



December 1, 2008

President-elect Barack Obama
451 6th Street NW
Washington DC 20004

Dear President-elect Obama,

Throughout the summer and fall Presidential campaign, members of the freshman Centralis Scholarship class of Central Michigan University (44 students) have been debating and researching the top issues facing the winner of the 2008 U.S. Presidential campaign. These bright and politically active Centralis students are recipients of our university's most competitive and distinguished merit scholarship. They offer the results of their research for your consideration.

The students were given several tasks. First, they were asked to identify, as a class, the ten most important issues facing the nation. Then, they were divided into groups based on their interest in a particular topic and asked to develop a consensual approach for resolving their assigned issue. In the process of developing recommendations for these issue papers, the students also were required to develop a solution which likely would be acceptable to either winning Presidential candidate, as they did not know who would assume the Presidency when we began this exercise in August.

The students were divided into teams of 4-5 students, and these teams were assembled so there was an appropriate ideological balance of students on each team. After completing their research and reaching a team consensus on their assigned issue, each team was required to orally and in writing persuade the rest of the class that the solutions they developed for their topic were appropriate and acceptable to the entire class.

The result of this semester long exercise is the enclosed document which defines what the class believes are the top 10 issues facing our nation, along with a proposed approach for addressing each issue. In effect, the issues and solutions proposed in the attached documents have gone through a mini-legislative process among the Centralis freshman class, so they are at times general to ensure widespread support. However, they do provide a good, bi-partisan framework for addressing each concern; and we hope you and your administration will find them of some use as you plan the legislative agenda of your new administration.

On behalf of the freshman Centralis class of 2008, congratulations on your election! Our very active student body is excited about your election, and we hope in some small way this attached document will be of use to you and your staff.

Sincerely,

James P. Hill, Director
CMU Honors & Centralis Programs



We, the undersigned, do offer the following 10 recommendations for addressing what we believe to be the 10 most pressing issues facing the President of the United States in 2009:

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**RECOMMENDATIONS TO
PRESIDENT-ELECT
BARACK OBAMA**

~

**FROM THE 2012
CENTRALIS CLASS OF
CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY**

DECEMBER 1, 2008



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Issue: Civil Rights

A prominent civil rights issue that has not received sufficient attention from the federal government is the issue of same-sex unions. We have come to a consensus that there is a need to grant equal rights for same-sex unions, and that the best way to go about this is to create a comprehensive, expanded national definition of “civil union” which would include both heterosexual and homosexual couples. This same sex union approach would be the same for marriages and civil unions, the benefits and rights would be equal, and the same persons would be authorized to perform either ceremony. It is important to note that with our proposal, the existing marriage laws would remain unchanged for the time being.

Our proposal is not the final word but simply the first step. It would provide more options, heterosexual couples would be given an alternative to marriage, and homosexual couples would be given a legal union that is equivalent to marriage. Most importantly, as per our initiative, the rights and benefits granted to civil unions would be the same as those granted to marriages.

However, in order to truly give equal rights to couples with civil unions, there must be Federal and State action. First of all, the Defense of Marriage Act would need to be revoked because it defines marriage as a union of two persons of the opposite sexes, and states do not have to recognize same-sex marriages from other States.

With this legislation enacted *with all deliberate speed*, couples would have increased access to legal unions which guarantee equal rights, regardless of their state residence. These rights would include, but are not limited to: Social Security, work benefits, federal and state tax cuts, etc. This proposal is an important first step to reach the goal of equal rights for same sex couples.



Issue: Education Financing and Reform

We have defined the issue of education finance and reform in terms of the necessity of reforming the No Child Left Behind Act. The demand for education reform spurred the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). While NCLB was a step in the right direction, there are lingering problems which need to be addressed. We recommend that NCLB be revised to address these problems within the current legislation, as well as other issues not addressed in NCLB as one of the first priorities of your administration.

Prompt attention to promote early childhood development programs such as Headstart is needed. These programs are imperative to strengthen the future learning of our youth and their success in higher learning.

We also believe that there need to be increases in higher education assistance. The necessity for a college degree in today's workplace is very high, but too many students cannot afford the high tuition costs of many schools. Increasing the amount of federal assistance through such programs as Pell Grants would be a good step. We also recommend creating more federal merit-based scholarships for truly outstanding high school graduates to pursue college degrees. The United States needs to strengthen its commitment to higher learning so we are able to keep up with the rest of the world in technology and other advancements.

The major problems with the NCLB can be found by looking at the Four Pillars of NCLB: (1) stronger accountability for results; (2) more freedom for states and communities; (3) using proven education methods; and (4) more choice for parents. These positions are admirable, but they have been met with many problems, not the least of which is inadequate funding. Another large problem is the pressure on teachers to produce high standardized test scores in order to receive more funding, leading teachers to teach almost exclusively to standardized tests and decreasing the overall quality of education that students receive.

In order to address failures in the current legislation, we recommend less emphasis be placed on standardized testing scores and increasing aid for failing schools. We believe that all schools in the United States should be competitive but requiring certain test scores to receive funding is detrimental to the well being of all students. Also, test scores used to measure the "achievement" of a particular school should not include special education students as it currently does. We also must institute a program that supports failing schools, rather than punishing them.

The current system gives schools with small special education programs an advantage over schools with large special education programs. Funding should be given to schools for their special education students, regardless of the academic achievements of these students. Also, removing the provision giving military recruiters contact information on every high school student is needed. This little known provision has nothing to do with improving the quality of education and should be abolished.



Issue: Energy Policy

We have determined that reforming the infrastructure to adapt to bio-fuels and other forms of alternative energy should be a top priority of your new administration. Currently, United States citizens often are unable to use alternative fuels because they are too costly or unavailable. A major obstacle preventing implementation of alternative fuels is the fact that the country is set up for primary usage of fossil fuels. This fossil fuel infrastructure is not conducive for the American family to use alternative fuels in their daily lifestyles.

Minimizing the cost of redesigning the infrastructure could be accomplished by initially introducing energy sources which have the potential to work well in our current situation. For example, we already have ways of distributing electricity, so solar power conversion needs to be linked to that grid. Also, bio-fuels have the option of substituting or mixing with petroleum based fuels. While at the moment, the fuel is transported by truck from a source-plant to a gas station or other fueling station, the bio-fuel could be transported along the pipelines now used for petroleum.

Research and development would be a valid long-term solution for the energy crisis, as it would increase our span of knowledge on possible sources for sustainable energy. Increasing funding for the research and development sector would allow more development on existing sources as well as the increased knowledge of sources that “don’t have names yet”. Our future security in energy use depends on sources other than fossil fuels, which we need to improve and discover.

Trying to change the system now is much safer and efficient than trying to switch when our oil supply is largely exhausted. Without this fundamental infrastructure transition, shifting to a new energy source would be both disruptive and certainly much more expensive.



Issue: Ethics in Government- The Lobbying Question

In order to have a more effective and ethical government, corruption and the appearance of corruption first must be addressed. We recognize that the right of all citizens to be heard is an important and fundamental aspect of our democracy and for the effective operation of the United States government. However, citizens also have the right to be informed as to whom are their elected representatives being influenced, so they can intelligently vote for the candidates who best represent the interests of all citizens.

Numerous approaches to combat unethical lobbying were explored. Viewing the topic of ethics from different angles, it was agreed that the transfer of money between politicians and lobbyists first needed to be addressed. We determined that such money linkages include both soft and hard money, as well as the money lobbyists and their corporate officers donate to politicians' campaigns.

After examining the strengths and weaknesses of multiple solutions, a process that incorporates many of the alternatives explored was found. It was decided that a process similar to Wisconsin's "Eye on Lobbying" campaign should be adopted nation-wide.

This "Eye on Lobbying" law would require several implementation steps. First, it would require that lobbyists and businesses specify what legislation and areas of policy they are trying to influence. This law would be in addition to and not a substitute for current laws regulating lobbying. The government then would compile a list of lobbyists, special interest groups, and the companies that hire lobbyists. Within this list, groups supporting each law or proposal and how much money lobbyists had given would be identified. In addition to this information, the list would also identify who specifically had donated to each candidate and how much had been donated.

The difference between this approach and other previously proposed solutions is that this information would be posted on the Internet and updated daily. The key to this approach is that it would be easily accessible. For example, when Wisconsin and lobbying are Googled, the first response would be their "Eye on Lobbying" website.

By knowing this information, voters would be able to hold elected officials accountable at the polls for their dealings with lobbyists. Over time, this plan would create a more ethical government both because unethical activity would be easier to detect, and citizens could elect officials who are truly representing the positions of the majority of the representative's electorate.



Issue: Global Warming

Global warming is a growing problem in America and throughout the world today. As a major polluting nation, it is imperative that legislation be passed to drastically reduce America's carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels.

We acknowledge the complexity of this issue, but we believe that there are numerous steps, both short-term and long-term, that can be taken to reduce carbon emissions. Some of the possible courses of action that can be taken, in the form of legislation, are: (1) adopting a public awareness campaign, (2) ratifying the Kyoto Protocol, (3) researching and integrating alternative fuels into a national energy policy, and (4) the introduction of a more regulated Cap and Trade system.

Overall, we believe that the system of Cap and Trade, combined with alternative energy research funding and development, would have the greatest impact on preventing the continuing threat of global warming. The implementation of a well regulated Cap and Trade system, in turn, would provide incentives for alternative energy development and use. Implementation of such alternative energy research could not only reduce America's oil consumption, but also lead to the formation of a new industries and new, sustainable, American jobs.

As a world superpower, America should be leading the way in terms of an approach to global warming concerns, demonstrating that we are not just a nation of consumers but also a nation of character.



Issue: Health Care

Americans today are struggling with a health care system that fails to meet their needs. Its weaknesses are most detrimental to the elderly population, which is heavily burdened with high medical costs. Important progress has been made through programs such as Medicare and Social Security, but even these expansive methods have been inadequate in ensuring that all senior citizens receive the care they need. It is essential that these critical flaws are addressed in order to progress toward providing all Americans the ability to enjoy a healthy life, especially because the “Baby Boomers” are approaching retirement age and will place an incredible stress upon the current system. There are multiple ways to improve the health care system that will benefit the elderly and the population as a whole. These methods, if properly executed, are capable of lowering medical costs and increasing the quality of care on a national scale.

The first part of our proposed method includes the re-importation of prescription drugs from foreign countries in order to lower the costs for the elderly, as well as the rest of the population. The high costs of prescription drugs have led many United States citizens to, against our laws, purchase American-made drugs from foreign countries at much lower prices. The elderly are hard hit by these expenses. In 2003, the average income for Medicare beneficiaries was only \$14,300, and a quarter of them spent more than \$100 a month on prescriptions. Lowering drug costs would provide great financial relief to seniors.

The FDA imposes strict rules to ensure drug safety. On average, it takes 12-13 years for a newly discovered drug to obtain FDA approval. FDA regulation minimizes the market principles of freedom of contract and assumption of risk, which leads, in part, to high prescription drug costs in America. Patent rights, which extend twenty years, start from the moment the company applies for FDA approval. Thus, the drug companies only obtain effective use of the patents for about nine years. After patent rights expire, generic drug companies can manufacture the once-private property. Although property rights must be protected to retain incentives for drug creation, FDA regulation minimizes the amount of time which drug companies make money from their invention, causing companies to increase drug prices.

Lifting the re-importation ban would force companies to choose one of a few options to maintain their profits. They could implement no-resale contracts, which encourage countries to control their own exports of American-made drugs by allowing the country to buy the drugs at lower prices if they do so. This way, the regulation does not fall on the US government. However, some countries are unable or unwilling to do this. Another option for drug companies would be to rethink their pricing. If companies cannot limit re-importation, they would have to raise prices abroad and decrease them in the United States to discourage drug re-importation. American companies still maintain their incentives to create new drugs because they are still able to make money from their patents rights, even by selling drugs overseas. Either way, Americans will pay less money for prescription drugs. This would benefit the elderly especially, since they often have the highest medication costs.

The next part of our proposed plan involves changes to the Medicare program. Presently, Medicare – the most prominent health care system for senior citizens – is split into two segments. Part A is paid for through Social Security and covers inpatient procedures, which are defined as hospital stays that last more than 72 hours. Part B is not included with Social Security, and it includes outpatient procedures. Physical examinations are not covered by any part.

Medicare Part B has become increasingly expensive, and more people cannot afford it. Not having Medicare Part B is a serious problem, especially considering the recent trends in medical



treatment. According to data gathered and published in the U.S. Statistical Abstract of 2008, the medical field has begun to shift more toward outpatient procedures as medical technology has become more effective and safe and inpatient stays have become shorter.

Medicare must be altered to reflect this trend. The main part of our proposition includes moving elements of Medicare Part B to Part A and privatizing the remaining aspects. Routine physicals, emergency room visits and lab testing are the elements that should be shifted. By moving these aspects to Part A, a large majority of seniors would receive important coverage at minimal cost. This, combined with the privatization of Part B and drug re-importation, would dramatically decrease the cost of health care for the elderly.

Once certain elements are transferred to Part A, the leftover coverage in Part B would be privatized. This includes outpatient hospital care and services, doctors' services, and blood when needed as an outpatient. By eliminating a part of Medicare from their jurisdiction, the government would save money previously used to fund Part B coverage and be able to budget what is left of Medicare (Part A) more efficiently, offering it at a lower price to senior citizens. Since private companies would be offering services that were previously covered by Medicare, the Medicare program as a whole would be more affordable. This would provide essential health care to the elderly, who could then elect to purchase another plan with additional coverage from a private company. In addition, since the federal government would no longer have to administer Part B, the funds that previously would have paid for Part B would be available to spend on other aspects of health care, including prevention.

In order to transition to the new system, assuming this legislation is passed, seniors would be given a window of time to switch from the current Part B to the new privatized Part B. Once they switch, their previous Part B would be taken off the books, replaced by the new privatized Part B. If an individual does not switch during the window, their part B coverage will simply be dropped. The window will give customers ample time to complete the switch. Also, in order to avoid confusion and deception by the insurance companies, the government will give their seal of approval to certain programs to signify a legitimate program.

One cause of high health care costs that must be addressed is the low supply of physicians and other medical professionals. Unequal distribution of physicians in rural and underprivileged areas is a detrimental factor as well. While there are large numbers of doctors in more affluent and populous states like Massachusetts and New York, there are fewer than half as many physicians in more rural states like Mississippi and Nevada .

In order to increase the number of medical school graduates and available doctors, the U.S. government should provide scholarships to medical schools with long waiting lists. The scholarship money would be provided with the stipulation that those medical schools must use the money to increase the number of students they can take in. The money could be used to build new facilities, hire new professors, or be used in other ways to expand their programs. The government should also remove the limit on the number of residencies it will fund. No matter how many medical students graduate per year, the nation's supply of doctors will not increase unless they can complete their residency training and obtain a license to practice.

By allowing drug re-importation, altering the structure of Medicare, transferring certain medical services to private companies, and increasing the nation's supply of doctors, health care costs can be minimized for those with the greatest need.



Issue: Social Security

To address the issue of Social Security Program reform, we have chosen the solution of partial social security privatization. Using this system, beneficiaries would be allowed to invest a portion (approximately twenty percent) of their income tax money into a private investment portfolio. These investment portfolios would still be government regulated, and the government would still manage the bulk of their money.

Investors would be given several pre-determined portfolio options from which to choose. Trained portfolio advisors would guide citizens, so beneficiaries would not be randomly investing their money with no education or guidance. This approach would give individuals a sense of ownership and control over their money, but there would still be a safety net for the government-controlled portion of their social security.

Under this proposal, money would not be totally invested in the stock market, so if the market were to crash, beneficiaries would not lose all of their money. Conversely, if the traditional system were to fail, there would still be money in the individual accounts.

This solution is much less risky than total privatization. This new system would provide a higher return rate on investments than the traditional social security system. This outcome would be a great benefit to the investor. It also would increase the longevity of the program and is not as radical a solution as full privatization or fully eliminating the program.

This proposal would be an attempt to reform the social security system incrementally and test the value of a partial market solution without risking the entire program.



Issue: The War in Iraq

The war in Iraq remains a major issue in our world today. However, no problem is of greater concern to U. S. citizens than the number of military and civilian lives lost in Iraq during this prolonged engagement. Reducing the loss of American and civilian lives in Iraq is a key issue when examining opposition to the war. A plan of action must be taken for removing troops from Iraq which reflects the concerns of the citizens of the United States to end the loss of life in Iraq.

The clear choice for reducing the amount of lives lost in Iraq is the proposed strategy for withdrawal. This plan entails a 16-month withdrawal period which would gradually lower U. S. military presence in Iraq. Training of Iraq forces would continue during this withdrawal. By 2010, only a small task force of troops would remain to assist Iraqi forces in training.

This solution, in theory, would allow the Iraqis to take complete control over their own country and defuse Iraqi anger towards U.S. forces. Troop departure would hopefully lower Iraqi hatred towards the U. S., leading to political reconciliation in the entire region. In the meantime, an aggressive diplomacy campaign involving Iran, Pakistan and Syria would help secure the Iraq region and isolate Al-Qaeda terrorist groups.

More troops could then be sent to Afghanistan to focus on securing that region and capturing the masterminds of 9/11. Again, this proposal would accelerate troop withdrawal; thus, reducing the loss of life in Iraq while allowing the Iraqi government to step up and take control of its military, social and economic development. Also, the increased potential for political reconciliation could reduce the chances of future wars and violent outbreaks in the region.

Many people are concerned that this strategy may only reduce the number of lives lost for America but will not decrease the death toll of Iraqi citizens. Staying within the Iraqi borders to try to rebuild the broken nation is simply going to cause the hatred against the United States to grow and lead to more deaths for the United States and its allies. However, with more aggressive diplomacy instead of military action during and after the withdrawal, there is a much greater chance for less conflict and death to occur in the future for all sides of the conflict.



Issue: War on Terror

The United States declaration of war on terror after the 9/11 attacks highlight our vulnerability to terrorist threats. To keep the nation safe, the U. S. has been working to dissuade nations from supporting terrorist organizations within their boundaries by military force. This policy is best exemplified by our recent actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have been highly publicized and remain at the forefront of the United States' efforts.

However, the United States government also has been watching with concern the activities in Iran. This petroleum rich country has a history of aiding terrorist organizations and is currently in the process of developing nuclear capabilities, posing a possible threat to the safety of the entire region. This situation poses the most immediate question regarding the war on terror: what should the United States do to combat the growing nuclear threat in Iran?

We propose that the U.S. engage Iran in a series of diplomatic talks. Representatives of the United States and leaders of Iran need to discuss the perils of nation-sponsored terrorism. In order to ease Iranian suspicions and enhance the negotiation atmosphere, the United States initially must stop the Iran-bashing in the media.

If the United States were successful with these initial talks regarding state-supported terrorism, the next step would be to engage the UN in the nuclear weapons negotiations with Iran. One possible outcome could be Iran retaining their nuclear facilities with internationally negotiated regulation of the types of nuclear activities permitted.

We believe that the best short-term solution to the war on terror is a diplomatic solution. Negotiating with Iran would be a long and taxing feat, but there is no reason to use military force without first exploring this potentially more lasting diplomatic solution.



Issue: Unemployment

Our approach to the problem of unemployment is to appropriate more funds to work relief programs for people of all ages. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) are historical models, but we feel that these types of programs should be expanded. They were started in the 1930's as part of the New Deal in order to help lower unemployment and fuel the American work force during the Great Depression.

We believe these types of programs could stimulate our nation's current economy while addressing the needs of many unemployed Americans. For example, Michigan has the highest unemployment rate in the nation. One way to solve this crisis would be to create infrastructure work programs in major Michigan cities such as Detroit. These workers would rebuild the cities by reconstructing roads, repairing old buildings for modern-day use, building and maintaining parks and schools, and fixing up historical landmarks in order to feed tourism.

The new image this type of infrastructure workforce would create will increase interest in businesses in the Detroit area and encourage more people to explore what this city has to offer. We also believe that these programs should be implemented in selected high unemployment cities across our great nation.

These programs are only meant to give workers a temporary job; but, after their work is completed, we believe that workers should receive educational funding to further their education. These funds can be used so that they can eventually obtain a job that will adequately and more securely support them and their families.