

**'A Conversation with John McCain', Shaw Library, October 10  
2012, 2 - 3pm**

*By Benjamin Mueller*

In a talk that was as gripping as it was wide-ranging, Senator John McCain lived up to his reputation as one of the foremost foreign policy authorities in the US political establishment today. The 'Town Hall' format preferred by Senator McCain is somewhat of an unusual basis for an LSE talk, but brought the aura of the American presidential race into the distinguished surroundings of the Shaw Library.

Senator McCain began his talk with a broad-sweep analysis of the key dynamics driving international affairs today, arguing that the 'Arab Spring' is a geographical misnomer: we are witnessing a sea-change in political emancipation which will not confine itself to the Middle East alone. Instead, autocratically-led regimes like Russia and China will soon find their populace unwilling to submit to the rule of an unaccountable and corrupt elite, Senator McCain predicted. The Senator had short shrift for those who long for the predictability and stability of dealing with the dictators of the pre-Arab Spring era: not only was revolutionary change inevitable and long in the making, but the case for letting Arab dictatorships succumb to popular rule is strong on grounds of principle and American values.

Senator McCain proceeded to make an impassioned call for Western support of the Syrian uprising, recounting harrowing tales of torture, gang-rape and mass-shootings that had been relayed to him during a recent visit of a refugee camp on the Turkish-Syrian border - "and all of this is happening as we speak, with Russian weaponry and Iranian boots on the ground assisting Assad's henchmen." His point about the need for the President to display a Reaganesque intuition about what America stands for and its role in the world was well-taken. Senator McCain convincingly argued that the merely by publicly condemning the treatment of Soviet dissident Nathan Sharansky in the Gulag, President Reagan helped to mobilise and energize the regime's opponents. As such, President Obama, too, should make use of the bully pulpit to defend the Syrian people.

The lessons of non-intervention in Rwanda should be heeded, the Senator maintained. When pressed on the possibility of yet another American military misadventure in the Middle East, Senator McCain made clear that any US involvement will have to be limited to arms supplies for the rebels, the creation of safe zones and firm and unequivocal support for the overthrow of Assad. The crucial point, he asserted, is that inaction, too, is a form of action, albeit the worst of all options: "All that was said to happen if we arm Syrian rebels is happening anyway: Al-Qaeda is arriving in droves, borders to neighbouring states have been destabilized, and Assad is not only still in power but has stepped up his fight against the insurgents." Thanks to the information provided by NATO's intelligence agencies, pro-Western elements in the opposition have already been identified, and these need NATO's material support if Assad's reign of terror is to end.

Senator McCain berated President Obama for 'leading from behind' throughout the Arab Spring, failing to make the case for intervention in Syria to the American public, and disengaging too early from Libya. Rather than helping the new Libyan government secure its borders, disarming rebel forces and providing help and

assistance for the wounded and destitute, the passive US approach led to the instability that allowed al-Qaeda operatives to execute their heinous attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, an attack made all the more tragic by the fact that the vast majority of Libyans not only rejected Islamism at the polls, but view the United States as their friend and Ally. By extension, Senator McCain views NATO's failure to assist anti-Assad forces as a missed opportunity to generate good-will among the Muslim world whilst weakening Syria's key partner, Iran. Questioned about the Iranian nuclear programme, Senator McCain responded that he is "not afraid of an Iranian attack on Israel. What I do fear is the proliferation of nuclear technology by the world's biggest sponsor of state terrorism, and the inevitability of a nuclear arms race in the Gulf if Iran is allowed to become a nuclear state." On the issue of Afghanistan, Senator McCain was critical of President Obama's repeated announcements of the impending US withdrawal. A Taliban prisoner once quipped to his US guards that 'You have the watches; we have the time', which highlights the core issue with the current war strategy: the repeated emphasis on complete US disengagement in 2014 removes any incentive for average Afghans - who, McCain insists, despise the Taliban - to work with the Coalition. It was a mistake to withdraw completely from Iraq, instead of leaving behind a residual anti-terror force behind, a mistake which ought not be repeated in Afghanistan.

Senator McCain expressed his disappointment with the foreign policy of a rising China: "Normalization of our relations with China were accompanied by high hopes which are not being met." The Senator cited cyber-criminality as a central sticking point in Sino-American affairs. A recent discussion of the subject with Jeffrey Immelt, CEO of General Electric, revealed that roughly two-thirds of the dozens of cyber-attacks that GE is subjected to per month originate from China, but that no assistance in tackling the perpetrators is forthcoming from the Chinese government. Indeed, China's increasing assertiveness in its neighbourhood has created opportunities for American strategic engagement in the area: this explains the US' increasingly close naval co-operation with former foe Vietnam, the recent opening of a US Marine base in Australia and the creation of a Joint Operating Base with the Philippines. To solve the territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Senator McCain called upon the Chinese authorities to engage in multilateral negotiations, dismissing their current strategy of bilateral talks, which has proved ineffective.

On the topic of domestic politics, Senator McCain offered candid answers on a range of issues. He defended the rise of the Tea Party as a typically American political movement borne out of protest against gridlock in Washington. The best response, he maintained, is to engage these protest voters, and educate them about the need for immigration reform, the importance of American leadership in the world and other topics that have produced the most heated grassroots discontent. When challenged about his choice of running mate during the 2008 election, Senator McCain offered a robust defence of Sarah Palin, dubiously arguing that she was a more qualified candidate than Barack Obama (by virtue of having held executive office in Alaska). The reason for her negative public image is the 'unprecedented attack campaign' orchestrated by what McCain terms the 'liberal media establishment'. This was McCain at his least convincing, along with the response to a question about his vision

for economic recovery in the United States. He answered this by touting the party line, supporting the Romney-Ryan tax plan as a means of creating the conditions for growth. To this end, the Senator peddled the myth of President Reagan's growth-inducing agenda of tax cuts, ignoring the fact that he introduced a tax increase package in August 1982 in the midst of a recession (President Reagan argued at the time that 'the goal is simple and just: to see to it that everyone pays his fair share,' a statement which, if made in 2012, would be met with pitchforks and cries of 'Communist!' by the GOP rank-and-file). Senator McCain batted away suggestions that he, too, had taken a turn to the right since 2008, arguing that his reason for objecting to Obamacare was its partisan nature and the 'sleaze' and lobbying by pharmaceutical corporations and the AARP that accompanied the legislation.

Mitt Romney's poll bounce following his recent debate with the President was explained by Senator McCain as follows: "Since March, the Obama campaign has been running a relentless barrage of attack ads against Mitt Romney, painting him as an elitist extremist. The debate gave him the chance to overturn this perception by speaking to the American people directly." McCain stressed the importance of the next presidential debate, which will be watched by up to 80 million voters, and also expressed his view that the key to election victory will be turnout, and the Hispanic vote. Here, Senator McCain correctly pointed to demographic trends which will spell the end of the GOP as a major political force unless Hispanic voters are brought into the fold. Given that Romney has the support of about 27% of Hispanics (compared to George W. Bush's 44%), that seems like a tall order, but explains why advocates of immigration reform such as McCain are likely to end up winning the argument on this sooner rather than later.

Unexpectedly, Senator McCain did not unconditionally condemn Julian Assange and Wikileaks when asked about the matter, instead making the sensible point that the release of the cables illustrates the tendency for governments to over-classify - after all, most of the cables turned out to be trivial and uninteresting. What McCain rightly deems inexcusable, however, is the fact that Wikileaks refused to redact names in the cables, callously putting the lives of informants and intelligence assets at risk. The Senator also took the chance to unequivocally denounce the abuse of detainees by US personnel at Abu Ghraib, as well as the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, as a black stain on American history. Also unusual for a Republican, Senator McCain was scathing about the *Citizens United* decision, calling it "the worst Supreme Court judgment in recent history", having produced a limitless influx of corporate money into the presidential race.

The Senator's performance was highly entertaining, peppered as it was with his usual light-hearted witticisms. For instance, he reminded the audience that Egypt's new president, Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, holds a degree from the University of Southern California - 'which helps to explain his extremist views.' In a similar vein, he noted that he was the most recent of all Arizonian presidential candidates throughout history to lose the election: "Arizona may be the only State where mothers do not tell their children that they can grow up to be President." Indeed, after his defeat to Barack Obama, he slept like a baby: "Sleep for two hours,

wake up and cry, go back to sleep for two hours..."

Asked about his view on the development he deems most likely to shape the future, the Senator removed his iPhone from his jacket, explaining that the technological revolution had brought about the greatest overhaul of man's means of communication since Gutenberg invented the printing press. This will change the nature of society radically, at once leading to greater strife and turmoil, whilst simultaneously helping to empower citizens - an unpredictable dynamic tension which will fundamentally re-make the world. Here was Senator McCain at his most perceptive: decades of analysis and participation in international affairs allow him to identify the most significant of trends from the constant buzz and white noise of an ever-evolving world.

Senator McCain reminded Americans in the audience of Mayor Daley's advice to 'Vote early and vote often', concluding his sweeping analysis with a call for renewed US diplomatic and military engagement with its Allies: "The world cries out for more American leadership, and this requires strong and durable alliances with our partners." The 'pivot to Asia' announced by President Obama, whilst necessary, should not come at the cost of neglecting America's European Allies. Lastly, he urged students present at the talk to make the most of their privilege of attending one of the world's finest higher education institutions, encouraging them to use their knowledge, education and leadership skills to make the world a better place, because "there is no end nobler than that of serving a cause higher than one's own self-interest."

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