

## //Notas de Análisis//

### **Unconventional Wisdom**

*\*By Maria L. Fornella*

After two weeks of drama and excitement, the Democratic and the Republican National Conventions have drawn to an end, and an exhausted American public will now have to focus on the home stretch of the presidential campaign. There is general agreement that both candidates achieved their most important convention objectives. Obama re-introduced himself to America as an ordinary man, a down-to-earth candidate who understands their problems and proposes solutions, while McCain moved away from George W. Bush and re-emerged as his party's maverick: the independent, likable and trustworthy reformer that puts "the country first". In spite of the truncated schedule of the Republican National Convention due to the hurricane that hit the Gulf Coast, McCain's surprise announcement of his running mate, and his acknowledgement of his own party's mistakes in the last eight years, appear to have taken some of the wind from under Obama's wings.

The most recent Gallup poll has Obama leading 44% to 40 % in voters' approval ratings, while a CBS poll has them at 40% each. It is clear that the race is now in a dead heat and that McCain has been on the rebound, narrowing down the eight percent margin that Obama had before the Conventions. Taking into account that Obama has already had his post-convention bounce, the direction of this change favoring McCain will continue. Historically, after Labor Day and the end of the two conventions, poll numbers appear to hold pretty steadily all the way up to the election, which means that, barring an "October surprise", the outcome of this election will again be too close to predict.

This is an enormous accomplishment for McCain, whose candidacy was given up for dead by pundits mid-way through the primary last year. Americans love survivors, and both his life story and his political narrative fit this characterization perfectly. Credit is given of course to the candidate himself, but also to his campaign director Rick Davis, who had the audacity to take a 180-degree turn and recast him as the candidate of change. How he did it will be a textbook example for campaign strategists in

years to come.

First, McCain came into the Republican Primary as too independent, too secular and too much of a critic of George W. Bush, to be chosen as the Grand Old Party's nominee. In the course of the primary campaign, he moved closer to the President, repeatedly reminding voters that in the Senate, he had voted in favor of the President's initiatives 90% of the time. A clip of this acknowledgement is being used by the Obama campaign with glee in a TV commercial that plays several times an hour in the network stations. After a terrible start, and after firing several top advisers and restructuring his whole campaign plan, he regained the confidence of the Republican voters, mainly because he was the most credible, experienced and likable of the Republican presidential candidates. These may be the same attributes that put him today in a dead heat with Obama, in spite of the lowest numbers of approval ever for the Republican Party he represents.

Second, serious campaign strategic thinking went into in his choice of Vice-president and in planning the timing of this announcement. Sources close to the campaign have confirmed that, to counterbalance the perfectly choreographed Democratic Convention, the choice of Joe Biden for Vice- presidential candidate, and Obama's acceptance speech, McCain wanted to recast himself as the bipartisan candidate that reaches across the isle, and regardless of the disapproval of Republican Party stalwarts, pick Democrat Joe Lieberman, his very close friend, as his running mate. It took some serious coaxing by his staff for him to pick Sarah Palin, the little-known governor of Alaska, instead. This has so far proved to have been a very shrewd decision. With the announcement made on the next morning after Obama's acceptance speech, McCain's campaign was able to take away the momentum and the headlines from the Democrats. It was all about the Republican ticket from then on, with the Obama campaign having been unable so far, to regain the initiative.

Palin's speech on the convention floor was watched by almost as many people as Obama's. She came out swinging and directly attacked Obama for his lack of experience. Her delivery was flawless, she was relaxed and funny, and the public loved her. She electrified the Republican base and injected new imagery into the Republican tableau: that of a young working mother with a family of five that enamored the pro-life voters by having knowingly had

a baby with Down syndrome. The case for family values was somewhat blurred twenty-four hours later when her campaign confirmed rumors that her seventeen-year old daughter was pregnant. But Palin was able to turn this in her favor by presenting herself as a no-exceptions pro-life candidate, and thus pre-empted the avalanche of criticism that would have surely come her way from all sides. Asked for his reaction, a circumspect Obama said that the candidates' private lives should not be a topic for the presidential race and asked reporters to "back off".

Finally, there was John McCain's acceptance speech that rounded up what turned out to be a positive, yet odd, week for the Republican Convention. This was the first time that an incumbent President did not attend his party's convention since Lyndon B. Johnson skipped the violence-ridden 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. Indeed, George W Bush made only a short appearance via satellite on the second day of the convention. His parents were there the first two days, but were conspicuously absent during McCain's speech.

Vice-president Cheney was also absent throughout the three days. Senator McCain is a good communicator for smaller, town hall settings where he can speak directly to supporters, but strongly dislikes reading prepared speeches from the teleprompter to big audiences. The Convention hall was thus rearranged for his speech, to give the impression of a smaller venue, with the Republican delegates closer to him. But it was a fifty-minute long speech so he did have to read it. Although not a magnificent speaker, he came across as sincere and credible. Some have acclaimed it as the best Republican speech since Reagan's at the 1984 Convention. It drew the strongest interest of all speeches so far this election year: it was watched by 38.9 million people, more than Obama's (38.4 million) and Palin's (37 million). It was well-structured and aimed at delivering a convincing yet circumvolved message of change. It started with a long narrative of his life experiences as a Navy pilot and prisoner of war, then went on to offer a candid confession of his party's long list of mistakes in the last eight years, and culminated with his re-introduction to the American public as the bipartisan candidate that can find solutions, bring about change and lead the country into a more secure and prosperous future. He presented in detail a forceful narrative of his life: the son and grandson of admirals and an Annapolis graduate, he became a fighter pilot and fell prisoner of war in Vietnam. He survived the "Hanoi-Hilton", was rescued, married an Arizona heiress and

became Senator for that state for thirty years. Even if nothing new, this biographical portrait reminded the audience of his patriotism, his commitment to the country, his all-American upbringing and his strength, all of which makes him a fully vetted, trustworthy, and, by implication, a better candidate than his counterpart.

What surprised many observers was what an NBC analyst called his “Declaration of Independence” and later “McCain’s divorce” from the Republican Party and from George Bush. The latter was mentioned only once during the speech, and even then not directly by name, when McCain thanked “the president” for his leadership after the September 11 attacks. After that came a litany of mistakes the Republicans have made in the last few years, delivered in a contrite tone and followed by very weak applause by the audience. (“We were elected to change Washington and we let Washington change us. We lost the trust of the American people when some Republicans gave in to temptations of corruption.”). It was as if he had directly responded to the beckoning of the British journal *The Economist* who had him on its cover a week ago with the title: “Bring the Real McCain back”, an allusion to the fact that during the Primary season, many of his economic and national security policies looked like another term of George Bush. *The Economist* preferred an earlier version of McCain that was much more independent and acceptable to their point of view. In acknowledging the errors and missed opportunities of the previous years, the “real” McCain, the maverick, was back. He recognized the corruption and the hubris of his party, and, taking a page from the Democrats’ platform, promised to govern for the American people and not for private interests or lobbies: “And let me just offer an advance warning to the old, big-spending, do-nothing, me-first, country-second crowd: change is coming... to Washington.”

McCain had a tactical tightrope to walk: during the whole primary season, his campaign had been aggressively courting the support of the conservative, Evangelical Republican base. Having cemented that support with the choice of ultra-religious Palin, he used the opportunity of his acceptance speech to appeal to a broader audience. He broke free of the Bush legacy of budget deficits and a failed foreign policy, recast himself as the candidate of change and made his pitch for the center of the political spectrum, the independent voters and disgruntled Reagan Democrats. In the most arousing part of his address, he presented himself as the Republican leader that will bring the

Grand Old Party back to its original path and restore its unity, its pride and its principles. He also stressed his bipartisanship and delivered a strong blow to Obama's claim to that same mantle, by saying, "Again and again I have worked with members of both parties to fix problems...and I have the record, and the scars, to prove it. Senator Obama does not." He ended by stressing his national security experience and courage to confront enemies: "We face many dangerous threats but I am not afraid...I am prepared for them."

This speech may not have been the most dynamic of the Republican Convention (Sarah Palin took the kudos for that), and it was by no means a policy speech. Instead, its greatest value was the tone in which it was delivered and the level of comfort McCain awakened in the voting public. He focused on patriotism and on reforming Washington's bad habits; he communicated a sense of confidence, credibility and competence that may have reassured many undecided voters and that made him look almost Reaganesque.

While Barack Obama insists that this election will be decided based on the issues (the economy, the unpopular war), McCain contends it will be decided on which candidate has the better judgment to move the country forward. In the fifty-some days left before the election, both campaigns will focus on the "battleground states" (Ohio, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Michigan), so their messages will be narrowly tailored to those constituencies. But all voters will have another chance to take a new look at the candidates side by side on three upcoming debates, and then decide on who is better suited to lead the country in such difficult times. They will vote based on their pocketbooks and on gut feelings, on rational interests and on irrational emotions. Considering the closeness of the race, the complexity that the Electoral College injects into the process, and the fact that all political thinking is biased toward the thinker's own wishes and emotions, it is only fair for this writer to abstain from predicting the outcome.

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