

Presidential Candidates Gloss Over the Real Issues



BY KEVIN HOLL '86

The so-called “debates” between presidential candidates convey more fluff than substance. Republicans and Democrats alike glibly recite platitudes and sound bites tailored for the next news cycle, rather than articulating their specific remedies for the clear and present dangers confronting our nation.

For instance, the number of murder victims in our country in the last six years alone exceeds the number of U.S. soldiers killed in combat in all our wars combined since the end of World War II. The ongoing war within our own borders, however, has not been a debate topic. The country’s correctional industrial complex also warrants scrutiny. We incarcerate more people than any other nation and approximately 3.2 percent of the U.S. adult population was in jail, on probation or on parole at the end of 2006. California’s incarceration problem is especially acute. Thirty-one prisons in the state are overflowing with nearly 200,000 prisoners. Remarkably, the state now employs more prison guards than there were prisoners in 1980.

Having the world’s preeminent military provides a sense of security. But, considering that the U.S. military budget exceeds the military budgets of all other countries combined, we should not be bogged down in a six-year quagmire with a country the size of Iraq. Further, our role as the globe’s peacekeeper is ironic given that we export almost half of the world’s military arms.

We also face daunting economic challenges. The U.S. established a record \$763 billion trade deficit with rest of the world in 2006. Our staggering national debt is over \$9 trillion, increasing an average of \$1.4 billion per day. Inflation is rising and we now have the highest level of consumer credit card debt since the 2001 recession, only compounding the recent mortgage meltdown.

Equally ominous is our dependence upon foreigners to finance our debts. The dollars we prodigiously spend for oil in the Middle East, to the detriment of our economy, are now being used by some foreign investors to purchase ownership interests in U.S. corporations and to finance our government’s debt.

Our political system is also under siege. Campaign financing, characterized by some as “legalized bribery,” requires those seeking elective office to devote their efforts to fundraising at the expense of legislating. Money does buy access and, as such, the concerns of average citizens are often forced behind those of wealthy donors. If you don’t believe that, ask yourself if you’ve ever met or spoken to, much less seen in person, any of your elected representatives.

If not articulated during the debates, how can we determine if the candidates have reasoned solutions to these challenges? Ideally, the media would play a significant role but we cannot rely upon TV’s talking heads and pundits whose hyperkinetic discussions emphasize personalities, polls and tactics, rather than policies. Nor do we gain constructive information from the deluge of political mail. Ultimately, we have to conduct our own independent research about the candidates and become, as Presidents Jefferson and Eisenhower implored, well-informed and alert citizens.

Educate yourself by reading articles and books published by, or about, the candidates. Attend the candidates’ public appearances. Visit blogs and internet sites that analyze the candidates’ voting records, and their support or opposition to legislation. Identify the individuals and interest groups contributing money to the campaigns and consider whether the contributions are given to secure future paybacks. Submit questions and express your opinions on the candidates’ websites.

While the debates may be no more than political theater where the candidates recite scripted lines, we cannot afford to be a passive audience. One way to provoke change is to become actively engaged in our democratic process and demand substantive answers from the candidates.

Kevin Holl is a San Francisco attorney who practices commercial litigation with Gordon-Creed, Kelley, Holl & Sugarman. Reprint permission courtesy of the San Francisco Examiner.