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Democrats Need to Take a Stand

by Helen Thomas

After seven years of the Bush administration, who in the U.S. does not want to see a dramatic change in the nation's leadership?

For that reason the Republican candidates have an uphill battle, since most of them have not distanced themselves sufficiently from the failed stewardship of President Bush.

On the Democratic side, Sens. Hillary Clinton of New York and Barack Obama of Illinois say they are the true advocates of change. But they are short on specifics.

Former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina is more definitive on one issue at least, saying he would bring U.S. combat troops home from Iraq within 10 months.

He also is on the attack against poverty, corporate greed, war profiteering and free trade pacts that cost U.S. jobs.

Clinton emphasizes her "experience" in the White House as first lady, saying this makes her the best candidate to bring about change.

But in 2002 as war clouds gathered, Clinton aligned herself with the administration on a critical vote giving Bush the green light in Iraq.

And four months ago she voted for the resolution that could have paved the way for an attack on Iran.

The resolution — sponsored by Sens. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., and Jon Kyl, R-Ariz. — designates the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization.

The U.S. National Intelligence Estimate recently defused the threat of war by reporting that Iran in 2003 dropped plans to build a nuclear arsenal.

Of the Democrats' three top presidential seekers, Clinton appears to be the least inclined toward dramatic change on foreign policy.

But she may be able to trump Obama, whose campaign is based on "hope" and "optimism" — ephemeral terms at a time when the voters may be looking for solid answers to America's pressing problems.

That's what the 2008 election is all about: answers.

All the candidates should be pinned down on how they feel about Bush's concept of pre-emptive war; wiretapping without a warrant; waterboarding and other forms of torture; and the policy of "rendition" — sending prisoners to jails abroad where they are subject to abusive interrogation while being held in limbo.

The presidential hopefuls also should be quizzed on the lack of real oversight of CIA activities and immunity for the telecom companies that have cooperated with the administration's wiretapping schemes.

Their views are needed on privatizing the war with thousands of gun-slinging mercenaries employed by Blackwater and other private security firms. Assigned to protect U.S. diplomats, they're paid handsomely — some as much as \$1,500 a day and more.

The candidates also should offer specifics on how they will provide medical care for the 47 million Americans without health insurance.

A single-payer system — much like what we have with Social Security — is the most comprehensive solution, but the candidates are avoiding it in favor of tweaks to the haphazard, luck-of-the-draw coverage we have now.

Bush is trying to go green — belatedly — but the environment and the future of the planet are issues that have been neglected far too long.

There is also the economy, and the inroads that globalization and free trade have made on U.S. production capacity and the livelihoods of U.S. workers. Manufacturing has fled the country and globalization has proved to be a race to the economic bottom rather than a boon for U.S. jobs.

And how about the unscrupulous mortgage lending practices that yielded rampant housing foreclosures?

At this point, questions are in greater supply than answers: Which of the candidates buys Bush's biggest tax cuts for the richest Americans? What about how federal agencies have been politicized while the traditional, apolitical civil service has been gutted?

The candidates won't even touch the highly controversial issues of capital punishment and gun control. And you don't hear much about abortion rights and gay marriage.

Those wedge issues have given a lift to conservatives in the past. But now, they are nowhere near the top of the agenda.

Once we get the answers on issues that do matter from our would-be presidents, then we can all honestly wish for peace on Earth in 2008.

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