COMMENTARY

Caucuses become battle of Christians, Madisonians

COLUMN: GEORGE WILL

WASHINGTON — Like Job after losing his camels and acquiring boils, the conservative movement is in distress. Mike Huckabee shreds the compact that has held the movement's two tendencies in sometimes uneasy equipoise.

Social conservatives, many of whom share Huckabee's desire to "take back this nation for Christ," have collaborated with limited-government, market-oriented, capitalism-defending conservatives who want to take back the nation for James Madison. Under the doctrine that conservatives call "fusion," each faction has respected the other's agenda. Huckabee aggressively repudiates the Madisonians.

He and John Edwards, flaunting their histrionic humility in order to promote their curdled populism, hawked strikingly similar messages in Iowa, encouraging self-pity and economic hypochondria. Edwards and Huckabee lament a shrinking middle class. Well.

Economist Stephen Rose, defining the middle class as households with annual incomes between $30,000 and $100,000, says a smaller percentage of Americans are in that category than in 1979 — because the percentage of Americans earning more than $100,000 has *doubled* from 12 to 24, while the percentage earning less than $30,000 is *unchanged*. "So," Rose says, "the entire 'decline' of the middle class came from people moving up the income ladder." Even as housing values declined in 2007, the net worth of households increased.

Huckabee told heavily subsidized Iowa — Washington's ethanol enthusiasm has farm values and incomes soaring — that Americans striving to rise are "pushed down every time they try by their own government."

Edwards, synthetic candidate of theatrical bitterness on behalf of America's crushed, groaning majority, says the rich have an "iron-fisted grip" on democracy and a "stranglehold" on the economy. Strangely, these fists have imposed a tax code that makes the top 1 percent of earners pay 39 percent of all income tax revenues, the top 5 percent pay 60 percent, and the bottom 50 percent pay only 3 percent.

According to Edwards, the North Carolina of his youth resembled Chechnya today — "I had to fight to survive. I mean really. Literally." Huckabee, a compound of Uriah Heep, Elmer Gantry and Richard Nixon, preens about his humble background: "In my family, 'summer' was never a verb." Nixon, who maundered about his parents' privations and wife's cloth coat, followed Lyndon Johnson, another miscast president whose festering resentments and status anxieties colored his conduct of office. Here we go again?

Huckabee fancies himself persecuted by the Republican "establishment," a creature already negligible by 1964, when it failed to stop Barry Goldwater's nomination. The establishment's voice, the New York Herald Tribune, expired in 1966. Huckabee says "only one explanation" fits his Iowa success "and it's not a human one. It's the same power that helped a little boy with two fish and five loaves feed a crowd of 5,000 people." God so loves Huckabee's politics that He worked a Midwest miracle on his behalf? Should someone so delusional control nuclear weapons?

Speaking of delusions, Edwards seems unaware that the world market sets the price of oil. He says a $100-a-barrel price is evidence of — surging demand in India and China? unrest in Nigeria's oil fields? No, "corporate greed." That is Edwards' explanation of every unpleasantness. Mitt Romney's versatility of conviction, although it repelled Iowans, has been a modest makeover compared to Edwards' personality transplant. The sunny Southerner of 2004 has become the angry paladin of the suffering multitudes, to whom he shouts: "Treat these people the way they treat you!"

Presumably he means treat "the rich" badly — an odious exhortation to one portion of Americans, regarding another.

Although Huckabee and Edwards profess to loathe and vow to change Washington's culture, each would aggravate its toxicity. Each overflows with and wallows in the pugnacity of the self-righteous who discern contemptible motives behind all disagreements with them, and who therefore think opponents are enemies and differences are unsplittable.

The way to achieve Edwards' and Huckabee's populist goal of reducing the role of "special interests," meaning money, in government is to reduce the role of government in distributing money. But populists want to sharply increase that role by expanding the regulatory state's reach and enlarging its agenda of determining the distribution of wealth. Populists, who are slow learners, cannot comprehend this iron law: Concentrate power in Washington and you increase the power of interests whose representatives are concentrated there.

Barack Obama, who might be mercifully closing the Clinton parenthesis in presidential history, is refreshingly cerebral amid this recrudescence of the paranoid style in American politics. He is the un-Edwards and un-Huckabee — an adult aiming to reform the real world rather than an adolescent fantasizing mock-heroic "fights" against fictitious villains in a left-wing cartoon version of this country.

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Voices

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Consumer credit, high interest rates

The Daytona (Fla.) Beach News-Journal

It's the time of year when many Americans confront irresponsible spending — but now, the days of reckoning are taking on an air of desperation in many households, as families face bills they can't pay.

Nobody forced these families to spend beyond their means. And many debtors acknowledge that they are, themselves, to blame for much of their problem. But credit-card companies also must take responsibility for extending credit without a firm indication that debts could be repaid ...

These companies' profits still are running high. In fact, many card companies have adopted policies that make it likely that the default rate will continue to spike, and purposefully target high-risk debtors ...

But Congress and federal regulators also should examine the costs of high default rates on a wider scale, especially when coupled with the still-developing mortgage-foreclosure boom.

...Federal regulators should face reality: Too much of the U.S. economy is based on high-risk debt, much of which probably should never have been extended in the first place. ...

Health coverage for retirees

Chicago Sun-Times

The federal government has declared open season on older folks in a desperate attempt to save health-care coverage for younger retirees. Companies can now, with Uncle Sam's endorsement, openly discriminate against those 65 and older by cutting their health benefits, shoving them off to Medicare, whether they like it or not.

Endorsing age discrimination is just wrong and presents a slippery slope for employers to use age to discriminate for all kinds of reasons that are now still illegal. ...

Health insurance is the most important domestic issue facing the country, and it's time the government addressed the problem comprehensively, not this patchwork approach. The ruling shows how critical health-care reform is and how emotionally charged the issue has become.

Congress and the Farm Bill

The Kentucky Post Covington, Ky.

Senators left Washington to adjourn for the year bearing a gift for every U.S. consumer. Unfortunately, it was a lump of coal: the Farm Bill.

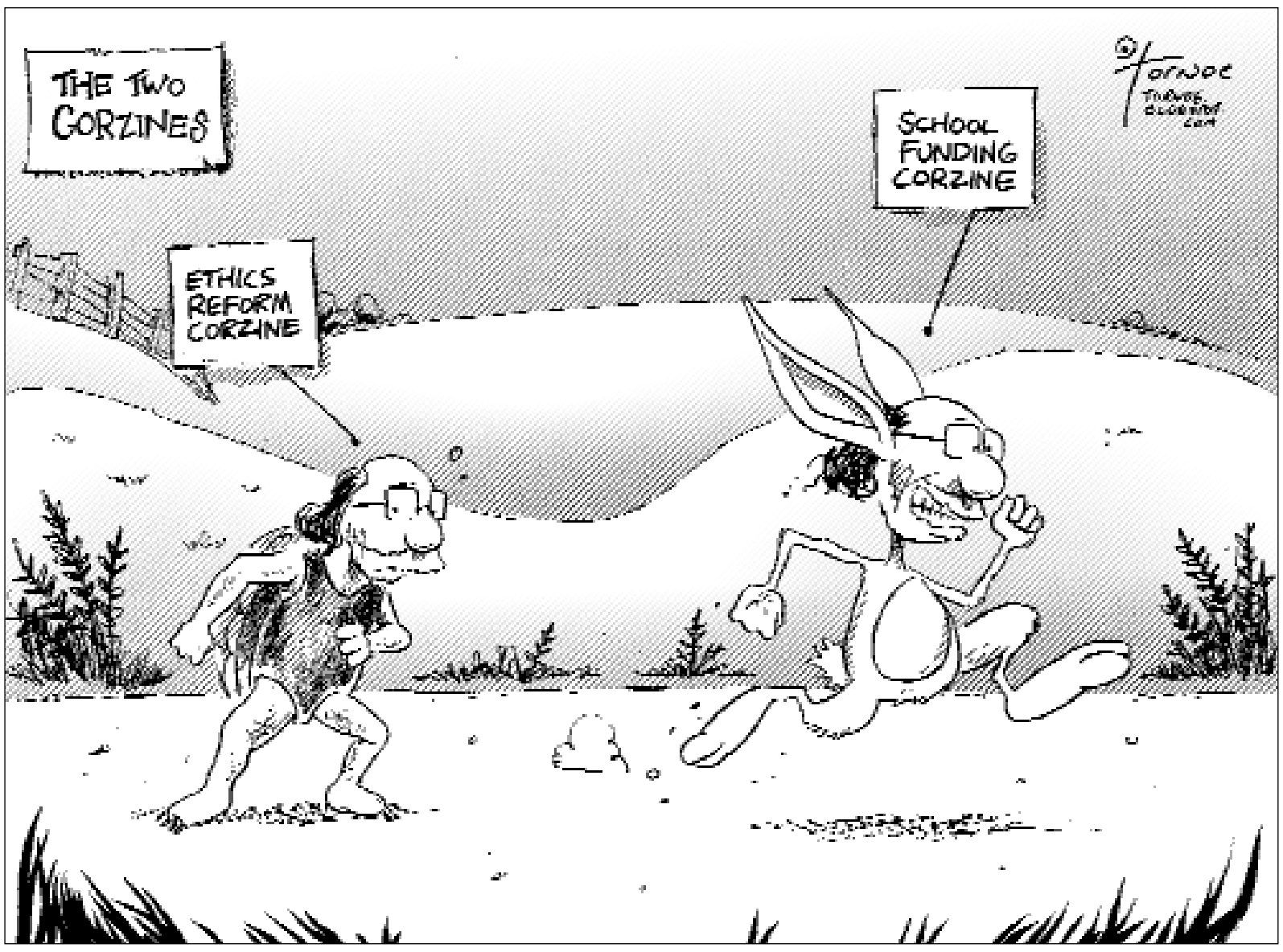
Congress had an opportunity to wean large commercial farming operations from taxpayer subsidies, and treat agricultural entities as businesses, rather than recipients of corporate welfare. It didn't. ...

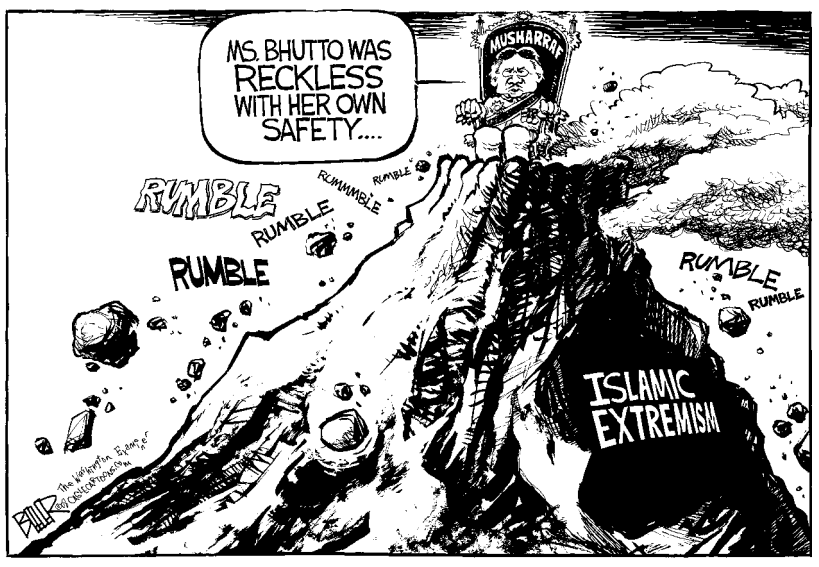
What the Senate passed makes a mockery of reform, and by some measures is worse than its House counterpart. The Senate version would by 2010 cut off agricultural payments to absentee owners and others who get more than a third of their income from non-farm sources if their adjusted gross income exceeds $750,000.

But if you're a full-time farmer, the Senate doesn't care how much you earn — you can collect subsidies even if you rake in millions annually. At least the House version would immediately end payments for "real" farmers who earn $1 million or more a year. The Senate bill is a sham. And since the House bill isn't much better, President Bush should veto whatever eventually reaches his desk. ...

President Bush should use his veto power and the evident skepticism in Congress about the bloated packages now on the table to force the conference committee to craft a final bill that dramatically curtails subsidies — or better yet, phases them out.

WEEKEND GALLERY





Fear the Bible when conservatives quote it

COLUMN: GREGORY RUMMO

The biggest story in politics right now is the role of religion. More specifically, from the Republican side is the media's focus on evangelical Christian voters. Credit Mike Huckabee's recent stratospheric rise from among the sea of mediocre cultural conservatives as the catalyst.

Huckabee may present a real threat to the Democrat's chances of taking the White House in 2008. Forget about charges that he's not qualified. He is just as qualified as that other man who also served as Arkansas's governor before being elected to two terms in the Oval Office.

But there's another reason why Democrats are worried. Evangelicals have political clout when they are not fighting each other. And Mike Huckabee, a Southern Baptist minister, has what it takes to bring them all together.

There have been various attempts to paint this group as a bunch of right-wing extremists, Bible-thumping, knuckle-dragging Neanderthals, or "largely poor, uneducated, and easy to command." But when researchers focused on ordinary evangelicals, "they (found) more diversity, complexity and ambivalence than conventional wisdom would lead us to expect."

At least this is what was reported in a story that appeared in the Dec. 8, 2003, issue of U.S. News & World Report. Entitled, "The New Evangelicals," the article examined evangelical's "bold take on Christianity" and concluded that it is "changing America." Included in the article were statistics reported by a Gallup survey, that "roughly 4 out of 10 Americans identified themselves as evangelical or born-again Christians." Get all of these people energized to vote next November and along with regular Republicans, we could have a landslide on our hands.

Politicians using Christianity and speeches laced with quotes from the Bible to pass themselves off as great moralists is nothing new. In fact it's a centuries-old approach. A rich young politician approached Jesus and delivered your basic stump speech about how his life had been moral, obeying the Ten Commandments since his youth. But when Jesus told this wealthy politician, "Sell everything you have. Give the money to those who are poor…Then come and follow me," this was simply too much to take when confronted with the challenge of matching actions with world view.

Which former governor of Arkansas said the following: "I don't think I could do my job… much less continue to try to grow as a person in the absence of my faith in God and my attempt to learn more about what it should be and grow. It provides a solace and support in the face of all these problems that I am not smart enough to solve."

It was Bill Clinton, not Mike Huckabee, and the former president was specifically referring to the importance of his faith in God that made it possible for him to do his job as the President of the United States.

His wife is now using the same strategy in her bid for the Oval Office. In November, the Associated Press reported Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton had "used an appearance at one of the nation's largest evangelical churches… to sketch a broad agenda to take on disease around the globe, calling it 'the right thing to do.' The centerpiece of a speech laced with Biblical references and reflections on her own faith was a call to spend billions of dollars to combat HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases at home and abroad. She said she would try to stamp out malaria deaths in Africa within eight years."

When a liberal speaks to a Christian group, no one in the mainstream media bats an eyelash. But when a conservative addresses a Christian audience, well that's a different story. Why is this so? Is it because when a liberal speaks to Christians, their comments aren't taken seriously because no one takes a liberal's faith seriously?

Perhaps voters in Iowa accurately divined the signs of the times; as Democrats sent Mrs. Clinton packing for New Hampshire, and Republicans chose Mr. Huckabee.

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