

Little framed in moral terms during presidential debate

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) — Economic woes and national security dominated a second presidential debate that offered little new information for undecided voters, including those looking for a values-based hook on which to hang their presidential choice.

Democratic candidate Barack Obama hammered for reform on Capitol Hill, while Republican John McCain emphasized his record throughout the town hall-style debate, held at Belmont University Oct. 7.

The questions posed, drawn from the group of 80 undecided voters assembled for the live debate and from thousands of queries submitted via the Internet, provided few opportunities to offer faith-influenced responses. Of the two candidates, Obama more frequently framed his responses in moral terminology.

When asked if health care should be treated as a commodity, Obama emphasized the federal government's "moral" responsibility. "Health care is breaking budgets," he said. "We have a moral commitment and economic imperative to repair" the current system.

If elected, the Illinois senator has proposed to work with employers to cut workers' health-care costs by 25 percent. He insisted that individuals would be able to keep their plans or buy the plan they wish. Part of his plan would allow the government to act as the "group" to make it easier for those without health insurance to get lower rates on private plans.

McCain said Obama's proposal amounts to "government mandates," setting limits on the insurance plan individuals could choose and taxing employers

who do not provide health coverage for employees.

The Arizona senator's plan calls for a \$5,000 tax credit that McCain said will provide increased funds for 95 percent of Americans to "shop for the best plan," including shopping across state lines.

The two differed sharply on health care's place in the economy. Health care is a "responsibility," McCain said, while Obama declared it a "right" for all American citizens.

McCain said Americans should have affordable, available health care. A federal tax credit would give them the economic power to make responsible insurance decisions, he said.

Obama declared that in a country as wealthy as the United States, individuals should not face bankruptcy because of rising health-care costs. "There are no mandates" in his proposal, he said. "But it's true that you are going to have to make sure your child has insurance. It's true that I think it's important for the government to crack down on insurance companies."

The call for morality also surfaced when questions turned to defense and military issues. "We have moral issues at stake," Obama responded when asked whether the United States should step into foreign conflicts that do not directly affect U.S. security.

"If genocide and ethnic cleansing is happening and we stand idly by, that diminishes us," he said. "But there is a lot of cruelty in the world."

Calling America the "greatest force for good in the world," McCain — like Obama — acknowledged that the nation doesn't have the capacity to right every international wrong. U.S. leaders need the ability to determine where resources would make the most impact on improving human-rights conditions, he said.

“It’s best to know when we can make a difference,” he said. “We must do whatever we can ... but we must recognize our limits.”

Both senators agreed that the United States should halt Iran’s effort to develop nuclear weapons. They also agreed that, should Iran attack Israel, they would deploy U.S. troops to the region without first securing U.N. Security Council approval.

The televised debate focused a national spotlight on Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn. With 4,800 students, it is one of America's fastest-growing Christian institutions of higher learning. For 56 years the university was affiliated with the Tennessee Baptist Convention, but that relationship ended last November with settlement of a lawsuit over who gets to elect Belmont's board of trustees.