



Need to Know. What kind of expertise should voters look for in a candidate?

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Let's be blunt: If John McCain wins the election and drops dead during his first year in office, someone not very experienced will become president. But the same is true if Barack Obama wins the election and doesn't drop dead during his first year in office.

Truth be told, John McCain and Joseph Biden can't claim extensive experience either — not if experience is defined as spending many years making consequential decisions on tight deadlines based on insufficient information and conflicting advice. That is what presidents do for a living. It's also, to a lesser extent, what governors, mayors and many business executives do. It is not what legislators do. That's not a criticism — it's just a fact.

Of course, experience is one thing; knowledge is another. Last week, interviewing Sarah Palin, ABC's Charlie Gibson attempted to demonstrate that the Alaska governor doesn't know much about foreign policy. In the process, as Charles Krauthammer and others have made clear, he revealed his own ignorance: His grasp of the Bush Doctrine was based on spin, not substance.

Which raises this question: If I tell you someone is an expert surgeon, you know what I'm talking about. If I say someone is an expert accountant or mechanic, that's clear, too. But what does it mean to call someone a foreign policy expert?

I've been a student of foreign policy for over 30 years -- starting at Columbia University's School of International Affairs, and going on to become a foreign correspondent writing stories from more than two dozen countries. So I know the difference between Slovakia and Slovenia , Gambia and Zambia , Guinea-Bissau and Guinea-Conakry , Guyana and Guiana , Congo - Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa.

This is all very helpful when playing Foreign Policy Trivia. But I'm not sure that a president (or vice president) needs to go into office with such information stuffed into his (or her) head.

I served as one of the "experts" on the Iraq Study Group (ISG) that advised the Baker/Hamilton committee. Almost everyone within this group - which included former ambassadors and senior Foreign Service Officers, CIA operatives and professors - was certain that the conflict in Iraq could not be salvaged. They counseled a policy that's been described as "graceful defeat." Those of us who supported the Petraeus strategy, the "surge," were as rare -- and as unwelcome -- as vegetarians at a cattlemen's convention.

Harry Truman, a Democrat, and Ronald Reagan, a Republican, were hardly experts in international affairs. But they got the most important things right: Both recognized the threat posed by Communist regimes and movements, and both implemented serious policies to combat them.

So what do we need to know about what presidential and vice presidential candidates need to know? The best a voter can do is attempt to discern - amid the kabuki theater that is the modern presidential campaign -- a candidate's values, temperament and, yes, ideology - which is to say his political philosophy.

To perceive where a candidate really intends to take the country requires some probing. Reporters could help - if, instead of playing "gotcha," they'd ask the candidates how they will decide such pivotal questions as these:

* Should we go along with our West European friends who are surrendering their sovereignty to the United Nations, to "world courts" and to various non-governmental organizations? Or should we zealously guard America's independence?

* Should the United States continue to make the sacrifices required to remain a superpower? Or would we be better off relinquishing such burdens and embracing what Fareed Zakaria and other left-leaning foreign policy experts call a "post-American" world?

* Is it imperative to reverse America's increasing dependence on foreign oil as quickly as possible? If so, we'll have to drill just about everywhere while also aggressively developing alternative energy sources. And if that means not cutting carbon dioxide emissions for the next few years (causing the eco-left to scream), and authorizing some gov-

ernment intervention (which will drive the libertarian right crazy) in order to break oil's monopoly as a transportation fuel, is it worth it?

* Are we fighting a real war against Islamist terrorist regimes and movements – one that requires some tough and even unconventional weapons? Or is terrorism just a criminal justice problem that police, lawyers and courts are competent to handle?

* Should America invest in a comprehensive missile defense system? Or is it safe to assume that our contemporary enemies can be deterred, as were the Soviets, by the prospect of “mutually assured deterrence”?

If you know where the candidates stand on these issues – and where you stand – deciding for whom to vote should not be too difficult.

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