A two-fer presidency?

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

John Edwards' departure from the Democratic presidential field will undoubtedly cause the two remaining candidates to focus even more fiercely on one another as the Wisconsin primary approaches. If Bill Clinton, unleashed and unfiltered, remains a substantive part of that equation, this is bad news for the quality of the discourse.

There are those who invest in the Clintons far too much connivance, cleverness, calculation and conspiracy. But the former president's comparison recently of Sen. Barack Obama's victory in South Carolina's primary election to the Rev. Jesse Jackson's victories there in 1984 and 1988 had the whiff of too clever and at least a couple of those other "c" words.

Given that Jackson's victories are ancient history - in U.S. political years - and that Edwards' primary victory there in 2004 might have been a fresher example, the goal of the remark seemed unmistakable. To wit: "Look, white voters! There's a black candidate in the race for whom blacks will vote for in South Carolina's primary but who can't win a general election when a lot of whites vote." A fluke, in other words, with the intent to marginalize Obama.

This had the practical effect of insulting both Obama - whose campaign has been about transcending divisions - and white voters, because it labors under the assumption that they will, of course, reject a candidate based solely on race. Many were willing to give the actual presidential candidate - Sen. Hillary Clinton - the benefit of the doubt when she remarked that it took a president to enact civil rights legislation. This was widely viewed as diminishing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s substantial role.

But taken together, the remarks point to unnecessary racialization of the campaign. Moreover, Bill Clinton's loose-cannon contributions could lead voters to legitimately question the value of a two-fer candidacy and presidency.

As Wisconsin's primary approaches, we have a request. If the candidates campaign here (and they should), they should check that kind of rhetorical bunk at the border. Hillary Clinton is a worthy candidate (as is Obama and as was Edwards). And, no doubt, the complaining in some quarters about Bill Clinton's role is designed to undercut her feminist credentials - as in, "Look, she needs a man to stand up for her." And also to remind voters of behavior for which candidate Clinton '08 was not responsible.

Bill Clinton is an accomplished campaigner, and it's smart for Hillary Clinton to want to mine that gold. However, if her husband continues to act as if this campaign is about him and not her, she will have to question whether it's fool's gold.

We are, in any case, more interested in what she has to say than what a surrogate, even one who is a former president, does.

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