

//Notas de Análisis//

Sea of calm.

**By Maria L. Fornella*

At less than three weeks away from the national election, an Obama victory, even if not inevitable, seems today quite likely. Political scientist Larry Sabato of the University of Virginia, in his on-line publication Crystal Ball, has now put Obama over the magic number of 270 electoral votes (50% plus 1 of all electoral votes), with potentially many more votes to be added from close races in several states. Barack Obama leads John McCain in the polls by ten points, and the McCain campaign is in disarray. It has stopped campaigning in some states (i.e. Michigan) and is trying to hold on to other states that traditionally vote Republican but are about to be lost for the first time in decades (Virginia, North Carolina). Barring a huge end-of-October surprise, this trend will firm up and determine the result in favor of Obama. Democrats are also poised to win a majority of seats in the Senate and House of Representatives. The so-called “coattails effect” of the presidential race on the congressional election is starting to worry Republicans, who are becoming very critical of John McCain’s campaign. Considering that the electoral race was at a continuous dead heat in the last two months, it is worth discussing what has determined the steady rise of Obama in the polls.

First and foremost, of course, was the financial crisis. The astounding institutional banking crisis that originated from the meltdown of the real estate market, the resulting credit crunch, have created an anxiety not seen since the Great Depression of 1930. Historically, the Democratic Party has a better reputation for salvaging the economy in times of crisis. In addition to the historical record, several political scientists, Alan Abramowitz from Emory and Larry Bartels from Princeton among others, have developed models based on the correlation between economic growth and presidential election results, and have found that when the economy is not growing in the second quarter of the election year, the party in power almost without exception loses the election.

But just as important as the economic disarray has been the reaction of each candidate to that crisis, and the style of leadership that emerged from it. One week before the Wall Street

debacle, McCain had said that” the fundamentals of the economy were strong”. That unfortunate statement immediately gave an unequivocal ring of truth to Obama’s claim that his opponent was “out of touch” with the realities of the country, and it will probably be remembered in history books as the critical turning point of this election.

In the first debate, both candidates were cautious about the rescue plan (which had not yet been fully developed by the Treasury) and answered the questions on the economy as if little had changed. However, two days earlier, McCain had suspended his campaign and announced he was needed in Washington to “help solve the crisis”. He had also demanded that the debate be cancelled because “times were too serious for that type of exchange”. This was a gamble taken by his campaign and it backfired badly, as Obama (who also flew to Washington and attended the same meeting at the invitation of Bush) insisted that *because* times were difficult, the debate had become even more important and should take place: Americans were now paying attention to who should be the one to lead them out of this mess. Ultimately, McCain backed down and attended the debate, after no agreement on the Rescue Plan came out of that White House meeting. Although he did very well, was energetic and on message, his erratic pre-debate behavior worked against him by providing ammunition to the opposition, who were thereby able to portray him as unpredictable and over excitable, not the steady hand you would want at the helm of a nation in turmoil. Still, most experts and observers considered the first debate a draw, with both candidates passing their respective tests: Obama proving he was presidential enough to hold the office, and McCain reminding the public of his experience and dedication to the country. However, the polls showed most voters had chosen Obama as the winner.

The second debate was in a town-hall meeting format, but with strict control of time and of the questioning. Veteran journalist Tom Brockaw moderated it with a strong hand, but the questions were lame and it was a lackluster performance on the part of everybody involved. However, the body language proved an asset to Obama, who listened respectfully, did not take any notes, and when needed, moved comfortably around the set to approach the public. On the other hand, McCain had a nervous restlessness about him that put him at a disadvantage; he kept going back to his corner to make notes on his opponent’s comments and at a certain point referred to Obama as “that one” in what was

perceived by many to be an expression of slight contempt. This was compounded by his aimless wondering around the set, at times having to be called on by Brockaw for blocking the moderator's teleprompter. In comparison, Obama looked very relaxed and cool, exuding that kind of calm and self-confidence that most people seem to be yearning for during these difficult times. It paid off, and his numbers started mounting dramatically on the next day.

Even before that debate, the McCain campaign had thrown all self-restraint overboard and was using every trick in the book of negative campaigning. Thus, the name of William Ayres has become very widely known across the country, as a "domestic terrorist" who organized a bombing campaign of the Pentagon in the 60s, and as a "close associate to Barack Obama". Ayres was the founder of the Weather Underground movement, which protested against the Vietnam War four decades ago. Today he is a university professor and an educational reformer who has worked with many politicians (both Republican and Democrat) to change the educational system in Chicago. The more McCain slips in the poll numbers, the more we hear allusions to Obama's radical "associate", even if their contacts have been sporadic, that they met only a few years ago, and that Obama was eight years old when Ayres was a radical anti-war activist. McCain, however, did not bring this up in the face-to-face debate, perhaps for fear of opening the door to his own connection to Charles Keating, the convicted Savings and Loan scandal figure of the 1980s, whose investigation by regulators McCain had tried to suppress. McCain's vice-presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, on the other hand, has at every opportunity mentioned Ayres' name at her rallies, working her base up to frenzy to the point of violent threats, with some yelling "off with his (Obama's) head". For good measure, she added underhanded allusions to his "foreignness" (read: race) by saying for example: "*He is not a man who sees America the way you and I see it.*"

This decision to play the "guilt by association" game and to associate Obama with terrorism (of any kind) has led to a violent escalation in the rhetoric and has roused the base, but does not seem to be working with the independent voters, as poll after poll continues to show. On the contrary, it seems to have hurt McCain: at last weekend rallies he had to "correct" several of his own supporters who in their questions to him claimed Obama was an "Arab", a terrorist, a criminal. After one of such claims, McCain very determinedly took the microphone away from a

woman and told her: *“No, Ma’m, that is not true. He is a decent family man with whom I just happen to have disagreements on policy.”* Surely this disappointed the base, which has been led to believe differently.

In all fairness to Senator McCain, he is not a racist; in fact, he is a very moderate, middle of the road Republican who has taken on his own party on matters of campaign finance reform and immigration. Why, then, is he playing this self-destructive game? The only logical answer is: out of desperation, as his numbers slip and several senior Republicans have turned against him. The constant chasing of the headlines, the constant spewing of “rapid responses and frantic emails” has resulted in an incoherent message to the detriment of his own personal appeal.

Yesterday Bill Kristol, political analyst and commentator of impeccable conservative credentials, and editor of the Weekly Standard, in an op-ed column in the New York Times, called for McCain to fire his campaign staff, “set himself free” and run as the “cheerful, open and accessible candidate” he was in the past. He said it is the “strategic incoherence and operational incompetence of his staff that has made his campaign dysfunctional...and toxic.” To this, McCain retorted that “even Bill Kristol had bought into the Obama line” and that he himself was “exactly where he wanted to be, with the whole media establishment against him.” However, Republicans are starting to distance themselves from McCain, who they think is dragging the whole party down and will be responsible for loss of Senate and House Republican races, too.

To compound his plight even more, yesterday a bipartisan ethics report by the state legislature of Alaska found Sarah Palin abused her power when she fired the Police Commissioner over a family vendetta against a state trooper (an affair already nicknamed “Troopergate” by the media).

Voters seem to have tuned McCain out; it is no longer a question of message. It is a question of leadership, of calm amid the turmoil, of whom Americans want to answer the proverbial three-in-the-morning phone call that rings in the White House.

Confronted with the angst and fury of John McCain, his impulsive change of course and mixed messages at a time of enormous economic uncertainty, voters are turning in larger numbers to Obama, who has remained unflustered in the face of nasty accusations. Composed, focused on the economy, he

dismisses the violent rhetoric of his opponents, and prefers to focus on the difficulty of the times and on the specifics of his policy solutions. He has sharpened his message, spoken directly to the issues and remained a sea of calm amidst the turmoil, a source of optimism amidst the gloom and doom of the headlines.

In the meantime, his campaign has registered hundreds of thousands of voters in many states that have traditionally voted Republican, and that today are surprisingly in play for the Democrats (namely Virginia, North Carolina). The McCain campaign is financially weaker and had to pull out of Michigan, where he was down eight points, in order to concentrate more resources in Florida, where the race is still tight, but where the economy has been severely hit by the real estate bust and by the reduction in tourism due to the credit crunch, all of which may favor Obama. In spite of the 270 electoral votes that put him over the top, with potentially many more votes to be added from close races in several states, an Obama win is still not assured. McCain is defending states that went for Bush in the last two elections and which he absolutely must win in order to have a slim chance at the whole, and therefore he can't be on the offense as much in other states. If Obama wins Indiana, Virginia and North Carolina, he will be the first non-Southerner Democrat to carry these states since John F. Kennedy. That explains the frustration of Republican Party stalwarts with McCain, his irresponsible choice of running mate and the unraveling of his campaign.

Ironically, in the first debate McCain accused Obama of not knowing the difference between a tactic and a strategy. It actually seems it is McCain who has confused the two. Populism as a political tactic is common, but as the main strategy it is ineffective and harmful for the country. At times like this, when people are worried about their jobs, their pensions and their health care, the populist message of anger and division is not what the average voter is looking for. They are looking instead for some measure of optimism and reassurance. That is why they have turned to Obama.

To win, the McCain campaign should stop playing the race-and-terrorism card, and instead bring up a concept which surprisingly has been all but ignored in this election: that of Washington being swept up by a "one-party rule", with Democrats controlling not only the White House but also Congress. No checks and balances, no limits on government in this country of Lockean traditions? That is a scenario that few Americans would look

forward too, even in difficult times. It may win McCain more votes than destructive insinuations about his opponent.

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