

Competence over ideology

by Cal_Thomas

The last (but unfortunately not the final) "debate" among Republican presidential candidates aired Sunday at 10:30 a.m. EDT in the apparent hope that no one would watch. Few did. But among those who watched, or who read the transcript, ideology once again seemed to take precedence over something the voters might consider of greater importance in next year's election. That something is competence. While Sen. Sam Brownback and Gov. Mitt Romney sparred over who was pro-life first (the Republican version of the Democrats' battle between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton over who was first to oppose the war), I suspect most people are more interested in which candidate is best equipped to run the government. The Washington Post reported that the Pentagon has lost about 190,000 AK-47 assault rifles and pistols it had given to Iraqi security forces in 2004 and 2005. The Government Accountability Office found that the distribution of weapons was "haphazard and rushed" and established procedures were not followed. The head of security training during the period the arms disappeared was Gen. David Petraeus, who will report to President Bush next month on the progress of the surge. Perhaps the Pentagon should have affixed bar codes to the weapons. Like a book or a box of cereal we buy at the supermarket, they would have been easier to track. As it is, more of our tax dollars have gone down the hole with no hope of a rebate and some of the weapons have probably fallen into the hands of insurgents who will surely use them to shoot Americans. How would the presidential candidates address this? How would they propose making this broken system work more effectively? What about education? We pour increasing amounts of time, attention and money into giving children, especially underprivileged children, a chance to succeed. Do the candidates really believe the problem is not enough money, or is it too much money and not enough choice as to which school - public or private - best serves the needs of children? Ending the education monopoly would help those languishing in substandard schools. Are the candidates - especially Democrats - so beholden to the teachers unions that they care more about winning their approval than they do about educating children? The answer for Democrats is "yes." Why don't the overpaid interrogators/moderators ask the question this way? H. George Frederickson, a professor in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Kansas, has written a compelling essay on "Repairing Broken Government." It addresses the need to focus on competence more than ideology. Noting the familiar list most people make on the reasons for broken government - the pervasive influence of money in politics, the power of interest groups and lobbyists, legislative gridlock and more - Frederickson touches on something of perhaps even greater importance: "bureaucracy, ineffective management, or poor policy implementation are central elements of a broken national government." Instead of "sound-biting," character assassination and sloganeering, Frederickson calls for "substantive competence (think Katrina)" in government. He wants more competent people running things and he suggests the way to make that happen is to amend the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978. That law, he writes, "added a thick layer of political appointees to the upper ranks of federal agencies" while the ranks of merit-based civil servants were reduced from almost 3 million to about 1.8 million. "From the standpoint of government effectiveness, this has been a deadly combination," he says. Where are the voices of the presidential candidates promising to clean house of political appointees and replace them, not with political appointees from their party and persuasion, but with people who know what they are doing? I care about social issues and the eroding morality of the country, but I care more about competent government. We are spending more on government than ever and getting less for our money. A government that can't keep track of nearly 200,000 weapons during a war does not inspire confidence. Let's have a little less ideology from the presidential candidates of both parties and a lot more talk of how to repair broken government. (Direct all MAIL for Cal Thomas to 2225 Kenmore Ave., Suite 114, Buffalo, N.Y. 14207. Readers may also e-mail Cal Thomas at tmseditors@tribune.com.) (c) 2007 Tribune Media Services, Inc.

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