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Senate candidates air differences on taxes, Iraq war

The three U.S. Senate candidates sparred over how they would handle the big issues if they were sent to Washington.

Bill McAuliffe and Patricia Lopez, Star Tribune

MOORHEAD, MINN. - Against a backdrop of growing national and international turmoil and with only four weeks left before the election, the major candidates for Minnesota's open U.S. Senate seat showed more differences than similarities in a debate on Tuesday that was alternately pointed, polite and entertaining.

Republican nominee Mark Kennedy, DFL-endorsed Amy Klobuchar and Independence Party candidate Robert Fitzgerald staked out separate territory on Iraq and a broad range of spending policies, while outlining the strengths each would bring to the Senate.

In a 90-minute debate before 700 people at Concordia College sponsored by the Independent Bankers of Minnesota, Kennedy stressed that the coming election can be boiled down to matters of protecting families.

Klobuchar said it was about restoring the Senate's watchdog role in Washington, and Fitzgerald hit heavily on representing the interests of future generations.

Kennedy, under attack for voting consistently to support President Bush's agenda, took credit for tax cuts that support job creation and voiced support for a U.S. military presence until "after we're sure the terrorists can't win." He also said his "central commitment" would be to support domestic antiterrorism measures and Bush's positions on prisoner interrogations.

Klobuchar said she favored a "tough, smart" gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops after Iraqis demonstrate they can establish and control a government. She ripped Kennedy for echoing Bush's declarations of progress in Iraq and offering the prospect of the troops' return.

Fitzgerald said he favored an immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from involvement in Iraq, which he argued is a sacrifice being felt only by military families and future generations who will have to pay for it.

Fitzgerald appeared to win the affection of the crowd with his humor, references to his hometown of nearby Rothsay, Minn., and his appeals for fairness and opportunities for young people and future generations. The campus audience had a large share of college students.

Kennedy defended his support of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, saying it led to higher sugar prices for Red River Valley sugar beet farmers. But Fitzgerald said it "sold out" the same group. Klobuchar, who drew laughs by

recalling how she had asked for a diet soda while touring American Crystal Sugar operations, said she would have opposed the measure. "For me, it's sugar in the morning, sugar in the evening, sugar at suppertime," she said, quoting an old song.

Kennedy, while often referring to his own rural roots, spent more of his time attacking Klobuchar than reviewing his three terms in Congress. But he ultimately drew boos when he butted into her closing statement.

Hours before the debate, Kennedy, who has trailed in polls, gathered support from six Republican senators who appeared at a rally in Woodbury, with a private fundraiser to follow.

In coming days, Klobuchar will have her share of big-name support, too. Former Georgia Sen. Max Cleland, a triple amputee war vet, will help launch a Veterans for Klobuchar drive today at a rally in St. Louis Park. And, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., will be featured at a Klobuchar event in Minneapolis next Tuesday.

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