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## On the side of God

In her interview last night, Sarah Palin revealed she has quickly grasped John McCain's aggressive foreign policy aims



**Erik Jones**

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Alaska governor Sarah Palin's first interview with ABC anchor Charlie Gibson gives a unique window on the foreign policy and world view of Senator John McCain. Palin is obviously a quick study and she possesses a clear and logical mind. In a matter of just days she has gone from not having time to follow the situation in Iraq to being able to speak cogently about Russia, Georgia, Israel and Iran. Although she did not recognise what Gibson meant when he referred to the "Bush Doctrine", that is easy to understand as well.

The McCain team hardly has an interest in teaching her the continuities from one Republican administration to the next. And where there is a minus there is also a plus. Palin may not have recognised the Bush doctrine, but she was able to find a precedent in one of Abraham Lincoln's speeches for her comment that the war in Iraq is a mission from God. Her training has gaps but it can also pay off.

The insight comes from seeing how Palin's able mind comes to grips with the logical implications of McCain's foreign policy positions. For example, McCain is committed to preserve the territorial sovereignty of Georgia and he believes both Georgia and Ukraine should be in Nato. These are not just personal commitments, they are also policies that a McCain administration would inherit from Dick Cheney and George Bush. Gibson's question was how far McCain would be willing to go to back these commitments up. As she thought through her answer, Palin sketched the underlying logic. Both Ukraine and Georgia should be in Nato, she asserted. And once in Nato, they would benefit from an explicit American military guarantee: "That is in the agreement." So if Russia were to invade Georgia, a McCain-Palin Administration would expect "to be called upon and help". This was most likely an unscripted moment.

It is hard to see how McCain could imagine that Nato would survive an attempt by the US to commit the alliance to an open-ended security guarantee that stretches all the way across the Black Sea.

The fact that Palin regards the Russian intervention into Georgia as "unprovoked" makes such a commitment even more unlikely, at least from the European members of the alliance. Although most Europeans believe that the Georgians were trapped by the Russians and that the Russian reaction was grossly disproportionate, they remain cautious about Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, whom they regard as at best impetuous and at worst foolhardy. In their view, leaders like Saakashvili would only feel emboldened by the promise of a Nato security guarantee - making them more likely to trigger conflict with Russia rather than less.

If the conversation about Nato was unscripted, the exchange on Iran and Israel was etched in stone. Palin made it clear that Iran should not be allowed to have nuclear weapons, not because Iran would use them, but because the Iranian leadership "would allow terrorists to be able to use them". The implicit reference here is to the threat that the most dangerous weapons would fall into the hands of the most dangerous people - which was the original justification of the Bush administration and its allies, including Senator McCain, for the war in Iraq. At this point Gibson asked (repeatedly) how the McCain administration would react if Israel were to launch a preemptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities. Palin insisted: "We are friends with Israel, and I don't think that we should second-guess the measures that Israel has to take to defend themselves, and for their security."

The implication here is that while our allies are sovereign, our enemies are not. Moreover, the issue extends beyond territorial integrity to include the motivations of the actors involved. Russian action against Georgia is unprovoked; Israeli action against Iran cannot be second-guessed.

Moreover, as Palin explained, "if there is legitimate and enough intelligent and legitimate evidence that tells us that a strike is imminent against the American people, we have every right to defend our country." Indeed, this right exists even outside the threat of imminent attack. When Gibson asked whether "we have the right to go across the border, with or without the approval of the Pakistani government", Palin replied: "I believe that America has to exercise all options in order to stop the terrorists who are hell-bent on destroying America, and our allies. We have got to have all options out there on the table."

This last comment is perhaps the most revealing of all. It underscores Palin's commitment to the belief that the United States is, pace Lincoln, on the side of God. It also reveals an underlying logic. Palin starts by dividing the world into us and them and then proceeds to make sure that we are safe and they have no power to hurt us. It is unsurprising that a committed evangelical Christian would hold such a view. What is breathtaking is the depth of its idealism as an expression of foreign policy. The John McCain who spoke out about the dangers of over-extension in the Balkans in the early 1990s would never have embraced this perspective. The McCain who spoke cautiously about the need to support President Clinton in Kosovo would have rejected it as well. Even the McCain who lent his full-throated support to the Bush administration in Iraq would have balked at this stark abandonment of political realism. Only the new McCain who is running for president is willing to make the leap to such a Manichean world view. Sarah Palin has been a quick study of the new McCain's foreign policy. In her first interview, she revealed both the depth of her learning and the education of John McCain as well.

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