

TWO CLEAR VISIONS OF AMERICA'S FUTURE

David Herle

While Canadians trudge to the polls for their third election in four years, the United States is entering the final month of a two-year marathon for the presidency. By all accounts the most exciting campaign in modern times, it has presented new twists and turns through the summer conventions, and promises more than the usual October surprises down the home stretch. Contributing Writer David Herle appraises the Obama and McCain campaigns and considers the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of each.



Tandis que les Canadiens vont aux urnes pour une troisième fois en quatre ans, les États-Unis entament le dernier mois d'un marathon de deux ans vers la présidence. La campagne la plus passionnante de l'histoire contemporaine, selon tous les observateurs, n'a cessé d'étonner pendant les conventions estivales et promet plus que son lot de surprises dans la dernière ligne droite d'octobre. Notre collaborateur David Herle analyse les campagnes des candidats McCain et Obama et met en relief les forces et faiblesses fondamentales de chacun.

As Canadians reluctantly trudge into a federal election campaign more significant than they may realize, many — even partisans — will have a difficult time prying their attention away from a United States election campaign that continues to captivate and fascinate. After two years of open campaigning, new storylines are still emerging, and bold new strategies are being developed and employed by the sophisticated Republican and Democratic camps.

As the race south of the border crystallizes, it is becoming even more compelling than just what the thrill of watching extraordinarily gifted people working on an enormous stage can give you. Increasingly vituperative water-cooler discussions reveal a growing awareness that it isn't just fun, it is important. Inherently operating on a higher plane than most campaigns, because both Obama and McCain are such exceptional people, the campaign is giving Americans a choice between two starkly different visions of their country and their future.

The conventions provided epic opportunities for advertising as well as moments of great theatre (lightly sprinkled among vast swaths of tedium), but the most revealing evening of the campaign so far has come from Pastor Rick Warren. Instead of using his forum solely to promote a Christian Conservative agenda, he instead chose to ask the candidates probing questions that, over the course of an evening in which both candidates appeared candid and open, revealed two very different presidential options.

McCain described an America under siege from the “evil” of Islamic fundamentalism. In his convention speech he promised a foreign policy that would ensure the US could be trusted by allies and would be feared by enemies. Telling Warren that General David Petraeus was the person in the world whose advice he would most trust as president was but one indication of a man for whom the military is a central element of life and America. When asked which current Supreme Court justices he would not have appointed, McCain named all of the liberals on the Court — indicating that his Supreme Court nominees will change America in far-reaching ways, likely starting with *Roe v. Wade*.

Obama sees the world, and America, in many more shades of grey. Evil is not described as Islamic fundamentalism but as something that can be found anywhere, including the United States. Of the conservatives on the Court, he would remove only Thomas (for incompetence) and Scalia (for being too conservative). Obama gives the impression that on foreign policy he will wield that big stick sparingly and softly. In US terms, his policies envision an activist federal government on domestic policy.

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large part in creating. The US election can in these realms be as significant for Canadians as the outcome of the Canadian election, or more so. So how will it be decided?

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support, and the pronounced economic slowdown is hitting many more Americans through job losses and home losses than has so far been the case in Canada. All of this has led to a pervasive sense in America that their country is heading in the wrong direction. Many Democrats have a hard time believing that they could lose in such a circumstance.

Two issues, however, have evolved in a way that favours McCain. Energy price increases have diminished concern about the environment and raised support for policies that are seen to reduce the price of conventional sources of energy. Obama found himself — politically — on the wrong side of the offshore oil drilling issue and pivoted to offer qualified support, but McCain has seized ownership over the energy price and energy supply issues. Additionally, the Iraq War is seen to be improving, going better than it was a year ago, and much of the credit has gone to the surge in troops in Iraq that McCain long advocated and was attacked for. While the war is still not a positive, McCain now has a talking point about the Iraq war that emphasizes his military expertise.

Despite the favourable conditions for Obama, the election is close. "Close" does not mean it is a toss-up. Obama is the clear favourite and

McCain is the challenger. To date in this race, when Obama's support is cresting he leads McCain by close to 10 points. When McCain's support is cresting he comes close to or ties Obama. In most times, Obama's lead has been in the range of four to six points. Only six of the last 20 presidential elections have been decided by fewer than six points.

The election is closer than the landscape would suggest primarily because McCain is an exceptionally strong candidate for the Republicans and Obama, despite the fervour of his supporters, is at the moment a relatively weak candidate for the Democrats. He may yet turn out to be a very strong candidate. If he attracts so many new voters that he renders the polling — based on likely voter models — irrelevant, as he did in the early Democratic primaries, he will have turned out to be a strong candidate. If he makes a big breakthrough over the next month in terms of America's comfort level with him, he will have turned out to be a strong candidate.

But at the moment, Obama has two real weaknesses that have him running behind a generic Democratic candidate. The first is race and culture. There is no doubt that Obama's race hurts his candidacy. The great unknown is how much it will hurt on election day. This is just a question people are not inclined to be honest about, perhaps not even with themselves. He combines that with an urban sophistication and a membership in liberal elite circles that are alien and threatening to many Americans. Exacerbating that problem is his difficulty connecting with working-class voters on the economy. The state of the

economy should be enough to defeat the Republicans all by itself. But, as was first demonstrated in the primary fight with Clinton, Obama does not easily convince the economically struggling that he empathizes with their condition. One of the greatest communicators in modern political history has a communications problem.

McCain has a personal history and a career's worth of positioning as a maverick and Republican outsider that uniquely allow him to sidestep the Bush record and demand a look from voters on his own merits. He is running on those two points more than he is running on any policy

prescriptions.

His military record seems to act as a shield against any kind of character attack. Media are conflicted about the maverick message. Most of them once believed it of him, but recent behaviour in pursuit of the Republican nomination has made them skeptics. But the history is enough to give him permission to claim it and run on it.

The party conventions were the launch pad for the strategic positioning territory that the two candidates want going into the final stage of the election. Both campaigns have accepted that the circumstances do not allow for any campaign that does not promise substantial change. Therefore, the battle is on to define who represents change. On the surface, this should not be a challenge for the Democrats. In addition to the incumbency of the Republicans, Obama has been campaigning for two years on a mandate for change. He owned that territory in the Democratic primaries and he has galvanized a powerful campaign around it. McCain has decided to fight for the change mantle despite Obama's strong positioning on that territory.

The Democratic convention had two primary objectives: shore up key vulnerabilities; and make McCain represent a continuation of Bush.

By choosing Joe Biden as his nominee for vice-president, Obama was addressing concerns — planted by Clinton, watered aggressively by McCain — that Obama did not have the experience for the commander-in-chief role. The Clintons were given prime territory to demonstrate party unity after months of bitter scrapping. And speaker after speaker emphasized that McCain had voted with Bush almost all the time and that their policy prescriptions were virtually identical. For a campaign that had been known for its “audacious” political strategies (choosing white, rural Iowa as a battleground to take on the unstoppable Clinton candidacy, giving a speech on race relations in the United States), Obama’s team held a surprisingly cautious convention.

Choosing Biden as his VP nominee acknowledges the legitimacy of questions about his experience, but having Biden on the ticket does not address those concerns. The responsibility for commander-in-chief rests with the president, and voters know it. Obama had weathered the Clinton storm about his credentials in this area and he should have chosen a VP who did not indicate insecurity about his credentials. And Biden undercuts the message about Obama bringing change to Washington.

McCain saw that opening and pivoted to take advantage of it. He had the benefit of having the second move, of being able to see Obama’s moves and then react. There is no question that McCain’s campaign is in a difficult spot, walking the incumbency-or-change tightrope. Because of the Bush record, McCain is forced to run against both his own party and the opposition. Remarkably, neither Bush nor Cheney appeared at the Convention, and neither was mentioned in many speeches.

To claim the change positioning, McCain is attempting a high-risk gambit. In choosing Sarah Palin as his

vice-presidential nominee, he willingly gave away part of his “experience” message. But if Obama used his VP pick as a shield, McCain used his as a sword. The accepted wisdom about VP picks is to choose either a person who will deliver a state you would otherwise not have won (think JFK choosing Lyndon Johnson) or a person who accentuates your message (think Bill Clinton choosing Al Gore). Biden does neither for Obama. Palin does the latter for McCain. He is attempting to position Obama and the Democrats as the true incumbents. They are the representatives of a corrupt and misguided Washington establishment. Electing Obama/Biden will not bring real change, argues McCain, it just replaces one group of insiders and pork barrellers with another set. Real change requires not Republicans, but two uniquely positioned individuals — John McCain and Sarah Palin. Outsiders. Reformers. Mavericks, beholden to no special interests. With this strategy, he is able to take advantage of a lot of pre-positioning work that Obama did on this front when fighting Clinton.

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big show and if she blows up, it’s over. Obama may be impregnable on change because of two years of campaigning on it, because he’s a Democrat and because visually and stylistically he embodies it.

But a risk on McCain’s part was necessary. If McCain’s team hadn’t changed the trajectory of the race, he was quite likely to lose it.

The strategy of attempting to claim the change mantle is still problematic because McCain’s definition

of change is so small. He taps into a populist Ross Perot constituency angered by free-spending politicians and political insider trading. But the desire for change in the US is greater and more far-reaching than McCain seems to understand or be capable of addressing. With the exception of his deftness on the energy issue, he has no message of change on the economy and less empathy than Obama. He offers the Bush policy plus steroids in foreign affairs, while Bill Clinton summed up the Bush years by memorably noting, “The world has always been more impressed with the power of our example than with the example of our power.”

Perhaps McCain’s burden of proof is not as onerous as Obama’s. The case for change has been made and nobody is trying to argue it. There are no chants of “Four more years.” It is clear that the change Obama represents is, in policy terms, much closer to the change the American people are looking for than are McCain’s policies. But, in the final analysis, a big part of this election is a referendum on Obama and what he represents in personal terms. Many find it exhilarating. Many find it

unacceptable. Many are conflicted about it. If he wins the referendum, he wins the election, probably by a large margin. If he doesn’t win the referendum, then the McCain change gambit may be the fig leaf Americans need to reject Obama and feel okay about it.

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