

The Harbour League



THE AUTOPSY OF 2008

By Herbert I. London

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The autopsies of the 2008 presidential campaign are the story of the week as pundits put on their thinking caps to explain the Obama success and the Republican failure.

On one matter there appears to be consensus: bread and butter issues dominated this election. Contrary to the widely held opinion that youthful voters were caught in the whirlpool of Obamamania, it turns out they were principally concerned with the price of consumer products.

To my astonishment, the 18 to 25 year olds were not motivated to support Obama because of the war in Iraq or Oprah Winfrey's endorsement. It came down to the standard of living they either want or expect. So much for the new idealism.

As for older voters, the manifest opinion is that the Bush administration did not govern conservatively. Despite claims about fiscal responsibility, "compassionate conservatism" turned out to be big government programs, such as the prescription drug program, which resembled previous Democratic administration initiatives. Some voters argued that if the Republicans are 70 percent Democrats, why not vote for the genuine article.

It is instructive that Senator McCain who was persistent in his opposition to earmarks and government spending, could not make the argument that he was better prepared to deal with the economic issues than his political rival. Nor could he make the case that the credit meltdown is directly related to political

decisions made by Democrats. I would hazard a guess that perhaps one in a hundred voters was aware of the Community Reinvestment Act and its insidious influence in providing uncollateralized mortgages to unqualified borrowers.

Clearly there were other issues in the campaign. A majority of voters has a sense that the culture is moving in the wrong direction, but this is a vague feeling of unease over-shadowed by the economic concerns.

Similarly, the war against radical Islam and the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon has faded in the public consciousness. Americans take a great deal for granted, including their security. Neither the war nor homeland security played a critical role in this election, a curious testimonial to the Bush administration's success in Iraq and vigilance against terrorist threats.

On the matters that were emphasized by the public at large: spending, taxes, energy and the current economic crisis, a majority believes Obama and the Democratic party is in a better position to address these issues than their Republican counterparts.

Apparently Obama's ambiguous rhetoric played well, notwithstanding the fact he will most likely raise taxes, increase spending on government programs, apply an expensive "cap and trade" policy on the energy bureaucracy, and continue the present commitment to adding government liquidity to the market.

To conceal his costly spending impulses, Senator Obama raised the specter of a tax rebate for 95 percent of Americans, a curious measure since 44 percent of the population does not pay taxes. Yet remarkably, McCain did not take advantage of this obvious contradiction, mentioning it once in a throw away line during the third debate.

What the opinion polls seem to suggest is that this election, like the 1992 election of Bill Clinton, was a referendum on the economy and McCain, willy nilly, was perceived as a proponent of Bush policies which inaccurately were associated with the market downturn.

There will be much handwringing in the Republican party about this loss. And, as I see it, refashioning perceptions of the party is necessary. However, the essential prescription is that when Republicans act like real Republicans they have an excellent chance of gaining public acceptance, i.e. adherence to limited government, sensible expenditures and low taxes.

The key to future success is for Republicans to remember what led to success in the past and apply it to conditions in the present. Obama may be on the ascendancy at the moment, but political fortunes rise and fall. As Democratic policies fail – and they will – the Republicans should be poised to take advantage of the opportunity. This is the issue for Republicans: regroup, consider basic party positions and organize them in a manner that the public will embrace.

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Lexington Books, 2001) and ***America's Secular Challenge: The Rise of a New National Religion*** (Encounter Books, 2008). London maintains a website, www.herblondon.org.