

Barack Obama: The Real Deal or Just Another Democrat?

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The idea that black America is a political monolith is beginning to fade. Competing forces within the Democratic Party are creating new divisions. The party's been stung, even if slightly, by independents who succeeded in peeling away sizable portions of the black vote and by polls showing that 30-40% of African American adults under 30 now consider themselves independent rather than Democrat; there are generational conflicts over hot button issues, like censorship of hip hop lyrics and support for school vouchers.

Conventional wisdom has it that in spite of these political stress fractures, they will all heal – knitting together again in the crucible of a Democratic bid for the White House in 2008. The smart money is certainly there. But short term outcomes are not necessarily predictive of long term stability when newer and unaccountable forces are in the mix. Just ask the architects of the American invasion of Iraq. And there is no one who should be more acutely aware of the fact that you can't always get the genie back into the bottle than Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama.

II

The high-profile, self-promoting Sharpton ran for president in 2004, but had a dismal showing in the Democratic primaries.

Sharpton has also been involved in a longtime and highly publicized rivalry for recognition as the nation's leading African-American political activist with the Rev. Jesse Jackson, also a former Democratic presidential hopeful.

Obama, a polished Harvard-educated lawyer, puts forth a drastically different image from the street-smart high-school grad Sharpton.

"It's driving Al crazy that Obama is as impressive and popular as he is, and he's not happy about it," said another black Democratic activist. "Sharpton is just terrified of being overshadowed by someone of Obama's class and character."

New York Post, March 12, 2007

The Reverend Al Sharpton wasn't happy about the *Post* story and with good reason. No doubt it was planted by supposed allies, black Democratic Party elected officials who are backing Hillary Rodham Clinton for the Democratic nomination. The infighting within the infighting flared up just days after Obama's announcement. But it wasn't envy that tormented Sharpton. He's too shrewd a political player to indulge himself in that way.

It's rather that Sharpton, the recognized – if not fully anointed – “president” of black America, had been operating on his own timetable for challenging the Clintons' control of the Democratic Party. Obama's entry into the race forced Sharpton to scuttle that timetable, confronting him with a difficult choice: He could join Obama's black-led insurgency, in which he would play second fiddle but which might stage an extraordinary upset and thereby reshape the entire American political scene, or he could back the establishment Clinton team, standing to be an influential “all access” figure in Hillary's White House should the Clintons win.

Sharpton has always been torn between the legitimacy afforded by gaining admittance to the inner circles

of Democratic Party political power and the fundamental illegitimacy of being a black man in America. His political career has been shaped by that conflict and it has been especially operative in his relationship to the Clintons.

Beginning in 1992 the Clintons redefined the Democratic Party's relationship to black voters by signaling southern white Reagan Democrats that they were more than willing to put black people “in their place.” Bill Clinton's public slap at Jesse Jackson at his Rainbow Coalition convention – the so-called “Sister Souljah moment” when Clinton criticized Jackson for giving the stage to a nationalistic black female rapper – set the tone for the new Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) triangulation. Black America ultimately went along for the ride. But Sharpton was never comfortable with that.

Over time, and after she was elected to the Senate in 2000, Hillary and Sharpton reached an accommodation. As his political profile rose, and he emerged as the country's preeminent black civil rights leader, she began to make the pilgrimage to the annual Dr. King event at his National Action Network. In 2004, when Sharpton ran his presidential campaign, he brokered an agreement with then Democratic National Committee chair Terry McAuliffe, a Clinton ally, guaranteeing him inclusion in all of the televised primary debates. Privately, it was assumed that the price of admission was Sharpton's agreement to give Hillary a free pass in her 2006 reelection bid. She wanted a hassle-proof Senate run that would give her the room she needed to tee up for the 2008 presidential.

Sharpton's own presidential run – which consisted largely of giving well-received performances in the debates and qualifying for \$100,000 in federal primary matching funds (the FEC later forced him to return it) – culminated in his speech to the Democratic Convention at which John Kerry was nominated. It was at this same convention that the soon-to-be-elected Senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, stunned the political world with his nonpartisan eloquence in a prime time address. The magnitude of Obama's potential was apparent. The dimensions of his ambition were, as yet, unknown.

Soon, though, Sharpton became less concerned with the national scene than he was with the goings on in his home base of New York. In 2005 his longtime friend and frequent ally, Lenora Fulani (who'd run two minor presidential campaigns as an independent but who'd established major precedents – among other achievements she became the first woman and the first African American to access the ballot in all 50 states), emerged as an influential figure in the Independence Party of New York. Mayor Michael Bloomberg had run on the Independence Party line as well as on the Republican line four years earlier. Independence provided his margin of victory in a perilously close race. Four years later, Fulani and a Coalition of Outsiders – black and Latino insurgent Democratic activists – led 47% of black voters to abandon the Democratic Party ticket and vote independently for Bloomberg.

Sharpton was stung by the results. He had supported, however half-heartedly, the Democrat Fernando Ferrer. The black exodus to Bloomberg, instigated by the independent Fulani, was an unwelcome bellwether for Sharpton. But his position was made even more uncomfortable when Hillary Clinton trained her sights on Fulani, and – together with then gubernatorial hopeful Eliot Spitzer, a fellow Democrat – presented state leaders of the Independence Party with an ultimatum: Dump Fulani and her entire New York City organization or else...the “else” being that Clinton and Spitzer would refuse to run on the party's line in 2006. As the Clinton/Spitzer script played itself out – they received IP's endorsement but were ultimately unsuccessful in their crusade to crush the Fulani forces – Sharpton claimed to have attempted to intervene behind the scenes on Fulani's behalf.

It was not the Clinton/Spitzer takeover of the Independence Party that bothered Sharpton, however, but their takeover of the Democratic Party. By early 2006 Sharpton knew he faced a defining political fight. The Clintons were on a course to control both the party and the White House. Sharpton saw himself as a pivotal figure in blocking their unimpeded path to power. His plans for the presidential race and for the run-up to the 2009 New York City mayoral election, he told friends, would be shaped by that fight.

Then came Obama. Overnight Sharpton's game plan had to be recalibrated. A national black leader was taking on the Clintons – but it wasn't Al Sharpton. What's more, this challenger had tens of millions of dollars and was a magnet for adoring media and huge crowds.

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Obama was presenting voters – including black voters – with a new political vision. He wasn't just *against* something – Bush, the white power structure, racism, the war in Iraq, failed anti-poverty programs; he actually seemed to be *for* something – a new generation of leadership, a reform-oriented anti-partisan rejection of the “old politics.” He was seen as a racial healer, not a divider, someone who could transport America out of its self-destructive impulses to a new political culture. And Obama was a Democrat who might attract the all-important independent voter, the constituency that had handed the Democrats control of Congress in the 2006 midterm elections.

Sharpton had to pause and take a deep breath. In mid-March, when he reportedly met to talk, and smoke a cigar with, Bill Clinton in Harlem, he must have expected that the former president was going to pitch him hard.

III

Barack Obama is a formidable contender for the presidency. In the first three months of 2007 he raised \$25 million dollars from 100,000 contributors and moved up in the polls, surpassing Clinton among black voters, where the former first lady had expected to dominate. The “roll-out” of Obama by his skillful handlers began with positioning him as the anti-Clinton. The Clintons had to downgrade the Democratic Party's longstanding attachment to the black community as the conscience of America; Obama resurrected it. To break the Republican Party's hold on the South, Bill Clinton, himself a southerner, had to free his party from the influence of insurgent black power brokers – like Jackson – and interrupt the rise of Jackson's Rainbow Coalition; to restore the Democratic Party's control of the White House, Obama is hoping to construct a new coalition, one in which race matters, but does not define.

But the political electricity surrounding the Obama campaign is more than just the money, the size of the crowds, and the media frenzy. It is the character of the response to his message. Obama speaks of Americans' lost faith in government and calls restoring their confidence “the most difficult task that confronts us, even harder than dealing with Iraq...We have a sense that

special interests and big money set the agenda, so there's reason for cynicism, but there's also reason for hope.”

Obama's message, in its essence, is that *he* is the reason for hope – and that is not accidental. “Lost faith in government” is also a lost faith in the political parties, a public revulsion at the partisanship that permeates the Beltway. In other words, Obama seems to believe he is a man who can transcend the institutions that misguide and corrupt our democracy.

Obama must walk a fine line with that message. He is popular, deeply popular, because he is seen as other than a partisan, someone who can lead America out of party-based rancor and gridlock. But he is also a Democrat, a “true believer,” and he relies on the party to pursue his political path, without criticism or rebuke of its role in the degrading of American democracy. He may remember that in 2004 Howard Dean told the political world that he was out “to remake the Democratic Party” and found himself confronted by party elders who were not merely inhospitable, but hostile. It was they who remade Dean, ultimately as the chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Obama does not want to fall into the same trap.

But if Obama expects to channel all the expectations he is raising into a political party that has been a primary source of the corruption of American progressivism, he runs the risk of dissipating the movement that is driving his candidacy. The polls show him leading among independent voters – according to the latest Rasmussen poll he has a 19-point advantage over Hillary Clinton. Obama is simultaneously party loyalist and independent populist, a becoming hardened political operator and a visionary radical reformer.

American history reserves a special place for such controversial and conflicted social transformers. Obama has already been compared (and compared himself) to Abraham Lincoln, another Illinois politician with humble roots. Lincoln, like Obama, rose to national prominence in the context of the search for a new America, one in which the sins of slavery could be cleansed. In the mid-1850s Lincoln challenged the voters of Illinois, arguing that their love for the Declaration of Independence – at the time still a resonant spiritual and political motivator – could not co-exist alongside the institution of slavery. Meanwhile Stephen Douglas, in his famous Senate campaign debates with Lincoln, insisted that America did not have to make a choice; the Founding Fathers were slave owners, Douglas said, and

the Constitution recognized and permitted slavery.

Lincoln countered by distinguishing between the Declaration and the Constitution: the Declaration, he said, “meant to set up a standard maxim for free society” while the Constitution was but an expression of the effort to attain that ideal – as Lincoln historian Gary Wills explains, “to be tested against it, kept in motion toward it.” The Constitution does not use the words “slave” or “slavery,” Lincoln argued, because “...the thing is hid away, in the Constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death; with the promise, nevertheless, that the cutting may begin at the end of a given time. Less than this, our fathers COULD not do; and more they WOULD not do...”

When Abraham Lincoln spoke those words, the country was already embroiled in a profound social crisis that would soon drive his election to the presidency as a third party candidate and thereafter escalate into the Civil War. America is not currently at such a dramatic crossroads and, many would insist, whatever the injustices wrought by partisanship and political corruption, they do not compare to the inhumanity of slavery. That is as it should be if America can claim to have progressed in the past 150 years. Nonetheless, there are manifest signs of political discontent. Our country is now mired in a war, at an annual cost of tens of billions of dollars, that lacks the support of two-thirds of the public. The environment is being degraded so as to cause scientists and policy makers to predict that we may destroy our planet before we can save it. Untold misery afflicts much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Poverty and disease remain intractable here at home.

These are the issues Barack Obama says he wants to address. For Lincoln, and the voters of 1860, the social crisis of the mid-19th century could not be resolved within the pre-existing political framework; the Republican Party was born out of that impasse. Obama may face a similar challenge in 21st century postmodern form.

And what of the independent movement – the 42% of Americans who have ceased to identify themselves as either Democrat or Republican? They are not as politicized or steeled as the diverse elements of the broad anti-slavery movement that gave rise to Lincoln’s presidency and a new political party. But they are searching for a new America, even if they have yet to find their own distinctive voice. Many are drawn to Obama.

But they also want to know if Obama is drawn to them. Will he connect himself to the independent movement, including the significant portion of it which is African American, even if he is a Democrat? There are countless pragmatic arguments for doing so. Half of the states hold open primaries in which independents may vote. No less a prognosticator than Andrew Kohut of the Pew Center for the People and the Press says independents will decide the presidential election.

Barack Obama has good practical arguments for connecting with – even legitimizing – independent voters and the independent movement. But there is also a friction that is not easily overlooked. Independents do not like partisan politics. Obama must persuade them that he is more interested in doing good for the country than he is in empowering the Democratic Party, that he is not just another Democrat but the “real deal.” This is a difficult challenge in a political world where there is no such thing as a “real deal” because everything and everyone in the public square have been molded to maximize the chances of winning.

How will independents judge Barack Obama? They will look to see if he acknowledges them, the leaders who have shaped the movement thus far, and their cause for reform. He would have to become a new kind of abolitionist – someone who seeks the abolition of unbridled party control of the political process. These sound like simple things, and they are. But the partisan machine will want to deny independents even that. Obama will have to challenge the partisans – the Democrats most of all – to fully engage with the independents.

IV

Ironically, there is one political figure who could act as a bridge to help Obama make these connections: Al Sharpton. He has witnessed the intransigence of the Democratic establishment when it comes to empowering independents. He has observed the full force of their wrath toward Fulani and the Independence Party. He has some sense of how to navigate the terrain. He also knows that the political ground is shifting in the African American community. He’s seen half of black voters, under the right circumstances and with the right leadership, turn away from the Democrats. He’s cultivated his relationship to Fulani and to the independent movement over many years, using it to



PHOTO: CUIP ARCHIVES

Lenora Fulani (with microphone) and Reverend Al Sharpton: A key connection

enhance his leverage within the Democratic fold. He could play the role of power broker, laying the groundwork for effecting a black and independent alliance that crosses the lines between being inside and outside the Democratic Party. And in doing so he could reassert his long-held ambition to be the black leader who halted the forward march of Clintonism.

Central to this scenario is Sharpton's connection to Fulani. She is the black independent most abused by the Democratic Party bosses. She has been a favorite target, along with other black and progressive independents, of Hillary Clinton, of assorted local and national Democratic elected officials and of the liberal/left media. If Barack Obama wants to restore the lost

faith in government, he could begin by asserting that the demonization of independent black leaders by his own party must stop. Al Sharpton could instruct him in those matters, introduce him to Fulani, and open a gateway to the independent movement she has helped to shape.

Al Sharpton – like every other Democratic Party leader – is going to have to make a choice. If Hillary Clinton wins the Democratic nomination and then the general election, Clintonism reigns supreme. If she is stopped, Clintonism is finished and those who worked against her will be recognized for having finally undercut the DLC. They will lead the new Democratic Party. No Democrat can wait to see how it turns out before making a move. Not even Al Sharpton. **NEO**