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## Election 2004: Where They Stand

### John Kerry

In challenging an incumbent president..., Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., has had his work cut out for him... Kerry, who has served 20 years as a senator from Massachusetts, seems fully aware that the outcome of the Nov. 2 election could rest with a key constituency: older voters who may well hold the balance of poll-booth power in a few swing states. On Sept. 10, four days after the onset of the pedal-to-the-metal period from Labor Day to Election Day, Kerry traveled to a community center in Affton, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis, for a town-hall-style event designed to highlight his positions on health care. Following the event, in an interview with *AARP Bulletin* reporters, Kerry said that the difference between the two candidates, as older voters evaluate them, "is, frankly, the difference between night and day." He said, "This president's priority has been tax cuts for wealthy people, that's not really doing the job for our seniors. Seniors in this country deserve a president who is going to stand up and fight for them and represent them." Following are highlights of the *Bulletin's* interview with Kerry.

### The Future of Social Security

I will never privatize Social Security. I will not cut the benefits, and I will not raise the retirement age. I believe we can guarantee Social Security is whole and strong for the future by being fiscally responsible. If anything, I would like to fight for an America where people would retire earlier, not later. The concept of raising the retirement age is coming at it backwards. I will not cut Social Security benefits, and I will not raise the retirement age. Social Security is being raided by the Bush administration to transfer money to the wealthiest Americans. It's the most irresponsible generational policy

### George W. Bush

...President George W. Bush is asking voters for four more years. Tax cuts and Medicare reform have been high on his domestic agenda. Out on the stump, a centerpiece of Bush's platform has been the 2003 Medicare law that adds prescription drug coverage and expands the role of private health insurance plans in the Medicare program. Kerry has consistently attacked the legislation, and Bush has defended it with equal vigor. In speeches, Bush often sharply criticizes his opponent. Kerry's "policies of tax and spend, of expanding government rather than expanding opportunity, are the politics of the past," Bush said at the Republican National Convention last month. "We are on the path to the future and we are not turning back." The president was not available to be interviewed in person by the *AARP Bulletin* but provided the following answers to written questions.

### The Future of Social Security

Social Security is sound for today's retirees. I oppose any changes in benefits for those who are now in or near retirement. We must also take responsible, bipartisan action to strengthen Social Security for our children and grandchildren. I oppose any changes in Social Security benefits for those who are now in or near retirement. I favor the voluntary personal accounts for younger workers. [Eds. note: These accounts privatize control and benefits.] These accounts would provide ownership, choice, control and the opportunity to build a nest egg that these workers could use for their retirement and pass on to their families... Those workers who do not want a personal account would continue to receive their benefits from the federally administered Social Security system.

## John Kerry

I've seen in the entire time I've been in Congress.

### **The Medicare Modernization Act**

I voted against George Bush's Medicare plan. I know AARP supported it, and I understand they wanted to get something rather than nothing, but I was in the camp that said we can do better than something—we can do the whole deal. I never believed we had to limit it to \$400 billion and that we had to have a “doughnut” and that we had to have people pushed off of Medicare into HMOs. So while I understand the argument that some people are getting something, I want seniors in America to get a full prescription drug benefit under Medicare. And I'm going to send that bill back to Congress. This administration broke the law by intimidating a Medicare official and preventing that official from telling the truth to the American people and to the Congress about how much the Medicare program cost. George Bush's idea of how to fix [Medicare] was to raise premiums by 17 percent, which is a killer for a whole bunch of people. We didn't have to do that. We could have rolled back his tax cuts for wealthy people.

### **Prescription Drug Prices**

[Republicans] hid from Americans that they were taking out the provision to allow people to import drugs from Canada and prohibiting Medicare from negotiating bulk purchase prices, so they could transfer \$139 billion of windfall profits to the drug companies and \$49 billion to the HMOs at the expense of seniors and other taxpayers who fund the program. That's unconscionable. There are plenty of ways to lower the cost of Medicare and to put more money in the pockets of seniors that don't require us to cut their programs. I'll give you an example. The Veterans Administration bulk-purchases drugs. The VA is a government-paid-for, taxpayer-supported program. Well, so is Medicare. Why on earth would you have a prohibition against Medicare being able to save the taxpayers money? The pharmacy benefit managers abuse our seniors because they have their incentive and kickback and rebate schemes that raise the prices of prescription

## George W. Bush

Even those who choose a personal account would continue to draw traditional Social Security benefits.

### **The Medicare Modernization Act**

I was proud to sign the Medicare Modernization Act this year, which, for the first time in the history of the program, [will provide] all 40 million Medicare beneficiaries with a voluntary prescription drug benefit. This drug benefit will give seniors their choice of various plans to help them afford the cost of their medicines. Seniors are seeing immediate relief with their Medicare prescription drug cards, which are cutting 16 percent to 30 percent off the retail prices of most brand name medicines and 30 percent to 60 percent off the price of generics, and providing a \$600 a year subsidy to low-income seniors. [The act] expands coverage of preventive services, offers new services to seniors with chronic medical conditions, provides additional funds to doctors and hospitals in rural areas and makes other important improvements in the Medicare program.

### **Prescription Drug Prices**

The Medicare bill that I signed into law relies on private pharmacy benefit managers, using the purchasing power of millions of seniors, to negotiate the best prices for beneficiaries. Seniors will be able to choose the private plan that offers them the best value and the highest quality. This is the same competitive model that delivers affordable prescription drug coverage to the nearly 200 million Americans who are enrolled in private health plans, including seniors who have retiree health benefits through their former employers. The federal government sets the prices that Medicare pays for these drugs. Private purchasers are getting good prices on drugs and we believe that choice and competition will serve seniors and taxpayers better than regulation and bureaucracy. I am concerned about the safety of drugs that are illegally imported from Mexico, Canada and other countries. I will not open up our borders to medicines from other countries unless the FDA can build a system to protect the safety

## John Kerry

drugs by anywhere from 10 to 15 percent, and President Bush has done nothing about them.

### **Saving Retiree Health Benefits**

You have to change the Medicare bill that's been passed, which actually has an encouragement, an inducement, in it [for companies to terminate retiree health benefits]. There are about three or four million people in America who are going to be pushed off of their retirement benefits, and that's not fair. I would not allow that to happen.

### **The Future of Medicare**

[Medicare will not vanish] under me as president. I guarantee it.

### **Covering the Uninsured**

With 45 million Americans who have no coverage, the people who have the coverage are covering them anyway when they get sick or have a car accident or have a heart attack. What we need to do is spread risk efficiently, which is what insurance is supposed to do. I intend to see that we do that. Unlike George Bush, who has no health care plan at all for Americans, I have a health care plan that will lower costs and bring the huge majority of Americans who are uncovered into the system. It's a plan that will provide health care to about 96.5 percent of all Americans within three years of passage. And then we'll look at the other 3.5 percent. I'm going to allow people 55 to 64 to buy into Medicare early. And anybody who wants to will be able to buy into the same health care pool—health plan—as senators and congressmen give themselves.

## George W. Bush

of Americans. My administration continues to study the issue and to look for ways to lower drug costs for America's seniors.

### **Saving Retiree Health Benefits**

The new [Medicare] law provides subsidies, beginning in 2006, to employers who continue to provide these benefits. The inclusion of these subsidies was a critical factor in winning AARP's endorsement of this legislation. It also allows employers to supplement the new Medicare drug benefit, just as many employers now supplement Medicare's coverage of physicians and hospitals.

### **The Future of Medicare**

Medicare is the binding commitment of a caring society, and it is a commitment I intend to keep. I want our seniors to know that Medicare will always be there for them.

### **Covering the Uninsured**

We passed Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) so that Americans can pay for routine medical expenses and save for future medical expenses in a tax-free account. Through the expansion of community health centers we are serving 3 million more patients than in 2001, and I have committed to a five-year plan to open and expand 1,200 new community and rural health centers to serve an additional 6.1 million people. We have approved Medicaid and SCHIP changes that will extend eligibility to 2.6 million more Americans.

I have also asked Congress to approve refundable tax credits worth up to \$3,000 per family to help with the cost of health insurance. We have proposed to allow small businesses to band together to purchase more affordable coverage for their employees, and to reduce frivolous lawsuits that drive up costs and drive good doctors out of medicine. These combined efforts are putting health care control back into the hands of patients and doctors.

# John Kerry

# George W. Bush

## Long-Term Care

It's absurd to have a system that not only pushes people into the most expensive care, which is nursing homes, but strips people of their independence and their dignity because we're not willing to properly reimburse home care. When I'm president, we're going to change the home-care reimbursement structure.

## Older People in Debt

You have unscrupulous companies that are out there that offer very tiny print that nobody can read. People get suckered into these zero percentages, and then—boom!—you miss one payment and you're at 29 percent [interest] and they come in and they'll foreclose and everything. This administration basically has licensed that kind of greed and exploitation. I mean, look how long it took them to even get Enron indicted. ... They don't stand up and fight for average people. I have a long record, including as a prosecutor, of standing up and fighting for people.

## Uniting the Nation

This is the most divisive presidency I've seen. They lock the doors in the House of Representatives and don't even let Democrats come in to meet to work through things. I would come to the presidency with friendships and relationships on both sides of the aisle. My purpose in being president is not to drive a wedge between people and just win. My purpose is to get these things done.

## Long-Term Care

I have proposed a new above-the-line tax deduction to help individuals with their long-term care insurance premiums.

## Older People in Debt

Too many Americans are victims of fraud, and our seniors are particularly at risk. My administration is strongly committed to increasing consumer protections and helping individuals fend off predatory lending practices. I signed into law the Fair and Accurate Credit Transactions Act, which gives consumers the right to a free copy of their credit report, [and] established a new Presidential Commission on Financial Literacy to help consumers better understand their rights and increase their financial literacy. We are seeing results. The total number of bankruptcies filed in Federal courts declined in the 12-month period ending June 30, 2004, for the first time since 2000.

## Uniting the Nation

Many of my administration's most successful initiatives have been bipartisan efforts that will build prosperity for all Americans and affirm and safeguard human dignity. I will continue to work with men and women across the political spectrum to build on the progress we have made and increase the level of prosperity and civility throughout the nation.