

# The Amazing Race

I thought 1960 was the best campaign I'd ever cover. But 2008 has that election beat.

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I remember the precise moment when I became convinced that this presidential campaign was going to be the best I'd ever covered. It was Saturday afternoon, Dec. 8, 2007. I stood in the lobby of Hy-Vee Hall, the big convention center in Des Moines, watching an endless stream of men, women and children come down the escalators from the network of skywalks that link the downtown business blocks of Iowa's capital. They were bundled in winter coats against the chilly temperatures, and the mood was festive -- like a tailgate party for a football game. But the lure here was not a sporting contest; it was a political rally.

Sen. Barack Obama had imported Oprah Winfrey from Chicago to make the first of her endorsement appearances. The queen of daytime television, professing her nervousness at being on a political stage, was nonetheless firm in her declaration: "I'm here to tell you, Iowa, he is the one. Barack Obama!"

It was startling that almost a year before Election Day, 18,000 people had given up their Saturday shopping time to stand (there were no chairs) and listen to an hour of political rhetoric. In all the eight Iowa caucus campaigns I'd covered over four decades, I'd never seen anything like this. In fact, I'd not seen voters so turned on since my first campaign as a political reporter, the classic Kennedy-Nixon race of 1960.

That year, the old Washington Star sent me to Beckley, W.Va., to get a ground-level view of the Democratic primary between Sens. John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey. Raleigh County and all of West Virginia were made-to-order for Humphrey, who had the backing of the United Mine Workers and the Democratic state leadership, which was wary of endorsing the Roman Catholic Kennedy in an overwhelmingly Protestant state.

What I found during my week in Beckley, however, was an energized group of young Kennedy enthusiasts, egged on by the candidate's kid brother, Ted. When I walked the country roads and knocked on the doors of the wood-frame cabins, I met a surprising number of voters who were ready to give the youthful senator from Massachusetts a chance. Despite the odds, I reported, Kennedy could win Raleigh County -- as he did.

The day after the Oprah-Obama rally, I went down to Obama's Des Moines headquarters and found Mitch Stewart, his caucus director, happily pawing through a mountain of blue, white and green cards -- each bearing a name, phone number and e-mail address filled out by the people who had packed Hy-Vee Hall. A team of volunteers was beginning to sort the cards by location, distributing them among the 38 offices Stewart had already opened across Iowa. "Phoning will begin tonight," he said.

Nothing comparable was happening that Sunday at the headquarters of Hillary Rodham Clinton and John Edwards, the caucus favorites, so I reported that Obama might win.

He was not the only long shot who was beginning to move -- and not the only reason this race has been so enthralling.

Even earlier, right after Thanksgiving 2007, I had made my first trip to New Hampshire for this election. I watched a Republican debate at Dartmouth College. The following day, I visited with Mike Dennehy, a young man who had become Sen. John McCain's favorite operative in the Granite State during the 2000 primary, in which McCain had upset then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush.

Dennehy had stayed loyal to McCain after Bush won the nomination, and he was still with the senator, though most of the other campaign veterans had been thrown overboard in the summer of 2007, both perpetrators and victims of a spending spree that had left McCain penniless and seemingly without hope. Dennehy told me that something was happening in New Hampshire: The crowds at McCain's town meetings, which had earlier numbered in the tens or twenties, had begun to grow to 50 or 100. "It's beginning to feel like 2000 again," he said.

Despite the political and journalistic consensus that McCain was finished, he refused to quit and almost single-handedly resurrected his candidacy in a way no one had done since Ronald Reagan took on President Gerald Ford in 1976. On Dec. 2, I wrote that "if the Republican Party really wanted to hold onto the White House in 2009, it's pretty clear what it would do. It would swallow its doubt and nominate a ticket of John McCain for president and Mike Huckabee for vice president." (Huckabee, another long shot, was on his way to winning Iowa on the GOP side.)

In January of this year, you could have gotten great odds against Obama and McCain being the finalists in this election. Obama was challenging the obvious front-runner, Clinton, a former first lady and seasoned senator who had more money and better connections than anyone and offered the history-making prospect of becoming the first woman president. More credentialed and experienced rivals -- including Senate veterans Joe Biden and Chris Dodd, former vice presidential candidate Edwards and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson -- were competing for the non-Clinton vote.

As for McCain, his barriers seemed insurmountable. His angry tirade against the right-wing preachers who had backed Bush in 2000 had alienated him from that wing of the party. He had become the chief cheerleader for an unpopular war in Iraq and the chief GOP spokesman for an immigration bill that most of his party despised. There were younger, more attractive alternatives, including Mitt Romney, Rudy Giuliani, Fred Thompson and Huckabee.

But the voters -- bless 'em -- ignored the oddsmakers. They were determined to do their own thing -- set the nation on a new course, sharply different from that of George W. Bush. It did not matter much to them that McCain was too old, by conventional standards, to be running or that Obama's mixed-race background broke the historic color line on the presidency.

It was the emergence of these two implausible but impressive candidates that gave 2008 its special stamp. But they prevailed only after fierce struggles. McCain pocketed victory in New Hampshire but lost Michigan to Romney. He then turned to South Carolina, where he enlisted Sens.

Lindsey Graham and Tom Coburn and even Jack Kemp to vouch for his conservatism, and won narrowly over Huckabee. When he beat the field in Florida at the end of January, the fight was over.

Obama could only wish for that quick a verdict. In South Carolina, Clinton deployed her most powerful weapon, her husband Bill, and for the first time in my life, I saw a former president commit -- and in effect squander -- the prestige and loyalty he'd won in office to the ambitions of his wife. But South Carolina was not the end. Every time Obama seemed to be within one win of clinching, Clinton came back -- in California, New Jersey, Texas, Ohio and Pennsylvania. Obama could not shake her, but finally he wore her down.

The drama continued at the conventions. In Denver, the Democrats staged a celebration of newfound unity culminating in Obama's oration to a massive crowd in a football stadium. In St. Paul, the Republicans cheered McCain's surprise choice of a new heroine, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, as his vice presidential candidate. Listening to the roars that rocked the hall, I was transported back to San Francisco's Moscone Center in 1984, when Walter Mondale made Geraldine Ferraro the first woman on a national ticket. In both cases, the euphoria was as genuine as it was short-lived. Neither woman was able to establish herself as a plausible "heartbeat away" from the presidency.

That was one of many disappointments in the general election. A potentially captivating experience was lost when Obama declined McCain's invitation to join him in weekly town halls, to stand together and answer voters' questions. The traditional debates were lackluster affairs, with few dramatic moments.

Two things have made these final weeks notable in my eyes. One is the unbelievable volume of television ads, especially on the Democratic side, financed by the unprecedented fortune in private contributions that Obama acquired after he broke his word and rejected public financing, with its \$84 million spending limit. That put McCain at a serious disadvantage and probably dealt a death blow to the post-Watergate efforts to limit the role of money in presidential politics.

Second was the continuing tension over the unspoken issue of Obama's race. It had flared in the primaries, in part because of Bill Clinton's campaigning and in part because the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's Chicago minister and an important mentor for 20 years, was revealed to hold incendiary anti-white views. Obama delivered a personal, historically sophisticated address on race, as stirring as any such speech I had heard since the death of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. In the end, he broke completely with his minister and, thanks in large part to McCain's personal aversion to any suggestion of racial campaigning, the issue never fully emerged in a negative way this fall, sparing the country what could have been a divisive experience.

For decades, I have said that the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon campaign was the best I ever saw. But most of the drama in that contest came after Labor Day. This time, the excitement was generously distributed over a whole year, with moments of genuine humor from Huckabee, a torrent of uninhibited conversation from McCain and Biden, and rare eloquence from Obama and both Clintons. The country faces a choice between two men who both promise the nation a more principled, less partisan leadership.

And meanwhile, what a show it has been -- the best campaign I've ever covered.

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