

Field Report from Des Moines, Iowa

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Grand Avenue, in downtown Des Moines, is a street that has seen many a presidential candidates give speeches over the years. Six blocks from here, President Obama's Iowa re-election campaign headquarters just opened and already some Iowans are affirming their support for the president based on his foreign policy.

When Charles Montgomery was old enough to vote in 1972, he voted to re-elect President Richard Nixon. Montgomery says he grew up in a strong Republican household but after the Watergate scandal leading to President Nixon's resignation, he has only voted for Democrats in presidential elections. Montgomery says President Obama is exactly the kind of leader he wants to remain in the White House for another four years.

"I feel like Obama has taken a very different approach and Libya is a good example. He didn't feel the need to maintain the image of the United States out front, always leading."

Montgomery says he believes this year's military intervention by the United States in Libya is very different from the 2003 intervention in Iraq under President George W. Bush. Montgomery says he didn't support the Iraq war.

Iowan Lora Fraracci will vote to re-elect the president too because she says she doesn't think any of the Republican candidates will do any better.

"So, what other choices do have? I'm not going to vote for a Republican, because I think most of them are 'Drill baby, drill!' and 'War! War! War!'"

David Skidmore is a professor of politics and international relations at Drake University in Des Moines. Skidmore says it's not surprising to find opposition to war from Iowa voters because historically there have been strong peace movements arising in the Midwest.

"Iowa is not among those states that benefit a great deal from military spending. In fact, we send tax dollars to support the military budget, but we don't get very much back, unlike some other parts of the country. And then of course there's just the fatigue the Afghan war as gone on for a decade now. Iraq is a somewhat the same way."

While the war in Iraq is a strong issue, so is immigration.

In Des Moines, Betti Bolar attends a breakfast panel called "Smart Immigration Reform." Bolar lives in Marshalltown, a town 65 miles away from Des Moines and has a population of less than 30,000.

In the last decade there has been an influx of Mexican immigrants moving to Marshalltown. Bolar has been paying close attention to President Obama's support of the DREAM Act, a bill designed to grant a path to citizenship for the children of illegal immigrants.

"I think that the things he has said about immigration reform are appealing to me. He wasn't able to do as many of the things I wish we could have accomplished, although he did take some bold steps."

Bolar says she will vote for the President in 2012 as will her friend Karen Lischer, who is also from Marshalltown, attending the immigration reform breakfast. Lischer is supporting the President because she says he needs more time in office to reform the country's immigration policies.

"He also needs a congress that is more willing to listen to immigration reform and take bold steps. And make the path to immigration easier for the people who come here and want to stay."

While America's foreign policy with the Middle East and immigration are important topics to the President's supporters in Iowa, Skidmore says domestic issues will probably be the center of a voter's focus whether they choose to re-elect the President or vote a new person in office. But, as nations like China and India become stronger, the perception of the United States in decline makes voters pay more attention to global economics.

"I think this will become more pronounced as we get closer to the election. People will want to hear what politicians are going to tell them about how the United States can deal with our domestic problems, and ways to strengthen us globally as well."

—Reported by John Pemble for America Abroad.

A Continuation of our Roundtable Discussion...

*Guests include: **Carroll Doherty**, Associate Director at the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press; **Susan Glasser**, Editor in Chief of *Foreign Policy Magazine*; **Jennifer Rubin**, columnist and blogger for *The Washington Post*.*

Ray Suarez (RS): Susan Glasser, is immigration a foreign policy issue or a domestic policy issue that involves foreigners?

Susan Glasser (SG): I think that in some ways it has aspects of both. I think the conversation is probably different in a Republican primary context than it's going to be in the general election conversation with President Obama. I think the voters you just talked to suggested some of the reasons why.

RS: Jennifer, we heard John Bolton at the beginning of the [last segment](#) telling the people at that forum that we were getting out of Afghanistan too quickly. But now President Obama has to explain to these Democrats in Iowa why, in their view, he's not getting out quickly enough.

Jennifer Rubin (JR): Well, he does have his hands full, doesn't he? I think for those voters who, as this woman said, think this "war thing" is a big distraction, President Obama is trying his best to satisfy those people by setting, as Ambassador Bolton put it, a timeline that puts the big withdraw date just before the election for no real strategic reason. It's also worth noting that just as some of your guests perceived a change in the tenor on foreign policy. There's actually a bit of a change in the tenor on immigration within the Republican party. I would note that much of the really red meat, hot rhetoric that we saw in 2008, when you had someone like a Tom Tancredo running and even a Mitt Romney of 2008 is fundamentally different now. You will hear every single one of these candidates talk about their support for legal immigration, talking about the immigrant experience. You do have a candidate who is trying to walk a fine line—Rick Perry—in terms of his more moderate stance. But I think Republicans are very much aware that the Hispanic vote is in play in 2012. And secondly they are trying to cultivate an image that these are responsible internationalists. Although it may play in certain sectors in Iowa, and in certain sectors of the Republican party, people like Mitt Romney are not by their nature pull-up-the-draw-bridge kind of folks. These are people who made their livelihood in international business circles and who understand that we do live in integrated global economy. So it's beginning to change at least the tone of the debate. You are not going to hear too many Republicans, other than Rick Perry, come out against "the wall," as the phrase goes. And you're not going to hear too many Republicans defend in-state tuition rates for children of illegal immigrants. But I do think you have a tone change and I do think there is a cognizant that they need to remove the impression that they are opposed to immigrants per se or that they don't like Hispanic people which frankly was a lot of the sentiment after the 2008 election.

RS: Carroll Doherty, is the Latino vote in as much play as Jennifer Rubin makes it sound like?

Carroll Doherty: The support for Obama is down, but it's down among many groups as we've seen. It's down among Jews. Even strong support is down among African Americans, although the overall support hasn't moved a lot. But I think some of this is a little early to say how it will play out simply because you don't have an opponent yet. And a Romney who has been attacking Perry on his immigration stance will be a different candidate. State tuition for the children of illegals is a very popular issue among Hispanics and it will be a question as to how the Republican nominee comes down on that.

RS: Susan, one of our Iowa voters said, "Well, where else am I going to go?" It didn't sound like she was going to run to the polls with an Obama button on, but she was going to vote to re-elect the President. Are we going to see a lot of that?

SG: I think that's a very important point in this conversation about policy issues. Although they may signify values, as Jennifer had pointed out earlier, in the end we're making a choice between different characters, different people. I think that's really what's going to motivate people more than any individual foreign policy issue. By the way, presidents of all parties tend to say one thing on the campaign trail, and something very different once they get into office and begin to have to not only manage their inbox but navigate the world. We've seen that with Barack Obama, certainly in some of the things that he talked

about during the campaign trail. Of course we saw it with George W. Bush. It's just almost a fact of American political life that presidential candidates don't provide a very good record or guide to their behavior while in office on foreign policy based on what they say now. You could argue that some of this is actually irrelevant.

RS: If you're an antiwar Democrat, you wanted Guantánamo closed, you wanted us out of Iraq, you wanted us out of Afghanistan. Are you going to vote to re-elect Barack Obama, or are you going to take a look at Rick Perry or Governor Romney?

JR: Some of this is a little bit overinflated. They may not like that Guantánamo is still open, but these are also the same voters who passionately believe in national healthcare. These are the same voters who passionately believe that global warming is a great threat. These individuals may not be thrilled on this one issue but they are not conservatives. They are not by-in-large even moderates in many cases. These are traditional Democrats. Just as Republicans will perhaps have to swallow if they, for example select Rick Perry, and say we don't agree with him on immigration but here's all the things I do. Voters on the Democratic side of the aisle do to and simply because he didn't obtain the closure of Guantánamo, or simply because we are leaving a puny force in Iraq—which makes very little sense—doesn't mean that these people are going to be chased off. They like him for other reasons. Many of these people wouldn't vote for a Republican if one appeared that frankly had all of the outside indications on policy issues that they thought appropriate. They just have a visceral attachment to the Democratic party. The same is true on the Republican side. We've become a very polarized country. It's the moderates that are in play and that's why politicians fight so ferociously over them.