



THE VIEW

Issue #39

November 27, 2007

SHIFTING THE ELECTION GEARS

BY

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We have caught our collective breaths from the November Mississippi elections. The time has now arrived to get rolling on the next round – the Presidential and Congressional Elections. The View from the Stennis Institute will this week focus on the Presidential contest, and in so doing we will give the dust a chance to settle a bit before looking in depth at the Congressional races.

I have a real passion for political news and food. The confluence of the two over the Thanksgiving Holidays made for a lot of time flat on my back in one of the world's largest recliners with the television remote in my hand. I learned several things from nearly four days of following this pattern. The stage has been set. It is hard to believe that we have already endured a year of Presidential campaigning, but still have nearly a year to go. Some have complained that this is entirely too long for a Presidential campaign to last. I disagree with this assessment.

This is an historic election in the sense that it has been 80 years since there was neither a President nor Vice-President running for their respective party's nomination. It has been 56 years since there was neither an incumbent President nor incumbent Vice-President running for the White House in the general election. Thus, this is the first open election in many voters' lifetimes. Open elections, whether at the national, state, or local levels inevitably tend to tap pent up desire to run for a particular office. Certainly this is one explanation for a Presidential field that at one point numbered 18 candidates for the Republican and Democratic parties combined. As well known as some of these candidates might be, none has the Presidential name recognition that

would accrue to an incumbent President or Vice-President. The continuous parade of debates is aiding greatly in closing the gap that many of us have in what we know about the field of candidates.

Some eighty hours of intermittent monitoring of the news programs on a variety of networks including ABC, CBS, NBC, FOXNEWS, MSNBC, CNN, and others has been instructive. In that regard, I offer a few observations. As to national polls at this stage of the campaign, give them the same weight that you give the football polls in the month of August. National polls assess a candidate's strength based on a sample of the population in the entire country. Things can and do change drastically once the wins and losses begin mounting in the primaries and caucuses. January 3, 2008 is the kickoff day for the grueling series of caucuses and party primaries that will likely determine the respective party's nominees long before any convention vote is ever taken. Just as football teams begin to fade to the back of the pack in September, when the playing of games actually begins so will candidates who look quite promising on Christmas Eve begin to disappear in the snows of New Hampshire in early January. So those of you who are paralyzed with fear that Republican Rudy Giuliani or Democratic front runner Hillary Clinton appear to be home free can relax until the delegate garnering wins in the caucuses and primaries begin to mount up. Remember; because this is truly an open election there is no front runner.

My Thanksgiving sojourn in front of the pundits enabled me to form some more concrete opinions pertaining to the hot button issues in the campaign. In that regard, it is hardly a stretch to say that at this time various versions of the war or potential for a wider war in the Middle East is the top issue in the campaign. Nevertheless, the superior position of the war as a campaign issue may fall victim to the success of the recent Bush surge. In other words, other issues are apparently threatening to overtake this issue in importance. The issue that poses the greatest threat to overtake that related to the United States' military role in the Middle East is a broad one having to do with what I will label "personal economic issues". This is a catchall that captures the angst felt by individuals with regard to the high cost of health care and the dwindling role of health insurance, the disappearance of the old standby – defined benefit pension plans – and fears concerning social security, and rising costs of food and fuel among other things. Add to this the fact that we are entering a period in which that final element in living the American dream – home ownership – will be limited, and there is a recipe for discontent among those who count the most in an election – the voters. Additionally, at least according to a number of the talking heads responsible for political analysis, there is one issue just

appearing on the horizon that could gain additional traction. That issue is the repair of the United States' reputation in the world. That debate will turn on the proper amount of strength versus restraint and goodwill in the conduct of foreign affairs.

The issues are many, as are the solutions offered by the numerous candidates. We are fortunate to have the time to sort through them all.

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