

COMMENTARY

Palaima: Chief litmus test for politicians: Do they have, use compassion?

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As the Democratic presidential primary debates are held in Austin, we might ask why our country is in such a mess.

One reason is that all politics is local. In political decision-making, it is difficult to think beyond our own self-interests. Or, as diarist and sensualist Anais Nin put it, "We don't see things as they are, we see things as we are."

Traditional tools for overcoming our naturally provincial viewpoints are travel and education. We send our children to colleges and universities so that they will be exposed, as the very etymologies of these words imply, to collections of scholars whose many disciplines and perspectives will, in principle, make them look outward beyond themselves.

Travel, from Herodotus to modern study-abroad programs, also has been an effective tool for experiencing other ways of living in and conceiving of the world around us. If exposure to a wide range of thoughts and ideas through travel and education, firsthand and through electronic media, is conducive to good political decision-making, and more Americans than ever are getting information in these ways, why are we in the state we are in?

It is clear that the major candidates now - John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama - have had full and diverse life experiences and good educations. All three have strong records of political service. They all have capacities for human compassion. But when will they really use them?

At the risk of sounding simplistic - the truth is often simple - the biggest failure in the political process, broadly conceived, is our own. We don't feel the importance of issues deeply enough to make sure our political leaders address them. This lets them off the hook.

How can anyone with human sympathy think of the innocent students killed last week on the Northern Illinois University campus and the grief that has struck their families and friends, and argue in favor of firearms laws that permit any citizen to amass a private arsenal legally at a federally licensed gun store? Then think of the 32 dead at Virginia Tech last spring and the five dead and sixth paralyzed at the University of Iowa in November 1991.

As checks for \$600 to \$1,200 go out in June to citizens in an economy that has seen wages and salaries reach the lowest share of the nation's gross domestic product in 60 years, will sympathy be felt for the increasingly underpaid workers whose paychecks once provided the spending power, year in, year out, to support our economy, as this cynical stopgap will not? If the national primary debates return next week to Cleveland, the poorest big city and seventh-most dangerous city in the United States, will any candidate sympathize with the suffering of the families of the

permanently unemployed and discuss in pragmatic terms the manufacturing jobs that are never coming back?

Will any of the candidates explain why the standard lending practices of 30 years ago for 20 percent down payments and monthly payments on principle, interest, tax and insurance of no more than 33 percent of monthly income were abandoned over time so that lenders, builders and real estate brokers could extract large profits from subprime mortgage schemes that were clearly heading toward a train wreck?

We could extend this list to what neocon theorist Victor Davis Hanson rightly calls the "pathetic" dollar (the major factor in our rising gasoline prices) and astronomical national debt; the human, social, economic and diplomatic costs of the congressionally authorized presidential use of force in Iraq; and the existence of companies on American soil in control of large armed mercenary forces.

Serious questions on these topics would require compassionate answers. They would be far better litmus tests of candidates than the failings of Obama to cite the sources of borrowed texts, or the Clinton campaign's historical amnesia in arguing that a presidential candidate needs long-term Washington experience to be viable; or McCain's masquerading as the reincarnation of Ronald Reagan, which he is only in age.

As for the ongoing debate about politics and religion, my question is why anyone thinks God would want to have anything to do with the mess we have made of the great country we have, in song, long asked him to bless.

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