

# CAPITOL COMMENTS



Steven Williams, Ph.D.  
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER  
Boone and Crockett Club  
PRESIDENT  
Wildlife Management  
Institute

## Silence Is Not Always Golden

Seven years ago, George Bush and Al Gore campaigned across the country courting America's hunters and anglers. Three years ago, George Bush and John Kerry did the same. At that time, both political parties'

presidential candidates were posing for front-page pictures in fluorescent orange and camouflage jackets. Each candidate appeared in outdoors magazines discussing the importance of hunting and hunters. They bragged about their enjoyment of spending days in the field chasing various prey. They discussed their favorite recipes for wild game. Candidates actually tried to compete for our attention.

Today, just one year away from the 2008 Presidential election, the current candidates are as silent about hunting as a hunter in a tree stand.

What is going on? Why aren't American hunters in the bull's-eye of political campaigns? Are we still relevant? Although I do not profess to be a political scientist, I do have some thoughts on why hunters have not captured the interest of any of the dozens of candidates running for president. I also have some reasons why they should be concerned about the hunters' vote.

The national atmosphere has changed considerably since the 2000 election. The issues we have faced post-September 11, 2001, have significantly altered the political landscape. Today, the Iraq war, immigration, terrorism, political power struggles, the federal budget situation, and a myriad of other issues dominate campaign debates and the media's attention. The Democratic-controlled Congress pitted against a Republican-controlled Administration has led to "gotcha" politics and a log-jammed legislative process. Apparently, the interest in hunters and their issues have been tossed by the wayside. Perhaps one party assumes they are guaranteed the hunters' vote and assumes

there is no reason to focus on hunters. If either of the above is true, hunters have lost an important opportunity to shape federal public policy—shame on us for wasting a chance to remain on the political playing field.

What is at stake for hunters and hunting? Currently, more than a dozen bills exist to address the potential impacts of climate change. Many of these bills contain funding authorization that could provide federal and state wildlife resource agencies with significant amounts of money to conduct the wildlife monitoring and research activities necessary to detect and respond to climate change. Accepted climate-change models predict that Southwestern and Western big-game species are at considerable risk,

**Perhaps one party assumes they are guaranteed the hunters' vote and assumes there is no reason to focus on hunters. If either of the above is true, hunters have lost an important opportunity to shape federal public policy—shame on us for wasting a chance to remain on the political playing field.**

and nationwide the distribution of wildlife populations is expected to shift to more northerly latitudes and/or higher elevations. Energy development and alternative fuels promise to transform landscapes and habitat across the country. As the nation continues to grow, energy development will escalate across tens of thousands of acres. The manner in which energy development takes place will depend, in large part, on the current and future administrations' direction and guidance. The Department of Agriculture's Farm Bill programs affect millions of acres of private farm and ranch land. Wildlife resources will directly benefit or suffer based on the next administration's development and implementation of Farm Bill conservation programs.

Hunters also have a direct stake in federal land-management policies. The next administration will undoubtedly grapple with roadless areas, grazing and mining

laws, public access, wilderness areas, multiple-use management, endangered species, and hunting on public land. As new presidential appointees assume positions of leadership within the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, hunters' interests will hang in the balance. The federal budget, which is currently bloated due to defense spending, entitlements, and earmarks, will have little room for conservation funding at federal and state levels. Federal forest lands, National Wildlife Refuges, and other public lands are already strained to maintain current levels of service and access. The next folks who sit in the White House offices will weigh conservation spending versus the many other federal programs that demand funding. If an administration has little regard for hunting and hunters, our wildlife resources, public and private land conservation efforts, and the political support for hunting will suffer greatly.

It is up to us, individually and as members of the Boone and Crockett Club, to make sure that the candidates understand that conservation matters to the American people. Also, candidates must grasp that hunters are conservationists who actually work and pay for conservation, and that hunters vote in large and consistent numbers. The past two presidential elections showed this fact in spades.

However, I fear that current events have overshadowed the current crop of candidates' interest in hunters. It is up to us to make them hear loud and clear that we not only care about conservation, but our quality of life is largely dependent on well-managed public and private land, widely distributed and sustainable wildlife species, and opportunities and access to hunt.

Vice President Cheney once remarked that Americans should not have to give up their quality of life for any reason—I agree. I hope that the candidates for president understand that hunting is inextricably woven into the quality of life of more than 12 million hunters, 30 million anglers, and their families. Then I hope that he or she cares. We can turn that hope into reality if we become vocal advocates for conservation with all who wish to assume the Office of the President. ■