

Cohen, Andrew

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The Race to the White House 2008: Historic in Many Ways

Andrew Cohen

The first of the three acts of this long, feverish and historic presidential campaign of 2008 is over. The primary season, which stretched from the dead of winter to the end of spring, has finally produced nominees for the two major parties. Now, in the second act, the Republicans and the Democrats are mapping strategy, testing ideas and preparing to gather at their national conventions in late summer. In the third act, they will face each other in the general election this autumn. If the primaries were prologue, it will be an extraordinary contest between two unorthodox candidates unlike any before. They will spend a record amount of money, recruit new voters, and, prospectively, redraw the electoral map of the United States.

Few presidential elections have changed as quickly and decisively as this one. Nothing is as it first appeared to be, which is why it would be foolish to predict the campaign's *denouement* on November 4. Conventional wisdom has been wrong from the start. It was widely assumed in the summer of 2007, for example, that the Democrats would choose Senator Hillary Clinton of New York and the Republicans would choose Rudolf Giuliani, the former mayor of New York City. While both were in the race then, neither Senator Barack Obama of Illinois nor Senator John McCain of Arizona seemed a real possibility. McCain had dismissed most of his staff and was languishing in the polls; surely he was too old (then 71) and independent to become his party's nominee. Obama had been in the Senate only two years when he announced his candi-

dacy; surely he could not unseat Clinton, the party's star.

If you had said that Mike Huckabee, a little-known, long-serving governor of Arkansas, would emerge as the runner-up to McCain, or that the seemingly invincible Giuliani would melt before the winter's snows, that, too, would have been laughable. In each case, the improbable happened. Then again, this campaign is already the longest, most expensive, most competitive and most democratic in American political history. It is perfect political storm of superlatives to describe the first truly open race for the White House—that is, one without a sitting president or vice-president running—since the election of 1952.

When it began two years ago, who knew that the campaign would produce the oldest man to be nominated for president

by a major party? Or, that it would produce the first black man to be nominated for president by a major party, after he narrowly defeated the most formidable woman ever to seek the presidency? In trying to define what has taken place in the last year or so, let us examine some of the campaign's elements: policy, diversity, identity, electability, history, dynasty, inevitability, money, democracy, and strategy.

Policy

Among the leading Democrats, there were surprisingly few real differences. On immigration, education and health care, Clinton and Obama were alike. The prominence of universal health care, which was the leading domestic issue early on, suggests that the United States might be ready to embrace it decades after Europe and Canada. By the end of the campaign, though, the deteriorating economy had displaced health care as the top domestic issue. Clinton proposed rebates to diminish the impact of soaring gasoline prices; Obama rejected the idea. On Iraq, Obama argued that he had opposed the war that Clinton supported.

Among the leading Republicans, there were more differences, which was unusual for a party which likes to choose its nominee early. In a primary season which Republican strategist Ralph Reed called "the most unpredictable roller-coaster ride" since the 1960s, some of the candidates urged a tougher line on immigration as they tried to appeal to the party's conservative base. Like the Democrats, though, the Republicans thought other criteria (electability, character) more important in choosing their nominee than policy.

If there were few real differences *within* the parties in the primary season, there will be real differences *between* them in the general election. Obama will label a McCain presidency "the third term of George W. Bush," and on the economy, Iraq and health care, he can argue that the Senator's positions are indeed close to those of the

President. Obama disagrees with all of them. While McCain once opposed the Bush tax cuts (\$1.35 trillion in 2001 and \$320 billion in 2003), for example, he now wants to make them permanent. He has also proposed four new ones. Obama opposes all of them, which he says are regressive and favour the rich. He also opposed McCain's healthcare plan, which isn't as comprehensive as his. He will attack McCain for reversing himself on immigration, the treatment and torture of detainees in Guantanamo Bay and offshore oil drilling.

Obama isn't trumpeting any grand themes such as Kennedy's New Frontier or Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. He has plans and programs, but his appeal is less policy than personality. However, he will offer health care, tax cuts for the middle class and tax increases for those making more than \$250,000 a year. He favours more liberal immigration, controls on greenhouse gases, and has doubts about the North American Free Trade Agreement. McCain will attack him for his own inconsistency, such as reversing his support for campaign public financing.

Diversity

No race has had the complexion—and the complexity—of this one. This year, for the first time, a woman, a black and a Hispanic American ran for the Democrats, all of them highly credible. As the field thinned, John Edwards was the lone white male in the race. For the Republicans, there was an Italian and a Mormon.

What does this say? Diversity matters in America. The country is not the monolith or melting pot; consider the rise of Hispanic America (44 million, 15 percent of the population) as a political force, particularly in the Southwest. That the Democrats have chosen a black man as their nominee and that Americans may make him president shows the country's capacity to reinvent itself. In 2008, ethnic politics may be decisive. Obama hopes to mobilize the highest turnout ever among Black

America (40 million, 13 percent of the population). Obama hopes his stand on immigration—allowing illegal immigrants to stay—will also attract support among Hispanic Americans, whom the Republicans are courting aggressively in places like Florida. The Democrats are launching recruitment and registration drives in both communities. The challenge in wooing Hispanic voters, who are concentrated in Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, and Colorado, is that they account for only ten percent of the nation's voters. Their community is disproportionately young and one quarter of them cannot vote because they are not citizens. Still, McCain and Obama will be vying intensely for them.

Identity

With diversity has come a return to identity politics. Despite the efforts of Clinton and Obama to broaden their appeal, in the end both were relying heavily on their core constituencies. Women (as well as older men, Catholics, less-educated whites and Hispanics) went for her. Blacks (as well as young people and more-educated whites) went for him. The question is whether those voters who supported Clinton in the big industrial states such as Pennsylvania and Ohio will support Obama or switch to McCain, as some disenchanted supporters threatened after Clinton was defeated. For Clinton, establishing an identity apart from that of her husband was one of the great challenges of her campaign. When she asked him to play a major role—which he did as fervent partisan on her behalf, diminishing his stature as a former president—she made it more difficult for her to escape his shadow. In the campaign, she had many identities: heir apparent, come-back kid, scrappy underdog, aggrieved victim, gracious loser. Was Hillary Clinton a victim of misogyny? Her husband thought so, accusing the media of sexism, though studies of early campaign coverage suggest it wasn't so. More likely, Clinton lost because she was the weaker candidate with a weaker

organization, not because she is a woman. And was Barack Obama a victim of racism? Both remain imponderable.

Electability

In the absence of serious issues among Democrats, the ballot question in the primaries turned on electability. Who had the best chance of winning in the fall? Clinton argued that she had a longer record of public service, had greater appeal to middle class whites, and had more experience in government. Obama said that he could appeal to independent voters, who might have voted for the Republicans, as well as younger voters, who had never voted at all.

Beyond electability, the issue of experience defined the first act of the campaign. Clinton said her seven years in the Senate and eight years in the White House as First Lady had taught her how to lead, even if she was never clear about her responsibilities in the White House. (The one issue she called her own—healthcare—was the biggest policy failure of her husband's two-term presidency.) She declared Obama's three years in the Senate (after eight years in state politics in Illinois) inadequate preparation for the presidency. Obama argued that his background (of mixed race), character (cool and conciliatory) and his years living abroad were the basis of his appeal. Historically speaking, however, neither Clinton nor Obama had anywhere near the experience that John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon had in 1960.

Dynasty

After eight years of George W. Bush, following eight years of Bill Clinton, following four years of George H. Bush, many voters resisted Hillary Clinton. After two decades of the House of Bush and the House of Clinton, was America turning into the Stuarts and the Tudors? Was it becoming a banana republic, in which the presidency is a diarchy? Not really, but it hurt Clinton.

Enough Americans worried that the presidency has become a family affair, to be passed like a family heirloom from one member, or one generation, to another. To some, political dynasties have an aura of the aristocracy about them, which isn't how the Founding Fathers imagined things. To her harshest critics, a Clinton restoration seemed less Old World than Third World.

History

Every campaign is haunted by history, this one more than most. Pundits compare Barack Obama with John F. Kennedy, as if this were 1960. Both Senator Edward Kennedy, the president's brother, and Caroline Kennedy, his daughter, gave their much-coveted blessing to Obama. So did Theodore Sorensen, JFK's brilliant former speechwriter. To many, Obama is the new Kennedy.

A campaign of firsts? Never has a woman or a black fought this intensely for a party nomination. Never has a man as old as John McCain won his party's nomination. Never have so many people voted, volunteered and donated money, as they did in the primary season, particularly on behalf of Democrats. Another historical footnote: whichever party wins, a sitting senator will go the White House for the first time since 1960. Americans have come to prefer presidents who had the executive experience of governors (Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush) or vice-presidents (Nixon, Gerald Ford, George H. Bush). Senators have won nominations but they haven't won elections.

Inevitability

This campaign marked the end of "inevitability." In the beginning, John McCain was the frontrunner for the Republicans. He was inevitable. Then he was no longer inevitable; Rudy Giuliani was inevitable. But a funny thing happened in the primaries: Giuliani, who refused to mount a serious campaign in the Iowa Caucuses and

New Hampshire Primary, was out of the race before he entered it. The "inevitable" switched places. Who predicted that? Hillary Clinton had also once been inevitable, even more inevitable than McCain. She had fame, a name, money, the party establishment. She was defeated by Obama's insurgent candidacy—the most unorthodox since Jimmy Carter's upstart campaign in 1976—with its masterful fundraising and tactical agility. Who predicted that?

Money

It isn't surprising that money has been a motif of the most expensive campaign ever. The Democrats raised more than \$500 million, a record amount, led by Obama and Clinton. Mitt Romney, the former governor of Massachusetts, who was considered a strong challenger for the Republicans, spent \$40 million of his own money on his unsuccessful campaign. So skilled is Obama at fundraising that he has opted out of the public finance system, which gives each major party candidate \$84.1 million. It demonstrates his ability to raise money. Because of his mastery of the Internet, and his ability to appeal to thousands of small donors who can give again and again, some predict he will raise \$300 million, enabling him to compete in states such as Alaska, Colorado, Georgia and Mississippi, where Democrats do not do well. McCain, who will be unable to match Obama, is remaining in the public finance system.

Democracy

The campaign was grassroots democracy at work. There were 22 debates among the candidates in 57 contests in every state and territory in which 35 million people voted for Democrats alone. This shows the importance of campaigns in the making of the president. It is an enervating process that seems to go on forever, starting earlier each quadrennial cycle. (JFK announced his candidacy in January, 1960, for a primary season that began in March.) This time the

candidates entered the race in 2006 or 2007, and the first electoral test—the Iowa caucus—was January 3, 2008. To become president, a candidate must run a marathon—building an organization, raising money, winning endorsements, crafting policy, participating in one debate after another. It is challenging, to be sure; there may be no office in the world in which so many voters have a say. For all the cynicism about politics, the race of 2008 has become an invigorating debate about the future of America. While there were problems—Florida and Michigan were not given full representation at the Democratic Convention because they violated party rules in holding their primaries—more people had a say in choosing the nominees than ever before.

And speak they did. Obama won Iowa, and Clinton won New Hampshire. Then he won 11 consecutive contests. By mid spring she began winning in places like Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Still, Obama's 50-state campaign paid off, even if he limped rather than sprinted over the finish line in June.

Strategy

How will it turn out in November? John McCain will face questions about his age (72 on inauguration day), his character (he has an explosive temper) and his judgment (he supported the war in Iraq). He will cast himself as a maverick, a war hero with a distinguished record of public service in the military and politics. But he has the misfortune of trying to succeed a deeply unpopular president in a country at war and in recession. McCain will portray his opponent as callow and glib, as well as a free-spending "liberal." Selling himself as a moderate, he will try to poach votes from Obama in traditionally Democratic states such as Oregon, Washington, New Hampshire, and Maine. If McCain can make national security and foreign policy the ballot question, and broaden his base by attracting independents and disaffected Democrats, he will win.

Obama will face questions about his patriotism (he now wears the American flag in his lapel after refusing earlier), his experience (he has no background in foreign policy) and his race and faith (many erroneously believe he is Muslim and are wary of electing a black man, a prejudice few admit to pollsters). But he is a phenomenon, a handsome tribune of soaring oratory and cross-party appeal, with a broad, magical message of change that has inspired young and black Americans. If they both turn out in record numbers, they will put into play states such as North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia. He will also compete in Iowa, Colorado and New Mexico, where Democrats aren't usually competitive. In other words, he will not confine his campaign to states that Al Gore and John Kerry won in 2000 and 2004, he will push beyond them. Assuming he picks the right running mate and unites the party, he will lead a smart, opportunistic campaign which may overturn traditional assumptions and expectations. Obama will talk foremost about the economy, where the Democrats traditionally do better than Republicans. He will also talk about change, change, change, as he did so successfully against Hillary Clinton. Remarkably, he was able to present himself more of an agent of change as a black than she as a woman. If he can do that again in the fall, he will win.

Whether it is McCain or Obama, the United States will change; both are too different in intellect and temperament from George W. Bush. Change is the clarion call of the campaign of 2008, and the candidate who masters the message will carry the day and win the country.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3-4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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