

## ***POLITICAL NOTES OF A RELIC***

**By Michael Ventura**

**February 15, 2008**

Michelle Obama said something that cuts through much of the nonsense this primary season. She said, “There is nothing rational about politics.” (CNN Ballot Bowl, Feb. 2). Nothing rational about political reporting either, as our next item testifies.

Least Reported and Most Important Numbers: It’s in the interest of the media to pretend that John McCain has a chance in a national election against Barak Obama and/or Hillary Clinton – and a surprising number of smart people buy that storyline. It’s dramatic, after all. Pundits cite this poll and that, though polls got both New Hampshire and Super Tuesday severely wrong. Look not at the polls but at the numbers. On Super Tuesday Hillary Clinton received a total of 7,427,700 votes; Barak Obama, a total of 7,369,798 (*The New York Times*, Feb. 7, p.1). Strangely, neither *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, [Politico.com](http://Politico.com), CNN, nor MSNBC reported similar Republican totals. However, *USA Today* (Feb. 7, p.10) gave those totals state-by-state; I counted them up, rounding to the highest thousand. John McCain, Mitt Romney, and Mike Huckabee together won the votes of roughly 8,393,000 – compared to roughly 14,798,000 for Clinton and Obama. McCain alone got merely 3,628,000 – less than half the total of either Clinton or Obama.

These voting patterns have been consistent everywhere but Florida, where Democrats did not campaign, and, in all primaries but Florida, Democrats have turned out in higher numbers than Republicans by a rate of 2-to-1 (*The Week*, Feb. 8, p.16). In the Iowa primary, “three times as many Iowans shifted their registration to the Democratic party as shifted to the Republicans (*The New York Times*, Jan. 29, p.1).” “In the last 45 days of primary registration, 150,633 Californians registered as Democrats, while 39,246 registered as Republicans” (*The New York Times*, Feb. 4, p.20). In Kansas, supposedly “the reddest state,” Republican turnout was just half that of the Democrats (CNN, Feb. 9). What the numbers say is that if Clinton runs and Obama is not on the ticket, she’ll thrash McCain even if many African-Americans desert her. If Obama runs, and Clinton is not on the ticket, he’ll thrash McCain even without a large Hispanic turnout. If the ticket is Obama-Clinton or Clinton-Obama, they’ll grind John McCain into electoral dust. That is why Republicans are having big trouble raising money; their own people don’t believe they can win – while, as was widely reported on CNN and MSNBC (Feb. 7), Obama and Clinton between them, in just 2 days after Super Tuesday, raised roughly \$20 million. The real election is being decided in the primaries. Unless disaster intervenes, the next president will be Hillary Clinton or Barak Obama. All that folderol about “Hillary can’t beat McCain because she’s Hillary,” or “Obama can’t win because he’s black,” denies the only concrete data we have: money raised and votes cast.

Why Obama Is Suddenly Reluctant to Debate (Parts 1 &2): The day after Super Tuesday, Hillary challenged Barak to one debate a week. He declined. First his staff said there would be “at least one more” debate during the primaries(!). The next day, they said maybe two. But a refusal to debate does not look like hope or change, so – succumbing to pressure and/or doing the right thing – Obama has now agreed to two debates before the March 4<sup>th</sup> primaries in Texas and Ohio (*The New York Times*, Feb. 9, 11). But why was Obama, justly famous for his gift of gab, suddenly shy of debating? Perhaps this is why:

Part 1: On Sunday, February 3, two days before Super Tuesday, an article ran on the front page of *The New York Times* headlined, “Nuclear Leaks And Response Tested Obama.” In brief, this is what happened. Two years ago, Illinois residents were furious when they discovered that Exelon Corporation “had not disclosed leaks at one of its nuclear plants.” Obama swiftly introduced a bill in the Senate “to require all plant owners to notify state and local authorities immediately of even small leaks... Mr. Obama [who, according to his website, favors nuclear power] eventually rewrote [the bill] to reflect changes sought by Senate Republicans, Exelon, and nuclear regulators.” No longer did the bill *require* notification. It “simply offered guidance to regulators...” “In interviews over the past two weeks, Obama aides insisted that the revisions did not substantially alter the bill. In fact, it was left drastically different... giving the nuclear commission two years to come up with its own regulations... [and saying] that the commission shall ‘consider’ – not require – immediate public notification... The rewritten bill also contained... new wording sought by Exelon to make it clear that state and local authorities would have no regulatory oversight over nuclear power plants.” Obama caved to the nuke industry. Don’t be too shocked. Exelon employees have contributed \$227,000 to Obama’s campaigns. Exelon’s executive vice president, one of its directors, and its CEO are “among his largest fund-raisers.” Oh, and there’s this: fortunately, the Exelon-written bill died in the Senate, and Obama certainly knows that, but in his Iowa campaign he not only claimed to have passed the bill, he implied that he passed the *original* bill! (Let’s hear it for “hope” and “change.”)

Part 2: Everyone I know who’s voting for Obama – at least, everyone over 30 – has health insurance, and lucky for them. In the CNN debate on January 31, Obama claimed that his health care plan and Clinton’s were “95%” the same. *The Nation*, in its endorsement of Obama (Feb. 18, p.20), claimed his plan was only “marginally less progressive” than Clinton’s. I doubt any of *The Nation*’s editors lack health insurance, and lucky for them too – if Obama is elected.

The major difference in the two plans is that, for adults, Clinton’s is mandatory and Obama’s is not. Paul Krugman, *The New York Times*, Feb. 4, p.23: “Mr. Obama claims that people will buy insurance if it becomes affordable. Unfortunately, the evidence says otherwise.” Krugman cites a recent M.I.T study, “a detailed analysis of health care decisions,” which “finds that a plan without mandates, broadly resembling the Obama plan, would cover 23 million of [the 45 million] currently uninsured, at a taxpayer cost of \$102 billion a year. An otherwise identical plan *with mandates* [my italics] would cover 45 million of the uninsured... at a taxpayer cost of \$124 billion... one plan [Clinton’s] achieves more or less universal coverage; the other [Obama’s], although it costs more than 80% as much, covers only about half those currently uninsured.”

But the Obama campaign is busy demonizing mandates. A mailer in many primary states accuses Clinton of “forcing” people to get health insurance. “The real kicker,” notes WJS.com’s *Political Diary* (Feb. 4) features a couple at a kitchen table who, for all intents and purposes, could be the same ‘Harry and Louise’ who helped sink the 1993 Clinton health care plan in commercials financed by the health insurance industry.” *Political Diary* quotes a former health care advisor to John Edwards (whose plan required mandates) as saying that Obama’s campaign against Clinton’s plan “drives to the lowest common denominator.”

No one in my hearing has yet asked Obama about the M.I.T. study, but you may be sure Hillary Clinton would bring it up in a debate. And suddenly Obama got skittish about debating. He doesn't want to be questioned about Excelon, and he doesn't want to be confronted on health-care with studies like M.I.T.'s. We'll see if he's ready, as he often claims, to "tell the American people not just what they want to hear but what they need to hear" -- as he just said, while I write, on MSNBC (Feb. 9).

Do I sound like a relic of my generation, one of the "naysayers" and "doubting Thomases" Obama speechifies about. *The New York Times*, February 5, p.16: Rousing his audience, Obama shouted out, "This [his program] is what is possible if you believe!" The crowd shouted back, "We believe!" "There are a lot of people who tell you not to believe! There are a lot of naysayers. A lot of doubting Thomases." "We believe!" roared the crowd, and again, "We believe!"

As Michelle Obama said, "There is nothing rational about politics."

Ok, I'm a relic. In a missive to my *Chronicle* e-mail ([mventura@austinchronicle.com](mailto:mventura@austinchronicle.com)), one of my younger readers addressed me kindly as "Grandpa." I liked it. Felt kind of honored. Well, some of us relics have seen a lot, maybe too much, and I've lost more capacity to believe than I'd like, but I've never been jaded and will never be cynical. I admire Obama in many ways, most of all for his courage. If he's flawed, well, us relics don't expect or demand perfection. But one quality of my youth remains, and I won't give it up, not even for hope: a hunger for the truth.

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