

AS ONE EPIC CAMPAIGN ENDS, ANOTHER BEGINS

David Herle

In our continuing coverage of the US presidential campaign, Contributing Writer David Herle rings down the curtain on Hillary Clinton's campaign, and looks ahead to the general election between Barack Obama and John McCain, both of whom will have their challenges with US voters. Though Obama has proven he can take a punch from Clinton and weather storms unleashed by the likes of his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, he has also taken a lot of hits and needs to get his groove back. McCain carries the dead weight of George W. Bush, a slowing economy and the war in Iraq. As one campaign for the ages ends, another begins.



Dans le cadre de notre série sur les élections américaines, notre collaborateur David Herle tire le rideau sur la campagne de Hillary Clinton et anticipe le duel entre Barack Obama et John McCain, qui ont tous deux leurs propres défis à surmonter face aux électeurs. Le premier a su encaisser les coups du clan Clinton et gérer la tempête soulevée par les propos de son ancien pasteur Jeremiah Wright, mais il a subi quelques revers dont il devra se relever. Le second doit supporter le triple poids de George W. Bush, du ralentissement économique et de la guerre en Irak. Une campagne mémorable s'achève, une autre commencera bientôt.

Barring a development so unforeseeable that it would qualify as a *deus ex machina*, the historic race for the Democratic nomination between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama is over. It effectively ended on May 6, the night of the Indiana and North Carolina primaries, when Clinton's hopes of branding Obama as so unelectable that superdelegates would move her way were dashed. John Edwards's subsequent endorsement of Obama on May 14 was a public illustration of a trend that had been gathering steam since the night of those primaries — the smart money is now moving massively to Obama. Those superdelegates who, as careerist politicians, had been waiting to see which way the race was going to break before committing are now scrambling to avoid being the last people on the Obama bus.

Sadly for Hillary and her supporters, they will have to look back at this as one that got away. Granted, she is running against a very skilled politician, and one who generates a level of enthusiasm unique in modern American politics. As the first woman to seriously contest the Presidency, she faced a shocking barrage of sexism based commentary. As Harvard professor Susan Estrich wrote, "watching mostly (but not entirely) male reporters and pundits demean and dismiss her, question her motives, her appearance and her sexual orientation, has brought

home for many women not how far we've come, but how far we have to go."

But that doesn't negate the truth that at the beginning she held almost all the cards. Ultimately, her failure to capture the desire for change, her campaign's bizarre decision not to be ready to compete in the states that hold caucuses rather than primaries and her inability to find a compelling narrative for her campaign until it was too late all combined to squander what should have been hers.

Obama came almost from nowhere, built a huge national organization of donors and supporters and defeated a front-runner with a legendary name and legacy in the Democratic Party. And now the hard part begins. This extended, epic and close campaign may have battle-hardened Obama and made him more prepared for the savagery of a US general election campaign. It has also left him with the task of repairing a breach right through the heart of any winning Democratic voting coalition.

This task bears no resemblance to the healing and uniting process that those who follow Canadian politics will be familiar with after one of our parties holds a leadership race. Our parties' leadership races seldom generate much public interest and involve almost no public engage-

ment. The unity process after a winner is selected consists of people management — placating the vanquished and their supporters with places of honour and status. In this race, both Obama and Clinton have developed huge followings with very different profiles, and Americans have taken sides. Clinton supporters in West Virginia said they were as likely to vote for McCain as for Obama in the general election.

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The candidates have split the Democratic voting coalition almost down the middle. Obama's strengths were enough to beat Clinton's in the nomination process, but he will need her supporters to beat John McCain in November. The electorate he will have to appeal to in the general election is more conservative and less African-American than the electorate he was dealing with in the nomination process.

His task in the general election is very different from what his task was in the nomination race. In the nomination process, where one is appealing to those who are so committed to the Democratic Party that they will participate in its primaries and caucuses, the job is to sing from the Democratic hymnbook in a way that is most pleasing to the Democratic ear. No convincing on policy was required — one needed a microscope to find differences in policy between Obama and Clinton. In the general election, the job is to take those ideas into the broad middle of America and sell those ideas as superior to the ones offered by McCain.

Obama rode to victory in the primaries on the basis of four key strengths: unprecedented ability to raise money, a tremendous ground organization, monolithic support from African-American voters and a huge turnout from supportive younger voters. All of those will be strengths he carries into the general election. Two in particular will be key. His ability to raise money means that the Democratic campaign

should be on at least equal footing with the Republican campaign, which was not the case in either of the last two elections. As well, his ability to bring new voters out to the polls could be the key to breaking the deadlock that has existed between the two parties. Inspired largely by Obama, the turnout in the Democratic nomination among those aged 18 to 29 surged this year by 50 percent. Replicated in the general election, this would be a huge boost for the Obama candidacy.

Obama's main vulnerability — well advertised by the Clintons' team and evident in the results of the primaries and caucuses — is his problem appealing to working-class white voters. Obama has already succeeded at winning over the majority of African Americans and wealthier, urban, whites. But he needs to focus on reaching out to working-class voters and identifying with them in their struggles.

This demographic has overwhelmingly embraced Clinton, largely because of the emphasis she placed on understanding the common Americans' prob-

lems; he took to emphasizing big dreams and broad vision. In the sound-bite-ridden political sphere, he was vision and she was practicality.

In the middle of this nomination contest something fundamental shifted — a campaign that was initially about the Iraq war became a campaign about the economy as the US careened toward recession.

The income divide between the white voters who support Obama and those who support Clinton is no coincidence. Obama voters are highly educated and relatively prosperous. They have the luxury of debating the nature of the change that is required in Washington. However, millions of Americans — many in swing states like Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia — do not have that luxury.

They are burdened with more prosaic concerns, such as “Will I be able to keep my house and a roof over my kids', heads?” “Will I lose my job?” and “Will I be able to afford to drive to work?”

Clinton offered these people programs tailored to their problems. Worried about your mortgage? Let's have a moratorium on foreclosures. Worried about the price of gas? Let's have a gas tax holiday. Those kinds of practical solutions resonated with anxious Americans more than did Obama's grand promise of change. Voters who said that they had been affected by the recession voted for Clinton; those who said they had not been affected tended to vote for Obama.

However, if he can get his head around talking to these people about their very real problems in a way they can relate to, he can take it to a different level. Clinton did not have “hope” in her repertoire. Obama does. Americans are in a dyspeptic mood, only in part because of the state of the economy. While two-thirds of

Canadians think this country is headed in the right direction, 85 percent of Americans think their country is headed in the wrong direction. That is why this is a “change” election. If Obama can marry his ability to inspire hope in people with a convincing story that he will help them through this recession, he could galvanize those Reagan Democrats. After all, the last time those people were given a real message of hope was the time that they became “Reagan Democrats.”

In addition to an economic message that resonates, Obama must close

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the culture or values gap that has grown between him and the Reagan Democrats. Much of what might have been latent became a central campaign dynamic in the person of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

After a good try that turned out to be a false start, Obama has completely distanced himself from the grand-standing minister, but the incident seemed to awaken in white voters some larger, underlying concerns they held about the character and cultural issues of the candidate.

The Wright factor, as some have taken to calling it, brought to the fore — in a far more serious manner than up until that point — race relations in modern America and cultural differences experienced by African Americans that many white voters had not considered. It exposed a part of discourse in African-American culture that white Americans are not accustomed to hearing and perhaps had never heard before, other than in a Chris Rock HBO special.

Some voters realized that for all

they liked of Obama, perhaps they didn’t know as much about him or his life as they had thought. The incident has provided many rural heartland voters with the evidence they were looking for that Obama is too liberal, too urban and, yes, too black for their preferences.

As well, Wright provided a lot of fodder for Republican attacks, and one can guarantee the Republicans will use his comments far more crassly than Clinton for political gain. The party of “Willie

Horton” will continue to play off the overt and covert concerns white voters have about an African-American presidential candidate. Of the half of Indiana Democratic primary voters who said the Wright situation was important to their vote, 71 percent voted for Clinton. If it has that kind of impact within the Democratic Party, it can be counted on to be larger in the general population.

Obama may need to find his own “Sister Souljah moment” in which he explicitly takes issue with the liberal urban wing of the Democratic Party to show small-town and rural voters that he understands their value system. It need not be on an issue related to African Americans. His real need is to temper the perception of him as too liberal. In state after state, those Democrats who described themselves as liberal voted for him and those who described themselves as moderates or conservatives voted against him. In Canadian politics this can be a winning formula. In American politics it is a one-way ticket back to the Senate.

Like McGovern, Mondale and Dukakis before him, Obama can depend on receiving strong support from liberal voters and African Americans. But as they demonstrated, without working-class white voters — especially in the industrial heartland and the South — that coalition leads to electoral history of a very unpleasant kind. (As Dennis Miller once said, “Mondale only got 13 more electoral votes than I did”). Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton offer the only viable route to the White House for a Democrat. That requires knitting together the two streams of the Democratic Party, despite the fact that they differ in so many ways. Obama, with such an uplifting message and such skill with words and ideas and a basic predisposition toward unifying politics, should be well suited to the task.

Obama and his team will be working now to figure out how to deal with the new reality. The shift from the nomination process to the general election and the shift from Iraq to the economy present him with new challenges and opportunities. He doesn’t necessarily need Hillary Clinton, but he needs her voters — the women she excited with possibility and the worried working-class voters who put their faith in her.

There is no obvious reason that the election in November should be close. An American public done with Republicans, an economy going into recession on the Republicans’ watch and an intractable unpopular war should amount to a big Democratic victory. The biggest obstacle that stands between Obama and that victory at the moment is Democrats.

Contributing Writer David Herle, former federal Liberal pollster and campaign co-chair under Paul Martin, is a principal of the Gandalf Group in Toronto. herle@gandalf.group.ca



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