

The girl gets banned again

Joan Chittister | May. 28, 2008 From Where I Stand

This primary season, one of the strangest in history, is awash in nonconsequentials. It has swung back and forth between the statements of two pastors and the comments of two women, all of them at best secondary to the real issues of the time.

The pastors, Hagee and Wright, gave us a glimpse of the extremes on both the left and the right sides of the Democratic Party.

One of the women, Michelle Obama, made what I considered a perfectly understandable statement from a woman who comes from a community long trapped by slavery, segregation, poverty, and inequity while the rest of the country looked on and did little or nothing. "This is the first time," she said, "when I have been really proud to be an American."

Of course she's proud to be alive when this country can finally see an African-American candidate more as a serious presidential candidate than as an African-American. So am I. What Irish Catholic, who could remember both the tales of anti-Catholicism in this country and the "Irish need not apply" signs on help-wanted posters in the midst of the Depression, did not feel the same when John F. Kennedy mounted the podium to accept the Democratic nomination for President at the Democratic convention in 1960.

Then, last week, when asked why she continues to stay in the race for the nomination, Hillary Clinton cited the fact that President Bill Clinton was not nominated until June of 1992 and, she noted wisely, we are so far from the convention anything can still happen in U.S. politics to change the dynamics of the race. Remember, for instance, Gary Hart's girlfriend or Muskie's tears or Eagleton's medical records or the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. Those are occurrences of historical fact. They are neither threats nor hopes. They are nothing for which a person ought to be expected to apologize. They are simply facts that need to be considered, perhaps, before we fold up the electoral tent in so close a race. But for the people who want her out of the race, Clinton's reminder looked like it just might be the bomb they have been waiting for. Unable to prove the context of the comment, it is also impossible to disprove any interpretation that's made of it. Convenient. Also troubling.

As a slightly-used American history teacher, I have, consequently, found myself fascinated, frustrated and totally confused -- all of them in turn -- at the twists in this year's Democratic primary. We have, I am convinced, two competent and committed candidates -- people to be proud of, people worthy of support. But I am not as sure of the quality of the system they're in. Either the party or the news media.

In the midst of an electoral contest in which neither candidate is capable of garnering the required number of pledged delegates, the race is beginning to look like a fraternity pledge party. Consider the situation:

At this point, the Democrats have one candidate, barely ahead, who is reportedly holding secret meetings to choose a vice-presidential candidate.

The other candidate, barely behind, is being pressured -- dinned -- day and night by the news media and pols to leave the race however unfinished it is.

Two key states have been disenfranchised in the primary system by the Democratic Party itself.

The Republican candidate, John McCain, is still being called "the presumptive Republican candidate by the press," while the Democratic party has apparently simply dumped the whole function of the Democratic convention at a time when the party may never have needed a convention more. The goal, it seems, is to forget the fact that the country has yet to really make up its mind about who should be the Democratic candidate. As a result, the last of the state primaries do not count. An electoral convention does not count. The country, it seems, does not count.

What counts, apparently, is that the Democratic Party be able to start its run for the roses now. Today. This moment. This is, it seems, more an exercise in party politics than it is in presidential politics.

But it is not the Democratic Party that will take office. It is one person and one person alone whose personality, experience, preparation and goals will make all the difference to the role and place of the United States of America in the world. We may need all the time the calendar gives us to decide between such evenly matched candidates. We may need all the time we can get to know which candidate is best tooled to deal with each emerging situation.

We may need the long, slow, intense electoral process at least as much, if not more, than in most periods before this one.

I have tried hard to make sense of such a situation. There has to be a reason why the party would want to get rid of one of its best candidates ever. Why would any party rush to judgment at a time like this, when the reputation of the United States in the world has never been lower; when the international risks have never been higher; when the economy has never been more challenged by the costliest "war" in history and a failed foreign policy has put us at the mercy of an oil cartel that has the power to take both the war machine and the country to its knees.

Finally, today, I found another story that may have more to do with the situation than we want either to believe or to admit. CNN ran a video feature on the plight of a 12-year-old basketball phenom, a girl, Jaime Nared, who has been denied the right -- banned, actually -- from playing on the boys grade school basketball team where she has been starring recently. The boys on her team want her there. They know how good she is. The boys and the parents of the opposing teams do not. They know how good she is, too, and that, they say, intimidates their boys. So they moved to have the girl banned from the team in the middle of the season.

When reporters asked her what she intended to do when she gets out of school, Jaime answered, "Play in the NBA." N-BA, note.

From where I stand, the parallel may be too close for comfort. Instead of pressuring even the superdelegates to make up their minds early, as well as pressure candidates to leave the race, maybe we better all just stay in the process till the convention. Better that the people decide than that committees, commissions and boys who aren't accustomed to playing against more competent women do it for us.

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