THE CHOICE

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Never in living memory has an election been more critical than the one fast approaching—that's the quadrennial cliché, as expected as the balloons and the bombast. And yet when has it ever felt so urgently true? When have so many Americans had so clear a sense that a Presidency has—at the levels of competence, vision, and integrity—undermined the country and its ideals?

The incumbent Administration has distinguished itself for the ages. The Presidency of George W. Bush is the worst since Reconstruction, so there is no mystery about why the Republican Party—which has held dominion over the executive branch of the federal government for the past eight years and the legislative branch for most of that time—has little desire to defend its record, domestic or foreign. The only speaker at the Convention in St. Paul who uttered more than a sentence or two in support of the President was his wife, Laura. Meanwhile, the nominee, John McCain, played the part of a vaudeville illusionist, asking to be regarded as an apostle of change after years of embracing the essentials of the Bush agenda with ever-increasing ardor.

The Republican disaster begins at home. Even before taking into account whatever fantastically expensive plan eventually emerges to help rescue the financial system from Wall Street's long-running pyramid schemes, the economic and fiscal picture is bleak. During the Bush Administration, the national debt, now approaching ten trillion dollars, has nearly doubled. Next year's federal budget is projected to run a half-trillion-dollar deficit, a precipitous fall from the seven-hundred-billion-dollar

surplus that was projected when Bill Clinton left office. Private-sector job creation has been a sixth of what it was under President Clinton. Five million people have fallen into poverty. The number of Americans without health insurance has grown by seven million, while average premiums have nearly doubled. Meanwhile, the principal domestic achievement of the Bush Administration has been to shift the relative burden of taxation from the rich to the rest. For the top one per cent of us, the Bush tax cuts are worth, on average, about a thousand dollars a week; for the bottom fifth, about a dollar and a half. The unfairness will only increase if the painful, yet necessary, effort to rescue the credit markets ends up preventing the rescue of our health-care system, our environment, and our physical, educational, and industrial infrastructure.

At the same time, a hundred and fifty thousand American troops are in Iraq and thirty-three thousand are in Afghanistan. There is still disagreement about the wisdom of overthrowing Saddam Hussein and his horrific regime, but there is no longer the slightest doubt that the Bush Administration manipulated, bullied, and lied the American public into this war and then mismanaged its prosecution in nearly every aspect. The direct costs, besides an expenditure of more than six hundred billion dollars, have included the loss of more than four thousand Americans, the wounding of thirty thousand, the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqis, and the displacement of four and a half million men, women, and children. Only now, after American forces have been fighting for a year longer than they did in the Second World War, is there a glimmer of hope that the conflict in Iraq has entered a stage of fragile stability.

The indirect costs, both of the war in particular and of the Administration's unilateralist approach to foreign policy in general, have also been immense. The torture of prisoners, authorized at the highest level, has been an ethical and a public-diplomacy catastrophe. At a moment when the global environment, the global economy, and global stability all demand a transition to new sources of energy, the United States has been a global retrograde, wasteful in its consumption and heedless in its policy. Strategically and morally, the Bush Administration has squandered the American capacity to counter the example and the swagger of its rivals. China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other illiberal states have concluded, each in its own way, that democratic principles and human rights need not be components of a stable, prosperous future. At recent meetings of the United Nations, emboldened despots like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran came to town sneering at our predicament and hailing the "end of the American era."

The election of 2008 is the first in more than half a century in which no incumbent President or Vice-President is on the ballot. There is, however, an incumbent party, and that party has been lucky enough to find itself, apparently against the wishes of its "base," with a nominee who evidently disliked George W. Bush before it became fashionable to do so. In South Carolina in 2000, Bush crushed John McCain with a sub-rosa primary campaign of such viciousness that McCain lashed out memorably against Bush's Christian-right allies. So profound was McCain's anger that in 2004 he flirted with the possibility of joining the Democratic ticket under John Kerry. Bush, who took office as a "compassionate conservative," governed immediately as a rightist ideologue. During that first term, McCain bolstered his reputation, sometimes deserved, as a "maverick" willing to work with Democrats on

such issues as normalizing relations with Vietnam, campaign-finance reform, and immigration reform. He co-sponsored, with John Edwards and Edward Kennedy, a patients' bill of rights. In 2001 and 2003, he voted against the Bush tax cuts. With John Kerry, he co-sponsored a bill raising auto-fuel efficiency standards and, with Joseph Lieberman, a cap-and-trade regime on carbon emissions. He was one of a minority of Republicans opposed to unlimited drilling for oil and gas off America's shores.

Since the 2004 election, however, McCain has moved remorselessly rightward in his quest for the Republican nomination. He paid obeisance to Jerry Falwell and preachers of his ilk. He abandoned immigration reform, eventually coming out against his own bill. Most shocking, McCain, who had repeatedly denounced torture under all circumstances, voted in February against a ban on the very techniques of "enhanced interrogation" that he himself once endured in Vietnam—as long as the torturers were civilians employed by the C.I.A.

On almost every issue, McCain and the Democratic Party's nominee, Barack Obama, speak the generalized language of "reform," but only Obama has provided a convincing, rational, and fully developed vision. McCain has abandoned his opposition to the Bush-era tax cuts and has taken up the demagogic call—in the midst of recession and Wall Street calamity, with looming crises in Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid—for more tax cuts. Bush's expire in 2011. If McCain, as he has proposed, cuts taxes for corporations and estates, the benefits once more would go disproportionately to the wealthy.

In Washington, the craze for pure market triumphalism is over. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson arrived in town (via Goldman Sachs) a Republican, but it seems that he will leave a Democrat. In other words, he has come to see that the abuses that led to the current financial crisis--not least, excessive speculation on borrowed capital--can be fixed only with government regulation and oversight. McCain, who has never evinced much interest in, or knowledge of, economic questions, has had little of substance to say about the crisis. His most notable gesture of concern—a melodramatic call last month to suspend his campaign and postpone the first Presidential debate until the government bailout plan was ready—soon revealed itself as an empty diversionary tactic.

By contrast, Obama has made a serious study of the mechanics and the history of this economic disaster and of the possibilities of stimulating a recovery. Last March, in New York, in a speech notable for its depth, balance, and foresight, he said, “A complete disdain for pay-as-you-go budgeting, coupled with a generally scornful attitude towards oversight and enforcement, allowed far too many to put short-term gain ahead of long-term consequences.” Obama is committed to reforms that value not only the restoration of stability but also the protection of the vast majority of the population, which did not partake of the fruits of the binge years. He has called for greater and more programmatic regulation of the financial system; the creation of a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank, which would help reverse the decay of our roads, bridges, and mass-transit systems, and create millions of jobs; and a major investment in the green-energy sector.

On energy and global warming, Obama offers a set of forceful proposals. He supports a cap-and-trade program to reduce America's carbon emissions by eighty per cent by 2050—an enormously ambitious goal, but one that many climate scientists say must be met if atmospheric carbon dioxide is to be kept below disastrous levels. Large emitters, like utilities, would acquire carbon allowances, and those which emit less carbon dioxide than their allotment could sell the resulting credits to those which emit more; over time, the available allowances would decline. Significantly, Obama wants to auction off the allowances; this would provide fifteen billion dollars a year for developing alternative-energy sources and creating job-training programs in green technologies. He also wants to raise federal fuel-economy standards and to require that ten per cent of America's electricity be generated from renewable sources by 2012. Taken together, his proposals represent the most coherent and far-sighted strategy ever offered by a Presidential candidate for reducing the nation's reliance on fossil fuels.

There was once reason to hope that McCain and Obama would have a sensible debate about energy and climate policy. McCain was one of the first Republicans in the Senate to support federal limits on carbon dioxide, and he has touted his own support for a less ambitious cap-and-trade program as evidence of his independence from the White House. But, as polls showed Americans growing jittery about gasoline prices, McCain apparently found it expedient in this area, too, to shift course. He took a dubious idea—lifting the federal moratorium on offshore oil drilling—and placed it at the very center of his campaign. Opening up America's coastal waters to drilling would have no impact on gasoline prices in the short term, and, even over the long term, the effect, according to a recent analysis by the Department of Energy, would be

“insignificant.” Such inconvenient facts, however, are waved away by a campaign that finally found its voice with the slogan “Drill, baby, drill!”

The contrast between the candidates is even sharper with respect to the third branch of government. A tense equipoise currently prevails among the Justices of the Supreme Court, where four hard-core conservatives face off against four moderate liberals. Anthony M. Kennedy is the swing vote, determining the outcome of case after case.

McCain cites Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito, two reliable conservatives, as models for his own prospective appointments. If he means what he says, and if he replaces even one moderate on the current Supreme Court, then Roe v. Wade will be reversed, and states will again be allowed to impose absolute bans on abortion. McCain’s views have hardened on this issue. In 1999, he said he opposed overturning Roe; by 2006, he was saying that its demise “wouldn’t bother me any”; by 2008, he no longer supported adding rape and incest as exceptions to his party’s platform opposing abortion.

But scrapping Roe—which, after all, would leave states as free to permit abortion as to criminalize it—would be just the beginning. Given the ideological agenda that the existing conservative bloc has pursued, it’s safe to predict that affirmative action of all kinds would likely be outlawed by a McCain Court. Efforts to expand executive power, which, in recent years, certain Justices have nobly tried to resist, would likely increase. Barriers between church and state would fall; executions would soar; legal checks on corporate power would wither—all with just one new conservative nominee on the Court. And the next President is likely to make three appointments.

Obama, who taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago, voted against confirming not only Roberts and Alito but also several unqualified lower-court nominees. As an Illinois state senator, he won the support of prosecutors and police organizations for new protections against convicting the innocent in capital cases. While McCain voted to continue to deny habeas-corpus rights to detainees, perpetuating the Bush Administration's regime of state-sponsored extra-legal detention, Obama took the opposite side, pushing to restore the right of all U.S.-held prisoners to a hearing. The judicial future would be safe in his care.

In the shorthand of political commentary, the Iraq war seems to leave McCain and Obama roughly even. Opposing it before the invasion, Obama had the prescience to warn of a costly and indefinite occupation and rising anti-American radicalism around the world; supporting it, McCain foresaw none of this. More recently, in early 2007 McCain risked his Presidential prospects on the proposition that five additional combat brigades could salvage a war that by then appeared hopeless. Obama, along with most of the country, had decided that it was time to cut American losses. Neither candidate's calculations on Iraq have been as cheaply political as McCain's repeated assertion that Obama values his career over his country; both men based their positions, right or wrong, on judgment and principle.

President Bush's successor will inherit two wars and the realities of limited resources, flagging popular will, and the dwindling possibilities of what can be achieved by American power. McCain's views on these subjects range from the simplistic to the unknown. In Iraq, he seeks "victory"—a word that General David Petraeus refuses to use, and one

that fundamentally misrepresents the messy, open-ended nature of the conflict. As for Afghanistan, on the rare occasions when McCain mentions it he implies that the surge can be transferred directly from Iraq, which suggests that his grasp of counterinsurgency is not as firm as he insisted it was during the first Presidential debate. McCain always displays more faith in force than interest in its strategic consequences. Unlike Obama, McCain has no political strategy for either war, only the dubious hope that greater security will allow things to work out. Obama has long warned of deterioration along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, and has a considered grasp of its vital importance. His strategy for both Afghanistan and Iraq shows an understanding of the role that internal politics, economics, corruption, and regional diplomacy play in wars where there is no battlefield victory.

Unimaginably painful personal experience taught McCain that war is above all a test of honor: maintain the will to fight on, be prepared to risk everything, and you will prevail. Asked during the first debate to outline "the lessons of Iraq," McCain said, "I think the lessons of Iraq are very clear: that you cannot have a failed strategy that will then cause you to nearly lose a conflict." A soldier's answer––but a statesman must have a broader view of war and peace. The years ahead will demand not only determination but also diplomacy, flexibility, patience, judiciousness, and intellectual engagement. These are no more McCain's strong suit than the current President's. Obama, for his part, seems to know that more will be required than willpower and force to extract some advantage from the wreckage of the Bush years.

Obama is also better suited for the task of renewing the bedrock foundations of American influence. An American restoration in foreign

affairs will require a commitment not only to international coöperation but also to international institutions that can address global warming, the dislocations of what will likely be a deepening global economic crisis, disease epidemics, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and other, more traditional security challenges. Many of the Cold War-era vehicles for engagement and negotiation—the United Nations, the World Bank, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—are moribund, tattered, or outdated. Obama has the generational outlook that will be required to revive or reinvent these compacts. He would be the first postwar American President unencumbered by the legacies of either Munich or Vietnam.

The next President must also restore American moral credibility. Closing Guantánamo, banning all torture, and ending the Iraq war as responsibly as possible will provide a start, but only that. The modern Presidency is as much a vehicle for communication as for decision-making, and the relevant audiences are global. Obama has inspired many Americans in part because he holds up a mirror to their own idealism. His election would do no less—and likely more—overseas.

What most distinguishes the candidates, however, is character—and here, contrary to conventional wisdom, Obama is clearly the stronger of the two. Not long ago, Rick Davis, McCain's campaign manager, said, "This election is not about issues. This election is about a composite view of what people take away from these candidates." The view that this election is about personalities leaves out policy, complexity, and accountability. Even so, there's some truth in what Davis said--but it hardly points to the conclusion that he intended.

Echoing Obama, McCain has made “change” one of his campaign mantras. But the change he has actually provided has been in himself, and it is not just a matter of altering his positions. A willingness to pander and even lie has come to define his Presidential campaign and its televised advertisements. A contemptuous duplicity, a meanness, has entered his talk on the stump—so much so that it seems obvious that, in the drive for victory, he is willing to replicate some of the same underhanded methods that defeated him eight years ago in South Carolina.

Perhaps nothing revealed McCain’s cynicism more than his choice of Sarah Palin, the former mayor of Wasilla, Alaska, who had been governor of that state for twenty-one months, as the Republican nominee for Vice-President. In the interviews she has given since her nomination, she has had difficulty uttering coherent unscripted responses about the most basic issues of the day. We are watching a candidate for Vice-President cram for her ongoing exam in elementary domestic and foreign policy. This is funny as a Tina Fey routine on “Saturday Night Live,” but as a vision of the political future it’s deeply unsettling. Palin has no business being the backup to a President of any age, much less to one who is seventy-two and in imperfect health. In choosing her, McCain committed an act of breathtaking heedlessness and irresponsibility. Obama’s choice, Joe Biden, is not without imperfections. His tongue sometimes runs in advance of his mind, providing his own fodder for late-night comedians, but there is no comparison with Palin. His deep experience in foreign affairs, the judiciary, and social policy makes him an assuring and complementary partner for Obama.

The longer the campaign goes on, the more the issues of personality and character have reflected badly on McCain. Unless appearances are very deceiving, he is impulsive, impatient, self-dramatizing, erratic, and a compulsive risk-taker. These qualities may have contributed to his usefulness as a "maverick" senator. But in a President they would be a menace.

By contrast, Obama's transformative message is accompanied by a sense of pragmatic calm. A tropism for unity is an essential part of his character and of his campaign. It is part of what allowed him to overcome a Democratic opponent who entered the race with tremendous advantages. It is what helped him forge a political career relying both on the liberals of Hyde Park and on the political regulars of downtown Chicago. His policy preferences are distinctly liberal, but he is determined to speak to a broad range of Americans who do not necessarily share his every value or opinion. For some who oppose him, his equanimity even under the ugliest attack seems like hauteur; for some who support him, his reluctance to counterattack in the same vein seems like self-defeating detachment. Yet it is Obama's temperament—and not McCain's—that seems appropriate for the office both men seek and for the volatile and dangerous era in which we live. Those who dismiss his centeredness as self-centeredness or his composure as indifference are as wrong as those who mistook Eisenhower's stolidity for denseness or Lincoln's humor for lack of seriousness.

Nowadays, almost every politician who thinks about running for President arranges to become an author. Obama's books are different: he wrote them. "The Audacity of Hope" (2006) is a set of policy disquisitions loosely structured around an account of his freshman year

in the United States Senate. Though a campaign manifesto of sorts, it is superior to that genre's usual blowsy pastiche of ghostwritten speeches. But it is Obama's first book, "Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance" (1995), that offers an unprecedented glimpse into the mind and heart of a potential President. Obama began writing it in his early thirties, before he was a candidate for anything. Not since Theodore Roosevelt has an American politician this close to the pinnacle of power produced such a sustained, highly personal work of literary merit before being definitively swept up by the tides of political ambition.

A Presidential election is not the awarding of a Pulitzer Prize: we elect a politician and, we hope, a statesman, not an author. But Obama's first book is valuable in the way that it reveals his fundamental attitudes of mind and spirit. "Dreams from My Father" is an illuminating memoir not only in the substance of Obama's own peculiarly American story but also in the qualities he brings to the telling: a formidable intelligence, emotional empathy, self-reflection, balance, and a remarkable ability to see life and the world through the eyes of people very different from himself. In common with nearly all other senators and governors of his generation, Obama does not count military service as part of his biography. But his life has been full of tests—personal, spiritual, racial, political—that bear on his preparation for great responsibility.

It is perfectly legitimate to call attention, as McCain has done, to Obama's lack of conventional national and international policymaking experience. We, too, wish he had more of it. But office-holding is not the only kind of experience relevant to the task of leading a wildly variegated nation. Obama's immersion in diverse human environments (Hawaii's

racial rainbow, Chicago's racial cauldron, countercultural New York, middle-class Kansas, predominantly Muslim Indonesia), his years of organizing among the poor, his taste of corporate law and his grounding in public-interest and constitutional law—these, too, are experiences. And his books show that he has wrung from them every drop of insight and breadth of perspective they contained.

The exhaustingly, sometimes infuriatingly long campaign of 2008 (and 2007) has had at least one virtue: it has demonstrated that Obama's intelligence and steady temperament are not just figments of the writer's craft. He has made mistakes, to be sure. (His failure to accept McCain's imaginative proposal for a series of unmediated joint appearances was among them.) But, on the whole, his campaign has been marked by patience, planning, discipline, organization, technological proficiency, and strategic astuteness. Obama has often looked two or three moves ahead, relatively impervious to the permanent hysteria of the hourly news cycle and the cable-news shouters. And when crisis has struck, as it did when the divisive antics of his ex-pastor threatened to bring down his campaign, he has proved equal to the moment, rescuing himself with a speech that not only drew the poison but also demonstrated a profound respect for the electorate. Although his opponents have tried to attack him as a man of "mere" words, Obama has returned eloquence to its essential place in American politics. The choice between experience and eloquence is a false one––something that Lincoln, out of office after a single term in Congress, proved in his own campaign of political and national renewal. Obama's "mere" speeches on everything from the economy and foreign affairs to race have been at the center of his campaign and its success; if he wins, his eloquence will be central to his ability to govern.

We cannot expect one man to heal every wound, to solve every major crisis of policy. So much of the Presidency, as they say, is a matter of waking up in the morning and trying to drink from a fire hydrant. In the quiet of the Oval Office, the noise of immediate demands can be deafening. And yet Obama has precisely the temperament to shut out the noise when necessary and concentrate on the essential. The election of Obama—a man of mixed ethnicity, at once comfortable in the world and utterly representative of twenty-first-century America—would, at a stroke, reverse our country's image abroad and refresh its spirit at home. His ascendance to the Presidency would be a symbolic culmination of the civil- and voting-rights acts of the nineteen-sixties and the century-long struggles for equality that preceded them. It could not help but say something encouraging, even exhilarating, about the country, about its dedication to tolerance and inclusiveness, about its fidelity, after all, to the values it proclaims in its textbooks. At a moment of economic calamity, international perplexity, political failure, and battered morale, America needs both uplift and realism, both change and steadiness. It needs a leader temperamentally, intellectually, and emotionally attuned to the complexities of our troubled globe. That leader's name is Barack Obama.

—The Editors