

Journey's end

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

There was once a crowded field of presidential candidates from both parties. Well, don't look now but the crowd is thinning - and fast.

It's a safe bet that when Democrat John Edwards and Republican Rudy Giuliani launched their campaigns for president, they were filled with confidence and never imagined that they would come to an end on the same day. But that's what happened Wednesday, when both men withdrew from the race after suffering humiliating defeats in "must win" states.

Edwards' third-place showing in South Carolina had to be personally painful, given that he was born in the state. His tone was angry, his message defeatist, and his rhetoric divisive. Gone was the sunny optimism of "the son of the mill worker" who was born to humble circumstances, worked hard and became rich and successful in this greatest of countries. In came the populist rhetoric of "the son of the mill worker" who saw his father struggle and who later vowed to fight the rich and successful as part of a warped strategy to make the country greater. The truth is, Edwards never really had much of a message, as much as he had a cause. He obviously cared deeply about poor people, and he felt strongly that they needed to have a champion in Washington. He's not wrong about that. But where he went wrong was in offering people a convenient villain for what ails them - evil corporations that make profits while Americans struggle to make ends meet. In the style of CNN's Lou Dobbs, Edwards issued a simple diagnosis of what's wrong with America and then offered himself as the cure. Thankfully, Democrats saw through that brand of demagoguery and took their votes elsewhere.

Meanwhile, most Republicans passed on the Giuliani candidacy. Giuliani went from front-runner to bringing up the rear. He had a message, but it mostly was about using his leadership skills to keep America secure and preventing another terrorist attack. He turned himself inside out on the immigration issue, going from moderate to hard-liner in record time. Who can forget his naive sound-bite pledge to end illegal immigration in three years? A pro-choice Republican, he deserves credit for challenging his party's orthodoxy on abortion. That was supposed to take him out of the running, and fortunately it didn't.

But, ultimately, Giuliani took himself out of the running by relying on an ill-conceived strategy that put all of its eggs in the Florida basket. In the modern age, candidates have to ask for every single vote. The people of Iowa, New Hampshire, Wyoming, Michigan and South Carolina deserved to hear the Giuliani message. Giuliani overlooked them and attempted to use Florida to launch his campaign. By the time the Florida primary rolled around, his opponents had worked themselves into a full gallop. And the rest is history, and so is the Giuliani campaign.

A presidential election is no place for niche marketing, where a candidate targets one slice of the electorate at the expense of the rest. Those who attempt to divide and conquer sometimes wind up down for the count.

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