

Lively Debate On Obama's Foreign Policy

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Has Barack Obama strengthened or weakened the U.S. in the eyes of the world through his foreign policy of engagement?

In a lively encounter sponsored by Intelligence Squared U.S. Debates and held at the Skirball Center at NYU last night, Dan Senor, a journalist and Fox News commentator, scored the most dramatic point of the evening when he challenged General Wesley Clark and French philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy to name one prominent world leader with whom Obama has established a close personal connection as a sign of national loyalty.

Senor had argued that George Bush established "deep relationships" with the leaders of England, Canada, Australia, Italy and other countries, who in turn stood by the president, even in difficult times.

Senor and his debate partner, publisher Mort Zuckerman, watched as their opponents were speechless for a moment before Levy countered that personal relationships among political leaders are less important today in "a new world order" where mass appeal trumps individual relationships at the top. He said Obama has restored America's good name around the world through his efforts of engagement. And Clark added that it was "naïve" to believe that foreign leaders stand up for the U.S. out of personal conviction.

"Political leaders act for their own survival," he said.

The debate, smoothly moderated by ABC-TV journalist John Donovan, was titled "Obama's Foreign Policy Spells America's Decline," with Senor and Zuckerman arguing for the motion, and Clark and Levy arguing against.

Intelligence Squared, largely funded by the Rosenkranz Foundation, has been staging high-powered debates for four years. They are taped before a live audience – more than 800 people filled the Skirball Center – and later shown on Bloomberg Television and broadcast around the country on NPR.

(check www.intelligencesquaredus.org for details)

Senor and Zuckerman stressed that key American allies around the world feel the U.S. is backing away from longstanding support, including England, France and Eastern European countries. (Curiously, neither mentioned Israel as a case in point.)

"We're seeing a realignment now," said Senor, and once-solid alliances are now in jeopardy. "It's a good time to be an enemy [of Washington] now and a crummy time to be an ally."

Zuckerman said Obama, whom he voted for, has put too much stock in his rhetoric and not enough in "reality," asserting that the administration officials' peace efforts in the Mideast indicate "they don't know how to play the game" and are creating an "erosion of confidence."

Gen. Clark asserted that Obama "inherited a deep hole" from his predecessor in terms of the economy, foreign policy and other areas, and that while he has "broadened the dialogue" with other countries, he has also taken hard but admirable decisions, such as sending more troops to Afghanistan.

While Senor and Zuckerman contended that the world is a more dangerous place than it was when Obama took office, particularly in terms of Iran, their opponents maintained that the dialogue with Teheran, however unsuccessful, sent a positive signal around the world that America was no longer locked into a narrow ideology and was willing to engage in honest dialogue.

The audience was swayed by the latter argument, since 58 percent agreed with them (based on an instant electronic vote pad) and 34 percent sided with Senor and Zuckerman. Eight percent had no opinion.

Before the debate began, 23 percent of the audience agreed with the motion, 45 percent opposed and 32 percent had no opinion.