

Major Issues the Candidates Won't Address



All too many important policy issues are unlikely to be addressed by the major party candidates in this year's presidential campaign. As of the Democratic convention, Senator Kerry had chosen to differ with President Bush on only a few important issues: Who should be president? How much to spend on health care? And what should be the top marginal income tax rates? But there are a number of important policy issues about which there seems to be little prospect of an

informed debate during this year's campaign.

President Bush's budget for fiscal year 2005 projects that the deficit will decline by about half by FY09, but this budget is very misleading. It includes no funds for the military and reconstruction activities in Afghanistan and Iraq, no funds for the recent broadening of Medicare to cover obesity therapies, and no increase in nominal nondefense discretionary spending over the next five years. Although those projected budget outcomes may be desirable, they are not credible. President Bush had previously supported large increases in spending for agriculture, defense, education, energy, Medicare, and transportation, and he has yet to veto a single bill. In short, Bush has no plan to reduce the deficit.

Senator Kerry has made no comprehensive budget proposal. An analysis by the National Taxpayers Union Foundation, however, estimates that Kerry's spending proposals would increase total federal spending by about \$226 billion a year, far more than the increased revenues from his proposal to restore the pre-Bush income tax rates on the highest incomes. In short, Kerry also has no plan to reduce the deficit.

President Bush had promised to propose some Social Security choice option during a second term; he has not mentioned this issue during the campaign, however, so he is not likely to have a mandate for whatever he may propose. In one of his strongest statements, Senator Kerry said that he would never consider any form of Social Security choice. So we are unlikely to have a debate on this important issue during the campaign.

Neither Bush nor Kerry has addressed the much larger and more complex problem of Medicare. But, of course, both candidates supported the large unfunded coverage of prescription drugs as a Medicare benefit, and the Bush administration has recently added an unfunded coverage for obesity therapies as a Medicare benefit without any specific legislative authority.

The huge fiscal imbalance of Social Security and Medicare grows larger by several hundred billion dollars each year that a major reform of those programs is not addressed. Unfortunately, that seems to be the prospect for the near future.

President Bush has considered a major reform of our laws affecting immigration and undocumented residents, but neither Bush nor Kerry has addressed this issue during the campaign. In the meantime, we still have a net inflow of about 350,000 illegal immigrants a year and maybe eight to nine million undocumented residents who have an ambiguous legal status. America is a land of immigrants, most of whom have proved to be responsible individuals and good citizens. We owe the same welcome and legal clarity to current and recent immigrants in search of the American dream.

The most divisive measures initiated by the Bush administration have been the Iraq war and the Patriot Act. There is likely to be very little discussion of these issues in the campaign, because Senator Kerry voted for both the Iraq war resolution and the Patriot

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Act. For either Bush or Kerry to make a major issue of these measures, he would have to admit that his prior judgment was a mistake—most unlikely. So there will be no debate between the major party presidential candidates on whether the war in Iraq was necessary to protect America's vital interests or whether the Patriot Act was a necessary restriction on our civil liberties. We will be dependent on Ralph Nader or the Libertarian Party candidate Michael Badnarik to raise these issues, but a vote for either one may contribute to the election of one's less preferred major-party candidate. Senator Kerry's only significant criticism of U.S. policy on Iraq is that Bush did not seek more international support; Kerry does not acknowledge that more such support was

neither likely nor very effective and that Bush himself had sought more international support.

We need a major national debate about the orientation of U.S. foreign policy after the Cold War, the conditions for the use of U.S. military forces, and the most effective means consistent with our shared values to counter the continued threat of terrorism. One might hope that this would be a central focus of the 2004 presidential campaign, but that does not now seem to be in prospect. This debate may have to develop first outside of the political process in order to encourage the next generation of political leaders to recognize the dangers of the establishment consensus on these issues.

—William A. Niskanen