

Political Insulation

By **Terrence Heubert**

As we brace for a major political cycle this year, it is unclear what the party messages will be. Democrats and Republicans alike are looking for a theme to unite their party and excite their respective bases. With the President's approval ratings the lowest of Bush's reign, it is currently unlikely that incumbents or hopefuls will be calling on the Bush to stump for them. Unless you live firmly in the heartland, Bush is likely to be a lightning rod for the next year. It is possible that Osama Bin Laden could be captured or another terrorist attack could turn the president's numbers around before November. If either of those things happens, stop reading this article. It's then irrelevant. In case neither of these events takes place, then we can speculate about what's out there for candidates to discuss this fall.

From your local mayoral elections to races for the governors' mansions to those standing for Congress, there is one thing that all candidates are likely to be touting this year: They all will want to portray themselves as the best qualified to handle a problem. The problems that our nation is likely to face in the next few years are daunting.

Bird Flu is expected to strike our shores at some point in the next few years. If the doomsday scenarios play out, we could be facing a global pandemic that could crush our medical response infrastructure and kill tens of millions of Americans. Let's not even get into the global economic crisis that such a pandemic could inspire. The experts are saying that the only way to stop this disease could be to impose mass quarantines. Imagine this: millions of your fellow Americans are dying from bird flu, millions more are ill; everyone else is terrified that they may contract the disease. Is it likely that our political leaders know how to handle this situation? Probably not. Is it possible that there are things our political leaders could be doing to enhance their ability to lead through such a crisis? Definitely.

While bird flu could be the most frightening equal opportunity killer to arrive on the scene in decades, this is hardly the least of our worries. The nation is still embroiled in the War on Terror, and is likely to be so engaged for the foreseeable future. While the authorities can measure the "chatter" and attempt to stop terror plots before they occur, it's likely that at some point in the future, a terrorist is going to pull off another event on our soil. Some of our political leaders have been through this sort of event before; many of the top leaders are now private citizens. Publicly, public figures across the board will tell you that they are prepared. Privately, I've talked to many leaders who admit to being ill-prepared to respond to a massive incident. Let's hope that the public mantra is true; however, we won't know until it's too late. Who's to say if there is another Rudy Giuliani out there?

Our most recent and significant natural disaster has demonstrated that we cannot assume that political leaders are prepared to handle any situation. Clearly, the people of New Orleans would argue that their leaders were not fully prepared with how to address such a crisis.

Possibly the only thing that people in the Blue and Red states may be able to agree on is that something bad will happen over the next few years—and someone is going to take the blame, deserved or not. Being that we live in the era of instant cable news, there are a lot of people looking to fill hours on television and when something bad happens, what better thing to increase ratings than to point fingers. No politico wants to be the next Michael Brown.

While we can not expect that our political leaders are prepared for every possible situation, they must deal with any situation that comes about in their term office. As a result, every elected official—and anyone hoping to become one—would be wise to prepare themselves for the inevitable. Seek out training that will test your abilities, look for ways to improve your own personal critical response skills. Chances are that in a real scenario, you will not have a team of advisors to point you in the right direction. (Oh, and who's to say that they really know how to respond either?)

While it is impossible to escape from the media's second guessing attempt to gain ratings, leaders can insulate themselves. By being proactive and training in advance of a disaster situation, leaders can enhance their chances of performing well under pressure and thereby insulate themselves from criticism. Preparation may well be the only thing that politicians can agree on this year... and it may be the only thing that will count if a real problem arises.

About the Author

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