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The new war on poverty

With all the fuss about Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, John Edwards's presidential campaign might look like a long shot. That's too bad, because his message is the most important.

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For the past two years, US presidential candidate John Edwards has been crisscrossing the country speaking at union rallies, joining picket lines and campaigns to raise the minimum wage, and visiting homeless shelters, low-income housing developments and emergency food banks. This is hardly the typical path to the White House, and it certainly doesn't look like the higher-profile campaigns of fellow-Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. But instead of tailoring a message to have the widest possible appeal, Edwards, a former US senator and his party's vice presidential candidate in 2004, has charted a bold course for the presidency: He wants to lead a moral crusade against persistent poverty and widening inequality in the world's wealthiest nation.

This campaign makes sense. It's been over 40 years since President Lyndon Johnson declared a national "war on poverty." But while Johnson's domestic programs significantly reduced poverty, especially among the elderly, they were derailed by the Vietnam War and, later, by an effective business-sponsored rightwing attack on "big government" social spending. Americans are now once again ready for change. So don't count Edwards out: his crusade against inequality is exactly what the country needs.

It's not hard to see why. Since 2001, the number of poor Americans has climbed from 33m to 37m people. 12.6% of the population - 20% of children - live below the poverty line. About 47m Americans - 17% of the population - lack health insurance, a record

high. Inequality has almost never been worse. Wages now make up the lowest share of national income - and corporate profits have grown to the largest share - since the federal government started collecting such data in 1947.

Meanwhile, many private employers are dropping health insurance from their benefit plans, or requiring employees to pay premiums they can't afford. The number of Americans in debt, or at risk of losing their homes to foreclosure, is escalating. News headlines about outrageous compensation packages for corporate CEOs have focused attention on the concentration of wealth at the top. The share of income going to the richest 1% families has doubled from 1980 to 2004, while their federal tax burden has fallen by a third.

These trends have laid the groundwork for the Edwards campaign. He announced his presidential bid from the backyard of a hurricane-damaged house in a low-income area of New Orleans. And, since the 2004 election, he has been meeting with academics and grassroots practitioners to develop an agenda that will address America's economic divide - an agenda that includes cutting poverty by a third within a decade and ending it completely within 30 years.

That plan starts with increasing the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 an hour - where it's remained since 1997 - to \$7.50 an hour. He wants tax breaks for the working poor and a million new housing vouchers for low-income tenants. A consistent critic of corporate greed, Edwards wants to strengthen labour laws that now make it almost impossible for workers to unionize. "The best anti-poverty strategy," he frequently says, "is a strong labour movement."

While he's pulling people out of poverty, Edwards also wants to start shoring up the middle class. He proposes stronger protections against corporate downsizing and outsourcing, and more federal subsidies to help families pay for college. Finally, Edwards hopes to invest in a large-scale public works program that will create at least one million "stepping stone jobs" in the public and non-profit sectors - jobs such as cleaning up rivers and parks - to put people to work doing good.

These programs will be expensive. To help pay for them, Edwards, like other candidates, wants to repeal Bush's tax cuts for the richest 2%, which would generate about \$80 billion a year. But so far Edwards is the only candidate to candidly acknowledge that paying for new social programs should take priority over reducing the deficit. Indeed, his policy priorities come closer to a European-style social democratic agenda than those of any major candidate for president in years.

Can such a candidate win? Edwards is third in the polls, but with the first primary contests still a year away, much can change. And, despite Clinton's current fundraising advantage and the media frenzy surrounding Obama, the primary calendar - with many labour-friendly states hosting early votes - seems made to order for an Edwards victory. If he can win two or three of the early contests he could get the momentum, fundraising and media attention needed to take the nomination.

Either way, his campaign carries an important message. Americans are tired of Bush's noblesse oblige prescriptions for addressing poverty - like encouraging people to donate to charity and volunteer at homeless shelters and soup kitchens. In contrast, Edwards is seeking to define the next New Deal in an era of globalization - a new social compact requiring people to work, corporations to act responsibly and government to protect people during tough times with a stronger safety net. Some are uncomfortable with that brand of moral idealism. But it's exactly what's needed from the next president of the United States.



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