

The U.S. 2008 Presidential Election: An Evaluation

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“Bomb, bomb, bomb Iran.”

“The issue of economics is not something I’ve understood as well as I should.. ... I know a lot less about economics than I do about military and foreign policy issues. I still need to be educated.”

“I think that [to be rich] if you are only talking about income, how about \$5 million?”

John McCain, 2008 Republican presidential candidate

“Our national leaders are sending them [American soldiers to Iraq] out on a task that is from God. ...That’s what we have to make sure that we’re praying for, that there is a plan and that plan is God’s plan.”

Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin (June 2008)

“She’s not prepared to be governor. How can she be prepared to be vice president or president? Look at what she’s done to this state. What would she do to the nation?” [About Gov. Sarah Palin, McCain’s choice for a running mate]

[Lyda Green](#), Republican Alaska State Senate President

“If my guesses are confirmed, then that raises the suspicion that somebody in the U. S. purposefully created this conflict [the August 7-8 Georgia-Russia conflict] with the aim of aggravating the situation and creating an advantage...for one of the candidates in the battle for the post of U.S. president.”

Vladimir Putin, Russian Prime Minister and former President (August 28, 2008)

Traditionally, American presidential elections get into full gear after [Labor Day](#), once the political conventions have been completed, major speeches made and vice president running mates chosen. It is therefore a good time to make a general assessment of where this year’s election stands, what political camp has the momentum (or is losing it) and what good or bad decisions have been made by either of the two major presidential candidates.

1. Let us start with the [polls](#).

Three months ago, in mid June, at the end of the primary season, here was the standing in the polls of the two then presumptive main presidential candidates. The polls at that time showed Democratic candidate [Sen. Barack Obama](#) leading his Republican opponent [Sen. John McCain](#) by a comfortable margin. This was on the aftermath of Obama's primary victory over Sen. Hillary Clinton. For instance, the USA Today/Gallup typically showed Sen. Obama leading Sen. McCain on the order of 50% to 44%, among likely voters.

In late August, according to the same USA Today/Gallup Poll, Sen. Obama still had a 48%-45% edge over his opponent among likely voters, but a few other polls showed him trailing McCain. A Saturday September 6 Gallup poll showed Obama leading McCain only by 47% to 45%, indicating that the two presidential tickets were statistically neck and neck after the two parties' back-to-back conventions.

It should be mentioned that 10 times out of 12, the presidential ticket ahead after the conventions wins in November. But this year, poll data have to be analyzed in light of a likely negative "[Bradley Effect](#)" for the Obama-Biden ticket (see below).

Therefore, the conclusion is clear: This is going to be a close U.S. presidential election, much closer than it should have been expected after eight years of crisis-prone Republican rule. Why is this so?

2. The Attacks on the Persona of the Democratic Candidate

It is generally recognized that if Americans elect [Sen. Barack Obama](#) president, it will be considered some sort of a political miracle. This is because Sen. Obama is not your usual American presidential candidate. A junior U.S. senator with little administrative experience, he has to counteract the charge that he is inexperienced and untested. Not that his adversary, Sen. John McCain, has had much more administrative experience, but being younger, it is assumed that Sen. Obama is less experienced. Because of that, his choice of vice-presidential running mate was crucial. This was a test he could not afford to fail (see below).

Sen. Obama is also the first person of African-American ancestry to run as a presidential candidate for one of the two dominant American political parties. This in itself is an historical challenge since he does not fit totally with the image that many Americans have of their president. Indeed, it was said by some observers that some segments of the American public are not completely comfortable with candidate Obama and his convoluted personal history.

More importantly, perhaps, is the fact that Sen. Obama is considered a progressive and on the left of many domestic policy issues. This may be less of a handicap with the average American voter, who has suffered miserably under the rule of far right politicians, than it is with the neoconservative nomenclature who control the levers of many propaganda machines.

As with previous democratic presidential candidates of the recent past, it should have been expected that the ruling political cartel in the U.S. would be less than enthusiastic in allowing a relatively unknown and thus a somewhat more [risky candidate](#) get into the White House. It is obvious that there is a strong coalition of various interests that does not like the prospect of having Senator Obama become President Obama, and they are taking the necessary steps to attempt to deny him a victory.

For that, they have adopted the traditional Republican strategy of “attack and destroy.” The neocon [propaganda machine](#), which controls 90 percent of the American corporate media, has already done an effective job of sabotaging the Obama campaign. Indeed, the mainstream network talking heads, cable paid demagogues and other [smear artists](#) have savaged him ferociously with innuendos, half-truths and calumnies in order to distance him from the average voter, whose interests Sen. Obama has espoused.

It is obvious that this powerful propaganda machine is bent on electing a neocon and pro-[military-industrial complex](#) candidate, no matter how flawed and unfit that candidate may be, and so far they have used their considerable resources, including those of nonprofit [501\(c\)4 organizations](#), to attain that goal. That flawed candidate himself, Sen. [John McCain](#) has reached new lows in dirty campaigning, in smears and in political lies, even stooping as low as to accuse Sen. Obama of being responsible for high gas prices, while exonerating as culprits the incumbent Bush-Cheney administration, its ineffective energy policy and its wars of aggression.

3. The Obama Camp’s Weak Response

But the Republican “*ad hominen*” attack strategy was predictable, since they have used it before with success, and the Obama camp should have planned in accordance. It is said that candidate Obama “conceded” the crucial month of August to his adversaries. This is the same month that Democratic presidential candidates Michael Dukakis and John Kerry are also said to have conceded to their attackers during the 1988 and 2004 campaigns. Therefore, the fact that Sen. Obama remained on the defensive and did not strongly counterattack goes a long way in explaining his current lack of political momentum. To win, the Democrats cannot let the corrosive propaganda against them go unanswered, with only sporadic and weak [rebuttals](#), while their opponent’s flawed record and character remain largely off screen.

Since this is a mistake made by the Dukakis camp in 1988 and the Kerry camp in 2004, one would think that the Democrats would have learned from these two fiascos. But judging from what happened in August this year, it’s obvious that they have not. A question therefore must be raised: Is there an ongoing attempt from within the Democratic Party to sabotage Obama’s campaign? When something weird or unexplained happens, one has to ask if there is not a more rational reason that explains it.

4. The Republican Bag of Dirty Tricks

This election has been characterized so far by the McCain camp going deep into the bag of political [dirty tricks](#) to destroy the Democratic presidential candidate and derail his campaign. How come the McCain machine has been so amazingly successful in controlling the debate, especially in having foreign affairs and security issues dominate the presidential election campaign, at a time when millions of Americans are losing their homes, when the economy is going through one of the worst [financial and banking crisis](#) and is in the midst of an [economic slump](#)?

As for the question about the dominance of national security issues, it certainly can be asked whether Sen. Barack Obama has not already been the victim of an astute and wicked [“Wag the Dog” scheme](#). Such a scheme could have been designed by the Bush-Cheney White House to place foreign affairs and security matters front and center at a strategically important time in the U.S. presidential campaign, in the month of August, in order to bolster

McCain's campaign and help candidate McCain capitalize on his perceived advantage on such questions.

Indeed, the curious [international crisis](#) that McCain's personal friend [Mikhail Saakashvili](#), President of Georgia, created from scratch at the outset of the 2008 Olympic Games, during the night of August 7-8 (a period when Sen. Obama was taking a holiday in Hawaii) has all the appearances of a "Wag the Dog" operation.

Ever since Western countries supported the break-away of the territory of [Kosovo](#) from Serbia in February 2008, and created a precedent to be applied elsewhere, Georgia's President [Saakashvili](#) knew perfectly well that Russia was prepared to react to any provocation in South Ossetia. Why then did the hothead Saakashvili go ahead and provoke Russia by bombing and invading S. Ossetia? And with American and Israeli "advisers" on the ground, in Georgia, we can rest assured that Saakashvili would never have sent Georgian tanks to South Ossetia without receiving some form of go-ahead signal from Washington. An ominous sign was the presence of a top national security [aide to Vice President Dick Cheney in Georgia](#) (Joseph R. Wood), just before the latter country's August 7-8 attack on South Ossetia. Therefore, we can be certain that there was a direct link between the Georgian government and the Dick Cheney White House while George W. Bush was at the Beijing Olympics.

Many consider that the hairy Georgian, Washington-backed plan to attack Russian soldiers in S. Ossetia was "beyond comprehension". But was it? Was it intended, from Georgia's point of view, to draw the United States into a newly created *de facto* conflict with Russia, even thinking that the Georgian army could successfully occupy S. Ossetia with Russian soldiers stationed there, as some observers believed initially, or —was it not also, and this is more logical, part of a plan designed to boost Sen. John McCain's campaign for the American presidency, at a time when he was badly [trailing in the polls](#)? It is permitted, indeed, to suspect that the office of Vice President Cheney could have been interested in provoking a dispute with Russia over [NATO](#), in order to shift the political debate in the U.S. away from the economy and more towards the issue of national security and international affairs.

The fact that the Georgian military incursions into S. Ossetia were followed with ready-made declarations by candidate McCain ("[We are all Georgians](#)") in the aftermath of this provoked and gratuitous crisis points to a possibly more cynical political [scenario](#). —It is said that when something looks like a duck, walks like a duck and goes "Quack! Quack!" like a duck, there is a good chance that it's a duck. At the very least, this is a hypothesis which deserves to be investigated with all the available clues. It is also a hypothesis that has received support from Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#).

And you can rest assured that if the Bush-Cheney White House were to launch a gratuitous [attack against Iran](#) in the coming weeks, it would also be done with the current presidential election in mind. That's why there is always the fear that a miscalculation could lead to [World War III](#).

5. An Assessment of the Republican Candidate

As compared to Sen. Barack Obama, it would seem obvious that Sen. [John McCain](#) would be a ticking time bomb as president. The man is an old style militarist who confesses that he doesn't know anything about economics ("[I still need to be educated](#)").

These are the worst attributes one would like to see in a leader at this time of economic and financial stress, and with costly lingering wars in far away Iraq and Afghanistan draining the public budget. Indeed, if we study his pronouncements, all indicate that Sen. McCain would be a trigger-happy **[“roll-the-dice” president](#)**. He would be an interventionist president, who would gleefully start new wars, while his willingness to reinstitute the military draft would wreck havoc with thousands of families. That message does not seem to have been effectively conveyed to the American electorate. Why?

6. The Choice of Vice Presidential Candidates

On Saturday August 23, Sen. Barack Obama announced that he had chosen as running mate an old-timer senator. Indeed, **[Sen. Joe Biden \(D. Del\)](#)**, the Democratic Vice President nominee, is an insider and a master of Washington politics, having been in the U.S. Senate some 35 years. A lawyer and an international affairs specialist, Sen. Biden is undoubtedly as qualified to be president as anyone can be.

But, the choice has the effect of somewhat negating Obama’s central promise of a fundamental change in government. Moreover, since Sen. Biden supported the neocon-inspired October 2002 **[“Iraq War Resolution”](#)**, his selection removed, to a large extent, the rationale for those opposed to the Iraq war to work extra hard on behalf of the Democratic ticket.

Let’s keep in mind that one of Obama’s most serious and effective charges against Sen. Hillary Clinton during the primaries was the fact that, from the start, he had shown “better judgment” than her in opposing the Iraq War. It has become much more difficult to make this charge against Sen. McCain, now that Sen. Biden is at his side. Also, on foreign policy, Sen. Obama wants to draw down American troops in Iraq at the same time that he proposes a military “surge” in Afghanistan, by sending two more American brigades into that ravaged country, and even possibly into Pakistan. All this blurs Sen. Obama’s overall message and his pretense that he represented the hope for a fundamental change in American foreign policy.

Therefore, Sen. Obama’s Vice Presidential choice, while not a bad choice, was certainly a conservative one. It could reinforce the idea, in the minds of some younger voters, that when it comes to American foreign policy there is really a single bipartisan and right wing pro-war party in Washington. This image is in contradiction to that projected earlier by Sen. Barack Obama when he was running for the Democratic nomination.

Indeed, many of his supporters may have trouble understanding how Sen. Obama could present himself as an anti-Establishment and an anti-war presidential candidate and then turn around and choose an Establishment and pro-war Vice Presidential candidate who has had a long and close association with the pro-war **[AIPAC](#)** organization. The rationale, of course, was that an insider senator such as Sen. Biden would help an Obama administration deal with Congress ...once elected. But before governing, one has to win the election. And on this score, it is questionable whether the chosen running mate was the best choice to unite a badly divided party between the Obama camp and the Clinton camp.

To close the gap and introduce energy into the Democratic party, Sen. Obama could have called on **[former Vice President Al Gore](#)** and brought him into the campaign. It is understandable that a young senator could have been afraid that such a high profile Democratic running mate might cast a shadow upon himself. But a decision in this direction

would have electrified the Democratic Convention and gone a long way toward uniting the party.

Of course, the other obvious choice that could have united the Democratic Party would have been for Sen. Obama to swallow his pride and overcome his inferiority complex and choose as a running mate [Sen. Hillary Clinton \(D. NY\)](#), an adversary who received nearly as much support (18 million primary votes) as himself within the party. Indeed, [Sen. Clinton](#) could have helped the Democratic ticket win a strong majority of the crucial female vote, especially the vote of older white women, since it is widely acknowledged that Sen. Obama is not going to win the white male vote.

In 1960, for example, [Sen. John F. Kennedy](#) was less than personally enamored with [Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson](#) of Texas, but he needed to win that southern state to win the election. He overcame his personal feelings, and thanks to winning Texas, Kennedy won the election and became president. Therefore, in the end, it can be said that Sen. Obama has decided not to be audacious but to play it safe in his choice of a vice presidential running mate.

—The contrary can be said of Sen. McCain. In a cynical and blatantly calculated political move, John McCain announced on Friday, August 29, that he had chosen a relatively unknown and a relatively inexperienced woman, 44-year-old [Sarah Palin](#), a former [Miss Alaska](#) beauty contest finalist in 1984 and a former sports reporter. This was reminiscent of George H. Bush who, in 1988, chose an obscure senator named [Dan Quayle](#), then 41, to be his running mate. In the case of Ms. Palin, she is the former mayor of a small town and the recently elected Governor of Alaska, and has not an ounce of experience in world affairs. This is a good example of the [dumbing-down](#) of American politics where anything can be said (*"She has foreign affairs experience because she lives in a state next to Russia"*), done or sold, for expediency.

Therefore, since according to Sen. McCain himself he has no competence in economics or finance, one could have expected that he would have chosen someone better prepared in this crucial area. A candidate who fits the requirements would have been former [Massachusetts](#) Governor Mitt Romney, who has considerable business and executive experience. Instead, Sen. McCain chose a woman who has no background in economics or finance. Why? Essentially, because in the USA, religion trumps economics anytime. And, that's the problem.

7. A Republican Ticket as the Religious Far Right Likes It

In fact, what attracted candidate McCain to Sarah Palin was her [far right religious credentials](#), being a fervent Pentecostal Christian who is anti-abortion (even for rape and incest victims), pro-state-imposed-death penalty, anti-sexual education, anti-same-sex marriage, anti-environment, pro-creationism, pro-censorship, pro-gun ownership, and pro-war. More to the right than that, and one falls over the cliff!

To get the evangelical vote, evangelical leaders had to be wooed. For the religious far right leaders, indeed, such as [James Dobson](#), president of the Focus on the Family movement, the only issue that really matters is for them to take absolute control of the [U.S. Supreme Court](#) in order to impose their far right domestic cultural agenda. They particularly want the Court to repeal the 1973 decision of [Roe v. Wade](#) that gave American women control over their own body. Any politician who can help them achieve this goal is bound to receive their support, whatever his or her qualifications.

That is why Dobson declared upon learning that their favorite candidate had been selected, *"I would pull that lever" [for John McCain - Sarah Palin],* after he had said earlier that he *"cannot and will not vote for Senator John McCain."*

In 2004, the Dobson religious far right machine put its considerable media power (7 million American radio listeners) behind the disastrous Bush - Cheney ticket for a second term. And it won. In 2008, if the flawed and controversial McCain - Palin ticket were to win, it would be due in a large measure to the same religious far right support. People outside the United States must know such things if they are to understand American politics.

But was not Sen. McCain playing crass politics and demonstrating again a lack of judgment with such a surprising choice as a running mate? Indeed, if he had placed the welfare of his country first, would he have chosen such an inexperienced person to be a heartbeat away from the presidency, to be commander-in-chief, especially considering that he is himself already 72 years old and that, if elected, he would be the oldest American president ever inaugurated? [N.B.: Sen. John McCain's father (70) and grandfather (61) both died suddenly of heart attacks.]

The truth is that the American religious far right had its doubts about candidate McCain and was about to sit the election out. Something had to be improvised to get the religious far right aboard. —And Ms. Palin fit the bill. Her far right credentials were bound to "energize" a strategic part of the Republican base. That was the calculation.

Of course, there was also the hope of killing two birds with one stone by attracting some inattentive pro-Hillary Clinton Democrats and Independent women who could have felt somewhat snubbed by Obama's choice of Sen. Joe Biden as his running mate. But considering how far right politically Ms. Palin is, it is dubious that many Democratic or Independent leaning American women are going to fall in the trap that the McCain camp has opened for them.

While it is true that the campaign that Sen. Hillary Clinton ran gave legitimacy to the possibility of a woman as president, this does not apply to any woman. Not to a woman because she is a woman. She has to be qualified for the job. In fact, the choice of Ms. Sarah Palin as his running mate and his sell-out to the far right may have been a major blunder on Sen. McCain's part, because such a rash and impulsive decision puts his judgment in doubt.

Overall, **religion** continues to be the most politically divisive factor in the United States. Gallup found, for example, that nearly two thirds (65%) of highly religious American white voters would vote Republican, no matter what their interests in other issues are. They are **one-issue voters** and their political behavior explains to a large extent why relatively poor people and those of the middle class in the U. S. continue to vote for far right policies which mainly profit the rich. And that one single issue is an unhealthy desire to infuse religious dogma into the law of the land, no matter what the **U.S. Constitution** says about the division between Church and State and the requirement not to have a religious litmus test for any public office [Article 6, clause 3 of the U.S. Constitution says: ... *"no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."*]. The constitution says one thing, but the churches say another. That explains why candidate McCain felt obliged to pander to the American religious right movement.

Since economic studies show that when Democrats were in the White House, lower-income American families experienced slightly faster **income growth** than higher-income families,

and that the reverse was true when Republicans were in control, one would expect the Democrats to be favorite in this year of economic hardship. That is if people vote rationally their economic interests rather than voting along religious lines.

8. The “Bradley Effect” cannot be underestimated

Because of the nature of the Democratic nominee, it would be imprudent to dismiss the possibility of a strong [“Bradley effect.”](#) To the contrary, a [Pew Research Center poll](#) taken during mid-August could indicate that this is going to be the case. For instance, a majority of McCain supporters (53%) rejected candidate Obama overwhelmingly and found nothing positive about him, while many Obama supporters are able to say something positive about candidate McCain. To me, this smells like a somewhat racist stand on the part of many American voters who are attracted to candidate McCain. They simply cannot stomach the idea of having a black person as their president.

This is a political fact that Obama’s advisers have to deal with. Come November, indeed, the Obama-Biden ticket will have to be 2 or 3 percentage points ahead of the Republican ticket to counteract the expected “Bradley effect” in order to win.

Thus, one can wonder if their strategy of putting the emphasis on an “*Obama: The Celebrity*” campaign, rather than on an “*issues-based*” campaign is really what the situation would require. In other words, is it a good idea to turn the 2008 election into a popularity contest between Sen. Obama and Sen. McCain?

The reality is that Sen. Obama is also a candidate who has a high profile and [outspoken wife](#) who is certainly not your typical self-effacing American first lady (at least, before the election!). This may unduly reinforce the “celebrity” tone of the Democratic campaign. On the same level, it can be disputed whether the idea of having the Democratic candidate accept the nomination of his party before an imposing crowd of 75,000 at the Denver Broncos’ football [Invesco Field Stadium](#), Mount Olympus-Parthenon-style, was the greatest. This has also reinforced the “celebrity” message. —It is too early to know if that was the wrong message at the wrong time. The answer will be delivered on November 4.

9. Obama the Good One vs. McCain the Nasty One?

Finally, on the character issue, I have the feeling that there is some appearance of a lack of moral fortitude on the part of Candidate Obama. Some may have the impression that Sen. Obama is not his own man. That he says and does what others tell him to say and do and that this may explain his occasional flip-flops. This image, even if unfair and untrue, can be dangerous in politics because voters sometime value character above everything else in a candidate to public office.

On the other hand, even though John McCain has often been referred to ever since his high school days by those who know him well as [John “McNasty”](#), the Democrats seem incapable of conveying this information about McCain’s character flaws to the public. If they do not do it themselves, they surely cannot rely on the neocon corporate media to do it in their place! So far, Obama’s advisers have been [pulling their punches](#). They keep repeating that “*You have to be careful about attacking McCain.*” Well, the McCain camp has no such restraint in [attacking](#) Sen. Obama. They did exactly the same thing to [Sen. John Kerry](#) in 2004. In American politics, nice guys have the habit of finishing last.

10. Conclusion

The 2008 American presidential election is a most unusual and interesting election, and it will be studied intensively in the coming years. My preliminary assessment is that this is still a presidential election for the Democrats to lose, but they may lose it, at least at the strategic presidential level.

Of course, the Democrats have not yet lost the 2008 presidential election, far from it, but they must quickly regain the [momentum](#) and take control of the political agenda by reorienting their strategy and tactics. As President John Kennedy once said, *“an error is not a mistake unless you refuse to correct it.”*

For strategy, for instance, they would be wise to place less emphasis on the persona of Sen. Obama and his wife and more on [issues](#). They must demonstrate to the American electorate that they are better prepared to tackle them, while their adversaries are likely to make matters worse.

Are Americans better off today than eight years ago? By most measures, they are not. It should be no surprise that Americans are eager for a change in leadership, especially as it is related to their number one preoccupation, [the economy](#). If they were to vote for four more years of the same, it would only be by default. How could it be otherwise with the incumbent Republican George W. Bush having the highest disapproval rating (69%) ever of any American president?

Amazingly, however, the Democrats seem to have some problem zeroing in on a slogan. Perhaps they could adopt a slogan such as: *“For a Better and More Prosperous America”*. —I may be wrong, but I think that’s what a majority of Americans want.

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