

The Daily Star

Loyal Gore may find he loses out on presidency

by Chibli Mallat

At the risk of gross interference in the domestic affairs of a foreign country, let us indulge in some Americana.

At a recent conference in Fes, Morocco, the dean of the Yale Law School was dreaming aloud about the access of his colleague Owen Fiss to the American presidency. A humanist with a great heart, Fiss would do well for his country to reclaim the role of Plato's philosopher-king, leading the city-world. Since all history is but a footnote to Plato's Republic, we would all benefit from someone like Fiss in that position.

Alas Owen Fiss is not running for the U.S. presidency. Nor is the imprint of the Yale law school a golden handshake on the road to statesmanship. The incumbent American president a talented alumnus of the school and sometime Rhodes scholar is many things, but he is no statesman. Forgive the blow beneath the belt: Hilary Rodham is also an alumna. She does strike one as holding values that approximate stateswomanship in a way contrasting to that of her erratic husband. Nor can statesmanship happen, alas, by marital ersatz.

This brings us, a few months before the New Hampshire primaries, to those in the effective presidential running. Many of them are unknown to me, and there will be some defections and some newcomers. Distrusting evident filial or spousal nepotism, I will steer clear of Bush Junior and Lady Dole, and express the passing hope that Mrs. Clinton not start her Senate campaign, officially, until the term of her husband is over. It is disturbing to see a first Lady on a senatorial track while her husband is still in position. Back to the presidency proper. Of those whose names have reached our Mediterranean shores, there are two serious contenders: John McCain and Al Gore.

Neither may perhaps rise to Fissian qualities, but I am ready to endorse them both as world leaders, which is what a U.S. president inevitably becomes.

I have not met Al Gore, but my Iraq connection has made me attentive to him. I admire his sticking to his pal Clinton through thick and thin, at the serious risk of being identified with some of the latter's shameful behavior in allowing the presidency's most intimate privacy to be invaded by the vindictiveness of Ken Starr. I also hear, from democratic Iraqi friends, that Gore may be the most dedicated high-ranking U.S. official to their cause in the present administration. He sent them a good letter in 1993, a letter sourly betrayed by his president on more than one occasion. Al Gore should be alright for the Middle East, and has principled consistency. But that's hearsay.

I did have an occasion to meet Senator McCain a decade ago in London, when he generously agreed to participate in the International Committee for a Free Iraq (ICFI). I even shared for a few precious moments the podium with him in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee room, when the ICFI was launched in Congress in October 1991, and realised the depth of his commitment to a Middle East in which basic American values of freedom and equality before the law should be encouraged.

I then tried to follow his positions on foreign policy, the most remarkable of which was his principled stance in Kosovo: Contrast his position with that of the U.S. president and

his own republican colleagues. The first shot his policy in the foot by insisting, in the very first days of the war, that use of ground troops was out of the question. Only when talk about the use of ground troops started again, and when Milosevic was indicted, did the Serb dictator yield.

The majority of other Republican senators were not to be commended. Vulture-like, they were blowing hot and cold on their readiness to entertain "war" in the conflict as if America's relentless bombing of Serb Yugoslavia were anything but war. McCain came out the most respectable American figure in the Kosovo conflict.

This standing was increased recently over campaign politics, as indicated by James Zogbi on this page. Again, passing grades go to McCain, who has long been on record as supporting some control over capital's influence upon the electoral process this was tragically undermined in 1976 by a Supreme Court decision, Buckley v. Valeo. In that important decision the Supreme Court held that a law regulating money disbursements to candidates could not stand in the face of the First Amendment, hence allowing money to talk with megaphones as it is doing presently with George Bush Jr.

There are other reasons why I prefer McCain over Gore even though I would actually belong to the pro-welfare tradition of sixties children than to the grey-haired Missing in Action and POW heroes like the senator. I prefer McCain, despite this, because change is good, in the absolute.

I also prefer McCain because he thinks for himself. Gore has too readily allowed himself to be dwarfed for the sake of a chance in November, 2000. The good intentions in the above-mentioned letter did not translate into action when the going got tough for Iraqi democrats. But I mostly prefer McCain because, as a world leader, he is ready to articulate a vision which is not based on political expediency.

Regardless of his effective leadership in Kosovo against the indecisiveness of Clintonites and republicans alike, McCain is on record as being an advocate of taking Slobodan Milosevic seriously. After the Senator tabled his readiness to forget about partisan politics with a sound proposal to give the president the means to reverse ethnic cleansing, the Senate, in turn, tabled McCain's proposal. In American parlance, the latter tabling means sine die shelving.

McCain was furious, and did not hesitate to criticise his colleagues' moves. For this he was rewarded in the polls, and his standing increased significantly. So much for those who do not want to see that Americans, like other honest citizens in the rest of the world, know how to appreciate leadership and morality in conducting global politics.

This brings me to conclude on a point which is difficult to swallow by non-Americans: Like it or not, our future here is greatly shaped by what happens in Washington, in the same way as our future as Arabs is decided by the results of the Israeli elections.

Indulging in Americana requires some courage and a lot of reading, which the Internet makes easier. Western watch is crucial. Never mind that our voice does not reach far, we must go through the exercise until we ensconce our people in Capitol Hill and elsewhere in Washington.

Meanwhile, my preference for world leader goes to Owen Fiss. Alternatively to McCain, last though not least to Gore. Alas after Clinton, he will probably not be very much regretted in circles where moral standing is important. He has the talent, but not the fiber.

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