

[Hope springs electoral in 2008. Fear fails.]

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Presidential hopefuls

By Terry Michael

In the summer silly season of presidential politics, it doesn't seem unreasonable to consult dead English poets for campaign message strategy.

I can only imagine the fees, but former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney and Sen. Barack Obama have wisely engaged Alexander Pope. And the bard is soundly advising them that hope springs eternal in the breasts of voters.

Common sense, yes. But when citizens across these fruited plains express collective wisdom in the caucuses, primaries and general election next year, they're more apt to be guided by hopeful aspirations than they are to be enchanted with September 11 fear-mongers, Little Rock dynasty pretenders, uber-ambitious trial lawyers and increasingly pathetic Straight Talk Express re-treads. (Why doesn't he just take a well-deserved hero's rest, with occasional appearances on "The Daily Show"?). Voters have and will make silly choices when confronted with less-than-desirable options. But attractive optimists have always demonstrated greater appeal in our political history than have bleak doomsayers and transparent hustlers.

Republicans are more likely to respond to Mr. Romney's robust, five-vibrant-sons version of Ronald Reagan's shining city on a hill than they are to embrace mayor one-hit wonder's ominous promise to fend off the terrorists, or John McCain's self-imprisonment in an elective war draining America's moral authority.

And Democrats, whose DNA is encoded with nothing to fear but fear itself and a bright, shining moment called Camelot, are at least an even bet to close the deal with a male version of Hope-rah Winfrey, when the options are the ice queen from Wellesley-Whitewater and a \$400 haircut.

OK. Too much imagery. I'll admit I don't have the polling data and cluster sampling to back up those claims. Yes, they were transcripts from a focus group assembled in my mind. But a little common sense suggests the preliminaries have narrowed the 2008 contest to Clinton-Obama and Romney-Giuliani, with Bill Richardson and Fred Thompson serving as temporary place-holders for the truly conflicted professional voters of Iowa and New Hampshire.

My proof comes from the overall atmospheric of the political landscape and some quantifiable data from the early states and the pocketbook polls.

First, the climate.

Look no further than "The Colbert Report," and it's weekly "Threat Down," to see how the fear factor has worn so thin it's the butt of a running joke. Maybe there are still enough doomsday rapturists in the GOP primary electorate to award the nomination to a panic peddler like Rudy Giuliani and his Mussolini-in-drag authoritarian shtick. But I doubt it. The broad center of the electorate is weary of

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public policy Cassandras like those at the press-release-driven Centers for Disease Control who boost their budgets with CNN Breaking News threats of the week, like the drug resistant TB case that turned out not to be so much.

Americans are hungry for some good news and the hope prescribed by Mr. Romney and Mr. Obama may be just what the doctor ordered.

Now, let's do the numbers.

While still in third or fourth place in those meaningless national match-ups, Mr. Romney has pulled ahead in both of the important test markets of Des Moines and Manchester. Those who get to see him up close and personal feel the magnetism of that master of the universe jaw and industrial strength hair.

And while Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton may have bludgeoned her way into the wallets and frontal lobes of the bloodless investors in Democratic circles, Mr. Obama is viscerally connecting with the lower-brain instincts of masses of activists, many of them newly activated. The Tiger Woods of politics has amassed more than 250,000 contributors in the first half of 2007 and vaulted millions of dollars ahead of Mrs. Clinton in the second quarter reports. One more figure to make the case: Mr. Obama has five times the number of "friends" on facebook.com. The Illinois senator's coffers are now as deep as Mrs. Clinton's, but his much greater breadth augurs well for cashing in with actual voters.

My advice to those whose business it is to report and analyze presidential politics is to feel your way through this one. The data mass is overwhelming and the candidates' rosy scenarios are alluring moving targets. There's no way higher-level processing can make sense of it all.

Go with your gut. Dead poets have as much to teach you as do all the pollsters and smart operatives in your Rolodex.

So now, go look up Alexander Pope on Wikipedia and listen carefully to his insights into one of the most interesting races in my lifetime for leader of this continuing experiment in liberty.

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