



Front-Runners Who Can Still Be Tackled

(Published in *The Washington Post*, November 15, 2007)

George F. Will

Colaboraciones n° 2062

November 23, 2007

Americans say they are weary of political polarization and pugnacity. If so, the current situation in presidential politics is unstable: The leading Democratic and Republican candidates, [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Rudy Giuliani](#), are the most polarizing and pugnacious candidates, respectively. Hence [Barack Obama](#) and [Mitt Romney](#) might be stronger than national polls suggest.

[James Carville](#), political consultant and aphorist, says: Nothing validates a candidate to voters as much as other voters. If Romney wins [Iowa](#) and [New Hampshire](#) -- no Republican has ever won both -- and then [Michigan](#), where his father was governor, he will reach [South Carolina](#) very validated indeed.

Giuliani has a double-digit lead in [Florida](#), but if he wins the nomina-

tion after starting the delegate selection events 0-4, he will do something not done since prehistoric times. In 1952, Illinois Gov. Adlai Stevenson was nominated by bosses, an extinct species, who would not countenance the candidacy of Tennessee Sen. Estes Kefauver. [The New York Times](#) of May 11, 1952, proclaimed: "Kefauver Wins Votes But Not Party Leaders."

Kefauver had won every primary except Florida's, where he narrowly lost not to Stevenson but to Georgia Sen. Richard Russell.

Giuliani's strategy might be shrewd. Before Florida votes on Jan. 29, only 154 delegates will have been chosen. Florida, where Giuliani leads by 17 points, will allocate 57. Seven days later, 20 states vote, including [California](#) (173 delegates), where

Giuliani has another double-digit lead. Romney's campaign serenely notes that in 2004, when [John Kerry](#) won Iowa and New Hampshire, he shot from about 9 percent to 52 percent among Democrats. That is validation.

An Obama victory in Iowa might be initially injurious to Romney but beneficial to him four days later in New Hampshire. If Romney, who leads in Iowa, wins there and Obama beats Clinton, the latter story will overshadow the former. But an Obama win in Iowa would radically raise the stakes of the Democrats' New Hampshire primary. Independents there can vote in either party's primary. In 2000, they flooded into the Republican contest, dooming [Bill Bradley](#)'s challenge to [Al Gore](#) and propelling [John McCain](#) to victory over [George W. Bush](#), who won the Republican portion of that primary. If this time independents are drawn to the Democratic primary, that will hurt not just McCain but also Giuliani, whose strength with independents supports his claim of superior electability.

At last Saturday's Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in [Des Moines](#), Obama spoke with characteristic obliqueness but unmistakable bite when he said he was not running "because I believe it's somehow owed to me." The aura of inevitability that Clinton's campaign has cultivated carries an unpleasant aroma of entitlement. This is grating to Iowans, who feel entitled to a role grander than

that of ratifying a preordained outcome.

At that dinner, [Joe Biden](#), speaking with characteristic good sense and uncharacteristic concision, said that there is "not a single, solitary problem out there that can be solved with a 51 percent solution." That is, another close election will guarantee another four years of paralysis.

For conservatives, who think gridlocked government is wonderful, that is a second reason to hope Clinton is nominated. The first is that she would be easier to beat than Obama, for reasons highlighted in the latest [Wall Street Journal-NBC](#) poll: She is judged negatively by pluralities on sharing their positions on the issues and, even more important, on likeability and honesty.

Large undertakings in domestic policy -- e.g., the enactments of Social Security in 1935 and of [Medicare](#) in 1965 -- often follow landslide elections. In the 15 presidential elections since World War II, only twice has the Democratic candidate won 50 percent of the popular vote -- [Lyndon Johnson](#) emphatically in 1964 and [Jimmy Carter](#) narrowly in 1976. In 2008, Obama is more likely than Clinton to win an impressive electoral vote total that will look like a mandate. Conservatives should think: Although Republicans have much to fear in 2008, they might have less to fear from her as a candidate and, if she wins, as a president than they would from Obama.

Carville, who studies Republicans with the detached condescension of an anthropologist among primitives, notes that former Florida governor [Jeb Bush](#) is admired by social conservatives everywhere and by residents of his electorally crucial swing state (he left office with a 63 percent approval rating). Carville believes that if Bush's last name were any-

thing else, the Republican nomination would already be effectively his. And he is just 54.

But before shuddering at the prospect of Bush-Clinton-Bush-Clinton-Bush, take heart: The third Bush is not running, and the second Clinton is hardly inevitable.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company