

# Command decisions

Crafting a test for presidential candidates

By Robert P. Baird

**A** top Hillary Clinton adviser, Howard Wolfson, said last month that Barack Obama had not passed “the commander-in-chief test.” Though Wolfson never specified what that test consisted of, Clinton’s opponent for the Democratic presidential nomination did not take the challenge kindly.

“The disingenuousness of it was revealed,” Obama responded, “when [the Clinton campaign] started saying that, ‘Well, maybe he can be vice president,’ which by President Clinton’s own criteria means that I must be qualified to be commander in chief.”

The idea of a “commander-in-chief test” has gotten a lot of attention in the 2008 election, but it isn’t new with this presidential campaign. The phrase appears to have come up first in 1992, when George H.W. Bush’s re-election campaign suggested that a Democratic presidential candidate would have to pass a commander-in-chief test. The St. Petersburg Times described the Bush cam-

paign’s version of the test this way: “Try to imagine [the candidate] as commander in chief of the armed forces in a time of grave crisis.”

But what would happen, we wondered, if there really were a commander-in-chief test? What would it look like? We asked a range of national-security experts to help us put one together.

We asked them to suggest questions whose answers would help them decide whether a presidential candidate (of any party or political persuasion) was prepared for the role of commander in chief. Here’s what they said:

**1** “Gen. Petraeus has said that there is no military solution to the problems in Iraq. Do you agree? If so, how can the continued deployment or possible withdrawal of our armed forces best be used to encourage a political solution in Iraq?”



**Madeleine Albright**, former secretary of state and the author of the new book “Memo to the President Elect: How We Can Restore America’s Reputation and Leadership.”

**2** “If as president you received information that you believed to be sound that Iran would be able to test a nuclear weapon within a very short time—before any diplomacy or further sanctions could reasonably be expected to be effective in stopping the test—would you use force?”



**James Woolsey**, a venture partner with VantagePoint Venture Partners. He was director of the Central Intelligence Agency from 1993 to 1995.

**3** “Under what circumstances, aside from self-defensive actions against an attack or an imminent attack, is intervention, military or otherwise, by the United States justified or warranted?”



**Lee Hamilton**, president and director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, vice chairman of the 9/11 Commission and co-chairman of the Iraq Study Group.

**4** “Have you read ‘Day of Battle’ or ‘Red Badge of Courage’? Do you understand the difference between responsibility and authority?”



**Bob Kerrey**, president of The New School and a former U.S. senator and governor from Nebraska

**5** “The director of national intelligence informs you that a group of fundamentalist military officers has begun an armed insurrection to try to overthrow the Saudi royal family. The national security adviser and secretary of state urge you to use our military to keep our Saudi allies in power, arguing that, among other things, the price of oil will skyrocket. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff cautions that air and naval power will not be enough to prevent the coup and that tens of thousands of ground forces will be needed. The secretary of defense argues against putting our troops into the middle of a civil war. What do you do?”



**Lawrence Korb**, assistant secretary of defense during the Reagan administration and currently a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress

**6** “What criteria or factors would you consider in making a decision to send American military forces into harm’s way? What questions would you ask of your advisers before committing to the use of force?”



**Michele Flournoy**, president and co-founder of the Center for a New American Security

**7** “If the economy gets worse, or some part of your plan doesn’t prove as affordable as you thought it would be, which (if any) of your domestic initiatives would you be willing to scale back or sacrifice in order to ensure that your national security agenda was well-funded?”



**Michael O’Hanlon**, senior scholar at the Brookings Institution and a former adviser to Sen. Clinton

**8** “How do you weigh the relative merits of stability and democracy in our relationships with other states, such as Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Egypt?”



**Nathaniel Fick**, author of the best-selling book “One Bullet Away” and a fellow at the Center for a New American Security. He served in Afghanistan and Iraq as a Marine infantry officer.

**9** “How do you plan to coordinate the full spectrum of U.S. power—diplomatic, economic and military—to achieve the best result with the lowest cost in lives and treasure?”



**Paul Eaton**, a retired U.S. Army major general whose last operational assignment (2003-04) was to command and rebuild the Iraqi army

**10** “Seven-plus years after 9/11, America’s ground forces are badly overstretched. Simply put, we have too much war for too few warriors. How would you propose to close the gap?”



**Andrew Bacevich**, professor of history and international relations at Boston University

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