

The Republican Race That Wasn't

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As the 2008 election recedes into history it is clear that it will be remembered as no ordinary presidential campaign, and not just because of the eventual winner. This campaign, which really began when George W. Bush was sworn in for his second term in January of 2005, or perhaps even earlier when Hillary Clinton announced her campaign for the US Senate from the State of New York in spring of 2000, was eagerly anticipated because it was the first presidential election since 1952 where neither a sitting vice president or president was running.

For the most part, 2008 did not disappoint. The Democratic primary featured a hard fought struggle between two impressive, well-financed and talented politicians. The general election was characterized by fascinating plot developments, surreal cameo appearances by strange characters like Joe the Plumber and obscure historical figures like Bill Ayers, new phrases like "hockey mom", one last round of mid-twentieth style red baiting and ultimately, for those of us who are progressive Democrats, a very happy ending.

There was one part of this election season, however, which was a real disappointment. That, of course, was the Republican primary. For pure theater, the cast of characters seeking the Republican nomination promised perhaps even greater drama than the Democratic primary. The Republican primary had a 1970s style curmudgeonly Cold Warrior, a slick and well-spoken 21st century capitalist, a charmingly reactionary evangelist, a perpetually angry former mayor of New York City whose personal life had been an ongoing soap opera for years, a very thoughtful and serious 19th century Whig, and, for good measure, a conservative southern senator who almost literally came from central casting.

The Republican primary, unfortunately, never seemed to get off the ground and was over before the Democrats really got started. The Republican primary had the feel of a play with a great ensemble cast which got canceled after only a few weeks, or of a Giants-Dodgers game from the 1960s where at the last minute Sandy Koufax and Juan Marichal were replaced by minor league pitchers. Although, the Republicans, believe it or not, probably nominated the strongest candidate of the bunch, the process did not live up to its advance billing.

Interestingly, the Republican primary fight that didn't happen in the first months of 2008, may be unfolding now. As they begin to regroup from their not entirely unexpected defeat on November 4th, the GOP finds itself lacking leadership, vision or new constituencies. The problems facing the Republican Party may be bigger than Sarah Palin's future, Mike Huckabee sniping at his former primary opponents, Newt Gingrich trying to get one last hurrah from his unusual brand of reactionary futurism, and Mitt Romney trying to stay, or perhaps become, relevant. Nonetheless, each of these people represent some of the challenges which the Republicans need to resolve in the next year or two.

This post-election Republican primary will likely have influence on the party for the next several years. The range of possible outcomes is intriguing, albeit in an almost voyeuristic kind way. Sarah Palin's hold on the party faithful is extremely strong, but she has demonstrated limited ability to appeal to voters beyond the shrinking Republican base. She would be a formidable primary candidate, but in a general election, at least in 2012, would probably lose badly. She may be the Republican Party's George McGovern, difficult to stop in a primary, but almost unelectable in a general election.

Tim Pawlenty and a handful of other Republican governors are newly empowered because of the defeat of the Washington DC wing of the party, but nobody from that group has yet emerged as a truly national figure. Rudy Giuliani is exploring a gubernatorial race as well, but his stock as a national figure did not exactly rise during his disastrous campaign for his party's nomination; and he will have to work hard to return as a national figure in his party.

Mitt Romney and Mike Huckabee are probably the two most interesting candidates leftover from 2008, but they represent very different directions and futures for the party. Romney seems something of a reluctant conservative who is much more comfortable discussing free market capitalism and the economy than when mouthing support for far right Republican positions on social issues. Mike Huckabee was one of the early surprises of the campaign whose support seemed to fade away after his stunning Iowa win. Nonetheless, he represents a brand of what might be called far right social policies with a human face. Huckabee's patient, soothing and folksy voice might just make the extreme views of the conservative base more palatable to many voters. In this respect he may be able to build the bridge between the base and the center that Sarah Palin was unable to do between August and November of this year.

Sorting all of this out through the murky mechanisms of governor's meetings, state conventions and other unofficial and semi-official settings will be a difficult and messy task for the Republican Party. Nor is it guaranteed, that this process will resolve anything or succeed in moving the party in a direction that is palatable to a broader range of voters. The Republican Party spent most of the first half of 2008 congratulating themselves for avoiding the proverbial bruising primary, but it turns out the GOP probably should not have celebrated a primary battle narrowly averted because all they really accomplished was putting off an inevitable fight-that and soundly losing a national election.