

American Values, II by Dan Jacoby

(Note: This is an update from a column first written in February of 2005.)

As the McCain campaign's ... let's call them "inaccuracies" ... mount up, they are certain to turn again to that old Republican standard, "values." The argument will be that the "liberal" Barack Obama and his "liberal" running mate are out of touch with American values, while the veteran McCain and his "hockey mom" running mate are perfectly in line. This will be expanded to claim, once again, that the entire Democratic Party is out of touch and the entire Republican Party represent American values incarnate.

This begs the question, is the values claim as inaccurate as the rest of McCain's statements and advertisements?

Americans are the descendants of immigrants, most of whom came here to make a better life for their children. So making a better life for our children is probably the number one traditional American value. But when we break down that overarching concept into its parts, we discover that the current administration, the McCain/Palin ticket, and the Republican Party in general, don't support that value.

Let's take a look some of those traditional values, and see how closely the Republicans mirror the American value system:

Value #1: Jobs.

Let's face it, if Americans aren't working, then little else matters. Without stable jobs, along with the decent pay and benefits they bring, we can't afford anything else. Yet, under the last three Republican presidents, job creation was stagnant, barely able, even in the best of times, to keep up with demand. After seven years of George W. Bush, jobs are once again going away, and John McCain and the Republicans have offered nothing but more of the same.

Jobs aren't a Republican value.

Value #2: Balanced Budget.

Back in 1980, Ronald Reagan was swept into office by promising to balance the budget. Over the long term, a balanced federal budget is absolutely necessary; saddling our children with debt is no way to provide them with a better life. To that end, every Republican candidate for practically every office under the sun extols the virtues of a balanced budget. The truth, however, is that the last five Republican presidents have saddled us with more and more debt, and the current Republican occupant of the Oval Office is the worst of the lot.

By contrast, the last two Democratic presidents have worked to reduce that deficit, and President Clinton actually balanced the budget for the first time in 30 years.

Balanced budgets aren't a Republican value.

Value #3: Education

Education has been called the “magic bullet”, giving children of rich and poor alike the opportunity to get good jobs and pull themselves up the economic and social ladder. In addition, when a school system is effective and properly supported, the entire community benefits. Crime rates are lower, the streets are safer, and companies are more likely to locate in those cities and neighborhoods.

Republicans, however, consistently try to cut spending on education, or institute programs, such as the misnamed “No Child Left Behind,” without providing the funding to pay for them. In New York, a supposedly “moderate” Republican governor actually went to court to stop school funding by claiming that an 8th grade education was enough.

In addition, Republicans for a generation have tried to create “voucher” systems, in which the wealthiest families, many of whom already send their children to private schools, would get money back. All any voucher system will do, however, is cut the funds available to public schools. Meanwhile, private schools will raise their tuition, as more money becomes available. Those students most in need of good public education, and whose families would be unable to afford private schools even with vouchers, will see their public school systems decline, killing any chance those children have of getting the good jobs and advancement.

George W. Bush campaigned on a pledge to be the “education President.” Instead, he has concocted a scheme whereby schools are forced to spend millions of dollars on standardized tests that don’t test most subjects, and don’t do a good job testing the subjects they purport to test. Then, this scheme punishes schools that don’t successfully waste their meager resources on this boondoggle. Finally, Bush and the Republicans refuse to provide the money needed to perform these tests. Once again, schools suffer, and children are left behind.

Education is not a Republican value.

Value #4: Healthcare

It is no coincidence that health care costs, which rose significantly during the Republican-controlled 1980s, rose at a much slower pace when Bill Clinton was President. It is also no coincidence that health care costs began skyrocketing again under Republican leadership.

The only significant health care plan passed by George W. Bush and the Republicans was little more than a windfall for drug and insurance companies. The Medicare drug bill forbids Medicare from negotiating better drug prices. It prevents senior citizens from getting the help they need. It creates a maze of bureaucracy and confusing choices. And just to make things even more fun, it adds a new marriage penalty – elderly married lose benefits at a much lower income level than if they weren’t married.

Meanwhile, millions of people have lost their coverage, drug and other healthcare costs continue to soar, and George W. Bush and the Republicans are doing nothing to solve the problem. Instead, John Goodman, the president of the National Center for Policy Analysis and the man who crafted McCain’s healthcare policy, says that since emergency wards cannot turn away patients, everyone has access to healthcare already. His idea is simply to stop listing people as not being covered for healthcare, since they can all go to the emergency ward.

Healthcare is not a Republican value.

Value #5: The Environment

In his last week as President, Bill Clinton signed several executive orders designed to protect the environment. These orders were designed to ensure that the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land we live on, and the food we eat won't make us sick or, worse, kill us. Unfortunately, George W. Bush has reversed most of these orders.

Meanwhile, Bush, with the full backing of the powers that be in the Republican Party, has sought to reduce protections from various sources of pollution. He has sought to allow more mercury poisoning, increase production of greenhouse gases, stop the trend toward fuel-efficient hybrid cars and trucks, stimulate deforestation of our national parks, and systematically dismantle the Environmental Protection Agency.

This is nothing new. Those who remember James Watt, Ronald Reagan's first Interior Secretary, can only shake their heads at the Republicans and say, "There you go again."

Thanks in part to former Vice President Al Gore's work, global warming, and humanity's contribution to this looming catastrophe and its probable consequences, has become more thoroughly understood. Many younger evangelical Christians and evangelical Christian groups are moving away from this Republican view. They understand that we have a duty to protect the Earth's natural resources. But the Republican Party, led by George W. Bush and featuring its latest celebrity in Sarah Palin, either denies that global warming exists, or denies that our actions have anything to do with it.

The Environment is not a Republican value.

Value #6: Families

Generally, this value is expressed by Republicans as being against abortion rights, against gay marriage, and against equality for women. It's hard to understand just what Republicans are for. In fact, it's hard to believe that the Republicans are really against what they claim to be against.

The abortion rate rose during the Reagan and elder Bush terms, fell during the Clinton years, and is rising again under another Republican. If Republican power means higher abortion rates, doesn't that mean Republicans are in favor of abortion? In fact, the Republicans consistently cut funding for family planning, education, proper health care, and other programs that help lower the number of abortions. This is because the Republican value at work here is, quite simply, anti-women.

Regarding gay couples, every study available shows that gay couples tend to be more stable and long-lasting than straight couples. Studies also show that children brought up by gay couples, on average, are healthier, do better in school, make friends more easily, and adjust to adulthood and its societal demands better.

Meanwhile, Republicans bluster about protecting the "sacred institution" of marriage, but red states have a higher divorce rate than blue states.

Families are not a Republican value.

Reviewing these six American values: Jobs, Balanced Budget, Education, Healthcare, The Environment, and Families, we see that every one of these values falls under the general value of making a better life for our children:

- More, and better paying, jobs make it possible for our children to grow up in a better world than the one in which we grew up.
- A long-term balanced budget means our children won't be saddled with debt.
- Education not only helps those who get a good education compete in a global economy, but also makes our cities and neighborhoods better places to live, which benefits everyone.
- Healthcare, and healthcare coverage, leads to better, longer, more productive and happier lives, and makes it easier to raise children who are healthy and productive.
- The Environment – the air we breathe, water we drink, food we eat, and land on which we live – is indispensable and irreplaceable. Protecting the environment, and reversing the course of global warming, is a duty we owe ourselves and our children.
- Families are the core of our society. The family is the basic unit. Stable families mean a better chance for children to grow up ready to take on the challenges of the world.

All of these are clearly American values. All should be respected and supported by everyone, not just politicians. Yet, despite all of the Republicans' chatter about "values", it turns out that American values are not Republican values.