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Presidential candidates: Compared to what?

Engaged in a continuous PR blitz, presidential campaign strategists always strive to portray their candidate as damn near perfect. Even obvious flaws are apt to be touted as signs of integrity and human depth. Such media spin encourages Americans to confuse being excellent with being preferable.

Eager to dislodge George W. Bush from the White House, many voters lined up behind John Kerry in late January. It's true that the junior senator from Massachusetts is probably the best bet to defeat Bush – and, as president, Kerry would be a very significant improvement over the incumbent. But truth in labeling should impel acknowledgment that Kerry is not a progressive candidate.

Enthusiasm for a presidential contender often causes people to go overboard with their praise and lose touch with reality. On the left, a classic example came from the wonderful documentary filmmaker Michael Moore, who declared in a mid-September open letter to Gen. Wesley Clark: "And you oppose war." It was a preposterous statement about a retired four-star general who has never apologized for his commanding role in a war that inflicted more than two months of terrible bombing on densely populated areas of Yugoslavia in 1999.

A salutary antidote to the poisons of campaign propaganda and media hype could be summarized this way: "No matter how zealous you are about supporting a particular candidate, don't say things that aren't true!"

In national politics, most Americans have a strong pragmatic streak – and perhaps never more so than now. Evidently, at least half the country is hoping to see Bush leave the White House sooner rather than later. A nationwide Newsweek poll, released on Jan. 24, found that 52 percent of registered voters said they don't want Bush to have a second term – and nine-tenths of those voters held that view strongly. In light of the extremely destructive right-wing policies of the Bush administration, any flaws in the Democratic challenger will pale for many voters. Meanwhile, the news media will increasingly frame public debate about the presidential race as a contest between backers of President Bush and the Democratic nominee, presumably Kerry. Partisans

will be head-over-heels for their man. But an important question should still be asked and answered: "Compared to what?"

For example, we should consider that question in terms of whether John Kerry is a militarist. Compared to George W. Bush, he doesn't seem to be. Compared to Dennis Kucinich or Al Sharpton, he certainly is.

Kerry's senatorial vote for the war resolution in October 2002 remains an indefensible part of his record. Despite the absence of credible evidence, Kerry included this rhetorical question in his oratory: "Why is Saddam Hussein attempting to develop nuclear weapons when most nations don't even try?" In a speech on Oct. 9, 2002, Kerry also tried to justify his pro-war vote with the statement that "according to intelligence, Iraq has chemical and biological weapons." Politicians who support illegal wars of aggression always have excuses. Kerry blames "intelligence."

On the domestic front, after his New Hampshire victory, Kerry boasted to CNN viewers that he voted for the 1996 "welfare reform" law – which amounts to class war against low-income mothers.

Likewise, Howard Dean also supported that draconian measure. On the eve of the New Hampshire primary, Dean talked about the welfare law as a terrific booster of self-esteem for poor moms – even though the law is pushing them out of the home into dead-end minimum wage jobs. Days later, Dean tarnished his populist persona by choosing a new campaign manager, Roy Neel, a former mega-corporate Washington lobbyist who ran the U.S. Telecom Association.

Like most of his Democratic opponents, Dean pretends that the key problems with U.S. militarism began in the second year of George W. Bush's presidency – thus, Dean's approval for the Gulf War of 1991, the Clinton administration's bloody assault on Yugoslavia and the U.S. attack on Afghanistan that began in late 2001. Dean has not seemed troubled by the irony of evidence that the number of Afghan innocents killed by the Pentagon was quickly comparable to the 9/11 death toll.

With ample justification, some view the presidential race as a choice of weasels ... or far worse. While the likely prospect of Kerry as the Democratic nominee makes him a pragmatic choice for the November election, let's keep in mind that his political career has been sustained by largess from such corporate patrons as Time Warner and Fleet Boston Financial Corp.

Understandably, people who comprehend the damage done by the current administration are keen to see a President Kerry replace President Bush next January. But that eagerness should not mean buying into media spin that depicts John Kerry as an advocate of military restraint or a champion of economic justice.