

Looking Back, Moving Forward: Post-mortem of the Democratic Primary

**By Maria L. Fornella*

Having reached the mark of 2,118 delegates, Barack Obama has gone from candidate in the closest head-to-head primary ever to presumptive nominee.

Appropriately, he will accept the nomination at the August convention in Denver, on the 45th anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. This is political history in the making: he is the first African-American to be the head of the presidential ticket of a major party. After years of angst and self doubt, there is a renewed optimism on the street, and a whole new group of voters has been mobilized. However, Obama, who has run on a message of hope and change, faces an extremely difficult path ahead. His vulnerabilities have become apparent in the succession of events over the last few weeks of this long primary season.

He lost nine of the last fourteen primaries, including South Dakota, where he was favored (55% to 45%), and Puerto Rico (68% to 42%); he has had to cut ties with his Church due to its radicalism and anti-establishment stance, and, one day after Obama claimed the nomination, one of his top fund-raisers was found guilty of wire fraud and money laundering in a federal court in Chicago. Now his campaign will have to overcome this dry patch and move forward to the greater challenge, that of defeating McCain.

His next task at hand is to choose a vice-president, and this, too, poses a serious dilemma.

In the first place, Hillary Rodham-Clinton took five days to acknowledge defeat, giving cause for some speculation that she is pressing for the vice-presidential spot with the implied threat that she will continue fighting all the way to the convention. She has the right to do so, if we consider the fact that she has won all of the big states and probably a larger number of the popular vote (around 18 million). And, as she not so humbly claims, she is the more experienced candidate who could better stand up to McCain. On the other hand, there is great concern that Barack's image as the unconventional, charismatic, post-modern Washington outsider will be damaged if he chooses her. So the decision will require reflection, pondering and a lot of vetting interviews of alternative candidates.

Much ink will be spent in speculating why Hillary lost the primary. Here, I will just offer a few reflections, leaving the second guessing of the way her campaign was run to those who will manically analyze every decision taken, every tactic used, every gesture, every word, and will have their eureka moments when finding the flaw, the error, the underestimation that brought her down. And yet, quite often fate, luck and other imponderables irrevocably determine the outcome of a narrow race, regardless of the brilliant strategies of the campaign managers, advisers and other experts. It has already been said that Rodham

Clinton started her campaign as the inevitable candidate, as the incumbent, and that her sense of entitlement turned many voters away. At the same time, her main message was one of change, of moving forward, of undoing the Bush legacy, but Obama co-opted that message, and he was much more convincing as an agent of change.

Hillary began her campaign running not as a woman, but as the most hardened and experienced, candidate that would deliver both peace and prosperity to all Americans. Obama ran from the beginning as the post-racial candidate and this theme remained constant throughout his campaign. She was trying to woo independents and disaffected Republicans and had thus to prove that she was as tough as John McCain. Obama had no intention of treading down that path, which he derided as part of the Washington game. Instead, he stuck fearlessly to his convictions. It was this independent streak, his absolute confidence in the soundness of his cool, post-modern world vision that was irresistible to the young voters. This should not obfuscate the fact that both ran historic campaigns and have unremittingly shattered the barriers of gender and race in American politics at the highest level. Still, the promise of change was more credible when pledged by the young unknown than by the seasoned insider. With no substantial philosophical differences between the two, the richer contrast was all inspiration and charisma versus politics as usual.

First of all, we need to consider a fundamental fact: even if the media and their respective campaigns have played up the differences between the two candidates, their basic policy choices and ideologies are one and the same. From health care to fiscal policy, from education to foreign policy, there may be some minimal disagreements but they both share the basic ideology of more equitable economic distribution, protection of civil rights and overall tolerance toward others that typify Democrats in the United States.

Some observers may bring up Hillary's vote in favor of the Iraqi invasion of 2003 as evidence of an important disagreement, and also a cause of her loss of popularity in the early stages of the campaign. That certainly did her harm, which is ironic because, in academic and political circles alike, few believe it represents her real conviction. As a Senator for New York and a future presidential candidate, she carefully chose to vote in favor of a war that, in October 2002, had a high rate of approval among the population, who had clearly bought the Republican idea that the invasion "over there" would make us safer "over here". At the time, she hedged that gamble against the fact that "there was enough evidence" Saddam was piling up WMDs, which had little to do with 9-11 and Al Qaeda. But a scared populace is an easy target for deception and false reassurances. Intent on proving her masculine toughness on security issues, she fell into the Republican trap.

Five years down the road, this carefully measured decision came back to haunt her, and the controversy over that vote generated an enormous surge of support for Obama that might have created the momentum that helped him win the early contests, namely, the Iowa caucuses and the wins of February 5th. This momentum, coupled with the televised debates, proved he was a worthy, viable candidate; it brought the media to his side and attracted new voters. He irradiated a cool self-assurance, a subdued charm, an understated intelligence

that was indeed enchanting to young voters, to black voters and to hard core Democrats tired of the vitriol of Washington. The country, it seemed, was ready for Obama. His timing was impeccable and had the effect of making Rodham-Clinton look tired, strident and blasé. The media had found its golden boy and started treating Hillary as the intruder, who would do anything to prevent a new Camelot.

After his initial sweep, Hillary slowly started to recover and as the campaign progressed, her message became more focused and she found her voice. She switched strategies and, from being the more experienced candidate that would deliver peace and prosperity to all Americans, she turned back to her traditional constituencies, namely, women and blue-collar workers. Speaking to her strengths, namely, her devotion to public service and her familiarity with the intricacies of policy-making, she became a great communicator that invariably connected with her audiences. And she started winning again.

Even those that dislike her have to acknowledge her skills as a campaigner, her endurance and poise under tremendous pressure and, more importantly, her dramatic recovery of the popular vote towards the end of the campaign, which made her claim to bring this battle to the convention quite legitimate. Her wins in Pennsylvania, Ohio and West Virginia, as well as her immense support in the Hispanic community as shown by the Puerto Rican vote, cannot be discounted by the party when it looks ahead to the national election in November.

One should bear in mind that these primaries were the closest contest in primary history, and in spite of having the whole media establishment against her from the beginning, Hillary did not at any time show signs of faltering or self-doubt and never allowed herself to make the road easier for Obama. She stayed on message, speaking to the issues, proving she was ready to become the first woman president. Both her competency and her warmth gained her a huge following. But once she lost the media she also started losing the super-delegates from inside the party. One after the other, the big names in the party started lining up behind Obama: Tom Daschle, Ted and Caroline Kennedy, Christopher Dodd, Bill Richardson, and towards the end, even John Edwards.

This took many by surprise, and is related to another phenomenon that very few had perceived before: the animosity that the Clintons, especially Bill, provoke from within the party itself. Although Bill and Hillary are the most powerful brand name in the Democratic Party, there is a surprising amount of anger against them that had remained latent till now. Bill Clinton's harsh remarks in South Carolina primary astonished many and may have hurt her campaign, reinforcing the perception that the Clintons would do anything, even play the race card, in order to win the White House.

Then there was the question of demographics and identity politics. Although Rodham-Clinton attempted to run as the candidate for all, after the first losses and as she increasingly won the vote of women and blue collar workers, she turned to her natural constituencies. She started running as a woman and as the champion of the working class. In her new more populist persona, she also won among Jews, Catholics and rural workers. Obama did best among college educated youth, intellectuals and black voters. In other words, they both win the

identity vote. Identity has come up often during the campaign, and not in a positive way. Irrate at the way the media were treating Hillary and indulging Obama especially in interviews (there was even a sketch in Saturday Night Live that parodied this noticeable difference), Geraldine Ferraro accused the media of sexism and went as far as saying that Obama would not be treated with so much deference if he was a white man. After disproportionate outcry by the media and the public, Clinton had to fire Ferraro as her advisor. Thus, bringing up sexism completely backfired for Hillary.

The irony once again, is that Identity Politics is most likely the prism through which **both** Hillary and Obama, see America: as a society divided by categories of class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual preference. His as well as her policies are informed by this view. But Obama skillfully downplays it and tries to portray himself as the candidate for all Americans who want change and are tired of Washington politics. He does not deny that race and gender play a role in politics but prefers not to bring it up since it is “not productive”. His strategy has paid off so far, but this topic will certainly be revisited in the national election. Due to his background and life experience, McCain has a very different view based on patriotism and service to the country, on individual responsibility and a common civic culture. He will find a way to turn the notion of Identity Politics against Obama, who, in spite of his unifying message, often speaks about redressing balances and ending injustice.

Finally, the closeness of the race and the resilience of these two formidable candidates were again in display towards its end, and led to a new critical stage. The momentum that had carried Obama through the early and middle stages started to weaken. As time went by, more scrutiny brought up the issue of his membership in a radical Black Liberation Theology Church, the (inane) fact that he did not wear a US flag pin on his lapel (a symbol of patriotism that became particularly important after 9-11, when even academics came under no small degree of peer pressure to wear one), and this past week, the conviction by a Chicago federal jury of former fund-raiser and friend, Antoin Retzko.

As momentum weakened, and as Clinton seemed to resurrect and come closer to Obama in the delegate count, party rules regarding delegate selection became more important. Because in most primaries there has been an early front-runner, and because the last primary contest that had to be taken all the way to the convention without a presumptive nominee was in 1976, very few party leaders and even fewer journalists are aware of the rules. As they began to play out, we were all submitted to a crash course on these intra-party rules. The Democratic Party has a centralized structure, so all states play by the same rules, and its selection system is based on proportional representation, the most democratic form of representation: within each state, any candidate that reaches a threshold of 15% of votes is allocated delegates proportionally to the vote. This, while it is better for representation, tends to prolong the race and make it closer. While Clinton was recovering and making important gains, Obama still continued to pick up a few delegates here and there, and the media kept its constant drum roll in his favor. Super-delegates were swayed to his side, irrevocably. In contrast, Republicans have a decentralized structure so that each state establishes its own rules, and most choose a winner-take-all selection system. This system, while less democratic and representative, enabled them to

have a clear winner by March, with all the advantages that that entails.

This year a very peculiar situation arose out of Michigan and Florida, where the state governments scheduled the primaries too early, in breach of the Democratic Party rules, so the Democratic National Committee determined they would not seat their delegates. There were 313 delegates at stake. Obama withdrew his name from the ballot in Michigan, and did not campaign in Florida. Clinton won both. At that time nobody thought this issue would become decisive for the nomination, but in such a close race, it certainly did. Last weekend the DNC met with representative so both sides and settled on a formula that allocated delegates to both in a very non-scientific way. It gave each of those delegated half a vote at the convention. While the formula was accepted by both sides, it has been perceived as a bonus for Obama, whose name was not even on the ballot in Michigan and yet he still got delegates allocated. This may still come up again at the National Convention in August.

Many factors have thus combined to make Obama the presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party. In addition to momentum and rules we should also consider the fortunate pairing of Obama to the spirit of the times. The timing for an unconventional candidate could not have been better, and he emerged as the prophetic leader the times demanded. His demeanor, his background, and his non-assuming attitude, all make for the perfect post-modern candidate. The public embraced him and the media anointed him. Now, the question still remains, is his “gift of grace” strong enough to unify America? Can he summon the support he needs to win a national election? Given the complex electoral system based on state votes and an electoral college, and not on the popular vote, can he win the major states and the swing states?

Here is where the selection of a vice-president becomes crucial.

There is a big movement both from the grassroots and from Clintonites inside the party (yes, there are still some left!) to pressure Obama to pick Hillary as running mate. There are of course, both huge advantages and dismal disadvantages for Obama to ponder in his selection. His first consideration must be to *win* the election, but he also needs to be able to *govern*, once he wins.

Hillary would bring in those votes that have eluded Obama: mature women, blue collar, rural. Seventy-six of her supporters want her to be Vice-president. She energizes audiences and has won the hearts of all those groups above-mentioned. They feel very strongly about her place in History and demand respect for their candidate. Some may not even come out to vote if Obama’s ticket does not include her. She would also help win the big states (she won them all, among them California, Texas and New York) and the swing states, noticeable among them, Ohio, that determined Bush’s victory in 04.

On the other hand, she does evoke the past in the minds of many voters, and she is now undoubtedly a Washington insider (in fact, her experience has been counted as both an asset *and* a liability in this sense). She would distort Obama’s image as the unconventional candidate, and his message of change and hope may be, if not lost, at least diminished.

Insofar as governing, their ideologies and policy positions are perfectly compatible, if not identical, so that would not constitute a problem. She has been studying the intricacies of policy and politics since she was a university student at Wellesley College. She is capable, efficient, convincing and tireless. She is experienced in navigating the meandering straits of policy making, and can muster bipartisan support with her well-reasoned arguments.

Another often-mentioned handicap is Bill Clinton himself. With his larger than life personality, can he play prince consort? Or would he be the one that governs behind the scenes, and have his own shadow cabinet, Cheney-style? His reputation has suffered a lot lately, not any more because of that infamous blue dress but because he has not disclosed the list of donors to his library, among which there allegedly are several Middle Eastern governments. There is real vitriol against him, and that is directly transferred to Hillary.

For now, both candidates seem to be catching their breaths.

Hillary postponed her concession speech for as long as possible, some say to put pressure on Obama to include her in the ticket. Barack, on his part, has quietly named a vetting team for a vice-presidential search. Caroline Kennedy is among its members, as is Eric Holden, President Clinton's former attorney-general. It is headed by Jim Johnson, former Chairman of Fannie Mae, who vetted VPs for John Kerry and Walter Mondale. After exhaustive interviews and background checks, Obama will decide.

In the last two months of the campaign, the pundits were prone to repeating that the "math" was against Hillary. This was a gross oversimplification of a race that was characterized by peculiar circumstances and surprises at every turn, and one which was less about math than about intangibles: momentum, media frenzy, rules, emotions, charisma and *zeitgeist*.

In the end, however, it may all very well come down to the "math": if Barack can be convinced that he needs Hillary to win against McCain, then he will pick her as his VP and put the rest of his concerns aside. This will also heal party wounds and bring into the fold her loyal constituencies. But public opinion is fickle, politics is an inexact science and many times emotions can trump the best thought-out and scientifically devised plans. Like Sisyphus rolling the boulder up the mountain, Obama may find he has to prove himself all over again and then come out empty-handed in November.

In the meantime, and just for good measure, Obama, the "transformative candidate" is now wearing a US flag pin on his lapel.

Puerto Ricans do not have the right to vote in national elections due to the "associated state" status, but they can vote in primary elections.

This dynamic in the relationship between momentum and rules has been pointed out in a recent article by Jason Bello and Robert Shapiro, published in the Political Science Quarterly, vol. 123 No.1 Spring 08.

Super delegates are unpledged party leaders who do not have to declare their presidential preferences until balloting takes place at the Convention

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