

It's All Over But the Shouting

*Stephen J. Wayne**

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Summary: The race for the American Presidency has been described as one of the most important in recent US history. Policy issues, political leadership and governing style are all on the line. Should Senator Barack Obama become the next US President, however, he will need more than the audacity of hope, the title of his last book.

Analysis: The nomination process began almost two years before the first caucus and primary elections were to be held. It started early because the candidates were competing for contributions, consultants and national recognition. Finance laws in the US limit individual and group contributions and thereby require candidates for national office to gain a large contributor base as quickly as possible. Assembling such a base takes time and staff.

As the election cycle got underway, the leading candidates were John McCain and Rudolph Giuliani for the Republicans and Hillary Rodham Clinton for the Democrats. But there were others who jumped into the fray early and had success in raising money, targeting particular electoral constituencies within their party, and projecting their distinctive leadership images.

Of the Republicans, Mitt Romney raised and spent the most money during the competitive phase of that party's nomination process, almost US\$100 million of which over US\$42 million came from his own personal assets. He stated that he was the most conservative Republican candidate, but his relatively recent conversion to social conservative policy positions on abortion, same-sex unions and stem cell research combined with his Mormon religious faith was viewed with suspicion by Protestant fundamentalists and evangelicals who comprise a large portion of the GOP's electoral constituency. In the end, Romney was forced to share the social conservative vote with Mike Huckabee, an ordained minister and former Arkansas Governor, and former Senator and television actor Fred Thompson.

Giuliani also ran into trouble for views with social conservatives on the issues most important to them. Unable to find and successfully target a key group within that party's electoral coalition, his campaign faltered as the issue of terrorism receded in importance.

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Giuliani's claim to fame was that he was the mayor of New York City during the 2001 terrorist attacks and was onsite, directing the rescue operations.

The only other Republican to demonstrate some strength, at least in fund raising, was Congressman Ron Paul, a libertarian who opposed the war in Iraq, most government programmes and was a strong critic of the Bush Administration. His ability to raise over US\$12 million from donors revealed the extent of discontent by those who felt George W. Bush had deviated from basic conservative principles.

In the end, McCain was victorious. Although he did not raise or spend the most money, he won because of his reputation as a different kind of Republican, a maverick within his own party, a patriot who had been a prisoner of war in Vietnam, and a former candidate for his party's nomination. Seen as an independent thinker and straight talker, a man who spoke his mind and let the political chips fall where they may, McCain appealed to disaffected Republicans as well as independents who voted in the Republican primaries in many of the states. McCain was also aided by a weak Republican field, a divided social conservative vote, a winner-take-all selection method which the large states on the Republican side adopted and endorsements by leading Republicans, including his principal rivals when they dropped out of the race. He was probably the strongest candidate the Republicans could have nominated in 2008.

The Democratic contest lasted into late spring. Hillary Clinton was the early favourite. Well known and well liked by Democrats, she was aided by advisers who had worked on her husband's two campaigns as well as her own Senate campaigns in the state of New York. Those advisers, however, proved to be less helpful than their experience would have suggested. They rivalled each other for power and access to Clinton, disagreed on strategy and tactics, and leaked information to the news media to discredit their opponents within the campaign. Clinton herself appeared to be a prisoner of her staff, took few chances and articulated a mixed message of experience (which she claimed to have had) and change (which she said she would achieve).

In contrast, Obama, the new kid on the block, trumpeted a more powerful message of hope, unity, and policy and political change which resonated with younger voters, independents, as well as Democrats who opposed the War in Iraq, a war that Obama opposed from the outset but which Clinton had initially supported. Moreover, Obama ran a skilful, bottom-up campaign that effectively used the Internet to solicit money and volunteers and to spread the word.

A powerful speaker, Obama railed against the foreign and economic policies of the Bush Administration. He raised more money than Clinton, organised the smaller states more effectively than she did and ran a strategic campaign that took advantage of Democratic Party rules to maximise his vote. In addition, Obama lacked the negatives that Clinton had going into the race.

Under the Democratic system of proportional voting, Obama build a delegate lead which Clinton was unable to overcome. Although she won the popular vote in the big Democratic states, Obama received more delegates from the smaller states, and even in some of the large ones, in which Clinton had more popular votes. By the beginning of June, he had all but secured the Democratic nomination.

Clinton was slow to concede, however, hanging on until Democratic leaders, announcing their support for Obama, urged her to drop out of the race. But she and her supporters, particularly women, remained angry. They were further irritated by Obama's choice of Senator Joseph Biden as his running mate because they believed that Clinton should have been offered the number two position because she had come in second in the nomination contest. But Obama did not seriously consider her. He wanted a clear break from the politics of the Clinton Administration, did not want a potential competitor as his Vice President and probably did not want former President Clinton in or near the White House.

The Democratic convention, scheduled at the end of August, became a coronation for Obama. He needed to heal divisions within the party, generate partisan excitement and launch his presidential campaign. The healing proved to be the most difficult part to achieve. Although both Bill and Hillary Clinton gave speeches in which they urged fellow partisans to support Obama, some of Clinton's backers indicated that they were still not ready to give him their support. Obama's mixed race contributed to the problem, particularly among whites with lower educational levels who that held working-class jobs.

Nonetheless, Obama gave a powerful address, delivered in a large football stadium, which was well received. In the end, despite the disgruntled Clinton delegates and their supporters, the convention gave Obama a boost in the public opinion polls, putting him clearly ahead of McCain in the race for the presidency.

The Republicans met the week after the Democrats. Prior to the Republican convention, McCain had begun coalescing Republicans by criticising Obama. His campaign backed up this criticism with negative advertisements that questioned Obama's experience and judgment. The effort unified Republicans behind McCain, but did not generate excitement for him. Strong Republican partisans viewed him as a maverick; a person who could not always be always trusted to support Republican policy positions.

McCain's selection of Alaska Governor, Sarah Palin, as his running mate, however, generated excitement for the ticket, particularly among social conservatives who agreed with her strong anti-abortion, anti-same sex union and anti-stem cell research views. Moreover, Palin's convention speech, accepting the vice presidential nomination, electrified Republican delegates and gave McCain a much-needed bounce in the polls. He caught up with Obama in the polls. By early September the presidential race had become too close to call.

The turnaround in public opinion surprised political pundits who had expected an easy Democratic victory. After all, Democrats had expressed more excitement about their candidates during the nomination campaign, contributed more money to them, and turned out a larger vote for them than did the Republicans.

Moreover, the proportion of the population identifying themselves as Republican had declined. The partisan parity of 2004 had been replaced by a substantial Democratic advantage at the beginning of 2008. The portion of the population saying they were Independents also had increased although more indicated that they were leaning in a Democratic direction than Republican.

The Democrats also had a more favourable issue environment. For most of 2007, the major concern in the US was the war in Iraq. Although the American public acknowledged

that the surge in troop levels over the summer of 2007 had improved conditions on the ground, reduced the loss of American and Iraqi lives, and placed the Iraqi government in a stronger position to maintain order, the war was still perceived as a mistake; a substantial majority of the people wanted US forces withdrawn.

By December 2007, the faltering economy and high gasoline prices had replaced the war as the principal issues. Over the next nine months the economy worsened, unemployment went up, the stock market went down, mortgage foreclosures increased, credit dried up and the government had to rescue large and prominent investment houses and mortgage lenders, protect people's money market funds and bank deposits, and extend credit by lowering the interest rate. With the US facing a huge budget deficit, an enormous national debt, declining tax revenues and a host of domestic issues ranging from declining energy production to rising health care costs, high gasoline prices, big job losses and persisting immigration problems, with the financial conditions of the nation's Social Security and Medicare pension and health systems precarious, the party that controlled the White House for the last eight years, the Republicans, should have been greatly disadvantaged. That McCain was even or a little ahead of Obama in early September was surprising.

McCain had kept the race close by running a skilled campaign in which he questioned Obama's lack of experience and judgment on foreign policy issues as well as by presenting himself as a candidate for change. Although his selection of Sarah Palin excited Republicans, it also undercut his critique of Obama's lack of experience. Moreover, the way in which McCain made his vice presidential decision –meeting with Palin for only two hours and then offering her the job– raised questions about his own judgment, decision-making style and risk-taking tendencies.

And Palin did not hold up well under the scrutiny of the press. Her lack of knowledge of national and international affairs was evident. She did not know the Bush Doctrine in foreign policy, could not name a Supreme Court decision other than the one permitting abortion and was obviously unprepared to take the helm of the presidency from day one although her folksy manner and social conservative views continued to engage and energise strong Republicans.

The Obama campaign began to hit back. Its political advertisements linked McCain to the economic policies of the Bush Administration; despite McCain's support of stronger regulation of Wall Street and the banking industry, the Democrats noted that he had opposed such a role for government for most of his congressional career. They also took aim at the Senator's critique of special interests, pointing out that most of McCain's senior staff had been lobbyists representing those interests as well as representing the interests of foreign governments.

As Obama sharpened his negative message and aimed it at McCain, as economic conditions deteriorated, as the public mood soured even further, as trust in government in general and the Bush Administration in particular declined, Democrats started to come together. By mid-September, their coalition surpassed that of McCain's.

Then came the presidential debates: three 90-minute debates between the major party presidential candidates and one 90-minute debate between the vice presidential nominees. In the past, debates have made a difference when the presidential race was close. They help the lesser known candidate establish his credentials and qualifications

and demonstrate his knowledge. John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush all benefited from debates with their more experienced and better-known rivals.

In the 2008 debates, Obama was the principal beneficiary. He conveyed his understanding of foreign and domestic problems as well if not better than McCain; Biden was clearly the more knowledgeable of the two vice presidential candidates.

Following the first debate, Obama's lead in the polls began to increase. In addition to his debate performance, Obama was also helped by the deteriorating economic conditions and the credit crisis. The economic cloud over America had taken its toll on the party that controlled the White House, the Republicans. Their candidates for the House of Representatives and Senate began to suffer as well.

The electorate had come full circle from re-electing President Bush in 2004 to repudiating him and his fellow Republicans in 2008. Who would have thought in 2004 that George W. Bush's principal legacy during his second term would be to allow economic conditions and foreign affairs to deteriorate to the point that the very viability of the Republican Party would be threatened? Who would have thought that Bush's decisions would have contributed to the election of the first African-American President? Who would have thought that the man who prided himself on being a Reagan Republican who pursued his idol's conservative policies would be supporting government bailouts, bank guarantees and investments in the private sector?

Whether Obama and the Democrats will thank the Bush Administration, however, is another question. The next President and Congress inherit a mess: a recessed economy, the largest budget deficit in US history, a growing dependency on foreign oil, global warming, an unpopular war in Iraq, deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan, continuing instability and unsuccessful diplomacy in the Middle East and other parts of the world, nuclear proliferation and domestic and international health issues –and those are just the starters–.

On the plus side, the new President is likely to have an increased Democratic majority in Congress, but he also must operate within a highly partisan political environment, a political system that divides powers and a public that distrusts government and public officials but sees the government has the only option when times are bad, the only force for change.

Obama will be able to appoint new Department Secretaries and diplomats and fill judicial vacancies –all subject to Senate approval–, but do so with an antiquated and painfully slow appointment process. During the first year of the last two Presidents, Clinton and Bush, it took an average of 8.5 months from the time a nominee was proposed until that nominee was confirmed and took office.

Finally, the new President is apt to gain cooperation from a host of international leaders, eager for an Administration that emphasises diplomacy rather than force, multilateralism rather unilateralism, and pragmatism rather than ideology. However, to placate his political constituency at home, Obama has promised to renegotiate free-trade agreements, provide tax credits to encourage American companies to remain in the US and tax increases for companies that operate abroad, increase the size of the US military, keep force as an option in foreign affairs and, if necessary, disregard sovereignty to kill bin Laden and other terrorists.

Conclusion: Obama will have a full plate in front of him as he tries to address national and international issues. He inspires confidence but also has created great and diverse expectations. He is a thoughtful person but certainly not the most experienced in domestic and foreign affairs. He is an effective communicator, but first must fashion and achieve policy solutions before he tries to sell them to the American people and the international community. He will need all the leadership skills at his disposal, some luck and much good will to meet the challenges that he will face as America's next President. He will need more than the audacity of hope, the title of his last book.

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