

Princeton, NJ
Feb. 14, 2008

Dear Friends,

I write with another Obamagram because I believe we are at a critical point in the election season. Contrary to my usual practice, I am writing this time to ask for your help. The request for help is brief, and comes first (Part A). It is followed by some analysis of where we presently are in this whole process of selecting the next president (Part B). And at the end (Part C) I have included some useful links and other items with interesting indicators of where things stand.

PART A: THE REQUEST FOR HELP

Obama is now ahead in the delegate count (including both popularly pledged delegates and super-delegates with stated voting preferences and according to multiple methods of counting: see, below in part C, the link to a *New York Times* article on delegate count). The Clinton campaign has, however, made it plain that, even if Obama wins the majority of popularly-elected delegates, they will indeed pursue the fight through the extra-electoral channels that are available for securing delegates. At this point there are two such channels: securing super-delegates, of course, and driving an effort to seat the delegates from Florida and Michigan despite the facts that those states were stripped of their delegates, that the campaigns pledged not to campaign there, and that citizens in those states were told that their primary votes would not count. The Clinton campaign has also begun to describe the electoral results from states that hold caucuses as having insufficient democratic legitimacy (see NYT article link below). The only way to avoid a bitter battle that will be bad both for the Democratic Party and for the country is to ensure that Obama wins as many of the upcoming contests by margins as great as possible. That is, in order for his campaign to succeed at its stated goal, which is not merely to win but to win in such a way as to enable progress beyond a divisive politics, he must win by decisive margins.

If you are an Obama supporter, I hope you will recognize that, as a consequence of this situation, even more work lies ahead than behind. Please reach out to folks who are undecided and explain your reasons for supporting Senator Obama and please seek ways to reach out to people in Texas, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. We need decisive margins.

If you are a Clinton supporter, I know you will work for your candidate and I respect that. I ask, though, that, for everybody's best interest, you encourage the Clinton campaign to let the outcome of the popular votes for delegates stand. It remains possible that such an approach would ultimately benefit Senator Clinton. And if the party nominee is not also the popular nominee, the party will cease to be relevant to the people. Since the parties are the main structure for organizing the participation of the populace in politics, a crisis of legitimacy for the party would generate significant problems for our politics generally.

Finally, if you are voting Republican, I hope that, again for the general good, you too might think about how to help cultivate either a decisive margin for Obama or broad public expression of the need to let the popular vote carry the day.

At this point, how this primary season ends is as politically important as whom it nominates. It needs to end fairly.

PART B: WHERE THE CAMPAIGN IS NOW

You will have noticed that Senator Obama is beginning the delicate adjustment into general election mode. He has turned his attention to John McCain and he has begun to bring his long list of policy specifics (which he has had from the beginning) into his campaign speeches themselves, instead of leaving the work of conveying these to his website and town-hall meetings. At this point of transition, then, it is worth noting the difference between the conversation that we have had for the primary and the conversation that we can expect to have for the general election. This shift is beginning a little earlier than I for one had anticipated because the Republican nominating process reached clarity sooner than people expected. As a consequence, the primary conversation and general election conversation will blur for a few weeks. It is nonetheless useful, I think, to spell out what the stakes have been for the primary conversation and what they are likely to be for the general election conversation.

In my view, a candidate for President needs a vision in at least three areas:

(1) A candidate needs a vision of what kind of person he or she wishes to be; call it the character vision. This is the one that tells people what kind of judgment a person has when they have to decide on particular actions fast.

(2) A candidate needs a vision of how political processes do and can work. This is the vision for how change can be brought about. Call this the citizenship vision.

(3) A candidate needs a vision of the core principles that will guide his or her policy choices. Call this one the policy vision. For instance, for the Republicans the commonly received policy vision is that policies should have as little government involvement as possible, bring as little taxation as possible, protect markets as much as possible, and be oriented around values of honor and courage. For Clinton, this policy vision consists of a fairly traditional liberalism that is pro-government and comfortable with governmental intervention and conceives of the resources of government as deriving largely from government's capacity to re-distribute resources. She amplifies this recognizable vision by her regular habit of orienting herself on particular policy issues with the question, "What would be best for families and children?" The Republicans understand her policy vision which is why they have been talking about the "nanny state" and "Hillarycare." They are pushing at her gender, but they are not only doing that. They have accurately identified the core principles behind her policy orientation and have already been campaigning against her on this front.

During this primary season, Senator Obama has only very rarely and obliquely entered into debates about his policy vision. He has instead used the primary process to convey his vision in the first two areas of character and citizenship and, in fact, to generate an argument with his opponents about how a leader should approach these first two aspects of vision. Despite the plethora of specific policies on his campaign website, the charge that he has no specifics has stuck so far because he has not wanted yet to have the conversation about policy vision. A candidate comes to count as being specific on policy NOT so much when we hear his or her answers to specific policy questions but only once we have assimilated the core principles the candidate uses to craft policy judgments. Once we have assimilated those principles, we can ANTICIPATE what their positions are likely to be even in policy domains about which we have not yet heard them speak. We feel confident that we can accurately guess what McCain's policies and Clinton's policies will be in policy areas about which we haven't actually heard them speak. That's why we think of them as being rich on specifics. We cannot make those guesses with respect to Obama. This is not because he does not have policies, but because we do not yet understand the core policy vision under-girding his policies. We do not understand this yet because he has not yet wanted this to be the main subject of conversation. He has, for the primary, focused instead on character vision and citizenship vision. This has been very worthwhile for it has forced us all to think about how democracies do, can, and should work. We really have him to thank for having pushed the country into debate on the questions of what sorts of characters political leaders should have and on the question of how political processes in this country do and can work. Let me summarize, then, where I think this primary conversation has gotten us.

With respect to the character vision, Obama has argued for leadership that recognizes that words matter; this means both that we should attend to the principles we articulate and that we should be able to stick by what we say. As he uses them, words are not strategic markers to be placed largely with a view to political expedience. Senator Clinton, for instance, has explicitly argued that one needs to decide what to say up front based on an assessment of where one wants to conclude the conversation in the expectation that one will have to give ground in the political battles over policy outcomes. One should, in her account, start with a position different, stronger, or more extreme than where one actually hopes to end up. She has, for instance, said, with respect to health care, that the reason for beginning by talking about "universal health care," is because if you don't start there, you won't end up with anything. But this approach to language has led to an odd reconfiguration of the meaning of "universal health care" from the colloquially understood meaning of "universal provision" to the new and jarring meaning of "universally required." Because she is using language to set up a political game, her words lose their grip on reality. This, I believe, is her fundamental problem vis `a vis the perception that she is not trustworthy.

Obama, in contrast, believes that words should be used to present a genuine goal and then to organize the conversations and processes that can move people toward that goal. Obama's strong commitments to open, conversational political processes and to personal trustworthiness are deeply related to each other. They depend on each other. His commitment to a politics of respectfulness toward opponents is equally important here. His policy of respectfulness requires that one start by taking people at their word. In contrast, people who stake out positions strategically have difficult taking others at their

word and thereby inject habits and patterns of distrustfulness into their interactions. These habits and patterns of distrustfulness then have their own ramifying, negative effects.

(As a footnote, I should add that articulating genuine goals is fully compatible with acting strategically to obtain those goals; again, we are watching Obama do that in his campaign. He articulated his goals up front—to win in a fashion that moves the country away from divisive politics—and he has found numerous strategic methods, involving organization and persuasion, to make strategic advances for his position).

With respect to the “citizenship vision,” Senator Obama has been truly brilliant. He has made a clear case for individual agency, personal responsibility, organization, and collective action and then his campaign has made the lofty ideals of hope and change real by teaching tens of thousands of Americans how to participate in grass-roots politics. His methods for effecting change are doing just that. He who was originally the underdog has upset the politics of the Democratic Party by virtue of developing and operationalizing a vigorously democratic idea of how change can be brought about through political processes. In other words, on this point above all, he has not only spoken but also executed.

These two core areas of vision (of character and citizenship) have been neatly summed up with the slogan, “Change we can believe in.” This slogan captures both aspects of his vision. First, it articulates a need for trustworthiness in democratic politics; second, it calls up trustworthiness itself as a crucial resource for effecting change: change comes when you build politics around political and organizational methods that begin from a genuine and trustworthy statement of views. Throughout this primary, this has been the slogan we have seen and heard the most. Its purpose has been to frame the conversation about leadership and political process and it has served that purpose ably. Having had the conversation about these areas of vision, the time has come, with the turn to the contrast with the Republicans, to talk about the policy vision.

Obama has been leading up to this slowly and delicately. During this primary conversation, he has used three words to begin introducing us to his policy vision, which differs importantly from Clinton’s (as well as from the various Republicans). Those words appear in his recurring remark that he will put aside “politics based on ideology” for one based instead on “common sense and innovation.” These words preview for us the frame we can expect for a general election campaign with Obama as the Democratic nominee. What do they actually mean?

The orientation toward “common sense” is a democratic and egalitarian orientation toward ordinary people and their sense of how life is going for them. It indicates the choice of a politics that restores egalitarian commitments to prominence in our public discourse, which has of late been so consistently dominated by libertarian commitments. The orientation toward “common sense” is also an anti-bureaucratic orientation. Obama consistently says that one of the things he learned as a community organizer in Chicago was that governmental programs designed to help people often made things so complicated and made life so difficult to deal with it, that they caused harm. He often proposes to simplify the institutional solutions directed at particular problems and to lessen their bureaucratic elements (several of the articles on economic policy that I sent you earlier made this point). One of the ways that he seeks new, simpler, more efficient institutional solutions is to promote experimentation. In his education

policy, for instance, he hopes to foster excellence by supporting districts that experiment and get results that can then be replicated elsewhere. In other words, he brings an entrepreneurial approach to the policy arena. Hence, his focus on innovation and imagination. Several of his spending programs have the design of venture capital endeavors. They also tend to require that people on the ground actively engage in experimentation and take responsibility too for driving improvements in the relevant policy domain.

Thus, in contrast to the Republicans but like Clinton, his views are explicitly pro-government; he does think that government can make a positive difference in people's lives; and his goals for the work of government are egalitarian. In contrast to Clinton, however, he has developed a new "pro-government view." His is an orientation toward inventive institutional design, the same kind displayed by the folks who wrote the constitution and understood how institutions can unleash human capacities or block them; let's call this the conviction that there can be "good ideas" in government, smart institutional design that can bring great benefits to human beings. This is a different way of solving problems than throwing money at them. It's pro-government but not because government has money to spend; instead, it's pro-government because government can establish the rules we play by and improve the design of the rules for better human flourishing generally. (In professional jargon, his economic policy, for instance, draws on mechanism design theory). In short, in pursuing a politics of common sense and innovation, Obama pursues a politics of egalitarian *goals* with the *methods* of a constitutional lawyer who seeks to find institutional designs that will minimize bureaucracy and governmental imposition while maximizing public goods, conceived in an egalitarian fashion. He rightly rejects the idea that we have to choose between equality and liberty.

The Republican National Committee has already begun to label Obama as a "tax and spend" liberal. "Barack Obama may package his economic plans with poetic rhetoric, but it's fundamentally still the same old tax-and-spend liberal dogma," said Alex Conant, a [Republican National Committee] committee spokesman (M. Cooper, "Clinton and McCain Jab at Obama," NYT, 2.14.08). This doesn't get Obama right on several fronts: the rhetoric isn't terribly poetic but it is substantive; and his ideas are genuinely new.

It will be very interesting to see how Obama handles this rhetorical frame which issues from the world of the "old politics" that he is trying to leave behind.

PART C: INTERESTING ITEMS

On the politics of the delegate count:

Adam Nagourney, "Obama's Lead In Delegates Shifts Focus of Campaign"
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/14/us/politics/14delegates.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin

On the Clintonian turn to negative campaigning in the ad domain:

Ariel Alexovich, "Clinton Goes Negative in Wisconsin Ad"

<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/13/clinton-goes-negative-in-wisconsin-ad/?scp=1-b&sq=clinton+negative&st=nyt>

On where the pros (of various kinds) think matters stand:

(1) David Wilhelme, who was Bill Clinton's campaign chair in 1992, has endorsed Obama. The NYT reports: "He has out-worked her, out-organized her and out-raised her," Mr. Wilhelm said. "I know organizational excellence when I see it, and the Obama campaign, win or lose, will serve as a model" of execution of strategy, message discipline, application of new technology and small-donor fund raising. (See Katherine Seelye, "Bill Clinton Campaign Manager Goes for Obama"
<http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/02/13/bill-clinton-campaign-chair-goes-for-obama/?scp=3-b&sq=clinton+campaign+manager&st=nyt>)

(2) And Tuesday evening (Feb. 12), on Tavis Smiley's television show, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who is one of Senator Clinton's most prominent supporters, and who has been traveling all over the country with her starting in Iowa, *very* liberally hedged his bets. This excerpt from the transcript is definitely worth reading if for no other reason than to be reminded of how a *baldly* political politician works.

Tavis: Nice to see you.

Villaraigosa: Haven't been here for a while.

Tavis: It's been a while, but we're always glad to welcome you back to the studio.

Villaraigosa: I'm glad to be here.

Tavis: You have been everywhere - every time I see Hillary Clinton somewhere, no matter where she is, you're always standing right behind her. They obviously worked hard, and as the evidence suggests, appreciate your endorsement.

Villaraigosa: We go way back. I've had a relationship with the Clintons since the mid '90s when I was in the state assembly. They were very helpful when we were putting together a majority. If you remember, we had lost the majority for a while there in the state legislature. We go way back, have a long relationship, and a good friend.

Tavis: What do you make of the fact that she is doing so well with Hispanic voters? And I say that with this in mind - that outside of California, the contest since then where there are large Hispanic populations, he has done better with Hispanics outside of California. So there are two questions, really, there: Why is she doing so well and what do you make of, shall I say, his creep where the Hispanic vote is concerned?

Villaraigosa: They know her here in California, just like I knew her since the mid-'90s. Californians know her, and particularly Latinos. They remember the Clinton years when deficits were down and surpluses were up, when we created 22 million new jobs, the economy was doing well for working people. They remember her efforts around healthcare and particularly around the children's health care program.

Some 800,000 kids have health care, many of them disproportionately of color, Latino and African American. So they remember their efforts that cut the citizenship backlog, if you remember, in the mid '90s. So I think all of those things had a lot to do with her really groundswell of support among Latinos here in this state.

Tavis: And what do you make of his creep - I use that word because he is, again, doing better, has done better in these states since California that have Hispanic populations, and of course we all know that March 4th is the big one where Hispanic voters are concerned - we're going to Texas.

Villaraigosa: Well I've said this is the most talented group of presidential candidates in my memory, and I can tell you one of the big reasons why it's so talented is Barack Obama. The fact of the matter is his creep probably has a lot to do with people are getting to know him better. They're realizing that he, too, has something to offer.

When I endorsed Hillary Clinton, it wasn't an indication of opposition to anyone. What it was was a demonstration of my commitment to her, her leadership, her experience. But Barack's a great candidate and I think we're all seeing that, not just here in Los Angeles but across the nation.

Tavis: I can predict your answer on this but I want to ask anyway. There are some who think maybe they endorsed her too soon, before he really started to come on. I assume you don't put yourself in that camp, though.

Villaraigosa: Well, I'm a progressive, and I love his message. It's a message of hope, it's about bringing a movement together, and that's a very positive message. It certainly resonates with me and you remember my campaign. We did a lot of that, putting a coalition together. But I'll tell you something - I go way back with her, and I believe in her.

I think she offers experience to get America moving in a new direction on the first day on the job. I think she really has the strength of leadership that America needs right now. But if she were not the nominee, you'd see me working as hard for Barack as I have for her. I was in Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada, on more than one occasion a number of times throughout those states, and I'll be everywhere I need to be for whoever the Democratic nominee is.

Tavis: Your last comment raises an interesting question for me, at least, and that is Barack's wife, Michelle Obama, I think roundly taken to task for her suggestion in an interview that she would have to think about whether or not she would support Hillary if Hillary were the nominee. Very different than what you've said.

You said, "I support Hillary, but if Obama's the nominee I'm going to be behind him" - a lot of folk have said that. But Michelle Obama got in some trouble when she suggested she'd have to think about that. But that comment also kind of echoes something I've heard Obama say, which is that he feels strongly that he can pull her base of support if he's the nominee.

But he's not so certain that she can pull his young, energized, new to the process base if she is the nominee. Does that concern you?

Villaraigosa: Well, time will only tell. But I think that either nominee is going to be able to unite the party when it's all said and done. People are looking for a new direction. Both candidates offer change, they offer substance, but have differences as well. I can tell you that I believe strongly that both candidates will be able to unite our party and energize our party to chart a new beginning for America.

We've had eight years of an administration that's brought us to war, that's failed to take on the challenge of healthcare, the economic crisis on working families, with an overdependence on foreign oil. And I think people are looking for a change and either candidate would do that, and the party would unite around either candidate.

Tavis: Unity, as you know, Mayor, is a whole lot easier said than done on two fronts. Let's take one at a time. On the first front, there's some who believe that by the time you get to unity that the price that will have been paid may be too high. Is this process going to be so truncated, so dragged out, that by the time you get to the point where you have a nominee - some even suggested a brokered convention - how do you get to that place where unity is possible when you need it to be the reality?

Villaraigosa: Well, I am hoping that we don't have a brokered convention. I want the people to decide this election, not the superdelegates. I think it's very, very important that we have as much in the way of transparency and as much in the way of really letting this play out with the people. Having said that, this may be so close that we may not have that luxury.

My hope is no matter what happens that both the key supporters of Senator Clinton and the key supporters of Senator Obama are united on one thing: we've got to come together at the end of this election. I would be proud to endorse and support Senator Obama as much as I am proud to endorse Senator Clinton at this moment.

Can't say I admire the Mayor's approach but it is telling. I hope you're all well.

All best,

Danielle