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A new vision for America's security

By Tom Ridge and Barry McCaffrey | July 31, 2007

WHILE THE war in Iraq continues to dominate the news and the presidential candidates bob and weave on the issue, the nation finds itself at a major foreign policy crossroads. Elevated terrorist threat levels and global events make it increasingly clear that the next president will face national security and foreign policy challenges that will extend far beyond the question of what to do in Iraq. The path we choose will determine our future security, our image abroad, and our ability to continue to be a credible global leader.

Since 9/11, the nation has learned it cannot rely on the military alone to ensure national security. Global challenges confronting the United States remain intense and are growing. The US ability to forge partnerships with key allies to fight weapons proliferation remains increasingly important. The global drug trade is thriving, helped by bumper opium harvests in Afghanistan. The recently foiled attacks in the United Kingdom demonstrate that the United States must be prepared to tackle new fronts that may be opening in the war on terror.

The real national security challenges for the next president are not going to be primarily military, but rather will be about diplomacy, economic development, and the nature and scope of our international leadership and alliances. Successful future presidents will be those who inspire support for the common global objectives of humanity, prosperity, and freedom.

Whether the next president is a Democrat or a Republican, he or she must ensure that America projects smart power -- elevating development assistance and diplomacy as integral parts of a national security strategy. This was a conclusion of three recent reports on national security: the 9/11 Commission Report, the 2006 Department of Defense Quadrennial Review Report, and the 2006 National Security Strategy.

Placing more emphasis on saving lives and creating opportunities for people of other nations can strengthen our national security and revitalize America's global image and moral leadership. By advancing global health, strengthening civil society and rule of law, and expanding access to basic education and clean drinking water, the next president can show the world an America that is strong, secure, compassionate -- a country that can lead by example.

There is already a long track record of foreign assistance and diplomatic efforts working in concert with our military and homeland security programs to bolster our nation's

security and moral values. Over the past four decades, US assistance has helped millions of people feed their families; nearly eradicated river blindness and polio; helped Bosnia, Mozambique, and El Salvador rebound from civil war; and put hundreds of thousands of HIV/AIDS patients in Africa on lifesaving antiretroviral treatments.

With nearly 45 percent of US exports going to developing countries, job creation and economic progress in those countries have a direct impact on our own economic well-being and security. Diplomatic initiatives such as global partnerships, educational and cultural exchanges together with long-term investments in the health, education, and livelihood of citizens of other nations keep America safer by engendering goodwill toward the United States, and alleviating conditions that leave fragile countries vulnerable to the influence of extremist groups.

America, by design and by desire, has been -- and will always be -- connected to the rest of the world -- intellectually, emotionally, ethnically, and commercially. The interconnectedness of the world today spans many sectors -- health, agriculture, education, even domestic security. No country can be truly safe or prosperous without the cooperation and like-minded commitment from all others.

To pave the way for a new, broader vision of America's foreign policy and national security, these issues must be elevated to high priority status in the 2008 presidential campaigns. So far, the news media and most of the candidates have, unfortunately been content to keep the focus of the foreign policy campaign conversations largely on Iraq. To reverse this troubling trend, this week we are helping The Center for US Global Engagement's launch its "Impact '08: Building a Better, Safer World" campaign to engage presidential candidates in a national conversation about America's role in the world.

We are proud to join other foreign policy and national security experts, as well as leaders from American business, humanitarian, faith-based and community organizations, who want to build the political will to chart a new path for America's global engagement. Americans need to hear from presidential candidates how they plan to revitalize America's moral and pragmatic leadership in the world. Explaining how they would make greater investments in development assistance and diplomacy, better integrate military and civilian efforts, and ensure accountability and effectiveness would be a good start.

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