

Elections and Power in The United States 2012, an Unforgettable Contest

José Luis Valdés-Ugalde*



The United States is entering the 2012 electoral contest, perhaps the most fascinating in recent years, amidst international tumult. Since 1989, the complex globalization-imposed opening placed it in a position of relative fragility on the international scene *vis-à-vis* its closest competitors like China and the Russian Federation, and its allies and opponents in the European Union and other regions around the globe. It is a time when Washington is readjusting in order to recover its hegemony or to consolidate it. Both planes, the domestic and the international, have been directly and indirectly affecting the tone and content of the political debate since 2011.

In this article, I will analyze some of the events and issues that have been transcendent and impacted public debate in the United States, underlining that this election, perhaps like no other since the 1970s and 1980s, is a watershed in the political process and ideological debate. It would seem to be the cause of a major crisis in the Republican Party, more than the Democratic Party, since the presence of a *de facto* force like the Tea Party, has made emotions boil over internally and destroyed its decision-making equilibrium, basic for any political party that hopes to survive. Not even in the times of Republican first- and second-generation neo-conservatism had it shifted as much to the extreme right of the political spectrum and forgotten so soon the idea of “compassionate conservatism” that distinguished the era of Ronald Reagan and the two Bushes.

*Researcher at CISAN.

This election, perhaps like no other since the 1970s and 1980s, is a watershed in the political process and ideological debate.

THE POLITICS OF INFAMY

Amidst the plethora of Republican reproaches to Barack Obama is the accusation that the president has not exercised a foreign policy in accordance with the neo-imperial bases that have been the *raison d'être* of the United States. During the Republican primaries, Mitt Romney, Rick Santorum, and Newt Gingrich talked about his supposed weakness *vis-à-vis* Iran, the military withdrawal from Iraq, the lukewarm defense of Israel, and lastly, the weakening of U.S. might and the reduction of Pentagon spending. These last two issues were a direct consequence of the 2008 economic crisis and the budget that the Republicans in Congress barely helped pass. Romney has said,

Another of President Obama's presuppositions is that America is in state of inevitable decline. He seems to believe that we have entered the "post-American world" predicted by Fareed Zakaria's best selling book of that name. The perspective is shared by many in the foreign policy cognoscenti, and apparently by the president himself. He therefore sees his task as somehow managing that decline, making the transition to post-superpower status as smooth as possible, helping Americans understand and adjust to their new circumstances.¹

All of this is at the expense of the wise counsel of analysts and the empirical evidence showing that the United States is weakening.

For his part, Obama has consistently reaffirmed his "smart power" strategy. First and foremost, Obama has come out in favor of his uncomfortable ally, Israel, including the possibility of a concerted attack on Iran if it continues its rather unclear uranium-enrichment process. According Israel's prime minister, that process would allow Iran to build an atomic bomb within a few months. This refers to the so-called "red zone," where the production of nuclear weapons is irreversible. In this matter, for reasons of both need and political survival, Obama has become a "hawk by coercion," and could end

up being made vulnerable by the historically weakest U.S. foreign policy issue at the high point of his bid for reelection.

This pressure —although he would also say conviction— led him to say before the U.S. main Israeli lobby, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC),

I have said that when it comes to preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, I will take no options off the table, and I mean what I say. That includes all elements of American power: a political effort aimed at isolating Iran; a diplomatic effort to sustain our coalition and ensure that the Iranian program is monitored; an economic effort that imposes crippling sanctions; and, yes, a military effort to be prepared for any contingency.²

This is clear, unequivocal support to Israel, whose prime minister seems to have underestimated Obama. Despite this, Romney has not stopped insisting that Obama has abandoned Israel, which "is among America's greatest allies, a true and faithful friend, one that has made real sacrifices for peace."³ Despite this insistence, different mainstream academic and journalist analysts have taken care to reveal the truth. This is the case of Haim Saban, who wrote in *The New York Times* that,

Romney claims Mr. Obama has "thrown allies like Israel under the bus," but in fact the president has taken concrete steps to make Israel more secure —a commitment he has described as "not negotiable." . . . His support for Israel's security and well-being has been rock solid: as president he [provided] full financing technical assistance for Israel's Iron Dome short range anti-rocket defense system. . . . In July he provided an additional \$70 million to extend the Iron Dome system across southern Israel. That's in addition to the \$3 billion in annual military assistance for which Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed deep personal appreciation.⁴

Ideological delirium and lies embroider the Republican discourse. Obama had to respond to the moment's pressure and has been trapped between two politically and morally uncomfortable ways forward: either protect and guarantee his ally's security and shut the Republicans' up or continue to be the "smart power" president and keep emphasizing diplomatic pressure to avoid what is clearly a predictably catastrophic military adventure against Iran. He is divided between a military option —more over Israeli than U.S. priorities— and a diplomatic route that would lead to a place of relative peace.⁵

Romney is another case of unscrupulous speculation, or “casino capitalism,” that to a great extent was the cause of Black September 2008 and still has the United States mired in a recession that has complicated Obama’s administration.

OBAMA LAUNCHES MISSILES AND
ROMNEY IS LEFT SWINGING IN THE WIND

As the campaigns progress, Obama has taken Romney’s measure on several issues and is letting him swing in the wind. His website “Obama for America” levels grave charges at Romney as a 1980s and 1990s businessman whose enormous fortune, estimated at about US\$300 million, was made in part at the expense of the workers that he and his partners laid off. In a video featuring former GST Steel, Dade Behring, and clothing store Stage Stores workers, Romney is denounced for purchasing their companies through his subsidiary Bain Capital, inflating their stocks on the market, and selling them off when they topped out, making millions, and then leaving them to their fate so they had to go into bankruptcy and lay off their employees.⁶ The victims of these operations report that more than 9 000 workers were laid off from the three firms, with no severance or insurance of any kind.

This is one more case of savage capitalism, which displays no business ethics and the terrible management that Tony Judt exposes in his book *Ill Fares the Land*.⁷

Based on these data, Romney, as an aspiring head of state, is another case of unscrupulous speculation, or “casino capitalism,”⁸ that to a great extent was the cause of Black September 2008 and still has the United States mired in a recession that has complicated Obama’s administration and the lives of most U.S. Americans.

This background draws a picture of a frivolous, arbitrary politician who could well be turning into a liability for the Republicans, like Sarah Palin when she ran with John McCain in 2008. Based on Romney’s business background, we can speculate about why moderate Republican were fearful that he might win the nomination, since he lacked the moral authority to denounce Obama’s handling of the economy.

So, his argument that he’s a good bet because he was a successful businessman is falling apart, deepened by his disrespectful, plutocratic, and unforgettable statement about

the 47 percent of Americans who “consider themselves victims,” who are “in debt,” and “pariahs” dependent on the welfare system, which, truth be told, he himself built up when he was the governor of Massachusetts from 2003 to 2007.⁹ Krugman writes that this statement

reflects the extent to which the GOP has been taken over by an Ayn Rand-type vision of society, in which a handful of heroic businessmen are responsible for all economic good, while the rest of us are just along for the ride. . . . It was a window into the true attitudes of what has become a party of the wealthy, by the wealthy, and for the wealthy, a party that considers the rest of us unworthy of even a pretense of respect.¹⁰

On another front, Obama has also begun what can only be considered an original offense. On May 10, he stated in an interview that same-sex couples should be allowed to marry.¹¹ This position, which according to *The New York Times* still has no legal repercussions, and may not get much media play among the public, is, however, very audacious in addition to historical. It is the first time a sitting president takes a position like this on such a polemical issue. Merely an electoral move or not, it forced Romney to come out radically against, saying that marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman.¹²

It was a risk Obama took to set up his opponent: first, it aims to corner Romney in his own ideological corral imposed by the Tea Party’s extremism and force him to refuse legitimate civil rights to the large gay minority, which has the sympathies of the majority of the population (51 percent of women, 63 percent of young people, 68 percent of liberals, 56 percent of moderates, and 47 percent of non-Latino whites). Secondly, the idea is to expose his extreme right-wing intolerance because he does not recognize that this is a civil rights issue for a minority that, although socially accepted, has insufficient legal guarantees. And thirdly, Barack Obama, as a representative a racial minority, puts himself once again at the center as a lightning rod for the debate, forcing Romney to retreat, or at least show himself to be insensitive, an actor unfamiliar with the gender issue in the twenty-first century. By contrast, Obama reaffirms himself as a sensitive, open person, little by little becoming immune to Romney’s slander. It would seem that on issues like the handling the economy and civil rights, the Romney campaign will fall apart, since there is more than enough evidence up to now that shows him to be a smooth-talking, insensitive politician, scarcely qualified to become a statesman.

GOODBYE HEGEMONY?

Since September 11, 2001, the long-announced decline of U.S. power around the globe has been debated in academia and the public sphere. This is by no means an idle debate since, as Fred Halliday says, it is about the future of modernity in the capitalist, democratic world of the West, where Washington tries to be at the cutting edge. Halliday maintains that the terrorist attacks were a “global event,” which in turn precipitated a “global crisis” that could take 100 years to get out of.¹³ In any case, the most transcendental thing about that historic moment is that it is the product of modernity itself.

Both politically and economically, since 2001, the United States has been going through an unending crisis. George W. Bush’s schizoid invasion of Iraq in March 2003—which Romney wanted to repeat—radicalized and accelerated the decline of the United States and catapulted its global disrepute. The same thing happened with the 2008 crisis, which detonated a time bomb in Obama’s hands that shook U.S. capitalism to its foundations as well as those of global financial and economic stability.

For U.S. allies like the European Union and Japan, and even for emerging, powerful China, that instability has exposed their own instability, impacting their long-term economic equilibrium and sustainability. For some like Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, the United States is going through an economic depression—its third—as a result of a deflationary process (negative growth), given which the rational analysis of that country’s practitioners seems to have been uncommonly affected. For example, Krugman states that not even fiscal austerity is enough to provide the indispensable steps required to climb out of the hole. In addition, the economic bailout measures proposed by Obama today have been hijacked by the political clash that began with the Republican primaries and will certainly negatively impact the U.S. economy until November of this year.

Given the magnitude of the crisis the United States is dealing with today, some analysts affirm that the decline is a fact, while others argue that there is no such decline and therefore, it certainly will not be consummated. It is common for there to be a perception that, in the face of the emergence and economic growth of China, Brazil, India, and Turkey, among others, the United States will have to give up spaces of hegemony that it had never had to share before. However, and despite this loss of power, we must understand, as Joseph Nye suggests, that the decline is always relative to the power that the others hold,

and, in absolute terms, how it is based on domestic changes. In short, Nye suggests that since the Peloponnesian Wars, the emergence of Athens, and the crumbling of the British Empire, there has been no single model of comparison to understand the collapse of the great powers, much less that of the United States as a single power.¹⁴ The growing power of other global actors does not necessarily mean that the United States has weakened to the degree of no longer being hegemonic. As a result, it is probable that even for the rest of the twenty-first century, we will continue discussing whether the world is entering a post-U.S. order or not.

BURKE’S DILEMMA

You can never plan the future by the past.

EDMUND BURKE

At the risk of simplifying something transcendental, that even Edmund Burke, the father of conservative thought and inspiration to the Republican Party, could today be debating with concern, we could say that in general, Obama seems to be the charismatic, predictable candidate, and Romney, the one who sparks irremediable mistrust, the one who does not end up convincing with either his rhetoric or his image. One is the candidate of rational discourse and actions, with a strategic, statesmanlike vision, and the other, the candidate of duality and programmatic schizophrenia, the grossly opportunistic former governor. One, the liberal with a progressive profile, more pragmatic since taking office; the other, the candidate of conservative, even reactionary, frivolity, who changes tune according to the melody the Tea Party is playing. One, a former humanist, multicultural activist with a vision for social cohesion; the other, the remote millionaire, the shark of financial speculation, the candidate of power for money and money for power.

My concluding argument is that the Republican Party no longer knows how to proceed without betraying the principles

The emergence and economic growth of China, Brazil, India, and Turkey, among others, creates the perception that the United States will have to give up spaces of hegemony that it had never had to share before.

The president's proposals to deal with the crisis are coherent
for their time, particularly since the Republican Party has lost its compass
and is betraying its conservative roots.

of the common good—thus, my allusion to Burke—that even Ronald Reagan was faithful to when attending to the concerns of the Chorus and that are at serious risk since it put its aspirations to the presidency in the hands of a grey, ambiguous candidate, held hostage by the right's extremism. The Republican Party is terrified of not being able to win the presidency at a historical moment, and, because of its obsession with winning it at all costs, it fears losing it—and for a very long time—amidst a social base (which it considers despicable) that is already mistrustful of its rejection of fundamental, unavoidable issues of social cohesion like employment, economic well-being, immigration, cultural diversity, health, and education. During the primaries, the party went into a self-destructive spiral that seems unstoppable.

November 6 will be a historic election that poses two fundamental questions. The first is how is it that the Republican Party allowed a figure like Romney to slip in as its presidential candidate, personifying as few others could the excesses of casino capitalism, whose most conspicuous representatives are paying for his campaign? The second question is whether Barack Obama will be able to get reelected in the purest Roosevelt style, with less money, but with the best thought-out proposal for modernization through reforms similar to those that FDR implemented beginning in 1932.

Those were the times of the New Deal, and just like today—perhaps with a few minor adjustments—, times of economic crisis that demanded profound transformations in the regulatory system. The Republican Party has spent more than 50 years trying unsuccessfully to dismantle the Roosevelt-era normative framework. Today, given the urgency of the moment, it is trying small-mindedly to destroy Obama's alternative program. The president's proposals to deal with the crisis are coherent for their time, particularly since the Republican Party has lost its compass and is betraying its conservative roots, all of which will mean that it will arrive to the November balloting weakened and fragmented.

The Republican drama is that Mitt Romney will very probably not be up to overcoming Barack Obama's citizens' prop-

osition. In this context of conservative decadence, Burke would probably be much more optimistic about Obama's vision of the future than about the vision of the past that Romney is dragging along behind him. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Mitt Romney, *No Apology. The Case for American Greatness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), p. 28.

² See "Remarks by the president at AIPAC Policy Conference," March 4, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/03/04/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-0>.

³ M. Romney, op. cit., p. 26.

⁴ Haim Saban, "The Truth about Obama and Israel," *The New York Times*, September 4, 2012.

⁵ Amidst all this turmoil, Obama's insistence on making it clear to the Muslim world that the United States has not been nor will be at war against Islam should be taken into account. See his June 4, 2009, speech in Cairo at "Remarks by the president on a new beginning," www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09.

⁶ See <http://my.barackobama.com/Romney-Economics>.

⁷ Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (London: Penguin Press, 2010).

⁸ Robert B. Reich, "Mitt Romney and the New Gilded Age," *The Nation* (double issue), July 16-23, 2012.

⁹ These statements were revealed by a secret recording scooped by *Mother Jones* magazine, www.motherjones.com/.../09/secret-video-romney-private-fund-raiser.

¹⁰ Paul Krugman, "Disdain for Workers," *The New York Times*, September 20, 2012.

¹¹ Interview with Jeff Mason, May 10, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/10/us-usa-campaign-obama-gaymarriage-idUSBRE84818Y20120510>. [Editor's Note.]

¹² Paul Ryan, Republican vice-presidential candidate, has proposed a constitutional amendment to define marriage as the legal union of one man and one woman, which, if passed, would legally eliminate the constitutional right of a minority.

¹³ Fred Halliday, *Two Hours that Shook the World* (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

¹⁴ Joseph Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).