

CHANGE

Rhetoric and Reality

by Donald F. Kettl

The big headline of the 2008 presidential election is “change.” None of the candidates wants to become tied too tightly to George W. Bush’s sagging popularity. But that’s where the fun of this campaign begins.

As Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton lobbed mortar shells at each other, John McCain quietly cultivated the conservative Republican base (and the party’s big donors), trying to prove that he is a reliable conservative. Clinton and Obama burned barrels of pricey jet fuel scrapping over every last delegate. They bombarded each other about who best could wear the mantle of “change,” but their salvos nearly shredded the party. Clinton delegates wondered out loud if they could bring themselves to support Obama.

“Change” became a gauge of how far and how fast candidates want to run from Bush, especially on the economy, the mortgage meltdown, and the war in Iraq. The primary season established what they don’t want, but where McCain and Obama plan on taking us is anything but clear.

The Democrats are reaching back to the maxim that party strategist James Carville preached in Bill Clinton’s first White House run: It’s the economy, stupid. The focus on jobs and gas prices helps them tune into the big concerns of middle-class Americans and deflect the inevitable Republican counterattack that Democrats are soft on terrorism and weak on defense. As they turned from the haggling over who best could answer a 3:00 a.m. phone call, Obama began focusing the Democrats squarely on their core issues.

McCain burnished the foreign policy chops that came from his captivity in a North Vietnamese prison camp and his years in the Senate. As the Democrats lobbed mortars at each other, he readied a campaign based on policy maturity, senatorial experience, an uneasy link with the Republican base, and the uncertainties of the post-9/11 world.

For years, American voters have said that elections don’t matter because they never have real choices. It’s been hard to get college students to take campaigns seriously because they didn’t think elections mattered. This year’s campaign has bashed those cynical views. No election in recent memory has stirred up voters with such fervor. During the Pennsylvania primary, a stroll down Locust Walk became a gauntlet of rival signs. No one could accuse Penn students of apathy in this campaign, and as they return in the fall the students are likely to mobilize as never before.

Of course, presidents have to do more than preach about change. We elect them to run the government, but presidents really don’t act like CEOs (in large part because Congress has no interest in acting like a board of directors). We expect presidents to make sure the government works. They rarely get much credit for doing hard things well, but as the fallout from the government’s bungled response to Hurricane Katrina showed, big management problems can torpedo presidents.

The president we elect in 2008 will face a daunting array of big issues. There are the

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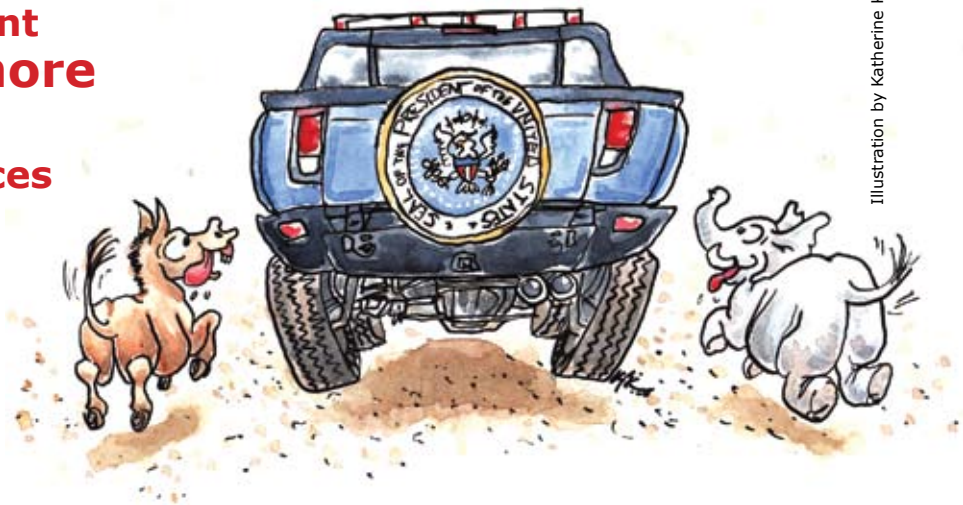


Illustration by Katherine Kuo

twin problems of the economic downturn and the war on Iraq, and the new president won't easily be able to snap his fingers to end either. There's also a big collection of sneaky issues that could creep up unexpectedly. In the last year, dog food disappeared from supermarket shelves because a foreign company slipped melamine into the wheat gluten used to make it. Toy manufacturers pulled dolls and trains from distribution because they contained lead paint. Airline passengers found planes grounded because maintenance workers had made a quarter-inch mistake in repairing the insulation on wheel-well wires. The new president can count on more surprises with big consequences – perhaps a breakdown of food safety, mega-overruns on defense contracts, a meltdown in the 2010 census, a West Coast earthquake or an East Coast hurricane or dirty bomb.

We've expanded the role of contractors into virtually every nook of American government. Private contractors spend 90 percent of all the government dollars in NASA's space shuttle program. The military has more private contractors than soldiers in Iraq. (Imagine how fast support for the war would erode if the military needed to find twice as many volunteers to fight the old-fashioned way.) Big problems have followed many federal contracts, and the new president is going to need to find a way to get the job done without allowing contractors to run amok.

And then there's the mega-problem of fiscal sanity. The next president will face a rising tsunami of budgetary red ink, as deficits grow from the war in Iraq, big tax decisions and entitlement programs for retiring baby boomers. It won't be much fun for any president preaching change without steps to get the nation's fiscal house in order, and that road runs through rising red ink of social security and health-care programs. The new president's second term won't be worth serving without a solution to these issues.

Chanting about change won't make it happen. The hard part is coming now that the primaries are moving into the fall campaign season and the inevitable problem of transforming big promises into practical results. Like a dog chasing traffic, one of these candidates is going to catch the car – and then, as president, will have to figure out what to do with it.

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ON OBAMA'S SIDE

Like hordes of college students, Ross Avila, C'08, enlisted in the Obama brigade. Avila, a psychology major who graduated last month, says he's been entranced by Senator Obama since he delivered his now-famous speech at the 2004 Democratic convention. So when his best friend at Penn, Jordan Grossman, C'08, decided to spend part of the holiday break in Iowa as an Obama organizer, Avila jumped aboard.

He spent more than a week going door-to-door, making phone calls and volunteering at rallies in Iowa City, home to the University of Iowa. Avila spent election night of the Iowa primary as a caucus observer, reporting turnout and the results. He was standing in the student union and watching television when he saw the networks put a check mark next to Obama's name. Excited, he barged into his friend's ongoing caucus, and later celebrated at a bar packed with young supporters, who cheered as Obama declared victory.

"It was one of the most memorable nights of my life," says Avila. "I had the sense since he declared his candidacy that it would be something big, but I didn't expect it to be this big."

Obama's Iowa victory foreshadowed an historic campaign, which now resembles the long-running soap series "All My Children" – with Ross Avila and David Helfenbein on opposite sides of history.