

Twenty Questions for Norm Coleman

Jim Fetzer (Duluth READER WEEKLY 3 October 2002, pp. 10-11)

Norm Coleman, Republican Candidate for the United States Senate from Minnesota, has been invited by the Duluth Chamber of Commerce to speak at its annual dinner on Tuesday, 8 October 2002, at the DECC. His principal opponent, Paul Wellstone, has represented our state in the US Senate for nearly 12 years now and is rather well known. Coleman, former Mayor of St. Paul, is not as familiar a figure to many in Northern Minnesota. It therefore appears appropriate to invite him to address a number of questions that have arisen concerning issues that confront the nation.

What I shall do is advance 20 questions for Norm Coleman, with some very brief explanations of why they are important. The Mayor is hereby invited to answer the WEEKLY READER with his replies to each question. As long as those responses are of approximately the same length as the explanations I am providing, then the READER will publish the same questions together with Coleman's replies using the same format. In lieu of my informal remarks on why the questions are important, Coleman's answers to them will run on the same pages as they originally appeared.

(1) *Do you believe in a woman's right to choose?*

The question is not whether you personally would encourage your wife or your daughter to have an abortion if they were to incur an unwanted pregnancy, but whether every American woman has a right to choose for herself in consultation with her physician and her family. Freedom of choice enables every woman to act in accordance with her conscience and her religious beliefs. If that were to

be taken away, many women would be forced to carry to term pregnancies they do not want. Why isn't freedom of choice the right public policy for America?

(2) Should creationism be taught in the public schools?

Scientific alternatives for understanding the origin of species include different theories of evolution based upon different causal mechanisms. But they do not encompass God as the Creator, which is not a scientific hypothesis. It is simply not possible to prove the existence of one or more gods or even whether god is a man or a woman. (Women, after all, can give birth, which makes them better exemplars of "creators".) This is why religious belief is a matter of faith. Why not teach science in our schools and religion in our churches and synagogues?

(3) Do you believe in the privatization of social security?

The collapse of the stock market has reinforced the impression that perhaps the privatization of Social Security is not such a great idea. Taking even 2% out of the trust fund to invest in stocks creates a shortfall of a trillion dollars to provide the support to retirees that 2% would have supported. And when the market inevitably falls again, millions upon millions of Americans will be left without the resources that 2% would have supplied. Aren't we going to have to bail them out--or is that something we only do for big corporations?

(4) Would you support a national health care system for the US?

No one seems to notice, but the United States is the only modern industrialized country in the world that does not have a national health care plan for all of its citizens. These plans are sometimes attacked as "socialized medicine". But the

members of the House and of the Senate enjoy comprehensive health care with the compliments of the American government. It seems to me that if it's good enough for the Congress, it's good enough for the American people. If you don't agree, would you then refuse to participate in the Senate's health care program?

(5) Should the Department of Justice be challenging the State of Oregon's right to have a "Death with Dignity" law on its books?

The Republican Party, I think, is supposed to stand for states' rights as rooted in the Constitution. It is difficult to understand why the federal government wants to intervene in the right of the voters of Oregon to allow its citizens to choose to die a dignified death when their time has come. The circumstances of terminal illness, mental competence, and great pain appear morally appropriate and well defined. It passed twice by large margins, but it is now being challenged by our Attorney General. Should his personal religious beliefs be dictating public policy?

(6) Do you support the President's massive tax cuts for the rich?

I was also raised to believe the Republican Party stands for fiscal responsibility.

The massive tax cut for the rich, however, was introduced by the President even before he had put together a budget for the nation. He used ENRON techniques to justify these cuts, treating projected future surpluses as though they were assets in hand. Given the radically different conditions the country faces today--with a slumping economy, volatile market, and terrorist threats--shouldn't consideration be given to revoking those cuts before massive deficits are locked in for decades?

(7) Are you concerned about the increasing gap between the rich and the poor?

From the end of World War II to the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States, the disparity between rich and poor was closing every year. In the time since, that trend has been reversed, to the extent that the richest 1% of Americans control 45% of the wealth. This disparity creates a vast imbalance in access to and control of the political process. The administration would make matters even worse by repealing the estate taxes on the very rich. If you are concerned about this tendency, what do you think should be done about it?

(8) Do you believe in social programs to benefit those who are less well-off?

The Great Depression led to the introduction of social programs that have proven to be of immense benefit to the American people, today including the Social Security system, unemployment insurance, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps and the like. Some Republicans want to abolish these programs on the ground that the poor, the homeless, and the powerless have chosen their life of poverty, which they deserve. This is because life is a struggle for resources where only the fittest survive, as Darwin explained. Do you agree with them?

(9) Do you believe that Iraq poses an immediate threat to the US?

Bush has gone to the UN to request restoration of weapons' inspections and action against Iraq's non-compliance with 16 UN resolutions. Violating UN resolutions is not a terrorist act, however, and, even according to our own intelligence agencies, Saddam Hussein has no links to Al Qaeda, has not engaged in acts of terrorism for at least ten years, and was not involved in 9/11. This rush to war looks as though it is motivated by domestic political calculations rather than national security. Are

we not straining relations with our allies and undermining our war on terrorism?

(10) *Should the US adopt a more "even handed" approach to Arab/Israeli relations?*

The occupation of Palestine continues unabated, where Ariel Sharon pursues what appears to be the policy of destroying everything of value belonging to the people.

The relentless assaults, which have included the assassination of Palestinians who are "suspected" of terrorists acts, carried out with F-16s and Apache helicopters, often including demolishing homes that are occupied with family members, has appalled and horrified the civilized world. Yet the Bush administration does next to nothing. Is it any surprise that the Arab world despises our own government?

(11) *Are there any circumstances under which you might vote against a military project or an increase in a defense budget?*

The American military budget exceeds that of the next 25 countries together, which suggests that it may be the least bit bloated. If a member of the Senate were to vote against wasteful spending, including new weapons that are costly but not effective, would they then be voting against "national security"? Even Donald Rumsfeld has questioned the purchase of the Crusader, the Osprey, and other expensive but not cost-effective weapons. Is he betraying the country? Are Senators who fight extravagant spending? How much defense is enough?

(12) *Do you support removing civil service protection for those in the proposed Department of Homeland Security?*

The administration suggests the most massive reorganization of the government

in recent American history, involving some 30 federal agencies and over 170,000 employees. The President claims that, in order to have the flexibility he needs to deal with terrorist threats, he must have the right to hire and fire at will, where civil service protections are merely a formality whose time has passed. He even threatens to veto the bill if those protections are not repealed. Do you agree with critics who suggest that this is really a plan to intimidate future whistle-blowing?

(13) Since ordinary intelligence failures appear to lie at the heart of the 9/11 fiasco, why do we need to reorganize government?

The federal agencies that would be involved in this massive reorganization, moreover, do not include the FBI or the CIA. Congressional hearings and reports from Senators Arlen Specter (R-PA), Bob Graham (D-FL), and Richard Shelby (R-AL) indicate that more and more evidence is emerging suggesting that the US had enough evidence to anticipate what was going to happen but that these agencies did not share it. If that is the case, then why are we going through this governmental reorganization? Don't we need to understand what went wrong before we can properly correct it?

(14) Do Americans have the right to criticize their government?

Former Vice President Al Gore advanced a critique challenging the administration by suggesting that turning the nation's attention to Saddam Hussein weakens the war against terrorism, strains our relations with our allies, and neglects important unfinished work begun in Afghanistan. A spokesman for the Republican National Committee denounced him as a "political hack" and The White House dismissed his views as "irrelevant". Gore won the popular vote by 500,000 votes. Do Americans as prominent even as Al Gore no longer have the right to criticize the government?

(15) *Do you believe that the government has the right to lie to the American people?*

The Pentagon recently proposed an official office of propaganda to disseminate false information around the world. Theodore Olsen, the United States Solicitor General, has gone so far as to suggest the government also has the right to lie to the American people: "It's easy to imagine an infinite number of situations in which the government might legitimately give out false information. It's an unfortunate reality that the issuance of incomplete information and even misinformation by government may sometimes be perceived as necessary to protect vital interests." Do you agree with him?

(16) *Do you believe that American governance should be conducted in secrecy?*

The administration has created a "secret government" that operates at undisclosed locations without even consulting the highest ranking members of Congress. The President has stopped the release of papers and records from past administrations, which are indispensable to historians and scholars. There are reasons to believe he acted to conceal his father's role in the Iran/Contra scandal. These documents and records belong to the American people. They were created by individuals on the taxpayers' payroll. Don't measures like these undermine democratic government?

(17) *Do you and your wife have a "open marriage", where you are open to having sexual relationships with others?*

The impeachment of Bill Clinton and the Gary Condit scandal have made personal lives of politicians a matter of public concern. According to multiple sources, you

and your wife appear to have an "open marriage" in which you live separate lives, where she spends most of her time in California pursuing her career as an actress and model, while you date many women in Minneapolis and St. Paul. I have been told that it is common knowledge in St. Paul and that television stations even have footage of your comings and goings. Is this appropriate conduct for a US Senator?

(18) *Do you have a fixation on John Fitzgerald Kennedy?*

As a student of the death of JFK, I have been profoundly troubled and personally offended that you appear to have adopted the mannerisms and speech of one of our country's most beloved leaders. A recent column discussing your background suggests your accent derives from being born and raised in Brooklyn. But my wife lived in Brooklyn and finds that explanation very peculiar. I have had friends tell me that they heard you on the radio and thought that they were listening to JFK. Has it been your intention to gain subliminal affection by means of affectations?

(19) *Are you planning to sue Paul Wellstone for using the word "privatization"?*

In offering explanations for why these questions are important, I have made no attempt to "split hairs". According to a piece in the local paper, you are thinking about bringing a lawsuit against Wellstone for describing your position on Social Security as being in favor of "privatization". Everyone knows that Karl Rove has advised Republican candidates to avoid using that term because everyone knows what it means but talk about "private accounts" instead. Are you making this the basis for a suit against the Senator? Wouldn't that be just the least bit dishonest?

(20) *Is your opponent a liar simply because he changed his mind?*

Ads on your behalf have also attacked Wellstone as a "liar" for changing his mind in deciding to run for a third term. If changing one's mind qualifies someone as a liar, I have noticed you once belonged to the DFL but changed affiliation in 1996. You brought a suit against Herbert H. Humphrey III for allegedly distorting your position in the 1998 governor's race, but let it drop. If changing your mind makes you a liar, then (as a one-time student radical) you appear to qualify--big time! So one last question: How can Minnesotans take you seriously when you act so hypocritically?

Jim Fetzer, a professor of philosophy at UMD, believes that White House intervention in Minnesota politics to pick the Republican candidate for the US Senate insults the people of this state and clearly reflects the high-handed, dictatorial and undemocratic attitudes of the Bush administration.