‘surge’ policy – an increase in US troops’ presence by close to 30,000 – is beginning to deliver results, including the fall in military and civilian casualties, drop in the number of daily attacks and even a modest growth of the Iraqi economy.

Iraq is by far the most polarising issue for the two parties and if it comes back to dominate the campaign the choice for Americans will be pretty clear-cut, with all leading Republicans advocating staying on in Iraq and all Democrats wanting to pull out, albeit on various terms. The Americans do not like the war in Iraq and most of them consider it to have been a mistake. But even more they do not like losing, especially after all the human and economic sacrifices that have been made. Who offers the best way out of Iraq without declaring a defeat? On the right, John McCain certainly has gained a lot of credibility on the issue. He argued in favour of investing more troops in Iraq from very beginning and the success of the surge policy looks to many as a vindication of his position. Hillary Clinton has more credibility on national security than her rivals – she voted in favour of the war and unlike John Edwards she never apologised for her vote. Her plan for pulling out is very cautious and full of caveats. In fact, it is unlikely that should she win, there would be a rapid change of policy in Iraq. Barack Obama is also rather cautious on the issue although he portrays himself as the anti-war candidate.

However, what counts in politics are perceptions and emotions. Whilst in terms of actual policy implementation the difference between a Democrat and a Republican President could be small, for the time being, the candidates on both sides use diametrically opposed rhetoric. Should Iraq come to look winnable and should the Republicans succeed in bringing it back as the main issue of the campaign, they would be able to put up a decent fight in a race whose outcome until recently looked like a foregone conclusion.

27 January 2008