

IOWA VOTES**Comment****The making of the president**

In the age of the amateur, Americans still want wisdom and judgment in their leader. But they don't seem to care whether their politicians are battle-scarred any more

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Experience and character have become the ballot questions of the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. As Iowa votes today, candidates in both parties are hotly disputing who has a longer record in national politics and who has sounder judgment – shaping this race as they have no other in a generation.

The sparring has intensified since Benazir Bhutto's assassination, which has sharply refocused attention on foreign affairs. Both Republican Senator John McCain, who is rising in national polls, and Democratic Senator Hillary Clinton, who is falling, have seized on Ms. Bhutto's death to assert their credentials as tested, seasoned leaders in a field of poseurs and upstarts.

So, in the hours after the news from Rawalpindi, Mr. McCain was talking up his relationship with Ms. Bhutto and his knowledge of terrorism, drawing a distinction between himself and his surging rival, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee, who has foundered on international issues. At the same time, Ms. Clinton invoked her familiarity with Pakistan and reasserted her fitness to be president from “day one” in contrast to Senator Barack Obama, whose three years in national politics she scorns.

Among Democrats, the focus on experience and character has been particularly striking. Bill Clinton says electing Mr. Obama would be “a roll of the dice,” while Magic Johnson, the former basketball star, fears “a rookie” in the White House. Mr. Obama responds that Ms. Clinton was never “treasury secretary” in her eight years as first lady. He says he's wiser (he opposed the war in Iraq) and more credible (he accuses her of inconsistency).

Why all this talk of experience and character? Probably because the differences among the Democrats are small on immigration, health care and Iraq, and no one among the Republicans has stood out. Experience was not an issue in 2000; in a distracted America enjoying peace and prosperity, it didn't matter who would succeed Mr. Clinton. George W. Bush ran against Al Gore in what became, as comedian Jerry Seinfeld cracked, the election about “nothing.”

Indeed, Mr. Bush arrived with the thinnest of resumé's. In 2000, he had been governor of Texas for fewer than six years. Before politics, he was undistinguished. He hadn't been a scholar like Woodrow Wilson, an author like Theodore Roosevelt, a general like Dwight Eisenhower, a humanitarian like Herbert Hoover. He championed no cause, as Ronald Reagan did conservatism. As a politician, he wasn't as successful as Lyndon Johnson or Richard Nixon.

Moreover, a son of wealth and privilege, Mr. Bush faced no great challenges in life, as Franklin Roosevelt did with polio. His record in the Ivy League was mediocre, his military service mysterious, his foray in the oil industry a failure. He did make millions in professional baseball, however.

Mr. Gore had been an activist vice-president for eight years, and a prominent congressman and senator for 16 years. He had served in Vietnam, worked as a journalist in Tennessee and written a prescient book (*Earth in the Balance*).

No matter. Mr. Bush was folksy and funny. Mr. Gore was stiff and ponderous. In a choice between experience and charm, Mr. Bush won.

But 2000 set a dubious precedent. When Republicans nominated Mr. Bush and Americans elected him, they lowered the bar of experience. While his troubled presidency has given inexperience a bad

name, his electoral success has emboldened others who, in another time, would have been disqualified to run.

Before 2005, Mr. Obama was a state senator in Illinois for eight years. He had attended Harvard Law School and was the first black president of the Harvard Law Review. He argues that holding high office matters less because he is more thoughtful and principled. In Iowa, he boasted that he has more foreign policy experience than Mr. Reagan did when he ran. It is a view that Representative William Delahunt of Massachusetts embraced when he endorsed Mr. Obama: "Please do not equate experience with judgment."

Ms. Clinton, for her part, has been a senator for seven years and argues that she was an engaged partner of the president for two terms, travelled widely, and met foreign leaders.

Of course, experience can be elastic. Ted Sorensen, John Kennedy's speechwriter, compares Mr. Obama with Mr. Kennedy, who was also said to lack experience in 1960. In a field that included LBJ, Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey, the youthful JFK was said to need "a little grey in his hair" (even though Mr. Nixon was only four years older).

Mr. Sorensen says that, when JFK began running for president in 1957, he was also "a first-term senator," younger than Mr. Obama is today. Curiously, he doesn't say that JFK had been in national politics for 10 years. Or that he was a decorated war hero, the author of two best-selling books and the winner of a Pulitzer Prize.

Still, the standards of the day were so exacting that JFK was called untested, a canard that Mr. Delahunt repeated. Had Ms. Clinton and Mr. Obama tried to run in 1960 with their political backgrounds, they would have been patted on the head and sent home.

In the age of the amateur, in which politics is too important to be left to professionals, Americans still want wisdom and judgment in a president. But they don't necessarily want battle-scarred politicians any more. The most powerful job in the world is now an entry-level position, on-the-job-training offered, no experience required.

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