

The Year of Passion

NOW THAT BARACK OBAMA HAS SECURED HIS PARTY'S presidential nomination, it is a good moment to assess the extraordinary and improbable thing that the Democrats have done.

It was not intuitively obvious, particularly to those who

saw the party's central task as winning back the Reagan Democrats, that the best way to retake the presidency would be to nominate an African American with an Islamic-sounding name. In the abstract, before Obama emerged, that concept had not suggested itself, and some political insiders may be excused for not immediately grasping its genius.

Let us recall the leading explanations in recent years as to why Democrats were losing and what they had to do to win. To appeal to the Reagan Democrats, some held that the party needed a candidate who was culturally and religiously close to middle America—say, a moderate (white) Southern governor along the lines of Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton, the only Democrats to get elected in the past 40 years. Central casting sent over Mark Warner to play this role, but he dropped out before the primaries began.

Others said that the party should wage its fight on economic grounds and nominate a populist. John Edwards used this script, but given his wealth and style, he wasn't the best choice for the part.

The populist strategy also had elements of a related theory. Instead of trying to appeal to voters who had moved right, this approach called for reaching out to millions of nonvoters, many of them minorities, women, and young people, who simply haven't seen any connection between politics and their own lives. This strategy, however, requires something that cannot be planned and that convention-

al politics rarely provides—inspiration.

Obama and Hillary Clinton drew upon these cultural/religious and economic theories in framing their campaigns. But they also stirred Americans at a deeper level than politics ordinarily does, raising the prospect that the Democrats might win the presidency this year by enlarging the electorate. Obama tapped into a repressed memory of what politics can be like when it lifts our aspirations instead of dashing them. His novelty is partly that he is very old-fashioned, a political leader who has risen largely on the strength of his oratory and the eloquence of his writing. In the course of the fight, Clinton became a better candidate, too, and found her own voice, though it was no match for his.

No recent campaign has had the same emotional intensity, and no voter could fail to be conscious of the election's symbolic importance. Once the nomination became a battle between Obama and Clinton, the party was certain to "make history"—it was just a question of which historic breakthrough it would make.

The contest was also riveting because at times it was painful to watch, infuriating,

and unjust. The thought crossed my mind more than once: Can't somebody make this stop? The collision between Clinton and Obama at history's doorstep put many Democrats in an agonizing position, the electoral equivalent of "Sophie's choice," as if they were being asked: Which of these two, each embodying a cherished cause, will you turn your back on and sacrifice?

We ought to resist the impulse, however, to give any transcendent meaning to Obama's edging out of Clinton. The popular vote was essentially a tie (you can argue it either way); Obama won more delegates chiefly because his campaign invested in the caucus states and his supporters turned out for caucuses at a higher rate. With different rules (for example, winner-take-all state elections, as it will be in the fall), Clinton could have won.

Nonetheless, Obama did win, and the world stands astonished, awaiting November's verdict. In the fine tradition of American self-congratulation, many people, including some who will vote against Obama, are already declaring that his victory proves how enlightened the country is and that racism is a thing of the past. That inference is premature.

Racism runs deep in American society, and looking at the polling this year, it is hard to miss it in the demographic patterns, particularly in the data on older voters. Some analysts believe that the economy and other underlying factors are so overwhelmingly in the Democrats' favor that they can accept the "cost" of nominating an African American and still prevail this fall. You could say that is the bet that the party is making, except to describe it as a

"bet" implies too much calculation. For Democrats, this is the year when passion reawakened—and although passion had its reasons, it paid the voice of calculation no mind. **TAP**

— PAUL STARR

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