

"False Choices, or Media Traps"

The United States is going through two sets of debates among presidential candidates, one set each for Democrats and Republicans. These debates usually have journalists as conveners and questioners, and the journalists seek to force the candidates to commit themselves on supposedly difficult choices. These "difficult" choices are regularly formulated in ways that they are media traps, sometime maliciously so.

A typical example occurred on Nov. 14 at a Democratic debate presided over by Wolf Blitzer. He posed the question, "Are human rights more important than American national security?" Obviously, the answer Blitzer was forcing was the pseudo-patriotic one that national security took precedence over everything else. Bravely, Richardson voted for human rights. But Dodd, Biden, and Clinton all said it was obvious that national security was the primary consideration. And Obama said the two considerations are complementary. Kucinich was cut off from answering.

No one said the question was an absurd one, in two different ways. First of all, was it a question about foreign policy? Or was it a question about U.S. internal policy? Blitzer and the candidates assumed it was a question about foreign policy, at the moment a question about U.S. policy in Pakistan. One person tried to shift the ground to internal policy, but he was not allowed to do this.

Yet, the question is of course primarily one about U.S. internal policy. George W. Bush has been persistently engaged in diminishing human rights in the United States on the grounds that something called "national security" requires this, and on the grounds that national security always comes first. Most Republican politicians and presidential candidates endorse this position enthusiastically, and most Democratic politicians and presidential candidates are intimidated into agreeing, lest they seem weak or unpatriotic.

But there is an obvious question to which almost no one alludes. What is it that the nation is trying to "secure"? The standard answer, on the rare occasions that this question is explicitly posed, is that the nation is trying to secure "liberty" or "freedom" or "human rights," which the United States is said to enjoy and which is the source of its national pride.

The illogic of seeking to "secure" freedom or human rights by diminishing freedom or human rights seems to escape attention, as it did when Wolf Blitzer posed his unhelpful, not to say malicious, question. The Obama answer, that the two are complementary, is meaningless. The logically necessary answer is that it is freedom or human rights that the government, the media, and the people should always be trying to "secure." There is nothing else to secure. It is surely not "life" that one is trying to secure. If it were, why would we make of Patrick Henry an American cultural hero because he said "Give me liberty or give me death"?

If one poses this pseudo-question as a question of foreign policy, it is equally a trap. Is the United States government, or any government, in fact able to "secure" human rights in Pakistan, or any other country? And if it does undertake actions with these ostensible objectives, does it, as a result, "secure" these human rights in these other countries?

The clear answer of five hundred years of history of the modern world-system is that such interventions occasionally have positive results but most frequently make the situation worse, from any middle-run standard. The Iraq invasion surely provides confirmation of this elementary observation. The primary historical observation we can make about the geopolitics of the modern world-system is that major powers have almost never engaged in interventionist action for any other reason than preserving their power position and advantages over the middle run. The rhetoric they employ - either of human rights or of national security - is vacuous for the most part, and is used primarily to throw dust in our eyes. Unfortunately, throwing dust to blind us to reality is most often a successful tactic in the short run.

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