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“ELECTION 2008: SHAPING TRENDS”

By William Bradley*

The presidential election year of 2008 will take place against a roiling backdrop of complex trends and political dynamics. Quite a few framing stories suggest themselves.

A CHALLENGED PROSPERITY

The outgoing president, George W. Bush, has led the nation through a lengthy period of war, which is simultaneously the matter of national consensus and great national division. At the same time, the nation has generally prospered, but with substantial inequality in that prosperity. The future of that prosperity, threatened in large part by dependence on an oil market which the U.S. has not succeeded in gaining control of, is uncertain.

AN ISOLATED AMERICA

At the same time, the U.S. has become more isolated from erstwhile allies as it has pursued military objectives which many nations do not share and as it has eschewed participation in emerging global environmental concords.

GREENHOUSE POLITICS

Environmental concern is rising in America as well, focused on climate change, with states increasingly rising to the challenge which Washington has set aside.

IMMIGRATION POLITICS

Immigration and race are also emerging. Each of the two major parties has problems with its base which conflict with a potential compromise. The Republican base focuses on a crackdown on immigrants here illegally; the Democratic base focuses, for the most part, on forgiveness for immigrants here illegally.

A REPUBLICAN MALAISE?

After eight years in power, the Republicans are likely to suffer from a malaise characteristic of a lengthy tenure in office. They have controlled all branches of national government, yet most Americans feel the nation is on the wrong track and the president has flirted with truly awful job approval ratings, though he lately has shown signs of a modest recovery. The party appears divided looking ahead, both in terms of assessing the president's legacy and in charting a future course.

DEMOCRATS STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

The Democrats are also troubled. For most of this year, it was assumed that an anti-Bush, anti-Republican wave would wash over the country. Then that seemed far less than certain. Now the Mark Foley scandal could overshadow what had been a Republican comeback centering on the Terror War. Should the wave come up well short of the shore, there will be tremendous angst. For all the talk of the party going increasingly to the left, the results of this year's election may yet short-circuit that move.

PROBLEMATIC FRONTRUNNERS

While both parties have famous candidates who might seem, at least from one perspective, overwhelming favorites -- John McCain and Rudy Giuliani for the Republicans and Hillary Clinton for the Democrats -- each of those candidacies has major structural problems within their respective parties.

THE RISE OF INDEPENDENTS

As the two long-established major parties grapple with their difficulties, and become ever more partisan, a non-party becomes an increasingly critical third force in American politics. The independent voter. Voters declining to state a partisan preference are a growing force.

A NEW PRESIDENTIAL GEOGRAPHY

While neither party has yet figured out how to appeal to independents, some individual political figures have. Both parties are moving to address new geographical constituencies in their presidential nomination processes. The Democrats have moved to alter the traditional Iowa and New Hampshire dominant duopoly at the front end of the nomination contest by inserting Nevada in between the two and following New Hampshire quickly with South Carolina. The two states have become iconic in presidential politics, but are quite unrepresentative of the country as a whole. For the Democrats, Nevada represents the West, where they are increasingly competitive, as well as the Latino, labor, and environmental elements the other two

states do not. South Carolina represents African Americans, very few in Iowa or New Hampshire, and the South. Republicans seem likely to follow suit.

LARGE PRESIDENTIAL FIELDS IN BOTH PARTIES

And each party, although possessing very well-known and seemingly dominant figures in the person of Hillary Clinton for the Democrats and John McCain and Rudy Giuliani for the Republicans, is likely to have a large field of contenders for their respective presidential nominations.

AN EFFECTIVE WAR ON TERROR?

There is widespread support for the War on Terror, i.e., the intelligence and special operations forces-driven struggle against Al Qaeda and aligned terrorist groups, especially insofar as it is seen as keeping America safe from future attacks. But how that war is waged is highly controversial. Both in terms of the techniques used to gather intelligence -- the frequent use of aggressive interrogation and torture and the extralegal incarceration of tens of thousands of suspects, mostly on foreign soil -- and in terms of the steps taken to secure the country's access points, its ports, air travel, and borders.

THE IRAQ OVERHANG

After great initial support, the Iraq War, of course, has become highly problematic and unpopular. Yet there is no consensus on what to do, in either party. The Republicans were mostly stay-the-courseers, which was true as well of the putative 2008 presidential frontrunner, John McCain. Lately, McCain has been much more critical. Yet neither he nor the others advocate anything approaching an immediate pullout.

A "NETROOTS" PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN?

Neither, on the Democratic side, does frontrunner Hillary Clinton. Which should open the way for a strong, clear-cut anti-war challenger, perhaps driven by the "netroots."

WAR WITH ISLAM?

Underlying both the Terror War and the Iraq War is a deeper question: Is America at war in the midst of a "clash of civilizations," to use the title of Samuel Huntington's book, with aggressive Islamic fundamentalism? And if so, what comes next? Most believe the next potential clash to be with Iran. Indeed, there are rumors of an "October surprise" attack on Iran to bring the Islamic powerhouse's nuclear program to the standstill that it is refusing through diplomacy. Whether that occurs or not, Iran will be a major issue in the politics of 2008.

A HYPERPARTISAN ERA

The country's politics are clearly in the midst of a hyper-partisan era. Debate has largely devolved into the mode of "Crossfire;" left and right have at it, combatively, playing almost always on partisan teams. While partisanship has always been important in America, the intensity of the present era's battles probably dates back to the 1987 fight over the Supreme Court nomination of conservative Robert Bork, whose appointment to the court was destroyed through a concerted attack on his character, background, and philosophy. This set the template for a number of subsequent fights over judicial nominations. It also set the stage for much of the ferocity we have seen in presidential politics, from both sides.

This, however, is a turn-off to many voters. And as hyper-partisanship has come to dominate discourse, many have become independents, with California the leading example.

THE FUNDRAISING TSUNAMI

Fundraising records are broken with regularity now in virtually every election cycle. Election 2008 will no doubt be yet another watershed year in the acceleration of political fundraising. Besides the party committees, more and more "independent" vehicles are being used to evade contribution limits.

Part of it will be a matter of destiny; the momentum is already established. Part of it will be a matter of necessity; TV advertising is becoming more expensive even as it becomes less effective. Its decreasing effectiveness is due to the panoply of new media options and to increasing consumer skepticism about advertising and politicians.

INTERNET CAMPAIGNING

Yet TV advertising is still the best way to reach large numbers of voters. The Internet as a tool of voter persuasion -- as distinguished from a source of information and a place for like-minded folk to band together on echo chamber web sites such as the Daily Kos on the left or Town Hall on the right -- has not yet reached critical mass.

HILLARY'S CHALLENGE

The change in the calendar for the presidential nomination contest may have a negative impact on the hopes of Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton. Iowa is a strong state for John Edwards, who ran second there in 2004. Nevada looks wide open, but could prove promising for the former North Carolina senator and 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee as well. Clinton would be expected to win New Hampshire, but South Carolina, slated to follow in less than a week, would also be a state advantageous for the Carolinian Edwards.

Clinton's principal representative in Democratic national committee councils argued against the changes but was outvoted.

JOHN MCCAIN TRIES AGAIN

On the Republican side, placing a Western state second in the process would likely help Arizonan John McCain, the strong runner-up for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000. But that assumes he does well first in Iowa. Giuliani might impress there, as might a more conservative candidate such as Mitt Romney. But this sort of handicapping is a bit beyond us at this point.

AN INDEPENDENT PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDACY?

Then, of course, there is the potential independent candidacy for the presidency of New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. A good friend of California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, the mayor is a billionaire media mogul who switched his lifelong Democratic registration to Republican in order to run for mayor of New York. That enabled him to avoid a messy Democratic primary. Now testing the waters, he presents the prospect of a more competent, saner version of Ross Perot. It's easy to forget today that in 1992, Perot actually led in the national polls before self-destructing.

SOME GOOD POTENTIAL SOURCES FOR ELECTION 2008

Political coverage and analysis on the Internet is in flux. The best players are still emerging, much like the candidacies and themes that will come to dominate the election itself. That said, here are a number of established sources that look to be helpful.

www.huffingtonpost.com

The famous socialite/activist/commentator has a web site that provides a good divining rod of left/liberal anti-Republican sentiment through a vast network of semi-celebrity bloggers.

Politics Central www.pajamasmedia.com

After a slow start, Pajamas Media has regrouped and ramped up, emphasizing a few star bloggers and providing a 24/7 newsflow service and a site specifically dedicated to politics.

www.townhall.com

This consortium of radio talk show hosts and bloggers, increasingly one and the same, gives daily doses of opinion and information from prominent conservatives, as well as an emerging group of bloggers.

www.dailykos.com

The cyber meeting hall of the hyperpartisan left. If you want to gauge the netroots nationally, this is the place.

Kevin Drum www.washingtonmonthly.com

Very fine analyst Kevin Drum informs from this cyber locale.

Joshua Micah Marshall www.talkingpointsmemo.com

Very fine analyst Joshua Micah Marshall informs from this cyber locale.

www.mysterypollster.com

The "mystery pollster" explains the arcana of polling. He and other polling colleagues report on and examine polls from around the nation.

www.newrepublic.com

A valuable transformation of the venerable neoliberal opinion journal into the cyber sphere.

www.rollingstone.com/nationalaffairs

Lots of good scoop here.

www.hotsoup.com

This site is about to launch. It is a joint effort between top Democratic and Republican strategists and may prove a valuable source for insights and analysis.

<http://hotlineblog.nationaljournal.com/>

The Hotline, the long-established, Beltway-oriented tip sheet takes to cyberspace.

www.slate.com

The first online political magazine.

www.kausfiles.com

The former New Republic columnist turned uber blogger.

Center for Responsive Politics <http://www.opensecrets.org/>

Valuable to track fundraising.

And three national experts should be in your cyber Rolodex:

- Prof. Larry Sabato
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- Stuart Rothenberg
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***WILLIAM BRADLEY** is a third-generation Californian, award-winning columnist and political analyst, and former advisor and operative in dozens of Democratic campaigns ranging from the city council to the White House. The *LA Weekly* political writer is the longtime publisher of the *New West Notes* newsletter, which has a California elections forecasting rate of over 90 percent over the past decade-and-a-half. Now NWN is available through NewWestNotes.com, a multimedia, interactive blog leading the way in near real time coverage and analysis of California politics.

Slate magazine declared Bradley "the guy who was right from the start on the California recall." In a long 2002 profile, Bradley had predicted that Schwarzenegger would be the next governor of California. In 2003, he was alone among journalists in reporting that the former Mr. Universe fully intended to run for governor in the recall election and was working through various obstacles to a candidacy, and has engaged in a frank exchange of views with the movie star-turned-governor. Yet more than a year and a half before Schwarzenegger's 2005 special election debacle, he forecast that the then-historically popular governor was riding for a fall. Bradley publicly predicted that Schwarzenegger's intervention in the 2004 legislative races would fail across the board and that he would lose all four of his initiatives in the 2005 California special election.

A co-founder of the California state capital's weekly newspaper, the *Sacramento News & Review*, Bradley has written for many state, national, and international publications, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Sacramento Bee*, *New Republic*, *American Prospect*, *The Nation*, *California Business*, *Salon*, *International Herald Tribune*, *The Economist*, *Le Monde*, *Excelsior*, *South China Morning Post*,

Chuokoron, and *Newsweek Japan*. He is a frequent guest analyst on various media outlets, including Pacifica Radio and Fox News. Bradley has been a senior advisor to a number of Democratic presidential and gubernatorial campaigns and to the California Democratic Party, earned a Telly Award, was chief consultant to legislative committees on long-range policy and science & technology issues, special advisor to the industrial innovation commission, and served as a Los Angeles county energy commissioner.

As a consultant and producer, he has moonlighted on a number of Hollywood projects from thriller to action to comedy-drama and, among other things, was consulting producer of the NBC drama series *Mister Sterling* and a producer of *See Arnold Run*, the cable movie drama depicting Schwarzenegger's seemingly carefree but calculated 1970s bodybuilding dominance and 2003 rise to the governorship. He was assistant to the chairman of Regis McKenna Inc., Silicon Valley's premier marketing and public relations firm, where he worked with the industry's top marketing/PR guru and with the CEOs of Apple and Intel. He was also an organizer for the United Farm Workers, working with the union's legendary co-founders.

A California Newspaper Publishers Award-winning political columnist and University of California graduate, Bradley is a former high school and college athlete and served as a VISTA Volunteer and in the U.S. Navy.

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