

The Campaign No One Will Forget

It would seem to be impossible not to recognize the historical significance and symbolism that Barack Obama's election represents, regardless of whether someone supported Obama, John McCain, Hillary Clinton, or any of the other thirteen contenders for the presidency. Just 45 years after Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and Birmingham Public Service Commissioner Bull Connor directed fire hoses to be aimed at civil rights demonstrators, an African-American was elected president of the United States. No matter how Obama fares as president, this is a remarkable milestone in U.S. history.

This was always going to be an exceedingly difficult election for Republicans. Historically, parties have a difficult time winning the presidency for three elections in a row. The "time for a change" dynamic usually becomes too great to overcome. Since the end of World War II, one party has held the White House for eight years, two consecutive terms, only five times. Four times out of the five, they were not successful in holding onto the White House for a third consecutive term. The only time they did was after former president Ronald Reagan's eight years in office. In the fall of 1988, he had an unprecedented job approval rating in the mid-50's, and the time for a change dynamic was unusually low.

The situation confronting Republicans in 2008 stood in stark contrast with the one they faced 20 years ago. Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, uncontrolled government spending, record high deficits, and a series of scandals on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue had taken a significant toll on President George

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W. Bush's approval ratings, which had dropped to the mid-twenties, 30 points lower than Reagan's numbers at a comparable point. The Republican Party had paid a great price as well, dropping from parity with Democrats in terms of party affiliation, to a deficit of eight points.

The significance of these two factors cannot be overstated. Given that roughly 90 percent of partisans usually vote for their party's presidential nominee, a shift from parity to eight points behind is an enormous disadvantage. With a

Republican nominee needing 50 percent of the popular vote and Bush's approval rating at 25 percent, half of a GOP nominee's support would need to come from voters who disapprove of the job that party's president was doing. Notwithstanding any other factors, those two dynamics made this challenge distinctly uphill no matter who Republicans nominated.

These disadvantages were compounded by the fact that, while over the years McCain had developed a reputation for independence and an identity distinct from his party, at 72-years old, he was a candidate past his prime. McCain had been justifiably seen as an effective candidate in 2000, when he was edged out when the GOP nominated George W. Bush. Eight years later, he was less so. Watching McCain this year on the campaign trail was like seeing a Cy Young-award winning major league baseball pitcher struggling eight years past his peak performance level. McCain was not at the top of his game in 2008. His fast ball wasn't as fast; his curve didn't curve so much anymore.

Clinton vs. Obama

It can be accurately said that the stars were aligned perfectly for Democrats to win the presidency in 2008. A more debatable and intriguing question is whether the stars were aligned right for a Democrat, or this particular Democrat to win the presidency.

In the fall of 2007 the question wasn't whether Obama could win a general election as much as: could he wrestle the Democratic nomination away from Clinton? Having begun his presidential quest just over two years after his departure from the Illinois state Senate and arrival in Washington, his resume was noticeably thinner than most presidential contenders. He was the most junior of the five Senators seeking the presidency, an African-American with less support in the polls from blacks than Clinton, and he had never won a difficult race. Indeed, the circumstances around his nomination and election to

the U.S. Senate were unusual and his victory based in no small part to peccadilloes derailing frontrunners in both parties.

Yet, there was a confluence of factors that helped Obama win the Democratic nomination. There remained some residual “Clinton fatigue” in the party, a desire to nominate a newer, younger, fresher face, without the baggage that the Clintons brought with them. Additionally, Clinton’s handlers seemed preoccupied with the fact that she would be the first woman with a serious chance at winning a presidential major party nomination, convincing them that she project an image as tough enough to be commander-in-chief. While a certain amount of that was undoubtedly necessary, it was executed to such a degree that it effectively wrung any humanity out of her, any ability to connect with voters on a personal level. It wasn’t until the eve of the New Hampshire primary, after she had lost the Iowa caucus and her frontrunner position, that she revealed some emotion. But by then, the Obama juggernaut had built up an enormous amount of momentum. In one of the debates when Obama was forced to reluctantly concede that Clinton was “likeable enough,” that highly qualified answer seemed to reflect an ambivalence that many Democratic voters found. Ironically, there certainly is a warmer and more charming side to Clinton, but that side was rarely revealed to the public, or for that matter, to the press corps that reported on her to the public.

Another strategic error on the part of the Clinton camp was that their campaign plan seemed predicated on winning Iowa and New Hampshire, since the last five nominations were effectively decided in either the Iowa caucus or the New Hampshire primary (though Bill Clinton came in second in the 1992 New Hampshire primary, it set him up as the “Comeback Kid”). While Obama had an impressive campaign apparatus that extended chronologically far beyond the first two states, Clinton did not. Though Obama’s base was initially narrower, his strong suit was enthusiasm, an intensity of support, which is of enormous value in caucus states, where turnout levels tend to be lower.

But on a broader level, the Democratic Party, the party whose icons include Franklin Roosevelt and John and Robert Kennedy, seemed not only to be looking for a charismatic leader but were looking to fall in love. In 2008, the year of the fortieth anniversary of Bobby Kennedy’s assassination, they seemed to be looking for a candidate that could replicate the excitement and romanticism of the Kennedy candidacies. That was something that Senators Joe Biden, Chris Dodd, and Clinton, Governor Bill Richardson, and former Senator John Edwards had no chance of matching.

There was something else, however, that set the Obama campaign apart from their primary and general election rivals. In many of the other campaigns, one had a sense that at least half of the senior staff and advisors would like nothing more than to stab the other half in the back. Infighting and jealousies, leaking

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and undercutting seemed at times to crowd out the ultimate goal of victory. With the Obama campaign, there seemed to be loyalty from the candidate down through the staff and apparatus, and more importantly, back up the chain of command as well. A zero tolerance for intra-campaign fighting or leaking to the press was apparent. Top advisors later said that they felt comfortable being completely candid in senior staff meetings and conference calls, not worried

that what they said or suggested would end up on cable news channels later that day, or in newspapers the next day. The goal was winning rather than the protection of posteriors.

The Obama campaign seemed to have a focus and discipline, a level of organization and planning, that would be remarkable in any presidential campaign but was particularly so for someone so new to national politics and whose election to statewide office was so serendipitous. Then again that reflected the candidate as well. Obama had a poise and self-confidence, an almost serene attitude that served him well. It was apparent even during the highest pressure points in the campaign, whether it was in the period after his unexpected loss in New Hampshire or during the financial meltdown in September 2008. For voters to take a risk on a candidate as young and with a resume as thin as Obama's, he had to project a maturity and steadiness far beyond his years, and he did.

Another aspect of this is that very issue of experience. It is interesting to wonder whether Obama could have won the nomination or general election had experience not been, in the eyes of many, discredited or devalued. It simply didn't have the salience that it has in the past and might well in the future. Voters in 2008 seemed more fearful of the status quo than they were of change. They seemed to be more open to trading off experience and seasoning for a candidate who appeared to represent hope and change.

As the Democratic campaign moved into February and March, there grew a growing inevitability around Obama's nomination, the opportunity for a Clinton victory came and went, and the final months of the contest ended up being little more than a mopping up exercise for Obama. The only doubt was whether the party would come back together sufficiently for him to win.

It's McCain's Turn

McCain's candidacy became a roller coaster and then came full circle, from frontrunner to political road kill to frontrunner and eventually nominee. He

started off putting together a political juggernaut designed to emulate the Bush campaigns of 2000 and 2004, to secure the GOP nomination through overwhelming force. But his campaign proved unable to finance such an endeavor, effectively coming apart at the seams in the summer of 2007, with most writing off his chances entirely. But through sheer tenacity, McCain reinvented his campaign as more of a guerilla warfare outfit, more befitting his personality, and eventually won his party's nomination, proving his critics (this one included) wrong.

There are at least two theories of how and why McCain was able to make this Lazarus-like comeback from the political dead. One is that the more dominant conservative wing of the GOP became divided, with former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney securing the support of most of the more economically-oriented wing of the Republican party while former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee excelled among socially and culturally conservative Republicans, allowing McCain to consolidate the smaller, more moderate, and less ideological elements of the party.

A second but not mutually exclusive theory is that after McCain's candidacy effectively collapsed, the Republican party held auditions for the role of frontrunner. One by one, the other contenders sought the mantle only to fall short. First former Mayor Rudy Giuliani, then former Senator Fred Thompson, then Romney and then Huckabee, but none could convert their opportunity into lasting momentum. There is also the axiom that, in terms of presidential nominations, "Democrats fall in love, Republicans fall in line." The GOP is hierarchical, they tend to nominate whoever's turn it is, and as the runner-up in the previous nomination fight, in 2000, it was McCain's turn.

While others had an opportunity to capitalize on the McCain campaign's early misfortune, none did. Even in its reincarnation, McCain's campaign had the political experience and acumen to outmaneuver their rivals, and while the win was not the product of its initial "shock and awe" overwhelming force strategy, they did nail their nomination early on.

The Wild Card

Going into the mid-summer of 2008, while the situation in Iraq was improving, the economy was in clear decline and it was becoming increasingly clear that the country was headed into a recession. While Iraq had become a crushing burden for the GOP in 2006, it began to improve later, shifting public attention toward the economy, robbing Bush and his party of any benefit from the turning situation in Iraq. The worsening economy continued to feed the "time for a change" dynamic, simply replacing one liability for Republicans with another.

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Over that summer, Democrats had an eight-point lead over Republicans in party identification and in “generic ballot tests.” Also, unnamed Democratic congressional and presidential candidates beat unnamed GOP candidates by comparable margins. Voters were disappointed and angry at Bush and his party. They wanted change. They were willing to vote for “a Democrat,” but Obama had not

yet closed the sale, and was averaging only about a three-point lead over McCain.

For some of these swing voters, there were reservations over whether Obama had the experience to be president. His tenure in statewide office had been brief and his accomplishments few. He symbolized hope and change but had few tangible achievements as an elected official to mollify doubters. For others, no doubt, race and religion came into play. Few had ever voted for a member of a minority group for significant statewide office. Religion seemed to cut against Obama two ways: there were (erroneous) suggestions from some that he a Muslim, while others criticized him for having been a member of inflammatory and controversial Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s church, Wright having officiated at the Obamas’ wedding and baptized his two children. The latter critics used the Wright connection to argue that Obama was not the conciliator, the figure that transcended politics as usual, but instead was a radical and outside the mainstream.

There is little doubt that the conditions were ripe for a Democratic win, the question is whether they were ripe for an Obama win. Interestingly though, many voters seemed to listen and contemplate such charges and suggestions but seemed to have put blinders on, choosing not to put weight on the accusations, remaining focused on larger issues and the broader concept of change. In many ways, the charges leveled at Obama were more incendiary than the “swift boat” attacks that derailed Senator John Kerry’s campaign in 2004, yet they didn’t have the same effect. Many seemed to listen to, consider, and ultimately reject the accusations.

The contest seemed locked in with Obama ahead, but not by a convincing margin, going into the selection of vice presidential running mates and the two nominating conventions. Running mates rarely make much positive difference outside of their home states, and voters are more likely to cast their ballots for president, not vice president. While there is a huge amount of attention to the selection and identity of the running mates, their roles are generally exaggerated, fed by a press corps looking for news during the campaign’s summer doldrums.

With the drama long removed from such convocations, national party conventions have become little more than four-day pep rallies for their parties, designed to build enthusiasm and drive a partisan message. With that as a backdrop, Obama's selection of Senator Joe Biden fit into the historical norm. Biden was exceedingly qualified for the post and his experience may have provided some comfort to voters who had reservations about Obama's thin resume, just as veteran Senator Walter Mondale may have helped Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter; former CIA Director, UN ambassador, and emissary to China George H.W. Bush may have helped former California Governor Ronald Reagan; and former defense secretary Dick Cheney helped Texas Governor George W. Bush. Others argue that the choice of Biden, who was born and raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania and frequently emphasized his "regular Joe" credentials, may have helped a ticket headed up by a figure as different as Obama. Maybe the Biden choice helped some, perhaps it made no difference, but it certainly didn't hurt Obama either. Similarly, the Democratic convention in Denver did little to boost the party's prospects. Democratic voters were already unified and energized prior to the convention. It is hard to imagine Democrats any more motivated than they already were.

Prior to McCain's choice of Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin, however, while Republicans were unified, they certainly were not enthusiastic. Polls had typically shown that McCain was drawing even higher percentages of GOP voters than Obama did among Democrats, but that is fairly normal. But the GOP was pessimistic, party morale was exceedingly low, and conservatives did not see McCain as one of their own. They accepted McCain but were hardly thrilled by him.

The choice of Palin, wise or not, certainly did energize previously lethargic conservatives while paradoxically boosting McCain's maverick image and distancing him from the Bush-Cheney administration, without overtly criticizing it. The Palin pick was effectively a B-12 shot for the Republican party, providing them with hope and actually, for a short period of time, a modest lead. But like a boost of B-12 or adrenaline, that wore off over time and Obama pulled back ahead, though once again not an insurmountable lead.

At this point, Obama had a financial and organizational advantage and a lead in the polls. The question was whether it was enough and whether there were any racial dynamics that made the polls in this particular race unreliable. It will never be known, but most experts believe that Obama was still in the stronger position and most likely going to win.

The most pivotal date in the campaign though came on September 15, when Wall Street powerhouse Lehman Brothers went into default, precipitating a meltdown on Wall Street and in credit markets worldwide. McCain's statement that morning that the economy was "fundamentally strong" only exacerbated

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the situation. In the matter of a couple of days, Obama's lack of experience and all other factors were effectively excised from the contest. The only thing that mattered was the economy.

While some argue that Palin was a liability, others say she was an asset, but once the credit markets seized up and stock market plummeted, no running mate would have made a significant difference. For that matter, even if McCain had

more money and a better campaign grassroots organization, it wouldn't have made any difference. Whatever one might think would have happened, the election had become fundamentally unwinnable for McCain on September 15.

With what happened on September 15 and the implications of the economic meltdown on Republican fortunes, it would be easy to underestimate the importance of Obama himself in this victory, but that would be wrong. It's fascinating to hear strategists for rival campaigns in both parties marvel at his skill, his focus and discipline, his drive. You will also hear them talk with envy about his campaign apparatus, that it would go down as one of the, if not the, most effective presidential campaign in history.

While there apparently is no ancient Chinese proverb stating, "may you live in interesting times," it certainly was true in 2008. This was a campaign that no one will ever forget.