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By the way, while we're changing Washington Ö

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*

The election that the numbers said ended almost a month ago -- whether anyone really noticed or not -- is just hours from being over. And not a day too soon for a country whose mental health has been taxed over and over again for the last four years. It's time for someone to start cleaning up the mess rather than simply go on creating it. We hope.

Before that can happen, however, someone ought to stop long enough to look at the election process itself. This time we had primaries full of likely presidential candidates, all of whom turned out to be what the world would have thought, looking in through the USA looking glass, to be unlikely candidates: a long-term politico, a young African-American, a two-time presidential candidate and a woman. Everything about this election distracted from everything else about it so nobody paid much attention to the obvious.

Maybe we should.

What is most obvious about this election is that it is far too long. No other democracy on the planet allows this much time for the election of a government official. Or to put it another way, twenty-two months of campaigning for a four year position seems at best a little skewed. Even a little extreme, perhaps. Certainly a little "over the top," as the Irish say.

It's not that the job isn't important enough to merit great attention. It is that the job is so important that maybe we ought not to obscure what's going on there while we run around looking for someone else to do it. Is George Bush still in office, by the way? We haven't heard much about him for the last year. No telling what he's been up to. All we really know is that Iraq drifted into oblivion, Afghanistan heated up, the economy crashed thousands of people lost their homes every single day "not with a bang but a whimper" and nobody, it seems, even questioned how that could happen let alone begin to do something about it. So now the entire country is waiting for the next shoe to drop.

There is, of course, another elephant in the living room. This nearly trillion dollar election (\$630,000,000 for Obama's campaign; \$300,000,000 for McCain's) is the most expensive in history. That does not sound to me like "changing the way we do things" -- which both candidates promise.

The last election blockbuster was called "The Making of the President." This one, rumor has it, will be called "The Buying of the Presidency." While the economy went to ash around our feet, the fastest growing industry in the United States was electioneering. It costs, you know, to print posters, manage Web sites, open offices and stage multiple campaign stops for multiple surrogates around the country, and run TV ads and run TV ads and run TV ads. Will no one dare to ask "What's wrong with this picture? And if not, let's take the log-cabin pictures of candidate Abraham Lincoln out of the history books. It's one thing to be born in a cabin; it's another thing to leave it for Washington without millions of dollars in your pocket for all the folksy cups of coffee in small diners everywhere.

Maybe it's about time we discussed the possibility of more local TV debates and the advantages of capping -- and equalizing -- campaign spending so both sides are even in their access to public media. At least we ought to discuss the questions themselves before the cost of running a campaign begins to rival the cost of running the entire executive branch of government.

Finally, it's difficult to argue that the greatest victim of all in this campaign hasn't been journalism itself -- its objectivity and its credibility both now and in the future. Who doesn't know at this point which media outlets, which anchorpersons, which commentators don't support which candidates? I found myself having to listen to at least four different programs a night trying to put one news story together with a modicum of equilibrium. In the last twenty-two months, trying to come out with one whole story one small piece at a time took channel surfing and sleuthing of unheard of proportions. It took the ability to tell the difference between a sensational headline and an unsensational story. It took the ability to distinguish facts from fiction. In any other arena you'd call it a scavenger hunt.

Ever since we began "embedding" journalists with army units, getting the whole story from any one news outlet has gotten to be more and more infrequent. Real news is getting tricky to come by as journalism traffics more in cheerleading and entertainment than it does in straight news. It isn't that we don't have need for good commentators and good columnists, both of which are by definition editorialists. It's just that we need good reporters, too -- journalists who dedicate themselves to grind out the news without editorial comment so that we can come to our own conclusions about it. Those kind of professionals are getting to be rare on the ground.

We have enough ideological spin and control in party politics. We don't need it on the airwaves, too, on

which most people depend to get a good deal of the information they need to function as intelligent citizens of an open democracy.

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But unless these elements are attended to quickly, what happens in this next administration may be no clearer than this one has been. And that is not the change the world is waiting for and we are counting on.

From where I stand there are simply too many unknowns out there to trust to change and hope alone. We need to level the financial playing field on which politicians compete. We need to concentrate electioneering into much less than half the term being sought. And, without doubt, we need good sound information on which to base our own decisions or the democracy we pride ourselves in preserving may well go the way of habeas corpus, the right to privacy, the citizen presidency and the checks and balance system of government which we have seen, in the last eight years, beginning to slip away from us.

I know that this may seem to be a strange column for the day before a national election but I also know that if we don't look at where we are right now and how we got here, we are going to have trouble getting to where we want to go in the future.

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