

Robert Guttman

Editor-in-Chief, *TransAtlantic Magazine*

(moderator)

John Carroll

Editor, *Los Angeles Times*

Andrew Gowers

Editor-in-Chief, *Financial Times*

Politics and Foreign Policy: Views from the *L.A. Times* and the *Financial Times*

Robert Guttman

Most presidential campaigns—and I’ve been on three presidential campaigns, ran for office myself in 1986, and covered campaigns—most of them are based on economics, jobs, local issues, unless there’s a war going on. Now we have three wars going on—one in Iraq and one in Afghanistan and the war on terrorism. So foreign policy is a key issue, and, according to most polls, the dominant issue in this campaign. The campaign basically ought to be a referendum on the Bush administration’s war in Iraq. So we’re going to try to get a perspective from an American paper, the *Los Angeles Times*, and also from a European global paper, the world’s financial newspaper, about how people are covering the campaign. At Johns Hopkins I’ve been lecturing a lot to foreign journalists and I have to say that in talking to two or three different groups from Europe every week, most Europeans can’t believe that America might reelect George Bush. I tell them there’s a 50-50 chance, and I think there’s going to be a lot of Europeans who are going to think: “How can America do this?” There’s going to be a disconnect.

I also think there’s a big disconnect on how we’re fighting the war on terrorism. Most Americans, especially if you live in Washington or New York, know that things are pretty serious. There is a war on terrorism. Most Europeans haven’t come around to that yet. People you talk to in Europe somehow think that we’re overstating the issue and it’s not as bad as we say it is. So, there’s a lot of disconnect between Americans and Europeans: The Prime Minister of Iraq spoke before a session of Congress today and he and the president just had a press conference at the White House. So, Iraq is probably going to be the defining issue in the final 40 or 50 days in the campaign. We have the first presidential debate coming up which will focus on foreign policy, which is just going to be the key issue because of what’s going on in the world.

So, what we’ll do now is have John Carroll come up and talk for a few minutes and then Mr. Gowers will come up and then we’ll open it up to everybody here to talk about issues they might want to talk about.

**There’s a lot of
disconnect between
Americans and
Europeans**

John Carroll

Well, it’s nice to see everybody again and especially nice to see my friend, Andrew Gowers. A year ago the *Los Angeles Times* formed a partnership with the *Financial Times* and we shared some stories. Before we went into that we sent one of our best editors over to London to hang around the office and we started reading the *Financial Times* much more closely than we had before and came to respect it as a newspaper of the most exacting standards. So, if you haven’t had a chance to read it, I commend it to your attention.

I’d like to start out by discussing several perspectives on the most important foreign story that’s going on today—Iraq, and to touch on several linkages between Iraq and U.S. public opinion and, therefore, the election.

Let me talk first about what I know most about, and that is how the U.S. media is covering this. The fact is that the keyhole through which we view the Iraq war is narrowing. Just yesterday I signed a purchase request for a 20-year old Mercedes that looks like a normal Mercedes but is armored. We didn’t get a 20-year old model just because we’re cheap; we got it because there are lots of 20-year old Mercedes on the streets of Baghdad and we didn’t want to stand out. Our strategy recently has been to have a low visibility and to be low key. For example, the security

guards that we have are armed but they don't show their weapons. We try to look just like normal people and blend in.

We're acutely aware of how dangerous it is over there. Last New Year's Eve three of our staff reporters plus several Iraqi assistants were injured in a car bombing. This was New Year's Eve. Last year we had another reporter in Baghdad die of a



John Carroll

heart attack. We had another reporter, Paul Watson, stabbed in a mob situation. We had another reporter go to the bottom of a canal in a military vehicle, he had to strip off all of his flak jacket and helmet, dump his computer, and swim for his life, and I've had any number of other harrowing episodes. This year it seems worse. The kidnappings are up. Kidnapping is a business. There are people who will kidnap you for money and turn you

over to terrorists, and we are fearful of that.

Let me read to you just a short passage from a memo that crossed my e-mail just within the last week from one of our best reporters. This is someone who has covered Colombia, where incidentally we had two freelancers who were working for us kidnapped last February. "My fear is that by maintaining our current low profile approach, the *L.A. Times* quickly becomes among the most attractive business opportunities in Baghdad. As the NGOs pull out and other companies harden up, we become the low-hanging fruit—Americans working for a Fortune 500 company, lightly guarded, easily invaded, high-profiled." So we're working on that as we speak.

Because of the conditions and the potential for kidnapping, our people are limited in where they can go. They plan every move very carefully, and it narrows the physical vision they have of the subject that they cover. It also cannot help but cloud their vision in the sense that if you have foreboding every day and concern about what's going on, that will cast a certain light on your view of the subject in other events of this nature. One of the ways we counter that is by selecting our reporters very carefully. We have the leadership of a wonderful bureau chief and others, including Patrick McDonnell there, who are seasoned reporters, who are not likely to fly off the handle or make a rash judgment based on a single episode and who will put things in a good perspective. Nevertheless, it's a very hard job and the conditions I'm describing to you are affecting all of the U.S. media and are, therefore, affecting the view that we all get of the war.

Now, let me turn to another linkage between the war and public opinion

and that is a perspective that we and others get on the meaning of 9/11 and what the implications of it are. I think that if you could measure it you would learn that the degree of alarm one has varies in proportion to the distance we are from Ground Zero. Alarming as it was here in the West Coast, I sense in my visits to the East Coast that it touched people far more deeply, and people were much more willing to take strong, and perhaps even rash, actions in response. The war in Afghanistan was an obvious thing to do. Anybody who would even think of running for president would have invaded Afghanistan. Iraq was another matter, and it had great support on the Eastern seaboard. I think that as you get farther away from the East Coast, enthusiasm is less. In today's *Los Angeles Times* we published a poll which said that Kerry was leading Bush by 15 percentage points, even though it also showed that Bush comes up pretty strong in his leadership qualities and Kerry is a bit of a question mark.

Because of the conditions and the potential for kidnapping, our people are limited in where they can go

And one of the interesting commentaries that I've read about in the European papers, including the *Financial Times*, is the fairly sharp perspective that the current deterioration in security and in the general situation in Iraq is, by a great magnitude, far different from what President Bush sees and describes in his speeches.

Let me talk about another political issue and how the refraction of the Iraq situation creates perceptions of the personalities of the two candidates—and we do tend to elect people to a considerable degree on their personalities. Bush, as we know from popular portrayal, is decisive; Kerry is vacillating. If you see the situation

Britain's ambassador to Italy was quoted inadvertently as saying that George Bush is the best recruiting sergeant that Osama bin Laden ever had

differently, you could say that Bush is rash and Kerry is thoughtful. I think that Bush benefits not only from the fact that he is, in fact, decisive and he has a great mechanism for portraying himself that way, but I think he also benefits from the sentiment expressed in the old saying, “My country, right or wrong.” That generally over the years has meant “My country and my president, right or wrong.” I remember reading a long time ago that even when politicians make mistakes in confrontations with foreign powers, they are supported in that. Eisenhower’s polls went up when he was caught lying about the U-2 incident. Kennedy’s polls went up after the Bay of Pigs, and I suspect Bush is getting such a benefit even though we don’t know whether the Iraq decision was wisdom or folly. This difference in personality has been amplified by the advent of attack politics. Attack politics is a kind of game in which one seeks to—this is the word—“define” one’s rival and to

repeat a message about that rival again, and again, and again, until the rival has lost all reputation. This we see every day and it’s used by both sides.

A disturbing trend to me is that, mimicking the attack politics trend, we have attack journalism, which is very similar in defining people and institutions and working them over day after day. This is prominent in the talk shows and also in the Internet. It tends to be preponderantly conservative, but not exclusively, and it is a very unsettling trend in my business.

Last, I’d like to call attention to the larger issue—not Iraq, but terrorism, which is the whole point of Iraq, and whether the Iraq situation has hurt the war on terrorism or helped it. I was interested to read in the paper recently that Britain’s ambassador to Italy was quoted inadvertently as saying that George Bush is the best recruiting sergeant that Osama bin Laden ever had. How do we know? I think that it’s very difficult to tell on balance whether or not Iraq has helped or hurt, and whether Bush’s policy helped or hurt. We don’t know the standing of the war on terrorism in the world at this moment but I have to wonder. I read for example that we’re concerned about the Iranians’ development of nuclear capability and it’s our desire to get this issue before the U.N. Security Council, which may not happen. If it doesn’t, our fall-back position is to put it in front of a coalition of European nations; I wonder how effective we can be in assembling a coalition of European nations in light of the friction between us and the European nations, or many of them, which resulted from our unilateral treatment of Iraq. Nobody knows.

I will close here with a quote that I like from a very quotable guy, Don Rumsfeld, and he’s seeking metrics to

understand the situation. Those of you who are old enough to remember Robert McNamara, this is kind of a blast from the past: “Today we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing, deterring, and dissuading more terrorists every day than the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us? Does the U.S. need to fashion a broad, integrated plan to stop the next generation of terrorists? The U.S. is putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan, but are we putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists? The cost-benefit ratio [and this is pure McNamara], is against us. Our cost is billions against the terrorist cost of millions. Is our current situation such that the harder we work the behinder we get?” The most striking thing, in my opinion, is that these questions were raised by Secretary Rumsfeld in October 2003 and the questions, of course, remain unanswered.

Thank you.

Andrew Gowers

My thanks to the Council for assembling such an impressive audience on such very short notice. I think it’s a great tribute to the international-mindedness and appetite for debate on these important issues in this fair city. I came here once before, 20 years ago, and all I remember is that I got lost on a freeway. But this proper visit is blowing me away. It’s wonderful to be here. It’s an appointment I made with myself when we first decided between the *FT* and the *L.A. Times* to enter into this partnership, which John described, and I’m very, very glad I came.

I’ll pick up where John left off in terms of the relationship between the foreign policy adventures that we are

currently involved in, international opinion and the election, and how the election is seen from my perspective, because I know much more about how it's seen from Europe than how it's seen here, but maybe I'll risk a few remarks on the domestic scene as well before I sit down.

I can tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that this coming election is the most closely and intensely watched U.S. presidential election, certainly in my recollection, probably in the last 40 years and possibly ever. I suggest "ever" is the correct answer because of the nature of the global media and communications now. But the reason why it's being closely watched in contrast to 1992, 1996, and even 2000 is because of a real sense that somehow it "matters." It matters because what's happened in U.S. policy over the last few years and especially since 9/11, has been quite unexpected and in many quarters, certainly in Europe, quite unwelcome.

The second reason people think it matters is because it's such a knife-

In 30 nations out of 35, including many whose governments are strongly allied with the U.S., the public favored Kerry over Bush

edge thing and people are struggling to understand why it should be such a knife-edge thing given the mess, I have to say, that unfolded in Iraq. There is an air around Europe that they cannot say they were not warned that this mess [would] ensue. The sense that it matters from the European perspective

stems, I think, more particularly, not from anti-Americanism. There is loose talk that anti-Americanism is sweeping the world, sweeping Europe. I don't believe that actually to be the case or, shall we say, not yet. I think it's a sense that this Bush administration is quite different in kind from anything that's gone before. I know we've had moments of transatlantic frictions in the past, I remember the Reagan years, and now we all have much warmer memories of the Reagan years and probably rightly so, but at the time it seemed that Europe and the U.S. were in crisis.

It's more than that. It's a feeling that somehow something has got torn in the fabric of this most important relationship in the world between the U.S. and Europe. It is the most important diplomatic relationship over the last 50 years and we, together, account for 70 percent of world trade. There is more investment going back and forth than ever before, but something has gotten torn and fault lines on both sides. The Europeans, I don't think understand, I don't think most people outside America really understand, the depth and power of the effects of 9/11. Certainly, as John mentioned, more acutely on the East Coast and perhaps here, the emotions of anger, fear and humiliation and the consequent moves to put out the lens through which all foreign policy is seen I don't think is understood, and even when people try to understand it, they don't quite see things like that. It's sometimes said that for Europe 9/11 is still less important than 11/9—11/9, by the way, was the 9 November 1989 when the Berlin Wall fell and suddenly Europe felt that it was at peace. That's still an abiding thought in many people's minds in Europe.



Andrew Gowers

So, I have to tell you that if the world, and certainly Europe, had a vote in this election I think Kerry would be the clear winner. We ran in our paper earlier this month a global poll and the results, I think, are for one of the most intense global polling exercises that we have ever seen on an issue of this kind. In 30 nations out of 35, including, by the way, many whose governments are strongly allied with the U.S., the public favored Kerry over Bush. Only Poland, Nigeria and the Philippines favored Bush and in India and Thailand they were neck-to-neck. What struck me was the strength of the data, particularly in Europe. In Germany, 74 percent of the sample favored Kerry, ten percent favored Bush. In France it was more dramatic. It was a 13-to-1 differential. Even in the UK, where nobody has invested more in supporting the Bush administration than Tony Blair, it was a margin of 3-to-1, 47 percent to 16 percent. I think all the evidence is entirely attributable to the Bush

administration's international politics and reactions to them. Not just in Iraq but also in matters such as the approach to the Kyoto Treaty on global warming or the approach to the International Criminal Court, and I think not just on issues of substance, because clearly there are a lot of substantial similarities between the policies of the Bush administration and the probable policies of the Kerry administration on a lot of these things—a sense of not being dealt with correctly. It has a lot to do with clumsy diplomacy, the take-no-prisoners approach, we'll enlist you as allies when we chose and then selectively, and then if you're not for us you're against us. That has created a great deal of resentment.

I guess that feeling is reflected in a lot of the European coverage of the election, or perhaps I should say it was, because I think the coverage in European newspapers, including our own, as the weeks have gone on has become more advanced. It's tended to focus increasingly on the similarities between the candidates rather than the differences. I have read a lot of the European press in the last few days, and there's a feeling of substantial disillusion with John Kerry as a candidate, that he's actually not a great campaigner and that he's not made the most of the opportunity he had with all of the tragic events in Iraq. There's a view that his peaceful alternative vision for Iraq is based on pretty shaky foundations. For example, the idea that after all that's happened he can suddenly pull magic out of the hat and get international help, for example, from France and Germany, into the Iraqi quagmire. If he really thinks that then he's in for a big disappointment.

But just to give you an idea of some of the statements that are being made there, *Le Monde* had a headline just this week: "Why He Must Go" meaning Bush, of course. *Le Monde* in France was the paper that, just to illustrate the scale of the way in which opinions have moved in the last three

difference with Bush would be more aesthetic than substantial. It's becoming apparent that the enthusiasm of many Europeans to Kerry will be exposed as excessive, and it's based on the Utopian idea that there will be pure and simple dismantling of the Bush experience.

What's been learned in Iraq about the disadvantages of going it alone could actually prompt a little bit more of a meeting of the minds

So Europe is left contemplating and rubbing its eyes about a Bush administration II and wondering somewhat anxiously what it portends. I would say there are two reasons for cautious optimism on that score. Clearly, whichever

years, after 9/11, *Le Monde* memorably had a front page editorial which said, "We Are All Americans Now." Just the other day *Le Monde* had a front-page headline that said "We Are All Non-Americans Now." This comment is very shrill in the French press and my colleagues there tell me that there has scarcely been one positive thing said about Bush in recent months.

But then to give the other side of the story I alluded to, I was looking in *Die Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, the largest circulation quality newspaper in Germany, and quote from that commentary for the last few days: "Kerry's biggest problem is called Kerry and to solve it he'll have to slip out of his own skin." They could understand the continuing appeal of President Bush in the sense that he embodies clarity, decisiveness and even optimism in the face of these terrible events.

L'espresso in Italy alluded to the point that perhaps we were fooling ourselves thinking if we get Kerry all would be well. We can hazard a guess, at least to begin with, that the

president is elected in November faces the same problems in Iraq and will have to find a way out of them, probably largely under his own and America's own steam, I fear because they could have been different. There could have been much more international effort even after the war. But I think also that reality bites in the sense that what's been learned in Iraq about the disadvantages of going it alone, on both sides actually, could actually prompt a little bit more of a meeting of the minds, in the sense that it is obvious now that an American military response without the aspects of "soft power," diplomacy, political support and indeed assistance in policing that Europe can provide, has its disadvantages. Equally, Europe feels, I think, that after its overreaction or after the rupture that took place in the Iraq war, that actually the process from the sidelines rendered them futile and irrelevant, so maybe there will be a move that to engage more. But I think an early test of that is coming, it's on the horizon, John alluded to it, and that was Iran.

Before I close I just want to say a couple of things about the domestic debate in the campaign and the domestic coverage of it. It really does differ extraordinarily widely from when I pick up the American papers and watch the American broadcast media to what they're saying on the other side of the Atlantic, and there are two ways that it stands out. First of all, the sense that we have of rigidly divided camps, the idea that, by virtue of the peculiarities of the electoral college system, there are very few swing states left, it's sort of a 50-50 situation, we find that quite hard to understand.

On the other side of it, which I welcome a discussion about here, is the nature of the media reporting on it. It seems to me John's absolutely right about the way it's become a lot more partisan. I see intense competition, intense fragmentation between the traditional print and broadcast media and the worlds of cable, talk radio and the world of blogs. One thing that brings out or exacerbates this is the tendency towards allowing opinion to lead coverage of the election, or coverage of anything. I think various people, including Rupert Murdoch, discovered a while ago that opinion can be more entertaining than sober factual reporting and it's also cheaper to produce. It also happens to dovetail with something that we know from the opinion polls. We're reporting tomorrow in the paper an opinion poll from the Pew Research Center which shows that 43 percent of those people who have an interest in hard news coverage in the U.S.—it's probably no different anywhere else, by the way—

watch channels that suit their political opinions, that tell them, in other words, what they want to hear. I'm not complaining about it. I think it's a fact of modern life, but it does raise two problems. One, where do people find something that they can trust as the real truth and secondly, how on earth are those few but rather crucial swing voters suppose to make up their minds?

Thank you very much.

Robert Guttman

I agree that right after 9/11 when *La Monde* had a headline "We're All Americans" what's happened in the three years when the world united behind the United States after the attack in supporting Afghanistan so the first question I have is everybody's talking Iraq, Iraq, Iraq. I interviewed the head of NATO three weeks ago and he said if NATO fails in Afghanistan NATO will be a failure and if we look at Afghanistan things are going so well there either. They're having an election next month but warlords have taken over again and the one thing I think that seems to slip everybody's minds I sent questions to Edwards and Cheney and the question I asked them was: Are we ever going to capture Osama bin Laden? Remember after 9/11 everybody talked about Osama bin Laden. We're going to bring him to justice or bring justice to him and if you listen to people speeches now they hardly ever mention Osama bin Laden. My question is: In Afghanistan we have 6,000 – 10,000



Robert Guttman

troops and some European troops and in Iraq we have 130,000 troops. So to me there's a disconnect. Why haven't we caught the person responsible for what happened three years ago and that's a question I'd like to bring up while we're focused on Iraq I don't think we're focused in on Afghanistan and why are we not talking more about how we're going to capture Osama bin Laden.

The other thing is that we talk about our allies, France and Germany, are not helping us in Iraq but if you look at Afghanistan we are having a lot of our allies, including France and Germany, helping us

*Speeches to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council are edited for readability, not content.
The Council is a non-partisan organization. The views expressed herein are solely those of the individual authors.
The Council is a non-profit organization that pays neither honoraria nor expenses to its speakers.*