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THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:

Faith

and democracy

BY JEFFREY BRADFORD P.H.D.



Unless you have been on a remote expedition to a far-flung region of the planet or some other worthy activity you will, no doubt already be aware that the Democratic Senator from Illinois, Barack Obama won the race for the US Presidency, beating Republican Senator and “Maverick” John McCain in early November’s general election.

As President-elect Obama busies himself with forming the next Administration, while keeping a weather eye on the ever-deteriorating economic situation – it is worth reflecting on the 18 month electoral cycle which has just played itself out in America, the process and what lessons it holds for others.

Once prospective candidates have built up the financial resources, which is a tale in itself, those of both parties start campaigning in what is known as the Primary season. This involves travelling state-to-state across the country soliciting votes to be chosen as

the Republican or Democrat Party nominee in a process spanning up to several months. The real work starts, post Party Congress of campaigning against the ‘other side’, again nationally, to win the popular vote and become President the following January.

This race broke several records beyond the ethnic background of the winner – the race was also the most expensive ever ran. GlobalVision caught up with Senator McCain, on the stump in New York City one cold January day in 2008. Surrounded by Senator Joe Lieberman and former Governor Tom Ridge McCain set out his political views which were predominantly security in nature. At this point his campaign was in deep trouble managerially and financially and there was some speculation of him not making it through the primaries.

Senator Obama on the other hand had a surprise win in the state of Ohio and was locked in mortal combat with Senator Hillary Clinton, representing New York state and wife of former President Bill Clinton. GlobalVision saw both of them together speaking in New York shortly after the

Democrat Party had fallen in behind Senator Obama. One of the key observations was how stunningly good an orator Hillary Clinton was.

Following the five-day Party conferences in late August, early September it was election campaigning time. The candidates headed off on whistle-stop tours of the key battleground states – some having higher electoral college points than others and thus representing an easier path to the White House. The quest for votes was interrupted by three Presidential debates – 90 minute face to face discussions by the two candidates live on television using slightly different formats. One Vice-Presidential debate also took place between Senator Joe Biden of the Democrats and Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin. GlobalVision was amongst the attendees at the final Presidential debate a couple of weeks prior to the election, held at Hofstra University on Long Island, near New York.

The Presidential debates had intense security, given that the two contenders for arguably the most important political job in the

modern world were present in one place. The world’s media were in attendance as were a bevy of the political elites.

In terms of comparing the campaigns there were many interesting differences beyond the expression of political ideology which provide lessons.

Campaign fund raising and sustainment. The Obama campaign adopted the internet early to communicate with and draw small amounts, regularly from supporters. The battle with Hillary Clinton and the finance requirements to keep fighting sharpened the Obama team’s fundraising machine so that despite the high cash burn, the Democrats could choose not to receive state funding and raise a record sum of money for their candidate.

Trying to avoid negative campaigning. Every political campaign, probably since the time of ancient Rome had its share of negative campaigning, smears and innuendo of various candidates. The Presidential election did not disappoint, though towards the end of the race the Democrats appeared to

change tactics. The final stages of the campaign saw a move away from tit-for-tat political smears and merely seeking to look and act like a President – leaving it to the Republicans and Senator McCain to come across in a less favourable light. Not all states are made equally. The political campaigning battlefield is shaped by a couple of considerable forces. Firstly there is the issue of state’s having differing electoral college points – the top ten states have some 50% of the total electoral college points. Second each state seems to have differing rules for counting votes and differing ways to make a vote (remember the 2000 election and the ‘chad’ situation in Florida which ultimately denied Al Gore the Presidency).

The media acts as king-maker. Regardless of political persuasion it is clear that the media play a major role in shaping public perceptions of candidates. TV interviewer Katie Couric rejuvenated her own career and stalled the election bandwagon with Sara Palin following a difficult interview experience. Likewise a comedian on the show Saturday Night Live did a series

of impersonations of the Governor which were less than flattering – all helping to chip away at the perceptions of the ticket. Experience lost to eloquence. Without doubt, Senator John McCain demonstrated to his rival and their supporters that he was the candidate with experience. The Obama team largely circumvented this through superior advertising spend, their choice of Vice-President and the economy. The economy as wild-card. At the end of the Republican conference held in early September, Senator McCain was level or modestly ahead of Senator Obama in the opinion polls following a bravura performance by himself and Governor Palin. Within a couple of weeks however, fears about the economy gained momentum and the situation deteriorated quickly. The side effect of this was to put the economy front and centre as the issue to address.

In late November, the struggle for election is past and thoughts are turning to the major challenges ahead – Afghanistan, Iraq and the economy, foreign policy and health care – it is clear the first 100 days will likely be extremely interesting.