



August 25, 2008

Letter from Washington

While we were enjoying our undeserved summer break for the last six weeks, surprisingly little of substance has taken place in the presidential campaigns.

Obama and McCain, after wrapping up their respective nominations, have spent the summer sniping at each other in somewhat desultory fashion, while awaiting the parties' conventions which will formally confirm their status as nominees.

The Democrats' convention convenes on Monday in Denver, followed by the Republicans the week after.

The race has remained surprisingly close over the summer and is essentially even at this point. Obama made his tour of Europe and the Middle East in July, and while greeted by adoring throngs along the way, got little in the way of traction from the trip. The McCain campaign has released a series of advertisements using the footage from Obama's Berlin speech, mocking him as "The One". Introduced by cuts of Charlton Heston from "The Ten Commandments", the ads make fun of Obama as heavy on hype but light on substance.

The biggest favor to McCain came from Vladimir Putin and the Russian invasion of Georgia. McCain has long been on record as tough on Putin and saw him for what he is well before most other US politicians. The Russians' invasion of Georgia, no matter the provocation, has served to reinforce the attitude held two-to-one by eligible voters that McCain is more capable of handling international affairs and foreign crises than Obama. Obama was caught unaware at the beginning of the invasion while vacationing in Hawaii, and made several ill-advised statements until his handlers could hone a get-tough message.

Obama's selection of Sen. Joe Biden (D-DE) as his Vice-Presidential running mate has been not surprisingly panned by the Republicans. Vice Presidents rarely affect the ticket one way or the other, but his selection of Biden says some interesting things about how Obama thinks the election will be won. Biden is a consummate Washington insider, having been in the Senate since

his running mate was 11 years old, which plays against the theme of "change". At the same time, Biden's solid foreign policy background tends to shore up Obama's perceived weakness in international issues, and indicates that Obama has heard that message in the polling. What he has also heard is that the Republican's effort to paint him as aloof and elitist has had some traction, and Biden, a solid-working class Democrat, may buy him some credibility with lunch-box voters, especially in Pennsylvania where he is well known.

The down side to Biden is that he has a reputation as a gas bag, and is prone to verbal miscues that will be a constant source of ammunition and amusement through out the campaign.

Obama's decision to eliminate Hillary Clinton from consideration may cost him with that same working class constituency, in which she scored heavily in the primaries. Obama has treated the whole Clinton issue with kid gloves, knowing that any perceived disrespect would cost him heavily with the older female demographic, but the politics aside, there is just too much bad blood between the two for her to be a serious consideration, even before the Bill Clinton wild card is factored in. Some of the die-hard Clinton supporters may go to McCain out of petulance, but the real danger is that they will just stay home in November in the key rust-belt states. 18 million Democrats voted for Clinton in the primaries, and Obama is taking a very calculated risk by not seriously considering her.

Obama's key effort during the convention will be to counter the Republicans' attempt to define him in an unfavorable way and to use this period of undivided media attention and focus to overcome the negatives. The closeness of the race still indicates that Obama has not "sealed the deal" with the American people, and he remains something of an unknown quantity. Obama's task is to use the convention week to become the reincarnation of Jack Kennedy in the eyes of the faithful.

McCain meanwhile will cede the spotlight to Obama for the week, except probably to announce his own Vice President in an effort to deflect some of the media attention. McCain's number two has significantly more importance since at his age (72 at inauguration) the odds of the VP having to fill out the term are significantly higher than on the other side. The Republican camp launched a couple of trial balloons in the last several weeks, suggesting that McCain might select a pro-choice Republican. These suggestions were immediately taken under fire by the right wing talk radio and the blogosphere.

McCain has a couple of obvious safe choices in young state governors with good conservative credentials but no international experience. If he believes that he needs a game-changing choice, he may select Sen. Joe Lieberman (ID-CT), as a way to shake up the status quo. Lieberman is a pro-choice Democrat who ran as Al Gore's VP in 2000, but has crossed the party line to

support McCain in the preliminary going. Lieberman and McCain share common views on the Islamist threat, and would be a comfortable pair. The Republican base however would have to swallow really really hard to buy in to the idea.

If Obama has to convince his base that he is Jack Kennedy, McCain needs to persuade his that he is Harry Truman --- a no-nonsense war-time internationalist --- willing to sacrifice personal popularity to make tough choices.

Most Americans do not pay particularly close attention to presidential politics until after the early September Labor Day weekend, with about two months left before the actual vote. What it will all come down to is the first 15 minutes of the first televised debate. If Obama comes across as unsure of himself or lacking in maturity or resolve, he will be fatally wounded and in an unrecoverable position. If McCain comes across as a cranky old man, or worse, forgetful and showing his age, he will be done as well. If they both flame out simultaneously it will fill the party bases with buyers' remorse and have them pining desperately for Hillary and Rudy.

Meanwhile, in the real world of appropriations and defense policy, the Democratic leadership in the House and Senate has decided that they just don't want to play with George Bush any more. The most likely appropriations scenario is that the Congress will send a Defense Bill, a Homeland Security Bill and probably a Military Construction Bill to the President before he leaves office. The remainder of the bills will be held over for the next Congress and the next President, presumably Obama in that logic.

The Airbus-Boeing Tanker controversy could play a role, in that Boeing has asked for a six-month extension in order to prepare a response to the RFP which will propose an extended range stretch 767 tanker --- an airplane that only exists on paper. If the extension request is denied, Boeing will likely no-bid and the House Boeing caucus will write in some language preventing the administration from spending money on a non-US designed airframe. The Senate will balk at that, and the Defense Appropriation may have to wait until the new administration as well.

It will be an interesting couple of weeks as we approach the end game of both the election process and the Bush administration.