

//Notas de Análisis//

AUTUMN OF FREEDOM

**By Maria L. Fornella*

“This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning...I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal..."And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.”

Martin Luther King Jr.” I have a dream speech” (March on Washington, August 28, 1963)

On Wednesday August 27th, at the Pepsi Center in Denver, Colorado, before a crowd of 20,000, Barack Obama became the first biracial man to be officially nominated as presidential candidate by a major party. When the turn came for the delegates from the state of New York to vote, Obama had received 1,549 and Hillary Rodham-Clinton 231. Hillary then made a motion to suspend the roll call vote and select him by acclamation:

“With eyes firmly fixed on the future in the spirit of unity, with the goal of victory, with faith in our party and country, let's declare together in one voice, right here and right now, that Barack Obama is our candidate and he will be our president.”

The night before, Hillary had made a gracious and persuasive speech in support of Obama, calling on her supporters to vote for the man that would bring health care to all Americans and restore the country's standing in the world, thus tacitly acknowledging that their platforms are one and the same. She had also reminded the audience that the (presidential) “glass ceiling now had 18 million cracks”, a reference at the number of votes she received and a reminder of how close women had come this time around to win the Presidency, a white male domain until now. That was her way to give comfort to her female supporters, some of which have avowed to vote for McCain in the Fall. Then on Wednesday night it came up to Bill Clinton to put the proverbial final nail in the coffin of the bitter conflict that had bitterly divided the party up to then. He did it with a masterful, authoritative speech, in which he reassured the audience that Obama was just as ready

for the Presidency as he himself had been in 1992. The clarity of his ideas and the perfect delivery reminded us all of why he will go down as one of the greatest Presidents in this country's History.

Already by Wednesday night there was a sense of fulfillment and relief, since the unification of the Democratic Party was perceived by most Democrats as the Convention's main objective. The party had been divided since the 1970s, when the moderate, blue collar workers and Southerners became disgruntled with McGovern's socially liberal platform and voted for Nixon. Ten years later they would become known as the Reagan democrats, and the label would stick. Bill Clinton was able to bring them all back to the fold by focused policies and his ability to connect both with white and black blue-collar workers. But in the last eight years the divisions have reappeared, as it became plain during the primary: Obama appeals strongly to the black community and to white college educated youth but has been unable to extend that appeal to older women and white workers. That is why Hillary got 18 million votes. That is also why Obama's choice of Vice President is a solid one. Senator Joseph Biden, with his Catholic, blue-collar background, his toughness and his 30 years of experience in the Senate, and his wisdom and knowledge of foreign affairs, has added weight and credibility to the ticket. The expectation is that this formula will reunite the fractured party once again.

This has been a historic Convention in more ways than one: the first African-American to win the nomination, the first woman to come so close to winning it, the passing of the torch to a new generation of Americans by Ted Kennedy, the brilliant speech by Bill Clinton which by all measures restores his stature within the party. But more than anything else, this Convention is historic because, as Clinton said, Barack Obama is "the twenty first century incarnation of the American Dream", and a reaffirmation of Ted Kennedy's proclamation on the first day of the Convention, that "the Dream Lives on" in Obama.

The climax came on Thursday night with Obama's long awaited acceptance speech at the closing of the Convention. It was a carefully choreographed affair, overlaid with symbolism. Delivered before a crowd of 75,000 at the INVESCO open-air stadium at Mile High, against a background evoking the pillars of the Lincoln Memorial, it was watched by a TV audience of around 40 million and ended with fireworks across the Colorado sky. Barack Obama is also the first candidate since John F Kennedy to

choose an open-to-the public venue to deliver his acceptance speech. There were some risks to this venue, from security to climactic. But more than anything else, his greatest challenge on this historic night was to communicate to his huge audience and the American nation at large, that he is not just a great orator but that he understands their woes and has the fortitude to fight for them; that he is ready to battle ahead and bring about the change he so brilliantly articulates in his speeches, and that this young man standing before them, half preacher, half professor, is also a practical politician, able to back his ideas with concrete and feasible plans. As Richard Haas says in his latest article on the *Foreign Affairs Journal*, the next president must confront “the reality of the country’s expectations” and he must do so by “identifying meaningful yet achievable goals and lay them out before the nation...and then achieve them through leadership skills that will be tested by pressures unimaginable to anyone who has not held the job.” Obama passed this difficult test on the first two requirements. The third is awaiting him, if elected in November.

By most accounts, the speech was an overwhelming success. Obama presented a complete blueprint on how he will govern if elected. He first listed all the issues Americans are dissatisfied with, starting with the economy and ending with Iraq. He then outlined his specific policies to solve these problems. He subsequently gave examples of how McCain is closely aligned with George W. Bush’s failed policies, thus demolishing his opponent’s claims of independence from the incumbent. Finally, he presented himself as open-minded and pragmatic, willing to find middle ground on the so-called culture wars issues (gays, guns, abortion) that are frequently framed as false choices to elicit emotions, not rationality, from the part of the voters. He re-introduced himself to the public as a common man, with personal accounts of his childhood as son of a single mother, who raised him with the help of her parents and at times had to use food stamps to take care of him; of his admiration for his grandfather, a WWII veteran who went to college on the GI bill and taught him hard work, pride and love of country. Looking straight into the cameras, he humanized his message and connected with people. He was able to turn the tables on John McCain, who he presented as elitist, out of touch and thus, less trustworthy. His move to the middle ground on cultural issues (“We can withhold the Second Amendment and still get AK 47s out of the hands of criminals”) and his calls for greater civic and parental responsibility (“Government cannot replace parents in educating

their children...”) gave consistency to his claim of post-partisanship.

By asserting that America is the best hope for the world, he rejected the notion that only Republicans are patriotic (“Democrats can own that, too.”). He also defied the fallacy that Democrats are weak on foreign policy (“We are the party of FDR and JFK, so don’t tell us Democrats that we cannot defend the country...and restore the moral standing for all who fight for freedom.”). And he did all this not so much with the soaring rhetoric of his earlier speeches, but with a tone of strength and defiance. He took the fight to John Mc Cain, promising to debate him not on petty issues but on who has the “judgment and the temperament” to be Commander-in-Chief. He thereby injected the question of McCain’s short temper into the Fall campaign. The speech ended with an evocation of Martin Luther King’s I have a dream speech delivered on this same day forty-five years ago at the Lincoln Memorial, and a pledge to once more “March forward together.”

Memories of the Democratic National Conventions and the momentum created by this brilliant speech were not, however, destined to linger for long in the American psyche. They were shattered by two events, one man-made, one natural. On Friday, August 29th, John McCain made an announcement that caused quite a stir in the media and public alike. He chose as his Vice president Mrs. Sarah Palin, the little-known first-term female governor of Alaska, a no exceptions pro-lifer who believes that Creationism should be taught in the schools alongside Evolution, and whose thin political résumé is startling to most observers. After they recovered from the initial shock, some pundits were able to articulate the intriguing yet-to-be-answered question: was this the brilliant decision of a crafty tactician or the insane choice of an impulsive, overly ambitious politician? Is this a masterful stroke or a risky gamble? Only time will tell.

That same day, Mrs. Palin had to share the limelight with Gustav, an impervious hurricane that was making its way toward the Gulf Coast at vertiginous speed and strength. Plans for the Republican National Convention to start on Monday had to be scrapped, while McCain and Palin made their way to Mississippi, turning this into an opportunity to distance themselves early on from Bush’s fiasco during hurricane Katrina two years ago. Most Convention events were suspended for Monday and Tuesday and replaced by a bare-bones schedule of committee meetings, while

the crucial events (vice-presidential speech and nomination vote) start this Wednesday and culminate Thursday with McCain's acceptance speech. This could turn out to be a blessing in disguise for Republicans. Courtesy of Gustav, now downgraded to a grade one hurricane, speeches by Bush and Cheney were cancelled. The President, who hastily made his way to New Orleans, may still speak for a short time via satellite on Wednesday, which will give him an opportunity to amend the terrible legacy of Katrina by replacing those images in the minds of the public with a much improved disaster relief response to Gustav.

Palin is expected to give a good speech at the Convention. As a young political reformer who has fought corruption in her home state, she has energized the campaign. As a social conservative with deep convictions against abortion she has galvanized the conservative Evangelical base of the party. She is attractive and warm, and connects easily with the public, one of the few advantages of her political experience in Alaska, a sparsely populated state that requires extensive face-to-face contact with voters. An active hunter and life-long member of the NRA, she may be able to connect with the kind of independent blue-collar and rural voters that Obama has not been able to appeal to. But Palin has never been under the extreme national scrutiny that the next few months will bring, nor has she had to answer any unscripted questions about a wide variety of topics from the often vicious national press. McCain picked her over men with extensive experience in economic matters (Mitt Romney) and in homeland security (Tom Ridge), both of whom had been extensively vetted. His choice of Palin as running mate is even more surprising if we consider that his main campaign theme against Obama was the latter's lack of executive experience. In contrast with Palin, Obama has had his trial-by-fire in the primary debates and through 18 months of campaigning. He has run against formidable candidates in the Primary, has been repeatedly tested by the media, and has emerged as the choice of Democratic voters. Palin, on the other hand, has one year of executive experience and a gaping lack of foreign policy knowledge. She is the choice of one man, John McCain, who has only met her twice. What will be the public's perception of Palin's credibility and readiness to step in as President should something happen to McCain? Did McCain, always the maverick, abdicate in his duty to the people by not choosing someone manifestly ready for the presidency? We may have some answers to these questions in a week or two.

For those that expect Hillary's women to flock to the Republican side just because of McCain's Vice-presidential pick, think again. If there is one principle those women activists care about is the protection of the Roe v Wade Supreme Court decision, so they would be loath to vote for a strongly anti-abortion candidate such as Palin. Nevertheless, Obama does need to worry about the white blue-collar workers' vote. He has been consistently ahead in the polls but the margin has narrowed somewhat. He is now 6 percentage points ahead in the polls (47% to 41%) but so far has been unable to break the 50% barrier. Given the byzantine workings of the Electoral College in a presidential election, even a sliver of independents and Reagan democrats here and there (especially in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Michigan) can win this election for McCain. The long-awaited Autumn of Freedom would then become for many, the Winter of Discontent.

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