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What a fine mess you've gotten us in

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From *Where I Stand*

This whole thing is a mess. I'm sure there are more elegant words for it. Like "complex," for instance. Or, "confusing," for instance. Or, "destabilizing," for instance. But in the final analysis, the fact is that the Democratic primary is a mess. What anyone will know with certainty when it's over, is anybody's guess. But for right now, at least, the system of choosing a candidate does not feel either clear or decisive.

The question, of course, is why not? And the fact that the answer to that question is no clearer than the primary itself may be the problem.

The troubling possibility is that the confusion facing the Democratic electorate in November may have little or nothing to do with the quality of the candidates or the nature of their campaigns. It may, in fact, be the Democratic National Committee itself that is the larger part of the problem.

No, the problem is not that the Democratic race is exciting and therefore tension-laden. On the contrary. The U.S. political environment hasn't been this charged with a feeling of endless possibility and outstanding options for decades. These candidates -- one a woman, one an African-American -- have given the very meaning of "politics" a new name. Now, it seems, maybe anything really is possible. Now, it appears, the world as we have known it for so long, really can be changed.

And no, it is not because one candidate offers "hope and change" and the other does not. On the contrary, the very nature of both candidates, one a woman, one an African-American, requires -- actually infuses -- both hope and change into "the good 'ol boy politics" of the past. Whichever candidate wins the primaries, a "page has already been turned" in U.S. history, a whole new world has dawned, at least one

or the other social sin -- sexism or racism -- has finally been officially repented. The "system" will, indeed, be different, as a result.

No, the confusion in this race does not stem from the candidates in question. Instead, the candidates -- what they offer and what they imply for the future of U.S. history -- are the clearest part of the process.

The problem facing a Democratic voter this year is that the very process of the Democratic race as it has been designed is chaotic.

In the first place, the principle of "one person, one vote" has been abandoned and in its place -- who knows what has taken its place? Who knows what a vote equals now? It all depends on what part of the state the vote comes from, apparently. Maybe. All we really know is that the distribution of delegates is, they tell us, "confusing." As in, Hillary Clinton just lost Guam -- by 7 votes -- but didn't really lose since delegates, not states or territories, are what counts and they both got the same number in that election.

In the second place, the Democratic playing field is not even. Some states have primary elections. Some states have caucuses. Some states have elections and caucuses. But in the end, all of them are given the same weight, the same meaning despite the fact that they do not all give the same results the same way.

In the third place, the Democratic Party came out of the last two presidential elections feeling disenfranchised: in the one due to the substitution of a Supreme Court decision for a popular vote in Florida and in the next because of confusion at the polls. The party has now managed to disenfranchise its own voters in Michigan and Florida over an issue as superficial as the date of the primary. The Democratic National Committee insisted on one date; the state insisted on another. Now, we have a situation where votes were cast and the Democratic National Committee itself has invalidated them. And that in one of the closest primary elections in history.

In the fourth place, having strung out the voting season from one end of the United States to the other for almost a year, the party itself has been pressuring for a similar disenfranchisement of the last 10 states in the process by pressing for one or other of the candidates to withdraw from the race before the primaries are over. And that when the difference in delegate count between the two candidates is less than one percent.

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And, finally, in the fifth place, having introduced the notion of "superdelegates" -- ex officio delegates to the party convention in August whose votes are meant to resolve the issue of candidacy when the popular results are either too close to call or too close to ignore -- some commentators and pundits are now arguing that superdelegates are now morally bound to follow the popular vote. So why have them if they are not supposed to take other things besides close votes into consideration at times like this?

From where I stand, this looks like a recipe for disaster. But we've already had one of those lately called "the not-President Gore." And the country has suffered deeply as a result.

Frankly, the whole mess looks like "tinkering." Why this year, why now, is anybody's guess. Because this was, without doubt, "a Democratic year"? Or because because the party wanted to change the electoral process and decided that this was an obvious time to flex its muscle at the expense of the states, the voters? After all, what's a couple hundred thousand votes lost among friends? Or because of sheer political incompetence or hubris where we needed wisdom most? Was it all simply because this was the

year "the Democrats couldn't lose?"

Whatever the conscious rationale, the basic question is even more serious: Was it ignorance or arrogance that led to such confusing, complex and inequitable changes at such an epochal moment in history?

From where I stand, whatever the reasons behind all of this disarray, the political landscape seems to have lost the sense of inevitability it had when the decisions were made. Pity. Maybe somebody ought to elect another Democratic National Committee -- but not like this.

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