

No room for nuance: Looking ahead to 2008

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

When I ran for a seat in the U.S. Congress a few decades ago, I was an unknown Democrat trying to unseat a Republican. During the campaign I was asked how, as a clergyman, I could serve in Congress, where so many compromises would have to be made. I replied by saying something about how we don't live in a perfect world and about ambiguity in politics. It was not a response on which to build a successful campaign. (I lost 73 percent to 27 percent.)

With each passing presidential election it becomes more difficult for a candidate to speak of ambiguity or nuance. An experienced U.S. senator would seem a logical choice to move into the White House. Instead, elections indicate that the nation consistently rejects senators who run for president. John Kerry is only the latest to confront that fact.

Kerry's record in the Senate left him vulnerable to the charge of flip-flopping, a theme the Bush campaign exploited to good effect. It was painful to watch Kerry explain how he voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq and then voted against funding it. His Senate-speak echoed an answer he had given during a debate in his last Senate election campaign. Asked why he voted for a bill endorsing the death penalty, Kerry answered that he opposed the death penalty but finally supported the bill because it would "put more cops on the street."

As the political saying goes, legislation is like sausage; you may like it but you don't want to watch it being made. Members craft the best bill they can come up with in an arena where opposing sides fight for their preferred language, while fending off (or too often yielding to) pressure groups and lobbyists—good (if messy) for the democratic process, but deadly for future presidential candidates.

Like many antiwar voters, my initial preference in the 2004 Democratic primaries was Howard Dean, a governor of a small state. It made sense; Dean is an able, straightforward politician who opposed the invasion of Iraq. Besides, in recent

elections for the White House, Democrats had won with governors from Georgia and Arkansas, while Republicans found success with governors from California and Texas.

In more recent times at least five experienced and capable senators—Hart, McGovern, Simon, McCain and Dole—and two former senators who were one-term vice presidents, Mondale and Gore, tried and failed in their run for the White House. Bob Dole actually resigned his seat to run for the office. Too late: his Senate performance was already on record, and yes, it was filled with compromises. Memo to future party nominating conventions: No more senators, even if her name is Hillary.

It all depends on your politics, of course, but for me, the politician I prefer for president is *The West Wing* television show's Jeb Bartlet. Just 12 hours after we learned we would have four more years of George W. Bush, President Bartlet uplifted his many fans with the news that his female press secretary, C. J. Cregg, will succeed Leo McGarry as White House chief of staff—a creative and courageous staff choice, even if it comes in a fictional TV series.

In this same episode, President Bartlet admits he made an almost fatal mistake when he fired Leo just minutes before his old friend collapsed from a heart attack. I hope that if Bartlet is asked if he has made any mistakes in office, he will start with admitting this one. Bartlet is a Catholic who argues with God. He turns to scripture to try to discern if a presumed Chinese seeking asylum on religious grounds is really a believer. He knows his scripture but he does not expect to find a simplistic moral certitude to impose on the public.

A nation whose values are partly shaped by television and movies appears to prefer a chief executive who will not change course, no matter what the changing circumstances. A voting majority preferred a candidate who took the nation into war on false assumptions and who attacked a country with no known ties to terrorist enemy (still at large) Osama bin Laden. The nation also preferred a candidate who took us from a budget surplus to a record high deficit—one so high that little is left for health care, education or housing and employment for the poor, while a lot is left for tax cuts for high-salaried executives.

Polls identified President Bush's moral certitude on war, gay marriage and abortion as "moral values," which energized his conservative base and contributed heavily to

his victory. Political guru Karl Rove convinced the media that Bush had a corner on the religious market (he prays and sings hymns), and that seemed to stifle interest in the biblical religious values of peace, justice and compassion for the poor, the sick and the aged.

Everyone is asking: What lies ahead ? In Illinois there is considerable enthusiasm over the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. Senate, a seat he won over conservative hard-liner Alan Keyes. There is even talk of Obama possibly becoming the first African-American president. Barack Obama is a friend of mine. But he will soon be a U.S. senator. He shouldn't run for president after six years of writing legislation in the Senate—unless by then the concepts of sin and ambiguity have become part of our national moral and political dialogue.