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Irrational exuberance;  
How do **voters** choose leaders?

**BYLINE:** By Suzanne Fields, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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"Throw the bums out!" That's one of the most familiar campaign cries in our history. It's even more effective than Herbert Hoover's slogan of "a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage," and stirs the blood like "Tippecanoe and Tyler, too" never could. Sometimes a little bum-throwing makes sense. Sometimes it doesn't.

In just over three weeks, we'll elect a **president**, who, whether it turns out that he's John McCain or **Barack Obama**, has crossed his heart and hoped to die if he doesn't make good on his promise to throw out the policies of an embattled **president**, if not that **president** himself. "**President Obama**," if there is one, might even chase George and Laura down Pennsylvania Avenue, throwing sticks, stones and harsh words at the moving van.

A lot of the rhetoric of any campaign is designed to encourage foolishness, like expecting **voters** to believe everything they hear from the platform. **Voters** often relish being unpredictable, and make unlikely choices. The political scientists and other academics, who demand a rational explanation of things for which there may be no rational explanation, often rail at "public **ignorance**" as the cause of not seeing things as they think the public should. These wise men think all that's important is "policy," and a candidate's ability to define undefined presidential "doctrine," or to play a version of Trivial Pursuit, such as identifying the middle initial of an assistant associate undersecretary of state.

Larry Bartels, a professor of politics at Princeton, suggests in a fascinating article in the Wilson Quarterly that the proper response to such thinking is a mocking, "So what?" **Voters** usually get to the place they want to go, and they choose how they get there.

"The political consequences of 'public **ignorance**' must be demonstrated, not assumed," argues Mr. Bartels. "And that requires focusing not just on what **voters** don't know, but on how what they don't know actually affects how they vote. Do they manage to make sensible choices despite being hazy about the details of politics and government? ... If they do, that's not stupid - it's efficient" These political scientists might make the common academic assumption that **voters** are always rational, "but a half-century of [scientific analysis] provides plenty of grounds for pessimism about **voters'** rationality."

Nothing annoys academics like the notion that faith in native common sense trumps arcane argument, that **voters** will take a lot on faith if they decide a candidate is likeable, down to earth and serious enough to be trusted. Sometimes **voters** make choices that seem to be textbook cases of irrationality, never more so, for example, than election results in Arkansas in 1968. **Voters** there on a single day gave resounding victories to George C. Wallace, a third-party segregationist candidate for **president**; William Fulbright, a moderately conservative Democratic incumbent senator; and Winthrop Rockefeller, a moderately liberal Republican running for governor. They still talk about that one in political-science seminars.

Sometimes **voters** just want to express unfocused anger, and take it out on whoever is unlucky enough to be at hand. Like this year. George W. Bush is not available as a target, so for some **voters** John McCain will have to do. There's a bizarre precedent of sorts.

In the summer of 1916 killer sharks repeatedly attacked swimmers along the New Jersey shore, killing four of them over a period of weeks. The attacks were brazen, even for hungry sharks. One shark even ventured up a freshwater stream to find a victim. The attacks were unprecedented, and the tourist season was ruined. Several hotels were all but forced into bankruptcy when vacationers abandoned the shore by the thousands, and didn't return.

New Jersey residents demanded that Congress pass a law, or something, though killer sharks are notorious for not obeying the law. So Jersey **voters** took it out on a popular **president**, who had been the state's favorite son from his term as governor and before that, the **president** of Princeton. Woodrow Wilson was re-elected **president** that November, anyway, though not with much help from **voters** in the towns along the Jersey shore.

History is an unreliable guide for Messrs. McCain and Obama, because nobody can ever be sure where whimsy - sometimes defined as "irrationality" in college lecture halls - will be aimed. Just as in earlier election years, millions of **voters** will act on hunches and guesses next month, on feelings held deep in the pit of the stomach. Therein lies the secret to the great political success we call democracy.

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A clueless nation led astray by an imperialistic elite?

**BYLINE:** Doug Bandow, For The Straits Times

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I'VE OFTEN been asked by people outside of America to explain US foreign policy. It's a daunting or, perhaps more accurately, embarrassing task. Americans know very little about the world. Their **ignorance** is almost charming. In one sense, it's good that most people in America are more interested in spending time with family and friends and in earning a living than in plotting a coup in some faraway land, waging a war against an emerging power or issuing foreign ultimatums over random economic and political demands.

Unfortunately, however, as a result, Americans have essentially delegated the power to do all of those things to a Washington-centred elite. When things go wrong, Americans get angry and policies sometimes change. But Washington's interventionist enthusiasm always quickly returns.

It's not a pretty spectacle. Most Americans are not ideologically committed to turning the United States into an imperial power.

Few of them would like to spend months or years patrolling failed foreign states, such as Iraq. Most of them turn against needless conflicts when it becomes evident that they aren't going to be short and sweet.

Indeed, when wars go bad - like in Iraq - the public eventually says 'Enough!'. Anger over the Bush administration's Iraq war - among other things, incompetently waged - led **voters** to transfer control of Congress to the Democrats. The failure of Congress to override the policies of **President** George W. Bush may lead **voters** to give the White House to the Democrats as well in next year's election.

Yet, in a perverse sense, the biggest US foreign policy problem is when the costs seem low. Then the public simply ignores the issue, giving policymakers wide discretion to continue advancing interventionist policies contrary to America's national interests.

How else to explain continuing American membership in Nato, especially one that keeps expanding? Europe once needed defending from the Soviet Union. From whom is America defending Europe today, a continent with a population and GDP larger than America's?

Moreover, what sense does it make to continue expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation up to the borders of Russia, absorbing countries with multiple disputes with Russia, an authoritarian, nuclear-armed power?

Yet the American people remain blissfully unaware of and uninterested in their nation's foreign policy. If America ends up at war with Russia over a recent addition to Nato, **voters** might take notice. Otherwise they just don't care.

Similarly misguided is America's continuing defence of South Korea, which has upwards of 40 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea. Most South Koreans no longer fear the North; in fact, they have been subsidising it for years.

Then there's Japan. The world's second-ranking economic power, Japan could do far more to protect itself and its region. Its neighbours prefer that the US does the job, but so what?

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vast majority of Americans, who have to pay the bill, probably would be much less enthused if they thought about it.

Beyond such major commitments, Washington has dribbled bases and forces around the world. Unfortunately, foreign alliances can act as transmission belts of war at a time when America should be building firebreaks to war.

Although serious armed conflict is unlikely in either Asia or Europe, Washington's explicit promise to defend the Baltic states and Eastern Europe necessarily makes all of those nations' squabbles with Russia America's squabbles as well. Washington's implicit guarantee to Taiwan does the same thing with China next door.

Advocates of scattering security guarantees around the globe argue that such commitments deter aggression, which is true to some degree. But US deployments also ensure American involvement in conflicts that would be of little relevance to it.

Moreover, guaranteeing the security of other nations creates an incentive for irresponsible behaviour. That is, so long as some countries believe the US will rush to their defence in a conflict with a bigger power - China and Russia most obviously today - they are likely to act more aggressively.

This phenomenon is evident in Taiwan, which has adopted a confrontational stance with China. Taipei asks: With Washington behind us, why not assert our interest?

The challenge for advocates of a new US world approach is to break through the public's **ignorance** to build popular support for overturning elite opinion. It won't be easy.

But without a real opposition to today's aggressive interventionism, America is doomed to following a flawed imperial policy. Only by supporting presidential candidates who challenge the interventionist status quo will **voters** recover the American republic.

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#### BURDEN OF PROOF

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