

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## ***Thoughts for Our Next President***

The year 2016 is a presidential election year and, although it seems as if the campaign began in early 2015, as we move into the New Year, voters will begin to get serious about a candidate. I am not interested in speculating on who will or who should win the election in November. I want to devote this edition of *Issues* to some thoughts for the future president and, by extension, for the voters who will elect that president. As we cross into 2016, at this juncture in the cycle, it is difficult to be optimistic about the nation or its prospective leaders. Our democratic-republican form of government seems to be broken and there is little question that a crisis of confidence permeates our land. But whoever is elected, that person will face a most difficult future.

- First of all, the new president will face a pending financial crisis of significant proportions. America's population is ageing and that fact is squeezing the federal budget, which will significantly increase the Social Security and Medicare costs of that budget. By 2025, there will be approximately 70 million beneficiaries, up from 44 million in 2007. Today, that part of the population consumes 10% of GDP; by 2025 it will be 12% and by 2040, 14%. Further, interest rates are going to start rising in 2016, which means the cost of borrowing money will increase, including those borrowing needs of the federal government. The national debt and the costs of servicing that debt will become unsustainable. To keep debt in 2040 beneath today's 74% of GDP, taxes will need to rise or spending cuts instituted, by about 6%. For 2019, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that federal borrowing will begin to rise again, pushing the debt to 78% of GDP by 2025. [The historic 45-year average for the national debt is 45% of GDP!!] Added to this is the astronomical rise in health-care costs in America. The US government spends more per person on health care than Canada, Sweden and Britain—all of which have universal taxed-funded health systems. The new president will face the difficult task of reforming the Social Security, Medicare and health-care system of the US or risk significant financial risk to the US economy and the ability of the US to respond to its growing military, infrastructure and education needs as a society. The next president can no longer kick all of this down the road.
- Second, obviously the next president must deal with the Middle East crisis and the unraveling of the global balance of power that has been unfolding during President Obama's two terms. I am not so much interested in policy recommendations here as envisioning the kind of president we need to position the US in this rapidly changing, chaotic world. Former Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates, recently offered some

counsel on “the kind of president we need.” I was so impressed with this piece, that I want to quote the salient parts of his counsel:

1. “We need a president who understands the system of government bequeathed to us by the Founders—and grasps the reality that building coalitions and making compromises are the only ways anything lasting can get done. Those who believe that compromise is synonymous with selling out or giving up one’s principles need to retake eighth-grade American history. The next president needs to have a core philosophy and set of principles, but he or she also needs to be a pragmatic and skilled political leader (e.g., Franklin D. Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan).
2. Our next leader needs to speak truthfully to the American people. People love brutal candor, but that candor is too often detached from reality and responsibility; too many candidates demagogically use divisive rhetoric and make grandiose promises that would be impossible to fulfill. Too many candidates are being just as deceptive and dishonest.
3. The next president must be resolute. He or she must be very cautious about drawing red lines in foreign policy, but other leaders must know that crossing a red line drawn by the president of the United States will have serious — even fatal — consequences. The public, members of Congress and foreign leaders alike must know that the president’s word is his or her bond, and that promises and commitments will be kept and threats will be carried out.
4. The next president must hold people in government accountable; when programs or initiatives are bungled, senior leaders should be fired. He or she needs to have the courage to act in defiance of public opinion and polls when the national interest requires it.
5. Our new leader must be a problem-solver. Recently, we have elected presidents with a conservative agenda or a liberal agenda. But the paralysis within Congress and between Congress and the White House under the past two presidents has been harming the country and putting our future at risk. No wonder so many Americans are pessimistic about the direction of the country. We desperately need a president who will strive tirelessly to identify and work with members of both parties in Congress interested in finding practical solutions to our manifold problems.
6. We need a president who is restrained. Restrained to respect the prerogatives of the other branches of government. Restrained in rhetoric, avoiding unrealistic promises, exaggerated claims of success and dire consequences if his or her initiatives are not adopted exactly as proposed. Restrained from foreign adventures and from using military force as a first option rather than a last resort. Restrained from questioning the motives of those who disagree and treating them as enemies with no redeeming qualities.

7. Finally, the most important quality for our next leader at this juncture in our history: The new president must be a true unifier of Americans. The nation is divided over how to deal with challenges such as immigration, the quality of public education, economic inequality, our role abroad and more. We must hope that the president we elect next year will again and again remind all Americans of our common destiny, and that our fate as a nation and as a people is bound up with one another.”
- Third and finally, the next president must also be a spiritual leader of the United States. By this I do not mean that the new president serve as our pastor. In God’s economy of things, He has established three key institutions—the family, the state and the church. Each has clear stewardship responsibilities. For example, the state is not to raise children nor is it to fulfill the Great Commission. But America has a strong spiritual/religious heritage. The challenge today, of course, is that our culture is very pluralistic. We will never get back to the days when Protestant evangelicalism sets the cultural agenda for America. But the next president must affirm and guard the religious liberty of all its citizens, including Protestant evangelicals. The new president must lead the nation in prayerful dependence on God and cultivate a national, thankful spirit among the nation's citizens. The new president should embrace that there is something exceptional about the American experiment, but do so in a humble, non-haughty manner.

My conviction is that the United States of America is at a significant crossroads in its history and the presidential election of 2016 will determine the path this nation will take. As believers, we must fervently pray about this election, asking God once again for His grace and His mercy. And it is important that we as believers in Jesus Christ seek to represent Him well in 2016, with the virtues that define His character (see Galatians 5:22-23).

See Robert Gates, “The Kind of President We Need,” in the *Washington Post* (3 December 2015) and *The Economist* (5 December 2015) pp. 25-26.