

## **Kerrey, Hagel eye gathering storms ahead**

BY DON WALTON / Lincoln Journal Star  
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Together again.

Chuck Hagel and Bob Kerrey, who served together four years in the Senate, joined forces again Thursday at a University of Nebraska-Lincoln forum.

The topic was health care reform, but their sense of urgency turned afterwards to an economic tsunami and the gathering thunderclouds awaiting the next president.

That new president will need to build a consensus government and hit the ground running with a seamless transition, Kerrey said.

Retaining Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, at least for a while, to deal with the financial meltdown and the war in Iraq is “almost a necessity,” Kerrey told a news conference after the forum.

Health care reform and major initiatives required to address other growing challenges require bipartisan cooperation, he said.

Earlier, Hagel suggested the deepening economic crisis forces a reshuffling of U.S. priorities because “we are in the process of bankrupting our country” with unmanageable debt.

“No more \$12 billion a month in Iraq — that ain’t gonna happen,” the Republican senator said.

Hagel told the media conference he’s “very unhappy with the tone” of the presidential campaign at a time when the nation faces such challenges.

“The American people deserve better,” he said.

Kerrey, who was a Democratic senator for 12 years, said he supports Barack Obama and expects him to defeat GOP nominee John McCain on Nov. 4.

The plunging economy has given Obama momentum, Kerrey said, and it’ll be difficult for McCain to overcome his record of support for the lack of regulation that contributed to the meltdown.

Hagel repeated his intention not to endorse either his party's nominee or Obama.

Kerrey, president of New School University in New York City, represented Nebraska in the Senate from 1989 to 2001. Hagel will step down next January after 12 years in the Senate.

During the health care discussion, Kerrey said he believes Obama's proposals are "a lot better in the short term," but that McCain may have some better long-term ideas to consider.

All Americans should be placed in a single pool and be eligible for subsidized health care if needed, Kerrey said.

Health care insurance "should be decoupled" from employment, he said.

Hagel called for creation of an outside commission of health care experts who could devise and recommend major reform to the Congress.

"You will not find the requisite courage and ability in Congress to break through the stranglehold" of political pressure that prevents required change, he said.

"This will require a radical, scary solution," Hagel said, "so you've got to take it away from the politicians."

Among the changes, he said, may be "a whole new regulatory scheme for insurance companies."

Kerrey said the end result probably should be "a mixed system," composed of segments from the private sector and public sector.

"We need a uniquely American solution," he said.

Hagel said personal responsibility for a healthy lifestyle should be included in the mix.

Unfunded Medicare, Social Security and Medicaid obligations are a "heavy, dark cloud that hangs over this country," Hagel said.

The next president will inherit a tougher agenda of problems than Franklin D. Roosevelt faced in 1933, he said.

*Reach Don Walton at 473-7248 or at [dwalton@journalstar.com](mailto:dwalton@journalstar.com).*