

The Audacity of Hopelessness

by Frank Rich via reed - New York Times *Sunday, Feb 24 2008, 11:24am*

international / social/political / other press

When people one day look back at the remarkable implosion of the Hillary Clinton campaign, they may notice that it both began and ended in the long dark shadow of Iraq. It's not just that her candidacy's central premise — the priceless value of "experience" — was fatally poisoned from the start by her still ill-explained vote to authorize the fiasco. Senator Clinton then compounded that 2002 misjudgment by pursuing a 2008 campaign strategy that uncannily mimicked the disastrous Bush Iraq war plan. After promising a cakewalk to the nomination — "It will be me," Mrs. Clinton told Katie Couric in November — she was routed by an insurgency.



Hillary Clinton

The Clinton camp was certain that its moneyed arsenal of political shock-and-awe would take out Barack Hussein Obama in a flash. The race would "be over by Feb. 5," Mrs. Clinton assured George Stephanopoulos just before New Year's. But once the Obama forces outwitted her, leaving her mission unaccomplished on Super Tuesday, there was no contingency plan. She had neither the boots on the ground nor the money to recoup.

That's why she has been losing battle after battle by double digits in every corner of the country ever since. And no matter how much bad stuff happened, she kept to the Bush playbook, stubbornly clinging to her own Rumsfeld, her chief strategist, Mark Penn. Like his prototype, Mr. Penn is bigger on loyalty and arrogance than strategic brilliance. But he's actually not even all that loyal. Mr. Penn, whose operation has billed several million dollars in fees to the Clinton campaign so far, has never given up his day job as chief executive of the public relations behemoth Burson-Marsteller. His top client there, Microsoft, is simultaneously engaged in a demanding campaign of its own to acquire Yahoo.

Clinton fans don't see their standard-bearer's troubles this way. In their view, their highly substantive candidate was unfairly undone by a lightweight showboat who got a free ride from an often misogynist press and from naïve young people who lap up messianic language as if it were Jim Jones's Kool-Aid. Or as Mrs. Clinton frames it, Senator Obama is all about empty words while she is all about action and hard work.

But it's the Clinton strategists, not the Obama voters, who drank the Kool-Aid. The Obama campaign is not a vaporous cult; it's a lean and mean political machine that gets the job done. The Clinton camp has been the slacker in this race, more words than action, and its candidate's message, for all its purported high-mindedness, was and is self-immolating.

The gap in hard work between the two campaigns was clear well before Feb. 5. Mrs. Clinton threw as much as \$25 million at the Iowa caucuses without ever matching Mr. Obama's organizational strength. In South Carolina, where last fall she was up 20 percentage points in the polls, she relied on top-down endorsements and the patina of inevitability, while the Obama campaign built a landslide-winning organization from scratch at the grass roots. In Kansas, three paid Obama organizers had the field to themselves for three months; ultimately Obama staff members outnumbered Clinton staff members there 18 to 3.

In the last battleground, Wisconsin, the Clinton campaign was six days behind Mr. Obama in putting up ads and had only four campaign offices to his 11. Even as Mrs. Clinton clings to her latest firewall — the March 4 contests — she is still being outthustled. Last week she told reporters that she “had no idea” that the Texas primary system was “so bizarre” (it's a primary-caucus hybrid), adding that she had “people trying to understand it as we speak.” Perhaps her people can borrow the road map from Obama's people. In Vermont, another March 4 contest, The Burlington Free Press reported that there were four Obama offices and no Clinton offices as of five days ago. For what will no doubt be the next firewall after March 4, Pennsylvania on April 22, the Clinton campaign is sufficiently disorganized that it couldn't file a complete slate of delegates by even an extended ballot deadline.

This is the candidate who keeps telling us she's so competent that she'll be ready to govern from Day 1. Mrs. Clinton may be right that Mr. Obama has a thin résumé, but her disheveled campaign keeps reminding us that the biggest item on her thicker résumé is the health care task force that was as botched as her presidential bid.

Given that Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama offer marginally different policy prescriptions — laid out in voluminous detail by both, by the way, on their Web sites — it's not clear what her added-value message is. The “experience” mantra has been compromised not only by her failure on the signal issue of Iraq but also by the deadening lingua franca of her particular experience, Washingtonese. No matter what the problem, she keeps rolling out another commission to solve it: a commission for infrastructure, a Financial Product Safety Commission, a Corporate Subsidy Commission, a Katrina/Rita Commission and, to deal with drought, a water summit.

As for countering what she sees as the empty Obama brand of hope, she offers only a chilly void: Abandon hope all ye who enter here. This must be the first presidential candidate in history to devote so much energy to preaching against optimism, against inspiring language and — talk about bizarre — against democracy itself. No sooner does Mrs. Clinton lose a state than her campaign belittles its voters as unrepresentative of the country.

Bill Clinton knocked states that hold caucuses instead of primaries because “they disproportionately favor upper-income voters” who “don't really need a president but feel like they need a change.” After the Potomac primary wipeout, Mr. Penn declared that Mr. Obama hadn't won in “any of the significant states” outside of his home state of Illinois. This might come as news to Virginia, Maryland, Washington and Iowa, among the other insignificant sites of Obama victories. The blogger Markos Moulitsas Zúniga has hilariously labeled this Penn spin the “insult 40 states” strategy.

The insults continued on Tuesday night when a surrogate preceding Mrs. Clinton onstage at an Ohio rally, Tom Buffenbarger of the machinists' union, derided Obama supporters as “latte-drinking,

Prius-driving, Birkenstock-wearing, trust-fund babies.” Even as he ranted, exit polls in Wisconsin were showing that Mr. Obama had in fact won that day among voters with the least education and the lowest incomes. Less than 24 hours later, Mr. Obama received the endorsement of the latte-drinking Teamsters.

If the press were as prejudiced against Mrs. Clinton as her campaign constantly whines, debate moderators would have pushed for the Clinton tax returns and the full list of Clinton foundation donors to be made public with the same vigor it devoted to Mr. Obama’s “plagiarism.” And it would have showered her with the same ridicule that Rudy Giuliani received in his endgame. With 11 straight losses in nominating contests, Mrs. Clinton has now nearly doubled the Giuliani losing streak (six) by the time he reached his Florida graveyard. But we gamely pay lip service to the illusion that she can erect one more firewall.

The other persistent gripe among some Clinton supporters is that a hard-working older woman has been unjustly usurped by a cool young guy intrinsically favored by a sexist culture. Slate posted a devilish video mash-up of the classic 1999 movie “Election”: Mrs. Clinton is reduced to a stand-in for Tracy Flick, the diligent candidate for high school president played by Reese Witherspoon, and Mr. Obama is implicitly cast as the mindless jock who upsets her by dint of his sheer, unearned popularity.

There is undoubtedly some truth to this, however demeaning it may be to both candidates, but in reality, the more consequential ur-text for the Clinton 2008 campaign may be another Hollywood classic, the Katharine Hepburn-Spencer Tracy “Pat and Mike” of 1952. In that movie, the proto-feminist Hepburn plays a professional athlete who loses a tennis or golf championship every time her self-regarding fiancé turns up in the crowd, pulling her focus and undermining her confidence with his grandstanding presence.

In the 2008 real-life remake of “Pat and Mike,” it’s not the fiancé, of course, but the husband who has sabotaged the heroine. The single biggest factor in Hillary Clinton’s collapse is less sexism in general than one man in particular — the man who began the campaign as her biggest political asset. The moment Bill Clinton started trash-talking about Mr. Obama and raising the specter of a co-presidency, even to the point of giving his own televised speech ahead of his wife’s on the night she lost South Carolina, her candidacy started spiraling downward.

What’s next? Despite Mrs. Clinton’s valedictory tone at Thursday’s debate, there remains the fear in some quarters that whether through sleights of hand involving superdelegates or bogus delegates from Michigan or Florida, the Clintons might yet game or even steal the nomination. I’m starting to wonder. An operation that has waged political war as incompetently as the Bush administration waged war in Iraq is unlikely to suddenly become smart enough to pull off that duplicitous a “victory.” Besides, after spending \$1,200 on Dunkin’ Donuts in January alone, this campaign simply may not have the cash on hand to mount a surge.

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