
August 26, 2008**OP-ED COLUMNIST****The 21st-Century Man****By DAVID BROOKS**

DENVER

I flew into the airport here on Sunday and the pilot could barely land because of the fog of bad advice. Democrats are nervous because Barack Obama's polling lead has evaporated. And when Democrats are nervous, all the Santa Monica Machiavellis emerge from their fund-raisers offering words of wisdom. And the subtext of the advice being offered this year is that Barack Obama should really be someone else.

Some sages are saying that Obama needs to get specific. He needs to lay out concrete plans and legislative agendas. Apparently, having nominated Obama, they really want a replay of the Dukakis campaign.

Others say he needs to describe his experience in government better, to make Americans comfortable with him as chief executive. Apparently, having nominated Obama, they want him to run as Chris Dodd.

Still others say he needs to be a scrappy class warrior defending the middle class against the depredations of the rich overlords with their multiple homes. Apparently, for these people it wasn't enough that they got to live through Al Gore's "people versus the powerful" campaign just once. They want to relive the joy again and again.

And yet there are still others who say Obama needs to get bare-knuckled. He needs to hammer McCain above the belt and below. Apparently, these people have decided that having nominated Obama, the party needs to be led by Michael Moore.

The words fly, the quotes are given, campaign aides are pulled aside. It's like a Greatest Misses compilation of every Democratic campaign idea ever conceived.

Obama is already an elusive Rorschach test candidate, and now he's being pulled by his party in a thousand directions. The Democrats are in danger of doing to Obama what they did to their last two nominees: burying authentic individuals under a layer of prefab themes.

Obama's chief problem in this campaign is that large numbers of voters still don't know who he is. They are having trouble putting him into one of the categories they use to grasp those they have not met.

And now he has to define himself amid the phantasmagorical vapors of his own party: the ghosts of the Kerry campaign, the overshadowing magic of the Kennedys and the ego-opera that perpetually surrounds the Clintons.

Of course, the Obama campaign has been here before. Just about a year ago, Obama was stagnant in the polls. His supporters were nervous and full of advice. And in the crowning moment of his whole race, Obama shut them out. He turned his back on the universe of geniuses and stayed true to his core identity.

At the core, Obama's best message has always been this: He is unconnected with the tired old fights that constrict our politics. He is in tune with a new era. He has very little experience but a lot of potential. He does not have big achievements, but he is authentically the sort of person who emerges in a multicultural, globalized age. He is therefore naturally in step with the problems that will confront us in the years to come.

So as I'm trying to measure the effectiveness of this convention, I'll be jotting down a little minus mark every time I hear a theme that muddies that image. I'll jot down a minus every time I hear the old class conflict, and the old culture war themes. I'll jot down a minus when I see the old Bush obsession rearing its head, which is not part of his natural persona. I'll write a demerit every time I hear the rich played off against the poor, undercutting Obama's One America dream.

I'll put a plus down every time a speaker says that McCain is a good man who happens to be out of step with the times. I'll put a plus down every time a speaker says that a multipolar world demands a softer international touch. I'll put a plus down when a speaker says the old free market policies worked fine in the 20th century, but no longer seem to be working today. These are arguments that reinforce Obama's identity as a 21st-century man.

And I have to say, during the first night of the convention, the pluses far outweighed the minuses. In spirit, the night extended Obama's 2004 convention speech. The overarching theme was intrinsic to the man, unity instead of division, something new instead of conflicts that are old. His sister hit this theme forcefully. Jesse Jackson Jr. made the generational-change argument explicitly, paying tribute to the fights of the past while describing the more subtle challenges of the present. Michelle Obama was short on biographical details, but long on the idealism, which is at the heart of Obama's appeal.

Obama may yet recover his core focus. Now he has to preserve it against his most terrifying foes: the "experts" in his own party.

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