

Republican hopefuls ignore the past

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

It seems ridiculously early to be vetting candidates in a presidential election still more than a year away. Modesty prompts the additional acknowledgment that many people, including a number of my good friends, are unlikely to look here for an assessment of the Republican field. For them, today's observations are therefore wholly gratuitous.

But ABC's recent hoedown involving all nine declared GOP candidates leaves me in a state of wonderment. Are these mainly intelligent, good-natured aspirants so busy dialing for dollars that they have failed to perceive the world around them? Have they not absorbed the message from last year's election? Why do they suppose U.S. voters handed walking papers to GOP majorities in both houses of Congress?

On at least three timely topics, the nine men aiming to lead us into a brighter future showed perplexing reluctance to abandon tired old ways of the past. With the single exception of Texas libertarian Rep. Ron Paul - whom others on the platform seemed to dismiss as a nut case - all (1) favored plodding forward with the winless war in Iraq. They (2) agreed that even the 45 million individuals living in America without health care will willingly accept their lot in life rather than the "socialized medicine" available in every other developed nation. And in the wake of tragedy in Minneapolis, (3) none of the candidates disputed a notion that the way to restore U.S. infrastructure - including hundreds of condemned bridges - is to cut taxes.

Small wonder, then, that only 19 percent of Iowa Republicans tell pollsters they're satisfied with present choices in their coming caucuses. Nor that the intrusive presence in that Des Moines debate, though nowhere in sight, was the man to whom countless conservatives look for salvation as ancient Israel once looked to Moses.

Former Tennessee Sen. Fred Thompson wanted no part of the frantic 90-second time limits placed on this week's participants, and stayed away. Without having declared himself a candidate, however, he already raises respectable polling numbers - not far behind Mitt Romney's multimillion-dollar showing in Iowa, for example.

What's Thompson waiting on? And is he really all that late? Except for an incumbent president's low standing, what makes this election so different? I recall the famous "No Third Term" year, 1940, when Republicans went into their summer convention with delegates almost evenly split between two establishment perennials, Tom Dewey and Robert A. Taft.

Eventually persuaded that no "establishment" type could beat Franklin Roosevelt, the convention turned to Indiana's Wendell Willkie, who - having started without a single delegate - won nomination on the sixth ballot.

OK, this is not 1940, and things are different. We have lots more primaries now, and the respective party conventions don't decide these nominations any longer. Voters will have settled on their favorites in an abundance of primaries. Or so we've come to expect.

No one, of course, can be a serious prospect for president without surviving thorough scrutiny - including the most personal aspects of his or her private life. I suppose it's a bit early to shelve Bill and Hillary Clinton up there with Ma and Pa Kettle. But the bridal path chosen by certain of the top GOP hopefuls provides inevitably interesting pillow talk. John McCain confides that a prenuptial agreement bars him from tapping into second wife Cindy's barrel-sized beer fortune. Thompson seeks to dispel notions that his present helpmeet Jeri, though 24 years his junior, should be thought a "trophy wife." And the current issue of Vanity Fair carries an investigative piece on third-wife Judith Giuliani, which the ex-mayor's presidential team deemed serious enough to refute, point by point.

As debates go, the Lincoln-Douglas reputation seems safe. As with the correspondingly unwieldy Democratic field of eight, TV's time limits prevent GOP voters from learning much about their candidates, who must seek attention in other ways.

Perhaps the most noteworthy new twist has been introduced by Kansas Sen. Sam Brownback. An entity calling itself "Pray for Brownback" circulates the faithful with an e-mail seeking divine intervention for a campaign that's met many earthly restraints. Lonnie Berger, the group's coordinator, lists specific prayer goals: (a) that Iowa Christians shall be moved to support Brownback in an upcoming straw poll; (b) that God be implored to "weed out" any candidates inimical to Christian goals, and Â© that the media be inspired to give Brownback's campaign more national coverage.

If these entreaties go unanswered, we must hope the senator's prayer circle will not petition for jammed voting machines.

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