

Election 2008: Here we go again

by Herbert G. Klein

One of Ronald Reagan's most remembered comments in his first debate with Jimmy Carter was, "There you go again." People remember little or nothing about the serious debate issues, but they do recall that phrase.

If Reagan were still alive and looking at the topsy-turvy political events we read about daily in our newspapers, he might well say to the American people, "There you go again." We seem to invent new oddities daily as we go into this political season.

We are only two months away from the first presidential caucuses and primary elections and the party nominees may be selected nine months ahead of the November 2008 elections, and yet we know little, except for the Iraq war, about what issues the new president will face when he or she takes office. Times change. Issues change. This year's agenda does not recognize that.

For the first time in modern political history, the Democrats are raising more campaign money than the Republicans and, with the exception of Mitt Romney, the Democratic candidates are spending more money than their GOP opponents. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama still have sizable reserves ready for the primaries, and Clinton already holds a 20-point lead. Republican reserves are small.

Al Gore, a defeated politician, has won a Nobel Peace Prize not related to peace or war. Global warming has become a hot issue and he has become a folk hero to many young environmentalists, commanding big fees wherever he speaks. His movie won an Oscar despite several inaccuracies.

Six months ago, it appeared that the traditional Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire and South Carolina primaries would have little effect on presidential elections with the races being decided on Feb. 5, when about 20 states will vote. The big states thought they would capture all of the campaign attention and much of the money now being spent in Iowa and New Hampshire. Things have not happened that way, and the candidates now are visiting the big states to raise money they are spending on the early small states.

It is difficult to go into a coffee shop in the smallest of towns in Iowa and New Hampshire without bumping into a candidate. In Iowa, every bus and many SUVs have been rented to deliver delegates to the caucuses.

Four years ago, Howard Dean became an overnight Democratic favorite in Iowa as he introduced the World Wide Web to big-time politicking. He gained new voters but lost the election with his vocal radicalism and his failure at organization. Today, Obama is the most effective user of the Web, and he has gained support from more than 100,000 new voters in the last summer reporting period, but at the same time he has lost ground to Clinton, and he probably will be out of the race after the February primaries. His name will be part of

speculation to be Clinton's vice presidential nominee, although Gov. Bill Richardson of New Mexico is more logical.

Clinton has raised record amounts of campaign money and, while many of the candidates will be out of funds after February, she reports a nest egg of \$35 million. She may not have to spend all of it to gain her party's nomination.

Popular opinion holds that the Republicans also will choose their nominee on Feb. 5, but it is my opinion that the battle could go on longer. Rudy Giuliani has consistently led national polls, and he has exceeded his opponents in fundraising and endorsements in the last three months, but he still trails Romney in both Iowa and New Hampshire.

Giuliani's advantage is that he is gaining leadership in large states such as New York, California, New Jersey and Florida.

Romney has gone all out in Iowa with 10,000 television commercials, and his strategy is to elevate his national poll position by emerging from the two early states with a victory.

Campaign managers never have faced the strategic dilemma they confront with the Feb. 5 "tsunami" elections. None of the candidates have tremendous, enthusiastic followings and all are pressed for money. Where do they spend it most effectively? What combination of states? Thus far Romney has used television and Giuliani has turned to direct mail.

The problem is greatest for John McCain. His positions on immigration and the war are unpopular in Iowa, but he may be stronger in New Hampshire and South Carolina. If the war turns more favorable in 2008, his position would be stronger, but the timing might be too late.

Fred Thompson gained more attention before he entered the race than he has since, but his strategy is built around winning in South Carolina and becoming the Southern candidate. Thus far, he has not been a strong campaigner, and his late entry into the race has hurt him.

In this topsy-turvy year there have been more debates than ever before, but none have attracted excitement or large TV audiences. In Iowa, where farm subsidies, the economy and national security are normally the big issues, immigration now looms large. Clinton has gone against her husband's policies and opposed free trade, and she has been joined in that position by the Republicans who trail the top four in their party. Social Security should be one of the nation's major issues, but both sides avoid it.

Clinton is photographed often with top Hollywood and New York stars, who raise big money for her, but a recent Los Angeles Times story reports she also is collecting sizable funds from New York's Chinatown, and many of her Chinese contributors neither vote nor speak English. The Democratic candidates generally oppose free trade with Latin America while seeking to attract Latino votes.

Too often, Americans and their political parties seem to be afraid of trade, whether with China or any other part of Asia or Latin America, and yet this is an election where we should be dedicated to bold strides to retain the global economic leadership that has helped make this country the leader of the free world. It is not a time for protectionism or retreat.

Next year's elections will be dominated by new political strategy. It also should be dominated by forward thinking on serious issues facing the nation. Perhaps the strangest part of all is that the Republicans will raise most of their campaign funds because of opposition to the likely Democratic nominee, Clinton. She has a tremendous following - for and against. Regardless who wins, she will be the dominant figure; perhaps providing the best issue for the Republican nominee.

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