

What Underlies the Change in the American Political Tide?
Comments on Professor Nakayama's Paper,
"Politics of National Security:
Generals, Civilians, and the Framing of the Iraq War"

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Introduction

Based on his detailed and informative analysis of policy process, Professor Nakayama identifies a tidal change in contemporary American politics and predicts that the failing U. S. economy will emerge as the most significant issue in the 2008 presidential election. I was really impressed with the way he established a connection between certain micro-level events, such as congressional testimony, and the change in political climate at the macro level. His findings differ markedly from the conventional wisdom that currently prevails in Japanese press commentary. Because it cannot effectively cover U.S. domestic politics using its own resources, the Japanese mainstream media's perspective is heavily influenced by the American East Coast press establishment and its shared viewpoints on the current situation.¹

His approach also shows a clear contrast with Professor Mastanduno's keynote lecture, which deals with American foreign policy at a thoroughly macro level. Mastanduno argues that foreign policy will not change drastically, even under a new Democrat-led administration, because unilateralism is one of the United States' strong traditions and still holds great meaning for many contemporary policymakers. Professor Nakayama appears to have reached a similar conclusion of American foreign policy from a different line of thought. According to him, foreign policy (the Iraq War policy, in particular) has been "depoliticized" through the tactics of the Bush Administration and this will not change "the structural fact that U. S. is the sole superpower" (p. 13). Given this situation, any change in foreign policy will be merely "a question of degree" (ibid.). I find that these two viewpoints totally synchronous and acceptable.

However, as a scholar of policymaking process and institutions, I would like to raise a couple of questions in the next two sections. The first matter concerns the strategies of the Bush Administration and the Republican Party.² The second point relates to the causal relationship between congressional testimony and the change in the political tide among the general public. I will conclude with some

discussion regarding my presentation.

I . Strategies of Bush Administration and Republican Party

Both Professor Nakayama and Professor Mastanduno point out that the economy has been a salient issue in presidential elections over a number of years. In 1992, for example, Bill Clinton criticized George H. W. Bush, who was president at the time of the Gulf War, over the economic downturn, and Clinton won the presidential race. A similar situation occurred in 1980, when Ronald Reagan gained the White House after attacking the Carter Administration on stagflation. As Mastanduno notes, it has been the exception rather than the rule for issues other than the economy to be the focus of presidential elections. Accordingly, I am persuaded to believe that the economy, not foreign policy, will be the most significant agenda item for the 2008 election.

I should also point out that challenges on economic issues have generally been advantageous to the non-governing party. This is particularly applicable in cases where the Democratic Party has been the challenger. Since the New Deal era, Americans have come to expect the federal government to play a more active role in improving economic conditions. Such involvement comports more naturally with the traditional policy line of the Democratic Party.³ It is often argued that the Republican Party attempts to exploit its capabilities in dealing with foreign policy. With respect to the Iraq War, there are still questions as to whether a new Democratic president can manage the issue more effectively than a new Republican leader. If I were a strategist for the Republican Party, I would not focus unduly on the economy ahead of foreign policy, at least not until the Democratic candidate has been determined.

Governing parties tend to lose elections due to economic downturns in many other industrialized countries, including Britain, France and Germany. Even in Japan, where the opposition parties have failed to unite over a period of many years and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has long maintained its governing party status, the LDP lost seats in the late 1970s and the mid-1990s, both periods when the economy was in bad shape. Some political scientists believe that the adverse effects of depression or recession conditions on the fortunes of governing parties have become even more severe in recent times (Matoba 2003). The current economic situation is gloomy, due largely to the subprime mortgage shock and its worldwide effects. The relentlessly rising price of gasoline will severely disadvantage the Republican Party. Therefore, it is important for the Republicans to avoid focusing on the economy as far as possible; or at least until the incumbent Republican president acts to try and stimulate an economic recovery.

Accordingly, I would like to ask Professor Nakayama why the Bush Administration and the Republican Party seem intent on focusing the electorate's attention on economic issues. This approach does not accord with the historical pattern whereby the economy has not been an advantageous issue for the

Republicans; neither does it recognize recent electoral results in other industrialized countries where governing parties frequently lose power under economic depression conditions. Although Nakayama implies that the shock of the 2006 mid-term congressional election results underlies this Republican shift in direction, the logic of that election process cannot be directly applied to the forthcoming presidential election. I would also like Professor Mastanduno to answer a related question: “Why do you believe that foreign policy will be the main issue in the 2008 presidential election?”

II. Causal Relationship between Congressional Testimony and Public Perception

My second question to Professor Nakayama asks how the congressional testimony by General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker may have affected public evaluation of the Bush Administration’s foreign policy course. While a very persuasive case is made that the Petraeus-Crocker testimony included a number of surprises for congressional Democrats, its effect on public opinion was not well documented in Nakayama’s paper. In other words, without the Petraeus-Crocker testimony, might the surge in Iraq and its effects have changed public attitudes toward foreign policy?

Generally speaking, it is highly doubtful that congressional testimony directly reaches the public because Congress holds a number of hearings on any given day and the national press does not cover most of them. Testimony is a relatively minor aspect of the congressional legislative process. Moreover, the national news media today exerts less impact on public attitudes toward politics and policy issues because people are increasingly relying on the “soft-news” programs and the Internet for information and commentary.⁴ In the case of the Petraeus-Crocker testimony, its political salience was clear and heavy media coverage was to be expected. Even so, the net effect of that testimony was largely limited to “inside-the-beltway” people.

While I agree with Professor Nakayama’s view that the 2008 presidential election will revolve around different issues from those that characterized the 2006 mid-term elections, it is difficult to discern from his paper the reasons for such a major shift of focus. We need to have a clearer picture of the causal relationship among policymakers’ intentions, public attitudes, and the issues in order to consider this question: If a shift to focusing on the economy is not strategically advantageous for the Republicans, as I point out above, and if the Democrats want to adhere to a foreign policy challenge, including the Iraq problem, what is driving the change in the political tide in the United States?

Here, we need to revert to the fundamentals of political science: changes in politics are always based on the actors’ behaviors, oriented to their own interests, in relation to new ideas, institutional reforms, or external events. I believe that bipartisan reporting following the 2006 mid-term elections brought to light some new ideas and thereby affected public attitudes toward the Iraq policy. However,

I have no documentation to support that personal viewpoint. While there is clear political polarization among policymakers, the electorate tends to hold to the middle line and to prefer bipartisan approaches to policy development (cf. Quirk 2007). There is no reason to believe that foreign policy is an exception to that model. Bipartisanship has been (and still is) an iconic concept for United States voters.

Conclusion

This presentation deals with a couple of questions arising out of Professor Nakayama's detailed analysis of the changing political tide in the United States. I am generally persuaded by his conclusion that contemporary American politics is not regulated by Iraq policy considerations. My argument is that the state of the economy is a relatively advantageous issue for the non-governing party, which means the Democrats in the 2008 election, and that orientation toward bipartisanship may have changed public attitudes to foreign policy following the 2006 mid-term elections. While I do not wish to conclude my commentary with an anticlimax, I should point out that these are fairly conventional and not particularly novel readings of the current situation.

However, these points do tell us at least two important things. First, if the new political mood of the electorate demands bipartisanship in foreign policy, this could conceivably lead to a multilateral approach to international relations.⁵ As Professor Mastanduno points out, both Jeffersonian and Jacksonian approaches have played roles in establishing the traditions of U.S. foreign policy. And, both have the potential to facilitate adoption of unilateralism. That said, it is also certain that a multilateral approach can only come about through bipartisan political consensus. Because, in many cases, multilateralism requires the United States to pursue its short-term interests, no government can afford to take this course in an era of polarization. In other words, only a political environment characterized by a spirit of bipartisanship can help to open the way to a multilateral foreign policy.

Second, the demand for bipartisanship shows that American politics is recovering a sense of balance. Since the mid-1990s, and particularly after 9/11, extremism has been the dominant tone in U.S. politics. Although some believe that things would have been different if Al Gore had won the 2000 presidential race, the prevailing wisdom is that this is just a myth. Political polarization was already underway prior to the 2000 election. The conditions for both bipartisanship and political cooperation must have their basis in both the public mood and intellectual ideas.⁶ The vital signs for a potential tide of bipartisanship remain weak in an era of political cynicism; however, we should watch and wait for this idea to mature.

References

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Notes

- 1 According to Aida Hirotsugu, a former correspondent in Washington D.C. for Kyodo Press, there are only a handful of Japanese press correspondents in the American capital and each one has to deal with almost all aspects of American society. As a result, it is very difficult to cover U.S. domestic politics in detail and correspondents often depend on major domestic news media sources such as CNN and the Washington Post (Aida 1995).
- 2 It might be preferable to distinguish moves made by the Bush Administration from those made by the Republican Party. However, with President Bush nearing the end of his second term, his personal electoral considerations are meaningless. Rather, we should expect Bush Administration policies and performance to impact on the fate of the whole Republican Party in the 2008 election.
- 3 Currently (as of late June, 2008), for example, both parties' presidential candidates have proposed that governmental regulation should be introduced to control the skyrocketing price of gasoline. This kind of policy approach is definitely in line with Democratic Party philosophy.
- 4 It is definitely arguable that manipulation of "soft-news" coverage has a significant effect and that the Republicans have actively pursued this approach. However, Democrats and the press can quickly identify and expose such manipulation, sparking further political battles. It should not be named "depoliticization" of the Iraq problem.
- 5 Here, I use the term "multilateral" rather than "Wilsonian" to describe an approach to internationalism because I believe the United States has traditionally connected realism with internationalism. It could also be termed a "Hamiltonian" approach, as was done by Mead (2001) and Murata (2005). It is perceptions concerning the states of the domestic and the international economies that will decide the choice of Wilsonian or Hamiltonian approach.
- 6 I have formerly argued that fiscal reform in the 1990s was affected by changes in the public mood and intellectual ideas (Machidori 2003).