

NEW YORK TIMES **October 28, 2008**

OP-ED COLUMNIST

## A Choice and an Echo

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

It seems to have taken forever (the seasons have changed, and changed and changed again), but this long presidential campaign is finally coming to an end. In January, with snow blanketing the trail in Iowa and New Hampshire, I wrote of the Barack Obama phenomenon: “Shake hands with tomorrow. It’s here.”

I didn’t mean that Senator Obama would win the election. He still seemed like a long shot to me. But it was clear that the message, style and strategy of his campaign pointed to a new direction for American politics, and that a new generation of voters — younger, smarter, more diverse, more open-minded — was anxious to follow his lead.

I remember talking with a voter named Debra Gable, who had driven from central Vermont to attend an Obama rally in Derry, N.H. “I dislike politics,” she told me, “because we focus on our differences even though we have so many more commonalities. That’s what I think I’m hearing from Obama, so I want to see how he is in person.”

Ms. Gable had not made up her mind, and the other candidate she was seriously considering — in a Republican field that was still wide open — was John McCain.

This election is hardly over, despite the impulse of the pundits to write the McCain campaign’s obituary. But Senator McCain has diminished his chances of winning the presidency in many ways, the most important of which was his failure to grasp the most significant new trend in American politics.

With the country facing enormous problems (even before the meltdown of the credit and financial markets in recent months), the voters wanted more substance from their candidates. They wanted a greater sense of maturity and a more civil approach to campaigning. They were tired of the politics of personal destruction and the playbook that counseled “attack, attack, attack.”

Senator Obama was perfectly suited to this new approach. He told the crowd that trekked through the cold and snow to hear his victory speech at the Iowa caucuses:

“You said the time has come to move beyond the bitterness and pettiness and anger that’s consumed Washington. To end the political strategy that’s been all about division, and instead make it about addition. To build a coalition for change that stretches through red states and blue states.”

John McCain didn’t get it. He seemed as baffled by the new politics as an Al Jolson aficionado trying to make sense of the Beatles.

He answered the desire for a higher tone in politics with ads that likened Senator Obama to Britney Spears and Paris Hilton and with attacks that questioned Mr. Obama’s patriotism, blamed him for high gasoline prices and all-but-accused him of being a socialist.

Mr. Obama, said Mr. McCain, would convert the Internal Revenue Service into “a giant welfare agency.”

Get it?

Whether this is admirable or honorable is not the question here. In the current political and economic atmosphere, it seems very much like a roadmap to defeat.

The heyday of Lee Atwater and Karl Rove is over. Yet Senator McCain handed the reins of his campaign to Rove’s worshipful acolytes. With the nation in a high state of anxiety over the conflagration in the credit and financial markets, Senator McCain traveled the country ranting Rovelike about Bill Ayers, trying to instill a bogus belief that the onetime ’60s radical and Senator Obama were good buddies and perhaps involved in some nefarious doings together. Senator Obama was about 8 years old when Mr. Ayers was engaged in his nefarious doings.

It was the classic fear card that the Republicans have played to such brilliant effect for years. But times have changed. (Lately Senator McCain has been obsessively invoking the name of “Joe the Plumber” at his campaign appearances, as if that might be the phrase that finally sways the electorate in a way that the Bill Ayers mantra did not.)

Senator Hillary Clinton helped define the new political atmosphere with her own historic run for the White House. Senator McCain, demonstrating again his tone-deafness to the new reality, tried to capitalize on Mrs. Clinton's remarkable achievement by cynically selecting Sarah Palin, the anti-Hillary, as his running mate.

Mr. McCain must never have noticed that the public turned overwhelmingly against the Bush administration because of its repeatedly demonstrated incompetence. Now here is Senator McCain, in the midst of a national crisis, with a running mate who is demonstrably incompetent to serve the nation as its president.

Ms. Palin is a walking affront to the many Republican women (not to mention women in general) who are, in fact, qualified to hold the highest office in the land.

John McCain could have traveled a higher road. He chose not to. He bet instead on one last gasping triumph of the politics of the past.

A version of this article appeared in print on October 28, 2008, on page A31 of the New York edition.