

OBAMA-RAMA OR VOTE FOR MAMA?

By Michael Ventura

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Virtues of inexperience: As a person of (I like to think) wide and deep experience, I know its limits. Experience can lock you in the past and blind you to the present. (Hillary Clinton's previous campaign experience blinded her to the needs of *this* campaign.) Experience can harden into habit. Experience can trick you into thinking that what *you* haven't experienced isn't real, and it can make you fall into the trap that my long-ago mentor John Ertha warned me against: "Don't mistake your limitations for the limitations of others." As for inexperience -- inexperience will and must make mistakes if it is to learn. In the Oval Office that is never pretty. Throw in the arrogance, stubbornness and willful orneriness inevitable in anyone as exceptionally gifted as Obama and Clinton, then magnify it all by the powers of the White House: The experienced Clinton and the inexperienced Obama will face different but equally trying tests of character and judgment. No one has the clairvoyance to know whose mistakes will be more severe.

I would love to have confidence in either the experience of Hillary or the potential of Barack, but all we know for sure about the presidency is that it changes people. Either candidate, as president, will change. Only the shallow dare predict how.

Clinton's Iraq vote: I don't like her vote either, but perspective is my job, so I'm grateful for some, especially from someone like Joe Wilson. He's the former Foreign Service officer whose CIA wife was outed by the White House to revenge Wilson's testimony that Bush-Cheney lied about "evidence" of WMD in Iraq. Writing in *The Baltimore Sun* (posted online Feb. 13), Wilson reminds us that "Obama himself suggested in 2004, 'I'm not privy to Senate intelligence reports. What would I have done? I don't know.'" He also told *The Chicago Tribune* in 2004: "There's not much difference between my position and George Bush's at this stage." [When Obama criticizes Clinton's Iraq vote, he] never mentions that Hans Blix, the chief United Nations weapons inspector, declared that without the congressional Authorization for the Use of Military Force, the inspectors would never have been allowed in Iraq."

Clinton's Iran vote: *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich is no friend of the Clintons, but he had to admit and quote a correction from the former president (Dec. 23, p.WK8): "If Senator Obama... had really believed [the Kyl-Lieberman resolution] was an indirect authorization to attack Iran, he would not have stayed away on the campaign trail, but would have come back to vote against it." Rich ate crow, admitting that if the vote was "as grave a step toward war as Obama claims, there's no excuse for his absence."

Iraq I: In *Foreign Policy* (July-August, 2007), Obama praised George H. W. Bush for "the effort to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991." Read that twice. Obama approves of Iraq I. I've not space to document the horrible cost of that "effort" to Iraqi civilians. Obama emphasizes: "I will not hesitate to use force, unilaterally if necessary." That's a bit more bellicose in tone than Clinton's "preference for multilateralism, with unilateralism as an option when absolutely necessary (*Foreign Policy*, November-December, 2007)."

Iraq II: Obama promises to have most U.S. troops out of Iraq 16 months after he's president. Wolf Blitzer asked (not very clearly), "If the 16 month deadline you've imposed, if you see that there's a need for flexibility, you're open to that, is that right?" Obama's answer: "I will make decisions on the basis of what's required to keep [Americans] safe." (CNN, The Situation Room, Feb. 4.) That's a maybe. That's a politician leaving himself wiggle-room. Maybe he'll be "flexible" about the 16 months. Very different from Clinton's oft-repeated flat statement that she will begin withdrawing troops within 60 days of her oath of office.

A mystery: Clinton wants a 90-day moratorium on home foreclosures, and she'd fix mortgage interest rates for 5 years. This could save the homes of thousands of families. The mystery? Why doesn't Obama sign on? There could be no more powerful statement to the working middle class than if this was the stand not only of Hillary Clinton but of the Democratic Party.

Vote for Mama: A friend asked why working people favored Hillary? "When I was a kid," I said, "we didn't go to my Uncle Hugo's or my Uncle Sal's, we went to my Aunt Anna's and my Aunt Laura's." No matter how macho the culture, working-class families that stay together revolve around strong, ever-sacrificing, endlessly-enduring, pain-in-the-ass mothers, women who just won't be beaten down. Sometimes they break, but they never give up. If Hillary Clinton has proved anything, she's proved she's more like those women than any other public figure. Working-class families are in trouble. Their recession is now (not next year). On my block when there's trouble, it's a good idea to vote for Mama.

The archetypes in this election are Mama and He Who Can Free the Sword From the Stone. Both have downsides. From Mama you get "issues," lots of them, and as for Arthur – things didn't work out so well for him in the end. Archetypes are tricky in politics.

Promises I: Barack Obama and John McCain signed a promise to use only public money for their campaigns if either was nominated for the presidency. Obama has no intention of keeping his promise, though the pledge was *his* idea (*New York Times*, Feb.15, p.18). And he put in writing that this was something he'd "aggressively pursue." Not anymore.

Promises II: If you live within 50 miles of a nuclear generating plant, Obama broke a promise made to you. Exelon's nukes "represent approximately 20% of the U.S. nuclear industry's power capacity" (their website). When Illinois residents discovered Exelon wasn't reporting "minor" leaks, Obama introduced a bill to make all nukes report *all* leaks. By the time Obama finished compromising with Exelon, the issue was foisted onto regulators who were to "consider" a requirement to report *some* leaks. Before the bill failed to get out of committee, it added that no state or local government would have authority over the nuke near you. After which, Exelon's CEO became "among [Obama's] largest fund-raisers." (*The New York Times*, Feb. 3, p.1.) So Obama creates a false impression when he says lobbyists don't contribute to his campaign. Who needs lobbyists when you've got CEOs?

Promises III: In the *The New York Times* endorsement of Hillary Clinton (Jan. 25, p. 24), I was frankly surprised to read that, as a senator, "she delivered on her promises."

Bribes: Clinton's political action committee, Hillpac, gave \$195,000 to superdelegates. Obama's Hope Fund has given three and a half times as much: \$694,000. *The New York*

Times (Feb. 15, p.19) quoted the Center for Responsive Politics' report, which delicately noted that contributions "have been a generally reliable predictor of whose side a superdelegate will take." A dirty game. We expect it of Clinton. As for Obama -- I don't blame him for playing the game and I don't like that he pretends not to.

Civil liberties: *The New York Times* (Jan. 8, p.16) reported that in 2006 Obama and Clinton voted to reauthorize the PATRIOT Act. What's that shit about?

Dreams from My Father: Obama's 1995 memoir is a subtle, powerful contemplation of race in America. I recommend it without reservation, and I wonder what Obama '95 would think of Obama '08? On page 195 he speaks of "honest self-reckoning," without which belief "easily degenerated into false exhortation." On page 21 he calls his grandmother "wise" because she was "suspicious of overwrought sentiments and overblown claims, content with common sense."

Obama has great courage and ability. In November I'd touch the screen for him. I don't expect or need to see eye-to-eye with a president who admits, "I never feel like I've left what I consider to be the mainstream of American thinking (Mendell's biography, *Obama – From Promise to Power*, p.247)." But to *believe* in him -- that would take more than verbal rock & roll and a better record than Obama's.

This paper, *The Austin Chronicle*, endorsed Obama (Feb. 15, p.8), stating that "on policy questions" he and Clinton "are frankly close." *The New York Times* says (Feb. 20, p.1) they have "no large differences... on big issues." Oh yeah? "Even with measures to cover the cost of coverage [Obama's plan], health care experts agree that the best way to ensure compliance is through a mandate backed with penalties [Hillary's plan] (New York Times, Feb. 22, p.18)." Clinton says Obama's plan leaves 15 million out. An M.I.T. study finds Obama leaves out 20 million (New York Times, Feb. 4, p.23). Fifteen to 20 million without health care under Obama – how is that "frankly close," how does that constitute "no large differences"? Fifteen to 20 million. I cannot break faith with those people. In this primary, mine is a vote for Mama.

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