

Impulsive, Impetuous, Impatient

Wednesday, 01 October 2008

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Suppose John McCain had been in the White House in October 1962, facing one of the great tests of the modern presidency. If so, we might remember that period not as "the Cuban missile crisis" but as "World War III." As Mr. McCain demonstrated in Friday evening's debate, he is a serious foreign policy thinker who has traveled widely, and he certainly showed vision and bipartisanship in helping to repair relations with Vietnam. But it's equally clear that in recent years Mr. McCain has become impish cubed — impulsive, impetuous and impatient — and those are perilous qualities in a commander in chief.

NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

Suppose John McCain had been in the White House in October 1962, facing one of the great tests of the modern presidency. If so, we might remember that period not as "the Cuban missile crisis" but as "World War III."

As Mr. McCain demonstrated in Friday evening's debate, he is a serious foreign policy thinker who has traveled widely, and he certainly showed vision and bipartisanship in helping to repair relations with Vietnam. But it's equally clear that in recent years Mr. McCain has become impish cubed — impulsive, impetuous and impatient — and those are perilous qualities in a commander in chief.

Although he is frantically trying to distance himself from President Bush, Mr. McCain, by his own accounting, would be more Bushian in foreign policy than even Mr. Bush is now. While Mr. Bush has been forced to accept more sensible policies in his second term, Mr. McCain has become steadily more of a neocon in the cowboy role that Mr. Bush played in his first term, prone to solving problems with stealth bombers rather than United Nations resolutions.

Judging from Mr. McCain's own positions, he might well revive a cold war with Russia and could start a hot war with Iran or North Korea. In those three hot spots, Mr. McCain could constitute a dangerous gamble for this country:

•

Iran seems determined to continue its uranium enrichment and will be vexing for any president. But Mr. Bush, under the influence of Bob Gates and Condoleezza Rice, has realized that the best hope is diplomacy and negotiation. In contrast, Mr. McCain denounces Barack Obama's call for direct talks with Iranian leaders and speaks openly about the possibility of bombing Iranian nuclear sites.

"There's only one thing worse than military action against Iran, and that is a nuclear-armed Iran," Mr. McCain has told me and others, repeating the line regularly. That's a nice sound bite, but it suggests that if Iran continues to enrich uranium he would feel obliged to launch airstrikes. And while Mr. McCain understands the lack of any effective military solution (we don't even know exactly what to hit), he can sound cavalier about a new war. When a South Carolina man asked him about Iran, he responded by singing to the tune of the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann": "Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran."

So if Iran continues its policies as most expect, we might well find ourselves under a McCain presidency headed toward our third war with a Muslim country. The result would be an Iranian nationalist backlash that would cement ayatollahs in place, as well as \$200-a-barrel oil, open season on Americans in Iraq, and global fury at American unilateralism.

•

North Korea is one of the Bush administration's greatest failures, and Mr. McCain seems intent on making it worse. For eight full years, the Clinton administration kept North Korea from obtaining plutonium to make a single nuclear weapon; on Mr. Bush's watch, North Korea has obtained enough for a half dozen weapons and has conducted a nuclear test.

Even President Bush recognized the failure of his first term's hard-line policy and abandoned it, instead pursuing negotiations and diplomatic solutions with North Korea. Mr. McCain fumes that this is accommodation and seems to prefer the first-term fist-waving that was emotionally satisfying but failed catastrophically.

A McCain administration would thus apparently mean no more diplomatic track with North Korea. The upshot would be North Korea's restarting its nuclear weapon assembly line. In similar circumstances in 1994, Mr. McCain raised the prospect of military strikes on North Korea and suggested that war might be inevitable (instead, President Clinton stopped plutonium production with a negotiated deal).

•

Russia underscores Mr. McCain's penchant for risk-taking, theatrics and fulmination. Most striking, he wants to kick Russia out of the Group of 8.

Mr. McCain's lead-with-the-chin approach to Russia reflects the same pugnacity that resulted in obscenity-laced dust-ups with fellow Republican senators, but it's less endearing when the risk is nuclear war. Do we really want to risk an exchange of nuclear warheads over Abkhazia or South Ossetia? The Spanish prime minister, José Zapatero, told me a few days ago that what he fears most under a McCain administration is a revival of the cold war with Russia.

In Friday's debate, Mr. McCain was on his best behavior. But he did reiterate his suspicion of diplomacy with our enemies, and he has often shown that his instinct in a confrontation (whether with a colleague or a country) is the opposite of John Kennedy's in the Cuban missile crisis; Mr. McCain responds to challenges by seeking to escalate, to fight.

All in all, it's astonishing that Mr. McCain seems determined to return to Mr. Bush's first-term policies that have been utterly discredited even within the administration. Judging from Mr. McCain's own positions, on foreign policy he could well end up more Bush than Bush.

Nicholas D. Kristof writes op-ed columns that appear twice each week in The New York Times. A two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, he previously was associate managing editor of The Times, responsible for the Sunday Times.