

## What Obama Did Right

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## What Obama Did Right

John C. Hulsman

*Barack Obama hat es geschafft. Nach einem langen, ermüdenden Zweikampf mit Hillary Clinton ist er de facto Präsidentschaftskandidat der Demokraten. Clinton hat im Vorwahlkampf zwar viele Fehler gemacht. Mindestens genauso wichtig für den Erfolg Obamas waren allerdings dessen eigene Leistungen. Dem Herausforderer gelang es, mit seiner Kritik am Irak-Krieg das richtige Thema zu besetzen; er konzentrierte seine Kampagne auf einen entscheidenden Gewinn der Vorwahlen in Iowa und führte den Vorwahlkampf auch in untypischen, kleineren Bundesstaaten; ihm gelang die Mobilisierung einer gewaltigen Anhängerschaft über das Internet, die ihm als eine schier unerschöpfliche Quelle für Wahlkampfspenden diente und die finanzielle Überlegenheit sicherte; schließlich griff er den Wunsch nach Veränderung im Land effektiv durch seine Person und sein Rednertalent auf.*

While not quite in the league of the Truman-Dewey presidential upset of 1948, Barack Obama's close but clean victory over former frontrunner Hillary Clinton certainly qualifies as a major political upset. And boy, have the post-mortems begun on the failings of the Clinton campaign, which were legion. Over-promoted prima donna staffers, who spent more time knifing each other in the press than focusing on the upstart from Illinois, did not help her. Neither, surprisingly, did her husband, who seems to have lost his fabled political touch. Running as a candidate of the status quo rather than seeing that 2008 was an election where the American people desperately wanted change was a huge mistake, as was Clinton not adjusting to the complicated Democratic party rules for the nomination process, a campaign system put into place by many of the same people (such as Harold Ickes) working for her. It is easy and correct to say that if one makes this many fundamental mistakes, she should not be president of much of anything.

While this is all certainly true and merits the discussion it is now receiving, I think it is more important and

more instructive to focus on what Obama did right, than on what Clinton did so wrong. Before we move on to the conventions and the general election, it is important to look in a little detail at Obama's amazing campaign for clues of what is to come.

### The Right Issue

While it is now second in terms of voters concerns (well behind fears of the spluttering American economy), Iraq was the issue that made Obama. His clear rejection of the war was the only substantial difference that can be found between the remarkable alike policy proposals of the Clinton and Obama teams. Especially early on, this opened political space for Obama on the left of the Democratic party, as Hillary Clinton could never quite get away from her vote in support of the Iraq war. She never fully understood as Obama did how much Iraq had turned the country off from the politics as usual practiced in both parties, symbolized by the colossal failure of the war. More importantly, it was an issue where Obama was in tune with the vast majority

of Democratic voters and activists, who felt a red-hot anger about Iraq, an anger that translated into money and volunteers for Obama. That Hillary, typically, would not apologize for her vote reminded people of the intellectual arrogance and rigidity that they suspected in Clinton. Vitally, the Iraq war played a vital role in the crucial state of Iowa, which Obama has recently acknowledged is the reason he won the nomination.

## The Right State

More than anything else, Hillary Clinton based her campaign on a sense of inevitability. Around Washington, amongst Democrats shopping for a candidate, it was commonly heard that if you didn't sign up for Hillary, and early, the train would leave the station. That is, if you are not with us now, don't expect a job in a Clinton administration later.

You can afford to be this arrogant only if you win, early and big. That is where Iowa came in. The two upstarts challenging Hillary, Obama and John Edwards, knew they had to trip her up and do so quickly, or her campaign's notion of her inevitable victory in the primaries would prove itself a self-fulfilling prophecy. Obama wisely rejected pressure to establish a nationwide campaign early on, instead putting all his eggs in the Iowa basket.

Clinton, on the other hand, ignored pleas from within her campaign not to put up a fight in Iowa, as it was at the time the only state in the country where she trailed Obama. By not ignoring it, pointing out how close it lies to Obama's home state of Illinois, Clinton lost the nomination. Instead she gave battle to Obama on grounds entirely of his own choosing.

For Iowa has always been as quirky as it is unrepresentative. A state where the Democratic party skews left of its national base, Iowa has always had a large pacifist streak, which played to Obama's strength on Iraq. As it is a caucus state, Iowa is more about grass-roots

organization than frontrunner status. For example in 1976 it catapulted a then unknown Georgia governor, Jimmy Carter, to the front of the Democratic pack. Obama, having invested all he had in Iowa, won a victory that shattered the myth of Clinton invincibility, which had formed the basis of her campaign. For all her tenacity, Clinton never truly overcame this devastating initial blow, where Edwards knocked her into a shocking third-place finish.

## The Right Tactics

While the Clinton team ran a good 20th century campaign, Obama ran the first 21st century campaign. Where Howard Dean and his chief campaign staffer, Joe Trippi, had just begun to understand the power of the internet to connect people and facilitate fund-raising, it was the Obama staff who transformed this insight into tactical brilliance. Realizing the goal was not to ask Wall Street fat cats for the maximum they could give (which amounts to only several thousand dollars, not much in terms of a modern campaign's needs), but rather the goal must be to energize supporters, make them stakeholders in the campaign, ask them for small donations, but do so repeatedly.

This great insight has allowed Obama to raise more than \$250 million, dwarfing all previous campaign totals. That makes him a multinational corporation, not merely a candidate. But more impressive is the fact that the individual average giving to Obama is so low; just over one million individuals have given small amounts of money to him, some of them repeatedly, as with the internet and the chat rooms for Obama that his campaign has engendered, they feel connected to this larger grass-roots movement. The Obama team have taken a peculiarly American tradition of an insurgent candidate appearing from nowhere (think the young William Jennings Bryan, Wendell Wilkie, Gary Hart) and managed to keep the magic going, while taking the raw energy and excitement of their candidate

and channeling it into a sustainable movement, something never really done before.

## The Right Strategy

Unlike Hillary's senior staff who had written the arcane (and, let's face it, insane) Democratic Party rules and forgotten them, the Obama team predicated their tactics on the fact that winning was about acquiring delegates, and not just triumphing in the big states. Given the Democratic preference for proportional representation, all a candidate needed was to clear a paltry 15 percent threshold, and they would start accruing delegates.

That meant two basic and counterintuitive things for the Obama team. First, 'winning' states was less the goal than limiting Clinton's chances for big victories. The best example of this came late in confusing Texas, which manages to hold both a primary and a caucus for delegates on the same day. Hillary cleanly won the popular vote. However because of the voting system, she had only the tiniest advantage in delegates over Obama. His team, focusing on the obscure system, carried the caucus. So in the end, despite winning more votes in Texas than Obama, Clinton actually lost ground to him there in terms of delegates.

Obama focused on caucuses in out-of-the-way places like the mountain west, that had never before seen a sustained political effort for their delegates, while Clinton followed the more traditional route of trying to win big states, turning this into an unstoppable wave of momentum. Caucuses are harder to organize than primaries; here Obama, with his background as a local community organizer, felt comfortable pursuing such a local strategy, this time across the country. In the end, it was victories in places like Kansas, Mississippi, Virginia, and Nevada (where he again won more delegates despite Clinton carrying the popular vote), not known as important political contests, which carried him over the top.

For one good way to look at the contest is to divide it into pre- and post-Super Tuesday. Before the beginning of February the two candidates had roughly the same number of delegates. After February, with Clinton closing strongly, they had approximately equal numbers of delegates. But the month of February won Barack Obama the nomination, as he triumphed in 11 straight contests, in out-of-the-way places like the District of Columbia, Wisconsin, Virginia, Washington, and Maine. While his team had planned for the race to go on a long time, well after Super Tuesday, the Clinton staff, with a typical mix of arrogance and incompetence, expected a knockout blow then. As such, in a tale as old as the Greeks, hubris set in; they had not bothered organizing in a serious way for the contests that came after. By weathering Super Tuesday by almost exactly tying Clinton in terms of delegates, despite her big wins in New Jersey and California, Obama's disciplined staff had created the conditions for his roll through February, where he certainly won the election.

## The Right Candidate

But as Howard Dean's self-destruction in 2004 illustrates, the best campaign team in the world still amounts to nothing if its candidate is fatally flawed. Obama has already proved himself an orator of rare caliber. Having a president who is a skilled public speaker (the present occupant of the White House notwithstanding), is a talent beloved of the American people. Woodrow Wilson, FDR, JFK, and Ronald Reagan are all remembered more fondly because of their magical gift with words. Obama has a chance to enter this pantheon in a way the worthy but far more tongue-tied John McCain can never hope to.

Likewise, Obama's consistent stress on the notion of change from the beginning of his run was particularly well-judged in terms of the country's mood. With seventy-plus percent of Americans thinking the country is heading in the wrong direction, Obama's emphasis

both reflected and has given voice to this overall and powerful feeling within the United States that something has gone very wrong the past decade. Equally importantly, Obama acknowledges this grim truth, but has a sunny outlook, also in line with general American feelings, that while there are serious problems, the American people together have the ability to overcome them. Hard reality mixed with sunshine is a quintessentially American message that Obama radiates.

Finally, there is the question of race. Or better put, there is the non-question of race with Obama. There has been a lot of bad news for the United States over the past years: Iraq; the terrible damage done to American foreign policy by neo-conservatism; the sub-prime mortgage crisis; gas prices going through the roof; one American public diplomacy disaster after another; the rise of new powers such as the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China). Obama offers some desperately needed good news. For he beguilingly, just by being who he is, offers Americans a chance to finally escape from the snake that has lingered in the garden of the country since its founding; the problem of race.

But he does so in the subtlest of ways. One of my favorite films is the great late 1960s social commentary; *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* In it a liberal, affluent San Francisco couple (immaculately played by the great Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn) must confront the fact that their only daughter wants to marry a black man. But what makes the movie is not this shocking point for the time, however well-acted. Rather it is the problem the younger black man, played to perfection by Sidney Poitier, has convincing his father, that the marriage should go ahead. Finally in

exasperation, Poitier says, "Dad, you're my father, I'll always love you. But you see yourself as a black man. And I see myself ... as a man."

That is what Obama promises to jaded, white, suburban voters, sickened by the general disasters of the past few years. He is a man who is running for president who happens to be black, and not (as Jesse Jackson was) a black man running for president. There is a world of difference between the two positions; one a sign of racial identification that has long hamstrung America, the other a symbol that even this most ingrained American blight can be transcended, can be moved beyond. It is a very subconscious dream to aspire to, but no less powerful in the collective American psyche for all that. Obama promises much, and his campaign has already delivered much.

And the race is only now just beginning.



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