

A Genuine American Dilemma

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Charles Dharapak/Reuters

The current presidential race in the United States is perceived worldwide as the most attractive electoral process ever, due to the transcendental nature of the issues at stake. Are we facing a possible turning point in the U.S. style of domestic and foreign policies? Or is it just a peculiar electoral context with uncommon personalities? In crisis, the United States can brook no delay in the evaluation of the state of political affairs. The opposition between the presidential candidates entails an honest predicament, but the apparent conflict between them and the core American assumptions about power and politics may overemphasize the tight spot the population is in on November 4. Whether

the character, the platform or the kind of change the winner will bring to the office, the dilemmas are a lot more present and the uncertainty even more influential than in previous elections.

Far from attempting a detailed examination of the political platforms, this is an exercise in presenting a comprehensive view of the dilemmas the average voter will have to deal with when exercising his or her vote.

NOT BLACK, NOT YOUNG: EXCEPTIONAL

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doubts about his being black enough, American enough, Democrat enough and, what is more, presidential enough. This hesitation does not lie in the Rove-style campaign that McCain has adopted, but in genuine concerns about Obama's capacity to fulfill national and international expectations. The electorate may feel identified with the kind of hope and change that Obama offers, but the questions that immediately arise are how feasible and enduring that promise of change can become. The problem of identification is no minor matter. It should be remembered that the U.S. electorate is driven by the identification a candidate and his/her whole campaign paraphernalia can create with his/her target constituency; and the relationship between the average voter and Obama has been erratically weak and breakable. It is interesting to note that before the financial crisis shook up presidential politics, the more the race advanced, the more Obama's presidential potential became diffuse and questionable.

The Democratic Momentum. There are several reasons why this presidential race belonged to the Democrats from the very beginning. First, Democrats found the most fertile soil for recapturing adherents and re-conquering Washington after the Bush disaster. The generalized displeasure with Bush's performance made a heavy burden for anyone the Republicans nominated.

Democrats almost had their way back to the White House assured, but their challenge was tougher: the party had to prove their suitability for the job, which in the current state of affairs implies surviving a crisis that may endanger the world economic system, and continuing to lead an unconventional war against terrorism and anti-Americanism. On the contrary, the only way for the GOP was up.

Secondly—and this has been mentioned repeatedly—for the first time a woman and an African-American had a real chance of being president of the United States. The race for the Democratic nomination between Hillary Clinton and

the unexpected Barack Obama was perhaps excessive even for the party that seemed to already have one foot in the Oval Office. It turned into something that slowed them down. The injuries from a fight between giants are deeper and harder to heal than the injuries when fighting a diminished opponent. In 2004, John Kerry was virtually nominated in February, after confirming his advantage over all opponents. Kerry's injuries were barely scratches. Four years later, Obama was simultaneously bleeding from the wounds inflicted by Clinton and fighting for the presidency.

An Unconventional Candidate. A lot has been said about Obama's blackness and the meaning it has for the African-American community. However, as transcendental and reminiscent of Martin Luther King's dream as it may be, the personal-history-led campaign accounts for a feature beyond race: Obama's most played card is his own exceptionality. It can be taken as an attempt to personalize the exceptionality expressed in the United States' mission and extraordinary character, creating an automatic association between the inherent purpose of the American nation and the black political messiah. Alternatively, the rareness of the Democratic candidate has been commonly related to a stranger, non-patriotic style, because of the remoteness of his politics from the Washington *modus operandi*. What makes Obama exceptional, then? His personal history and political thoughts, his background, rhetoric, poise and elegance and his non-racial appeal. His own way of doing politics is exceptional, including his being an astonishing fundraiser and political climber. Obama, being the figure of freshness, naïveté, idealism, change and boldness, is, as a matter of fact, a truly devote of nuance. This can be an advantage for making cautious and more objective decisions, but in any electoral race in the U.S., nuance is not a convenient quality. The opposite of nuance, Obama's flip-flopping is also commonly attributed to his lack of experience and political maturity. For instance, his free trade position turned into a self-destructive weapon, especially after the gaffe of his economic advisor, Austan Goolsbee, who assured a Canadian audience that Obama "did not really intend to renegotiate NAFTA, as he has often claimed on the campaign trail."

A Promise of a Different Foreign Policy. This is why Obama's presidential performance is subject to reservations. On the one hand, there is a new discourse and ideology on foreign policy as a response to the global pledge for multilateralism,

that praises diplomacy and dialogue at the highest level, in which the most controversial issues are the condemnation of the unnecessary war in Iraq, the need to fix the Afghan chaos and finally, the courageous proposal of sitting down with “evil” leaders to start up a dialogue without preconditions. The latter deserves close attention; it comes from a candidate whose main purpose is to restore the American place in the international order, but in a friendlier and a more cooperative way. Basically, it entails the end of the United State’s disastrous unilateralism, no minor thing. The scope of this promised future can be obscured by a sometimes clumsy foreign affairs amateur who declares —not to mince words— that the U.S. will act in Pakistan on high value terrorist targets. Can Obama materialize this transformation promise, or is it only a campaign-led fad?

A TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN, BUT DIFFERENT

John McCain, the Republican dissident, enjoyed a considerable advantage after winning the nomination to face a divided Democratic Party, which enabled him to build solid foundations for his campaign relying on experience, patriotism and personal qualifications. However, McCain’s problems center on his ideology, his explosive character, his own party, the link with the Bush administration and the contradiction between being the embodiment of Washington politics and his particular change mantra.

Republican Dissident. A maverick, a moderate, a different kind of Republican, McCain has been able to fight against Obama’s exceptionality using his own uniqueness, the most outstanding feature of which is his independence from his party. He has a record of following his own principles regardless of party values. This becomes appealing for independents and centrist Republicans for contributing to create a “McCain majority,” by giving a chance to “common-sense conservatism.”

Nevertheless, the moderate label is not self-sustaining; McCain has relied heavily on his voting record, which in fact does not show moderate behavior on military decisions, abortion rights or gun control. Yes, there are some moderate positions like the immigration reform initiative, but most are a consequence of unpleasant personal experiences like being prisoner of war in Vietnam, leading to an anti-torture amend-

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ment, and the “questionable conduct” he was criticized for when linked to Charles Keating in the savings and loan scandals in 1991, which somehow justifies his support for financial reform. McCain is building on his own rebelliousness and not relying on his party because, first, the party is not unified behind its candidate, and second, party reliability just cannot hold.

The Republican Despair. The lack of legitimacy the Bush administration is closing with has infected the party in several ways: any Republican would be linked to President George W. Bush, and, on the other hand, the GOP faces the strongest suspicion about the ideological guidance and appropriate judgment any Republican president has ever had. In the last days of Bush’s presidency, the executive was reduced to its minimum expression, and the proof was the inability to promote White House initiatives. Some of the worst events for the American nation happened under this administration. Bush is not to blame for all of them, but certainly some of his policies —or lack of them— extended the tragedy’s consequences: 1) the 9/11 terrorist attacks set the tone for the rest of the term, ranging from the war against terrorism to a crusade for imposing democracy unilaterally and disrespectfully of international principles, which nourished anti-Americanism around the globe and paradoxically increased the risk of being attacked; 2) Hurricane Katrina exposed the incompetence, lack of preparedness and racial politics still prevalent in the U.S. system; and, to make matters worse, 3) the financial crisis exploded, implicating the Bush administration for its excessive deregulation.

McCain has struggled to put sufficient distance between him and Bush in order to attract voters looking for a change. Nonetheless, his stand on Iraq, Gustav reminding everyone of Katrina on the very first day of the convention, and the population blaming Republicans and neoliberal policies for the current economic crisis all makes the endeavor of being perceived as a man who can actually be relied on titanic.

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Once called the number one Republican rival of Bush and a fierce critic of his and Rumsfeld's handling of Iraq, McCain remains tied to the Republicans' most impressive disappointment.

The Same Old Foreign Policies? On the whole, McCain's thinking belongs to the twentieth century, to the previous standing of the U.S. as an uncontested superpower; and this philosophy of condescending unilateralism no longer matches the current world context. The League of Democracies is not indicative of a multilateral approach in foreign affairs; on the contrary, an elitist group of nations acting superior levying sanctions on non-democratic countries does not guarantee peace, disarmament and democratization. It sacrifices diplomacy and dialogue and jeopardizes the existing international arrangements for peace and security. In Iraq, McCain is right about the need to adopt a problem-solving attitude, although the triumphalism evidenced by the idea that victory is just around the corner goes beyond naïveté.

THE VICE-PRESIDENT COUNTS

This may be one of the few elections in which the figure of the vice-presidential candidate is relevant for attracting votes. McCain choosing Palin was perhaps the riskiest move; even so, Palin was clearly a response to Obama's pick. Biden covers his candidacy's resume loopholes: we are talking about a partner who is the current chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. That may not match Obama's discourse for change, but Biden has contributed to building a more reliable ticket for addressing the second most important issue for Americans, right after the economic crisis: a safe withdrawal from Iraq. Biden is also an asset in Washington, for those who considered Obama too much an outsider; and he is adding his long career for those who were worried about Obama being too young and inexperienced.

The unexpected Palin was an attempt to take advantage of Clinton's absence for getting the female vote. She added an air of freshness and youth to the campaign; her links with the religious right helped repair McCain's hostile relationship with hardcore conservatives; and the average U.S. family can easily identify with her: a working mother of five who faces problems similar to every American family; for example, supporting her pregnant teenage daughter and raising a kid with Down syndrome.

Unlike Biden, she was a newcomer, and the ticket's bounce in the polls shows the power they have. She attracted the audience and media by her mastery of public relations; and she earned enough confidence by relying on her executive record. That overconfidence exposed her weak points to the extent that the bounce only lasted three weeks after the Republican Convention. So far, her suitability for assuming the responsibilities of the second most important job in the world has become dubious.

IDENTIFICATION OVER QUALIFICATIONS?

The election will be decided by a wide variety of factors including racial prejudices, party reliability, political influence and Bush's legacy. However, the U.S. population will have to choose between two different paradigms of doing politics, domestically and internationally, between two identities representing different sides of the American dream, and between two proposals for change. People may vote thinking about the economy, and Obama has significant advantage in this area; his party is not being blamed for the financial disaster and he has adopted a presidential attitude in his first presidential challenge. But, additionally, voters will be swayed by how much they identify with the values and character of a particular ticket.

McCain and Palin are relying on this identification, on sharing the same values with the electorate; Obama and Biden are calling for restituting the American dream because they represent its materialization. Whether a candidate is qualified or not to be the U.S. president is a tough question that cannot be solved by focusing merely on the candidate's resume or personal traits. The U.S. situation requires better judgment, bipartisan skills, popular support and public trust in the first executive. "When it comes to politics, there is a mad love of mediocrity in this country." Hopefully, Sam Harris will prove wrong... ■■■