



February 25, 2008

Letter from Washington

It has been another two weeks of increasing drama in the US Presidential primaries.

On the Republican side, John McCain has solidified his lead over Mike Huckabee and is within 100 pledged delegates of wrapping up the nomination.. This should occur by next week, barring some unforeseen development.

The *New York Times*, the establishment "paper of record" tried to provide that unforeseen development this past week by running a story which accused McCain of having a dalliance with a Washington lobbyist, and then doing legislative favors for her clients. The paper offered no proof of either charge, other than the anonymous word of "former McCain staffers". McCain and his wife denied the charges categorically at a press conference, leaving no wiggle room for possible later revision or Clintonesque parsing of words.

The result has, in the short term at least, been an up tick for McCain. The right wing blogosphere that had rejected him as a candidate because he is not "conservative enough" in their view, have rallied behind him.

The real question is what possessed the editorial board of the *Times* to push a story that appears to be half-baked at best? Is the paper sitting on some additional information that it is holding, waiting for McCain's denial to be absolute before revealing it? If that is the case, McCain has walked into the trap, but so far there doesn't appear to be anymore to the story.

On the Democrats' side, things are not as straightforward.

Barack Obama has now won the last 10 primaries and caucus events, and has the Clinton campaign seemingly on the ropes. In fact, if she were anyone other than Hillary Clinton, party leaders would have prevailed on her to withdraw by now.

In the last Clinton-Obama debate, she sounded rather wistful at one point, and seemed to be opening the possibility of withdrawing from the race with some dignity. If that was a trial balloon it was popped pretty quickly the

next day when she attacked Obama for misleading campaign literature, using the harshest language to date.

Her current line of attack, pointing out that Obama is long on platitudes but short on substance, seems to be the most effective, and has the potential of doing real damage to him without actually changing the outcome.

Clinton really is in a tough spot. Obama has outpolled her by more than a million votes since the primaries began, and her once inevitable march to the White House has taken a sharp detour, apparently because she and her staff could not figure out how to deal with the Obama phenomenon. She has apparently decided that her best hope is to take the gloves off and go negative, even though she comes across as shrill and unsympathetic.

She is counting on winning both Texas and Ohio next week, and those delegate-heavy states will supposedly reinvigorate her campaign. In reality, because of the Democrats' proportional allocation rules, she has to win very big, 60% or more, in all of the remaining contests to pull ahead of Obama.

What is keeping her hopes alive in the race are the unpledged "super delegates", which comprise about a third of the convention total. The super delegates are party officials, local office holders, members of Congress, etc., and they will hold the key in the tight race this has become.

The Democrats' nightmare scenario will be for Obama to come into the convention with a lead in both elected delegates and a big plurality in votes, and yet be denied the nomination by the super delegates. Obama has become a messianic figure with a large young, well-educated following that has become almost cult-like. If a deal were cut that handed the nomination to Clinton, there would be a civil war within the party that would guarantee the Republicans a November victory.

There doesn't appear to be anyone in the Democratic party with the stature to convince Clinton that she could be a very powerful and effective Senate Majority Leader, and that she would earn the gratitude of the party by standing down her campaign. If we learned anything about the Clintons in the eight years they occupied the White House, it is that they are ruthless fighters with a single-minded focus and intensity of purpose in the pursuit of political power. They will fight on as long as there is a shred of hope, and perhaps beyond.

Finally, as comic relief, Ralph Nader jumped into the race this weekend. Nader's quixotic third-party effort cost Al Gore the presidency in 2000, a fact that Democrats have never forgiven. In 2004 he polled .004% of the vote, and is likely destined to do worse this time.

Meanwhile, away from the political front, the Pentagon is gearing up for a periodic review of service roles and missions this year, an assessment that

will assign “core competencies” to each branch and will be used as a basis for allocating resources and future service acquisition plans.

There will be two separate assessments, an executive branch effort conducted by Secretary of Defense Gates, and a military assessment by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Mullen. The assessments will be the forum for debate over whether to focus future investments on low-intensity operations such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan, or boost spending for possible conflict with a near-peer competitor where air and naval power and precision strike are critical elements.

The 2008 Defense Authorization Act requires the assessments, and also requires that future defense budget submissions show resource allocation by core mission area, a feature designed to better permit the Congress to determine whether spending is in line with the established priorities.

Over the last several years, OSD and the Joint Staff have led an effort to develop a new way to view the mix of capabilities the U.S. military employs with a concept called “portfolio capability management.” The Defense Planning Guidance document for 2010-15 will be constructed using nine capability portfolios, superseding service-oriented frameworks for developing investment decisions. The portfolios will likely serve as the basis for the core competencies.

The whole concept of roles and missions is a very sensitive one, and will be bound to touch off intra-mural warfare between the services as they each try to position for a bigger slice of decreasing resources. Roles and missions haven't been fundamentally changed since 1948, with the creation of the Air Force and the construct of cold war capabilities, possibly because it is such a difficult subject for the service chiefs and civilian leadership to come to grips with.

Author's Note: *As a fairly well-traveled O-5, I landed in my first Pentagon assignment in 1985. I was assigned to the Strategy and Policy shop in OPNAV, and worked for a highly respected Rear Admiral attack pilot, also in his first Pentagon assignment. As we trudged back to Navy country on the 4th deck of the Pentagon after doing battle over resources with the Joint Staff and other services, he said, “You know, I’ve had it wrong all these years. I used to believe that the enemy was the Soviet Union, but now that I’m here in Washington I finally understand that it’s really the f_____ing Air Force”.*