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States set agenda on domestic issues

By Richard P. Nathan

It is fashionable to say that presidential campaigns begin too early, that there are too many candidates, and that the debates are tiresome and empty and only present slogans and sound bites.

However, watching the debates, especially the recent CNN debate with the YouTube format, I was impressed by the sheer fortitude and adroitness of the men and the woman engaged in this excruciating process. The debate format was original; the resulting program was good theater and informative. The questions from YouTube were creative, serious and often funny.

But there was one thing distinctly wrong about the dialogue. There is an easy assumption that once “I am president,” a whole series of big and bold changes will take place.

Many of these promised changes involve fundamental and profound reforms in the domestic affairs of the nation. What’s left out is that most of the domestic public affairs of the nation are decided upon, structured, and carried out by governments they will not head. I refer to the states. They are intrinsically embedded and historically influential in domestic affairs along with local governments which state governments can supervise, but which in many instances take matters into their own hands.

I turn to recent international confirmation that the new president (whomever) will not be as well positioned domestically as he or she may think. Before he left office, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was invited to write in the Economist about “What I’ve Learned.”

His May 31 article begins, “Ten years ago, if you had told me I would spend a significant part of

my premiership on foreign policy, I would have been surprised, a little shocked and probably somewhat alarmed.”

He went on to say it turned out that this is what he was “obliged” to do, describing international affairs and issues (terrorism, the emergence of China, globalism and global warming) as all — or almost all — consuming.

The next president will be Blair-y eyed fast and fully. How to deal with Iraq? And Pakistan, Israel and Palestine, global economics and global climate change, not to mention Darfur, Africa and international crises yet unborn, which agenda, as Tony Blair said, is far more than a “distraction from the hard slog of domestic reform.”

Indeed, America is blessed and just damned lucky that over our history the U.S. federal system of shared sovereignty between the federal government and the states has produced a constant ratcheting up of activism and innovation. New ideas are incubated and tested in the states, migrate to other states and often end up being reinforced by federal laws.

Throughout our history, some states — not all states — have been the seedbeds of governmental development and responsiveness to changing conditions in the world around us. Examples abound. States are now executing environmental reforms, supporting stem cell research and innovating with policies to expand health care coverage, stress preventive care, and press for health care cost controls.

This is nothing new. Child labor laws, workers’ compensation, social security, unemployment compensation did not emerge full born out of Washington, D.C., as from the head of Zeus.

All of this said, there is little (though some) attention to federalism and the states in the presidential debates. Most of it, ironically is on the

Republican side, despite the fact that conservative pundits now recognize that over time federalism has been an engine, not for retrenchment, but for the advancement and growth of government.

None of this is intended as a call to candidates to love and talk about the states and something as esoteric and mind-numbing as federalism. It is meant simply as a reminder to all of us that “promises, promises” is what they are, and if they involve domestic affairs, they can’t be dealt with by the stroke of a presidential pen or even a federal law.

H. L. Mencken is reported to have said, “For every human problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat and wrong.” Be careful, all you YouTube bloggers and everyone else in the audience for presidential debates. Not everything you hear is what you will get from Washington.

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