Spring 2008

Campaign 2008: The Critical Issues

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The Critical Issues

By Kevin Sims, Ph.D.

Unless you’ve been living in seclusion, you’ve probably noticed that we are firmly engulfed in the 2008 presidential campaign. The airwaves reverberate with earnest promises embedded in glitzy campaign advertisements intended to persuade the most cynical voter. Frequently lost in all of this activity is any reasonable or understandable discussion of the central issues of the campaign.

Candidate speeches are designed for short sound bites, and advertisements often communicate only in broad generalities, resulting in a surface-level presentation of the issues that most affect concerned voters. And what issues there are! Everything from property tax increases to pay for new school buildings to the war in Iraq. The economy and the threat of a recession, health care for every American citizen, universal pre-kindergarten education, immigration, tax cuts, abortion, same-sex marriage, and rising gasoline prices all present potential voters with a plethora of choices and decisions.

So, what is a wise and godly American to do? The following overview serves as a guide to the more critical issues facing the nation this election year.

The State of the Economy

“It’s the economy, stupid” has once again become the rallying cry for some of the presidential candidates. Just this past spring, increasing economic worries caused the issue to soar past the war in Iraq as the top issue for Americans — 67 percent to 48 percent, respectively, according to the Associated Press-Yahoo News Poll released on April 21. The closely related issue of rising gasoline prices also beat out the war at 59 percent. With growing layoffs, tight credit, and a troubled housing market, to say the least, voters are, quite understandably, concerned about the economy.

Annual government spending has ballooned to more than 50 percent higher than the Clinton-era budgets a decade ago. Of that, only 21 cents of every taxpayer dollar goes to national defense and homeland security. By contrast, 54 cents goes to entitlements like Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, and eight cents goes to servicing the national debt. Meanwhile, the federal deficit continues to grow, raising the national debt. Those debts tighten the money supply, increasing the costs of investment and slowing economic growth and prosperity.
Higher costs for energy and food last year pushed inflation up by the largest amount in 17 years. Energy costs rose by 17.4 percent this past year while food costs rose by 4.9 percent. Both were the biggest increases since 1990. Gasoline prices were up 29.6 percent, the biggest increase since 1999 when prices rose by 30.1 percent.

John McCain desires to make the Bush tax cuts permanent. He believes this action will provide a longer-term stimulus to personal purchasing power and will result in a more sustained recovery in the economy.

Democrats favor a quick end to the tax cuts and the restoration of larger amounts of funding for entitlement programs such as Medicare and Medicaid, as well as the potential provision of a universal, federally funded health care program. Further, they see another increase in the minimum wage as a more effective way to increase the purchasing power of the American consumer than a permanent tax cut.

**The War in Iraq/The War on Terror**

America’s fight against terrorism is viewed by many to be the most important policy question in this election. For more than six years we have been spared from a second September 11. Maintaining and enhancing that protection will be the most important job of the next president.

The surge, President Bush’s strategy for Iraq that just passed its first anniversary, appears to be accomplishing many of its goals and laying important groundwork for military and political initiatives yet to be fulfilled in a war that is now in its fifth year. This plan called for more than 20,000 additional troops on the ground in Baghdad and Anbar province, increased responsibility for the

A U.S. Army soldier talks to an Iraqi boy while providing security during a humanitarian mission in Iraq Sept. 27, 2007. Iraqi police forces were giving gifts to the children to help strengthen their relationship with the local populace.
Iraqi government and security forces, and more diplomatic and economic initiatives.

In January of this year, General David H. Petraeus, commander of the multinational force in Iraq, stated in his year-end report that attacks by insurgents in the country were down 60 percent from June 2007 and were at their lowest level since the early summer of 2005. Further, Petraeus also noted that civilian deaths were down approximately 75 percent from 2006, dropping to a level not seen since the end of 2005.

Bush has emphasized that a successful strategy for Iraq goes beyond military operations. As important as those victories are, the Iraqi citizens must see visible improvements in their neighborhoods and communities. It is widely believed that Iraq's best chance for long-term constancy is to develop democratic institutions that will protect the basic civil, political, and human liberties and rights of the Iraqi people. The policy options that have been advanced by both Democrats and Republicans have stated a desire to see stability in Iraq, as well as the entire Middle East region. The difference in achieving this desired outcome has been the focal point of discussion over the last couple of years.

Opinions from the Democrats on this issue typically run from an immediate withdrawal of all American troops to an immediate drawdown of 40,000 to 50,000 troops over the next year. McCain favors a continuation of the Bush Doctrine in the Middle East. All candidates stress the importance of encouraging the further development of the Iraqi government so the Iraqis can effectively govern their own population and provide for their own security against internal and external threats to their power.

It is no surprise that so many people want to come here: we are the most prosperous and free nation in the world. But our generosity and compassion should be tempered by the knowledge that those who want to harm us will use any means possible, including our immigration policy, to do so.

Today, anywhere from 12 million to 20 million illegal immigrants are in the United States. Half a million more enter illegally every year. The magnet that attracts most illegal immigrants is the easy availability of jobs. The 1996 law that makes it unlawful to hire illegal immigrants in this country is seldom enforced.

Some say there are jobs Americans will not do. But that demeans Americans who are working hard in every occupation. Almost one-quarter of all African-Americans and 40 percent of all Hispanics do not have a high school degree. These low-skilled legal workers are the victims of the depressed wages caused by illegal immigrants entering the workforce.

Most Americans feel that illegal immigration poses serious challenges. Several solutions have been suggested to cope with the problem, though they often result in more questions than answers. One is to give the 12 to 20 million illegal immigrants in the U.S. amnesty and a path to citizenship. The fear of many Americans is that...
this will send the wrong message to the potential illegals currently living outside of the United States. The possible result of this amnesty policy then is that others will be encouraged to enter this country illegally, too.

Another proposal is to create a guest worker program and permit illegal immigrants to stay and work legally. While there may be a legitimate need for this program in one industry — agriculture — most industries do not have the same need for foreign workers since most of their workers are legal.

Other proposals have centered around the completion of the 700 miles of fence along the border with Mexico, creating tamper-proof ID cards for all immigrants, eliminating the “visa lottery” that allows 50,000 random immigrants a year to enter the country, and deporting the nearly two million illegal immigrants with criminal records. Ending the debate over these possible proposals and making definitive decisions about their implementation is a critical need in this election year.

Some politicians want to put the entire health care system under government control, but many fear this large undertaking on the part of an already huge federal government would only create more problems for those needing critical care. A conservative alternative is to enact serious reforms in current tax and insurance law that would expand personal ownership and control of health insurance and transfer the control of health care dollars to individuals and families.

Further recommendations suggest that Congress create a federal health care tax credit that offers the same tax benefit for buying health insurance on the individual market that is currently available only for buying through an employer. This would allow people to own their own health insurance, without a tax or regulatory penalty, and hang on to their insurance no matter where or even if they work.

For those who reject a large, government-mandated, government-managed health care program, there are a variety of options which would allow individuals and families to be their own decision-makers and the managers of their own health care.

Conclusion
These are but a few of the issues to be considered by Americans as they prepare to vote in November. May God give us all wisdom as we sort through the alternatives and make our policy choices in this election year.

Health Care
America’s doctors and medical institutions are the envy of the world. The level of expertise and the facilities used to handle medical care are unmatched. Yet, many Americans worry whether they will have access to medical care when they need it.

Dr. Kevin Sims is a professor of political science at Cedarville University. Prior to coming to Cedarville, he invested six years as chairman and professor of history at Pillsbury College and then taught at Azusa Pacific University. He served as a staff assistant to Congressman David Dreier from 1984 to 1990. Sims received his Ph.D. from The Claremont Graduate School in 1991 and has been at Cedarville since 1990.