

## COMMENTARY

### **Palaima: In a democracy, we must defend freedom of thought**

**Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR**

*Austin American-Statesman* Thursday, September 18, 2008

After Sen. John McCain announced that Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin would be his running mate, Republican presidential campaign manager Rick Davis told us what kind of campaign they would run: "This election is not about issues. This election is about a composite view of what people take away from these candidates." And they are now running it right before our eyes.

Palin and McCain will not discuss issues. Palin is off-limits to the press as she travels from heavily scripted rally to heavily scripted rally repeating a demagogic message of change that has no meaning in a democratic society without serious public scrutiny.

The image of reporters shouting long-distance unanswered questions from airport tarmacs at her, even while our financial system and stock market get hit by Katrina-like forces, is, to me, a sacrilegious violation of a basic principle of our democracy. It is no change at all from the imperious secrecy of the Bush administration these last eight years.

This is all the more troubling given that Palin's track record, in a state that has fewer people than Austin, Texas, of intense partisanship, appointments of unqualified cronies and vindictive firings of independent-minded public servants mirrors how our White House has operated since the year 2000.

Davis wants us to trust his candidates when McCain mimics Herbert Hoover's assurances that the hemorrhaging economy is "fundamentally sound." The reality is that eight years of Republican laissez-faire policies have brought our economy to a perilous condition.

On other issues, too, Americans are asked to trust McCain's and Palin's personalities and the unchallenged assertions they make. They declare that victory can be achieved in Iraq, without explaining what victory even is and with Palin, either dishonestly or ignorantly, still linking Iraq to 9/11.

Shouldn't they be explaining to Americans why they think preemptive warfare (aka the Bush doctrine) and enhanced interrogative techniques are viable ways to secure our way of life? Shouldn't they explain how nearly \$10 trillion dollars in national debt will go away by cutting taxes yet again for the wealthiest Americans? Don't they need to prove to us how off-shore drilling will solve the energy crisis?

Beware when you hear talk about "composite views" and unspecified things that we individually should take away from candidates. Such words tell us it is okay to neglect the common good and the basic principles that made our country, until the last eight years, a world model of tolerance, personal freedom and respect for reason and law.

This kind of talk invites us to give into prejudices about gay marriage or Roe vs. Wade or the teaching of creationism or pre-millennialist religious beliefs or the banning of sex education in schools or removing certain kinds of books from libraries or the biased liberal press.

McCain and Palin are turning a critical election into a reality show. Nonetheless, here is my composite view of what I take away from the candidates.

Where our future president is concerned, I am prejudiced toward educational achievement, intellectual abilities and democratic engagement with the issues.

I admire Sen. Barack Obama, because, as the child of a single mother, he studied hard for years and became the first African American president of the Harvard Law Review. His achievement contrasts with McCain graduating 894 out of 899 from the naval academy and Palin hiding the transcripts of her six years at four different regional colleges.

I admire that Obama turned down lucrative jobs because he felt called to community organizing. I am biased towards his ability to devise solutions to complicated problems and explain them to critics and supporters. I want a president who has been involved in elite intellectual circles during his college and adult life, and has cared about human beings at the grass-roots, state and national levels.

I admire Obama for continuing to address important issues, while being Swift-boated by Jerome Corsi, who Swift-boated John Kerry.

I take away from such tactics and from the Republican personality-focused, take-no-questions campaign that Obama's ideas frighten those who do not like to think and who don't want us to think either.

tpalaima@sbcglobal.net