

Improbably, it's the Democrats who are in trouble

by Robert_J_Caldwell

Expect the unexpected is fast becoming the operative axiom for the 2008 presidential race. It's already scrambling the presidential fields for both Democrats and Republicans. There is, however, an ominous catch for the Dems: In an election cycle that should overwhelmingly favor them, their leading candidates have by far the more serious problems.

Ridiculous, you say? Examine the scenarios now unfolding.

Hillary Clinton was so far ahead of Barack Obama for most of 2007 that her campaign strategy came to be built around projecting an "aura of inevitability." Today, that aura is gone. In Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina, the first three caucus and primary states, Obama has climbed into statistical ties or narrow leads over Clinton. Suddenly, Hillary the inevitable is in serious trouble.

Yes, she still leads Obama by seemingly comfortable margins in the national preference polls. But the national polls at this point are largely meaningless. What counts is how she is faring in the opening caucus and primary states. And there, the news is not good. No one, it seems, in Hillary's overly calculating camp, including ex-President Bill, noticed that her "aura of inevitability" smacked of smugness and presumptuous entitlement, qualities many voters don't like.

Republicans have their own set of unanticipated surprises currently, but they bode less lasting damage.

Ex-Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, long mired in obscurity amid the GOP's bottom-tier contenders, has suddenly rocketed to the top tier. Improbably, Huckabee now leads the Republican field in Iowa and South Carolina and, even more improbably, has risen for the moment to second place behind Rudy Giuliani among Republicans in national preference polls. That's a measure of Republican restlessness about their candidates.

But Huckabee isn't likely to last, and not just because he has a minuscule staff, negligible campaign organization, very little money and no experience on the national political stage.

Huckabee, the former Baptist preacher, is solidly conservative on the social and cultural issues. But what happens when Republican primary voters learn that he didn't govern as a conservative in Arkansas? What happens when they discover that his views on trade, taxes and the economy lean more populist than free-market conservative? What happens when they realize that he has only a vague and amateurish grasp of foreign affairs?

In 2000, Republicans took a chance on a Texas governor who knew too little about the world. Despite George Bush's admirable resolution after 9/11, the country hasn't liked the results.

Odds are, the GOP faithful will return in time to weighing their more conventional choices: Giuliani, Mitt Romney, John McCain and Fred Thompson.

The Democrats have fewer viable choices, which is precisely their problem. They have two flawed front-runners, a badly trailing John Edwards with an angry message, and no other viable candidates in reserve.

Now that Hillary Clinton's facade is cracking, her known negatives stand in starker relief. Republicans plainly detest her. She remains the one Democrat whose polarizing persona and history could unite and revitalize the dispirited GOP. Even many Democrats and independents who provide her typically lukewarm support find her calculating, cold and aloof. Then add the widespread, and well-founded, suspicions that she's not always truthful. No wonder her negative ratings - 50 percent in a recent Gallup poll - are so high; in fact, the highest of any presidential contender in either party.

Those persistent negatives, in turn, raise lingering doubts, now reviving, about her electability next November. For a candidate who doesn't generate much personal devotion or genuine affection among Democrats anyway, the chilling fear that she could actually lose to a Giuliani, McCain or Romney is doubling damaging to her primary prospects.

Obama has what Clinton lacks - manifest warmth and empathy and a devoted following attracted by his apparent idealism and more credible promise of change and hope. Moreover, Obama can more easily pose as the fresh-faced outsider running against a discredited Washington establishment. Sen. Clinton's emphasis on her Washington experience, not to mention her inescapable links to the contentious Clinton years, makes her even less credible as an agent of change.

Yet, Obama has his own set of gaping vulnerabilities. For all his talk about change and uniting a politically polarized nation, Obama's slender voting record in the Senate, his tenure as a state senator in Illinois and his declared positions on major issues mark him as a conventional liberal Democrat. Rather more liberal, not to mention naive, in fact, than Hillary Clinton, including on issues of national security.

Then there is the little matter of whether Barack Obama, at 46 and with less than half of one term in the Senate, really has the credentials to be president of the United States. Andrew Young, an icon of the civil rights struggle, obviously wonders, too. Young said recently he wanted Obama to be president, but not until 2016.

However winning his personality, Obama's slender resume and scant experience would surely give millions of voters pause in a race against any of the top Republican contenders. A country at war and facing serious challenges on the economy, health care, entitlement spending and any number of weighty foreign policy problems might want someone with a bit more experience and a real record before it awards them the White House.

Obama's political role model, the youthful John F. Kennedy, had a dozen years of congressional experience and credentials plus a solid knowledge of the world when he took on Vice President Richard Nixon in 1960.

Obama gives a good speech and has an inspirational demeanor but his actual credentials for the presidency are decidedly thin. Hillary Clinton has a far better grip on the issues and altogether more gravitas than Obama, but that isn't saving her from the consequences of her own political and personal flaws.

Thus, the most improbable unexpected of all as 2008 looms: It's the Democrats who now have the more serious worries in the race for the White House.

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