

# Looking Backward-McCain Style

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It has become a cliché to call this election the most important election of our lives. As anybody with a decent memory can attest, this cliché is invoked every four years, but while ultimately history will show how important this election is, it has become clear that few American elections are as much a battle between the future and the past as this one is. The 1992 election certainly had this feel to it but not to the same extent as 2008 does.

First, never in American history have the two major candidates been separated in age by a quarter of a century. Obama and McCain grew up in distinctly different Americas with distinctly different problems and challenges. This helps explain why the Bill Ayers issue, for example, gets McCain so riled up, but seems so surreal to so many Obama supporters.

More specifically, McCain's political identity was forged by the Cold War more than any candidate since Bob Dole 12 years ago and more than any president since George H. W. Bush. McCain is, in many respects, the last Cold War presidential candidate, albeit with a uniquely Republican flavor. He is, like many Cold War Republican candidates were, tough, gruff, a little mean, not entirely focused on or concerned about domestic issues such as the economy, and running a campaign based on being the most American of the candidates while subtly, and increasingly not so subtly, questioning the patriotism and even Americanism of his opponent. Obama, by contrast is not only the first real post-Cold War candidate, but, in some respects, the first candidate of the 21st century.

The past and future dynamic begins with the candidates, but it does not end there. McCain's campaign has become a refuge for those who would resist the inevitable changes, both positive and negative, of the 21st century in America. While, the extent to which the bottom has fallen out of the Republican campaign is extraordinary even to the most partisan of observers, the McCain campaign's unwillingness to confront the future has become clearer through the words of both the Republican candidates and their supporters as Obama's lead has increased.

The Republican campaign has collapsed among a sordid and backward looking combination of incompetence, red-baiting that feels bizarrely anachronistic and almost quaint, the growing acceptance among many in the Republican establishment that Sarah Palin is about as qualified to be president as I am to play first base for the Yankees, an adolescent, but deeply disturbing attempt to fake a racially charged attack on a McCain supporter, attempts to suggest that the Democratic president is a supporter of terrorism essentially because he has an unusual name and through ugly anti-Muslim bigotry. Lastly, the dreaded October surprise that many Democrats feared would turn this election upside down and defeat Obama turned out to be a shopping spree in which Republican handlers bought Sarah Palin \$150,000 worth of clothes and makeup.

While the shopping spree and the uniquely unqualified vice-presidential candidate are somewhat sui generis, the red-baiting, terrorist-baiting, assault hoax and, most unambiguously, racist and violent comments made by McCain supporters at rallies suggest a fear and resistance of the future as represented by Obama who, make no mistake, represents a very different America to many voters. Sadly, McCain seems to view Obama this way too and has resorted to campaigning against him by focusing on this theme. The notions that Obama "pals around with terrorists", is a Marxist or, as Minnesota congresswoman Michele Bachmann suggested, that congress is dominated by enemies of America are, of course, outrageous, but they also evince a strong desire to hold onto the past on the part of McCain and his supporters. By alluding to incidents that happened almost 40 years ago and making charges that would have made Joe McCarthy proud they are, almost literally, fighting the last (Cold) war and using the language and imagery of that conflict as well.

For many voters under 40 years old, particularly those who are well educated, but moderate politically, who McCain desperately needs to win, calling somebody a Marxist or showing footage from the Days of Rage in Chicago influences their vote about as much as calling somebody a vegetarian or showing footage of wildcat strikes in the 1930s. This is, of course, an exaggeration, but only a slight one. McCain will probably never understand this and will lose this election wondering why nobody believed or cared about his assertions that Obama was a terrorist and a Marxist.

Age is not the major issue here as Obama will probably win all age groups; and many people older than McCain, including, for example, my father, know how to use the internet and are not so worried about a Communist takeover of the US these days. The issue is a fear of the future and comfort in the conflicts and certainties of the past. Many McCain supporters of all ages are drawn to those comforts.

Even in these increasingly difficult and frightening economic times, unless something extraordinary occurs in the next few days, Americans will vote for the future. Not only will McCain lose as badly as any Republican in at least 16, and more likely over 40, years, but he will drag his party down with him, contributing to big Democratic gains in both houses of congress, destroy his once impressive reputation as a man of character and, yes, a maverick, and with a little luck, spark internal bickering in the Republican Party that will damage the future of the party.

Although they will lose badly this year the death of the Republican Party, as Mark Twain might have said, is greatly exaggerated. The Republicans have been written off before and have managed to survive for almost 150 years. However, the party will have to determine whether there is still any percentage in being the party of the past or whether they are better off listening to those Republicans who want to make a genuine effort to expand the base and, for lack of a more delicate way of putting it, join 21st century America.