

McCain's Nomination - A Possible September Surprise?

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Party conventions are less than two months off, and already rumors are circulating. When the Democrats hold theirs from August 25 - 28, Obama is the virtually sure nominee. According to some, however, things aren't settled for Republicans a week later. Presumptive nominee John McCain may not be as certain as most people think, and why so should be asked.

For one thing, he trails in the polls (including in key battleground states like Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania) but not enough to be worrisome (in most of them), and the latest June Reuters/Zogby one is typical. It shows Obama ahead by about five points, and in recent months he's been up by from 6 to 10 and in one poll down six to McCain. It's much the same from a June Financial Dynamics one, but shows up much differently when respondents are asked which party's candidate they'll support. In recent months, Democrats have been strongly favored - since January from up 6 to 15 with three of the five survey months showing double digit leads.

That's indeed worrisome, and it showed up last March 29 in the Cook Political Report. It noted that by "almost every available gauge, Republicans are in deep trouble. Except that is, for the one that counts most - the presidential election trial heat." Back then, Obama or Clinton v. McCain came out pretty even with either side gaining an edge in different polls but not by much.

Fast forward to June 14, and the Cook Report said this: "After Clinton dropped out (Democrats quickly united and in Gallup polls) Obama is holding a steady 7-point lead, his largest since Gallup began tracking in March. (Further) Democrats now routinely hold a 6-to-8 point advantage on party identification. So Obama will have a distinct edge if he is as popular among Democrats as McCain is among Republicans. (He) represents the embodiment of change, which is an advantage in this political climate" when voters are begging for it. Yet it's too early to predict an outcome, and months earlier the Cook Report called the race a toss-up. It still says "anyone has a 50-50 chance of picking the winner today."

That view may change after the latest Los Angeles Times/Bloomberg Poll came out June 25 - conducted from June 19 - 23. Right or wrong, it was hugely different from others up to mid-June. It showed Obama with a "sizable" lead over McCain, and here are the numbers:

— head to head in a two-man race, Obama leads McCain by 49% to 37%;

— however, in a four-man race (including Ralph Nader and Libertarian Bob Barr), Obama outscores McCain 48% to 33% for a 15 point spread.

Conclusion: Nader, Barr, and a Green Party candidate are running; others likely also but not enough to matter unless a prominent figure unexpectedly does as an independent; alternate candidates at this stage are taking votes from McCain, most likely Republican ones. Why so? Largely because voters trust Obama more on their top concern – the economy. Other domestic issues also while McCain scores higher on national security matters.

Most significant is McCain's "passion gap" among conservatives – 58% support him, but 15% are for Obama and another 13% undecided. In contrast, 79% of self-described "liberals" back Obama. Further, and equally significant, more than half (55%) of McCain supporters lack enthusiasm, and only 13% are "very enthusiastic." It's mirror opposite for Obama – 81% of his backers are "enthusiastic" and nearly half "very enthusiastic."

Two Times/Bloomberg poll results highlight McCain's problem. First is George Bush's approval rating. It scored the lowest ever: 23% with 73% disapproving of his job performance.

Second is the Christian right's feeling that McCain isn't solid on its issues, and as a senator flip-flopped on key ones. Supporting abortion in cases of rape and incest, for example, and wanting stem cell research to go forward. Also his reference to Pat Robinson and Jerry Falwell as "agents of intolerance" in his 2000 presidential campaign. He later apologized, but it may be too little, too late.

Discord In the Ranks

Rumblings below the surface have Republicans worried. It's clear from the above poll results and in a May 11 AFP report. It noted that "many party members (are) having a hard time accepting (McCain and they're) showing it with symbolic votes against him in" primaries. Pennsylvania, Indiana and North Carolina to name three recent ones. It worries party leaders that "as many as 25% of Republicans want a different candidate" based on how many preferred other choices than McCain. Why so? Because his "reputation as a party maverick and a compromising moderate" makes him unpredictable. It also disgruntles "the party's most conservative and ideological members," and they've got plenty of clout to matter.

In recent weeks, however, McCain fought back by tilting noticeably to the right the way he's often done in the past. His speeches focused on conservative red meat issues like the Iraq war, national security, and appointing conservative High Court Justices while avoiding controversial ones like abortion, gay rights and others the religious right opposes. Nonetheless, his electability problem showed up in a May Wall Street Journal poll. It gave Bush a 27% approval rating, and 43% think McCain is "too closely aligned with the Bush agenda." That spells trouble (like the Times/Bloomberg results), and Democrats are exploiting it.

There's also McCain's temperament, his unimpressive intellect, unpredictability, his bigotry, arrogance, hardheadedness, legendary temper, instability, and his genius for making enemies among the faithful he needs for support. Observers also describe some recent speeches as wooden, halting, mechanical, bumbling, uninspiring, mean-spirited, and clearly no match for Obama who outclasses him. Then consider how Alexander Cockburn described him last February in a CounterPunch article: "a dunderhead in statecraft, devoid of self control, capricious in moral standards and an imbecile in his lack of political judgment." Worst of all it shows, and "the better people get to know (him), the less they care for him." The public as well that's shifting more to Obama as the two candidates face off with four

months to go until November.

More reasons are McCain's flip-flops on long-held positions – on defense spending, domestic spying, torture, the estate tax, Social Security, balanced budgets, immigration, taxes, and numerous others – to convince conservatives he's one of them, pretend he's also centrist, but end up satisfying neither side because he's not believable. He may triangulate around domestic issues like abortion and campaign finance reform but in most respects he's conservative, hard right, and pro-business down the line. And on foreign policy, he's a super-hawk, as extremist as any, a shoot-first kind of guy, and an unabashed adherent of the Bush-Cheney doctrine, much like Joe Lieberman who's rumored as one of his vice-presidential choices.

Consider another issue as well – widely reported on July 3. The pro-McCain Wall Street Journal headlined: "McCain Shakes Up Campaign Organization." It went on to say he did it "for the second time in a year (because he) lags behind....Obama in the polls and faces criticism that his message is fractured and his operation is disorganized." McCain approved the changes after close aides told him his presidential hopes were endangered, and his campaign had to be revamped to save it.

The Journal reported more bad news as well by comparing his war chest to Obama's. Through May, Obama raised \$287.5 million, had \$43.1 million in cash on hand, continues to raise about \$1 million a day, and expects to bring in another \$200 million by November 4. In contrast, McCain trails badly and surprisingly so for a Republican. He raised \$119 million, had \$36 million in cash on hand left, and new campaign-finance loopholes may net him tens of millions more. That plus whatever public funding brings in, however, will still leave him well behind.

On July 6, AP reported more trouble as well. For starters, McCain's "trying to succeed a deeply unpopular fellow Republican in a year that favors Democrats." He also lacks a "coherent message let alone much of a strategy." His "troubles are so acute that he recently gave (his) senior advisor "full operational control" of his campaign and "scaled back the duties of (his) campaign manager." Republican pollster, Steve Lombardo, stated his concern: " McCain's got "no big theme around which to build a winning campaign." He needs a "big strategic message (to) show differences between" him and Obama to help him win.

At best, GOP insiders are "cautious." They worry that every poll shows McCain behind, and "on voters' most important issues, (he) trails on (all of them) but Iraq and terrorism. He also lags in key states," including key battleground ones. And when "it comes to message and strategy, McCain has appeared to flounder." One more thing as well. "McCain's campaign is roughly 300-strong compared with Obama's 1000-person plus operation." Another sign of a mismatch, so far at least.

McCain's Health As A Campaign Issue

Then there's the health issue and delay in releasing his medical records. His former bouts with skin cancer raise questions about his fitness. He's had one or more very common squamous cell carcinomas, but three more serious "thin" melanomas and one a potentially deadly deep one since 1993. On June 18 Dermatologist Kevin Berman explained the risks in a SkinCancerConnection.com piece.

Three of McCain's tumors were diagnosed as "melanoma in-situ," meaning they were caught early, were superficial, hadn't penetrated into deep layers of skin, so hadn't spread to other parts of his body. His deep melanoma is another matter. It was diagnosed and treated in 2000 after it penetrated to a depth of 2.2 mm on his face and was excised "with wide margins (through) a lymph node dissection that showed that the cancer had not spread to the lymph nodes and 'presumably' not to any other internal organs." The five-year survival rate in this case is about 80%, so Dr. Berman asks is McCain's health an issue.

Overall, younger patients do better than older ones, and McCain will be 72 in August. In addition, women survive better than men, and limb melanomas turn out better than facial ones for which McCain was treated. However, everyone is unique, and "the fact that (he's been) cancer free for 8 years is a good sign that (he's) cured." But it's no guarantee for anyone, let alone a man with a history of skin cancer.

Further, melanoma is deadly and "can reappear later without any warning on any internal organ," so it's unwise to say McCain is "out of the woods" and the reason periodic checks are necessary. He gets full body ones every three months because it's uncommon to have had this many melanomas. That alone is reason for concern.

Dr. Berman's prognosis: he won't place odds on reoccurrences or complications, nor will he predict how McCain's history will affect his campaign or his health as president if elected. His only advice is to avoid excessive sun and suntanning, use a good sunscreen when exposed, and hope a good set of genes provide protection. McCain doesn't have them, however.

On May 23 (a quiet time ahead of the Memorial Day weekend), he released an astonishing 1173 pages of medical records (covering 2000-2008 only), including what relates to his August 2000 melanoma surgery. They showed no evidence of a recurrence, and his primary care physician, Dr. John Eckstein, said: "While it is impossible to predict any person's future health, today I can find no medical reason or problems that would preclude Senator McCain from fulfilling all the duties and obligations of the president of the United States." We find "no evidence of metastasis or recurrence of the invasive melanoma as we approach the eighth anniversary of that operation." Mr. McCain's prognosis is "very good" because the greatest risk comes within "the first few years after surgery."

The records also revealed:

- a history of kidney stones;
- high cholesterol;
- nasal allergies;
- a recent colonoscopy in which six benign polyps were removed;
- occasional brief episodes of "benign postitional vertigo" (dizziness) when he stands up too quickly, but it's "not a precursor for a stroke;" and
- a "significantly reduced range of motion" in his shoulders, arms and right knee from his wartime injuries and as a POW.

Overall, he was pronounced healthy and cancer-free.

He takes simvastatin for high cholesterol; hydrochlorothiazide for kidney stone prevention; aspirin to prevent blood clots; the antihistamine Zyrtec for nasal allergies; Ambien CR to aid sleep while traveling; and a multivitamin.

In 1999, McCain released 1500 earlier medical documents prior to his presidential run against George Bush. They were part of a US Navy project to assess the health of former POWs. They showed normal psychological tests and mental state and judged he had readjusted “exceptionally well” to civilian life. A 1974 psychiatric evaluation described him as “ambitious, competitive and energetic” with no evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) despite admitting twice he attempted suicide in captivity.

For now at least, McCain’s health seems not an issue unless there’s something hidden or his enemies or Obama want to make it one. Consider also at least six past presidents who were incapacitated for a time, unable to fulfill their duties as a result, but remained in office nonetheless – Lincoln, Garfield, Wilson, FDR, Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson.

Health As A Campaign Issue and For Serving Presidents

Consider four in particular who as candidates ran and were elected president in spite of debilitating or soon to be worrisome health problems. Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921 in office) for one. On October 3, 1919 (in his second term), he suffered a disabling stroke that doctors should have predicted from his history. Prior to his first election, he had atherosclerosis. He suffered a stroke in 1896 that caused marked weakness of the right upper limb and “sensory disturbances” in his fingers. For a time, he couldn’t write normally. He suffered a recurrence of right upper limb weakness in 1904 and lost vision in his left eye in 1906.

Up to and after his first 1912 election, he had multiple other neurological problems, and from 1915-1919 severe headaches causing double vision and signs of heart weakness. Wilson was a sick man, was twice elected president anyway, hid his condition from officials and the public, and when incapacitated remained president anyway.

Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945 in office) was another example from prior to his first election. A 1921 poliomyelitis attack (at age 39) left him paralyzed below the hips. Between 1920 and 1932, he developed an enlarged pigmented lesion above his left eye that some believe was a malignant melanoma. As president, it was excised, leaving a scar above the eyebrow. In 1944, his health was so poor, he was advised not to run a fourth time. In January that year, he complained of headaches, “seemed strangely tired, even in the morning,” and once blacked out at his desk. He was gravely ill, but kept it hidden.

In March 1944, hypertensive heart disease and high blood pressure were discovered, and he was diagnosed as cyanotic from poor circulation. By month’s end, he was worse with congestive heart disease. He had a series of other problems throughout the year, was in no condition to remain president, yet he ran and was reelected in November. On April 12, 1945, he died at age 63, and, considering his wartime stress, it’s a wonder he lasted that long. A stroke of good luck as well that disaster was avoided because a leader in his condition was commander-in-chief but couldn’t perform his duties.

Jack Kennedy was done in by an assassin, not his health, but had he lived long enough it might have. Some around him said “from a medical standpoint, (he) was a mess.” He was hospitalized more than three dozen times in his life and given last rites on three occasions.

He nearly died of scarlet fever at age 2 years, 9 months. He contracted measles, whooping cough and chicken pox the same year, and as a child, was susceptible to upper respiratory infections and bronchitis. He suffered jaundice in 1935, had a history of sports-related injuries because “his physique was inadequate,” and his mother remembered him as “a very, very sick little boy.” He began taking steroids for colitis in the 1930s and developed later complications from it, including duodenal ulcer, back problems, and underactive adrenal glands known as Addison’s disease.

He had a host of other problems as well, including a likely bout of malaria as a naval officer in the Pacific. The 1960 presidential campaign exhausted him (at age 43) because he overdid it for a man in his health. His Addisonism was diagnosed in 1947, at the time told he had one year to live, and was given his last rites shortly after. Yet as senator and president, it was hidden, and one observer called it “one of the most cleverly laid smoke screens ever put down around a politician(’s)” health.

Finally, there’s Ronald Reagan. After childhood, he had a series of health problems but nothing debilitating or serious – severe nearsightedness, fractures, urinary tract infections, prostate stones, hearing loss, temporomandibular (jaw) joint degeneration, osteoarthritis in his right thumb, and in 1967 a “trans-urethral prostatectomy” because of his history of “benign prostatic hypertrophy and several episodes of prostatitis.”

Things changed, however, after he was shot in March 1981. He was lucky and might have died from loss of blood alone, and only modern surgical care saved him. He had polyps removed in 1984 and a more serious one surgically in 1985. Some minor skin cancer as well in 1987. Alzheimer’s disease was another matter, and there were early signs in his presidency long before he was officially diagnosed (at age 83) or the public learned of it.

Straightaway in Cabinet meetings, he forgot the names of his officers. At other times his trusted aides and visiting dignitaries and once referred to his vice-president as “Prime Minister Bush.” In Brazil he toasted the people of Bolivia, and on one memorable occasion went completely blank when asked a question, until his wife Nancy whispered a response in his ear. After being shot, he became disoriented, and it took months for him to recover but likely never fully. Those around him began to speculate, and it became noticeable in his second term. Alzheimer’s progresses slowly, and though marginalized with it in office, he survived to age 93 when he died at his California home in June 2004.

John McCain – Will He or Won’t He Be Nominated in September

Writer Steve Rosenbaum thinks maybe not, and if so, it will be a “genuine September Surprise.” Why so? He thinks around mid-August, he and/or the party will decide he can’t win, but he’ll cite health or another excuse for dropping out. True or not, he looks bumbling and uncertain on stage and at times like he’s about “to keel over.”

As bad or worse, he’s got tepid Christian right support. The public sees him as pro-war as George Bush, and they want the Iraq one at least ended. Further, Bush’s endorsement is a kiss of death, and he may rue the day he got it. That along with his temper, unpredictable flip-flops, and a legion of enemies on the Hill make him vulnerable to stepping down or being dumped. But not to “sit this one out” and hand Obama the election, according to Rosenbaum. Not this time at least when Republicans plan to win and keep the presidency even though Democrats seem poised for big congressional gains.

They'll do it the same way as in 2004, electoral fraud aside. They'll "swift boat" Obama John Kerry-style, dig up any dirt they can find, play up the race card, call him soft on national defense, say he plans to raise taxes, whatever it takes to tear down a candidate who looks like a winner – and do it with a fresh new face, but a well-known conservative one or at least conservative enough. The possibilities range from Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell to Michael Bloomberg, Chuck Hagel and Richard Lugar with a host of others as well – all without McCain's baggage.

Can it happen? Why not, according to Rosenbaum, and he's not alone thinking it. It may be Republicans best chance to win, although changing horses this late ups the odds against it. Nonetheless, some party faithful want a bona fide conservative and nearly anyone but McCain. Others hate his flip-flops and at least one calls him the most flawed candidate ever and the Republican from Hanoi, referring to allegations that he got preferential POW treatment after his father, Admiral JS McCain, became CINCPAC Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Command over all Vietnam forces.

An organization called "Vietnam Veterans Against John McCain" feels a lot of questions remain about his time in captivity. They want answers, and feel he's obligated to provide them. So far he hasn't. It fuels criticism and doubts, and it's not doing his campaign or the party any good.

Will it sink him? Who knows, but we're into July, the convention is approaching, so party brokers have little time left to decide. Let him run and maybe lose, or if elected be unacceptable because he's too unpredictable. Stay tuned. If Rosenbaum and others are right, a September surprise is coming, and the fireworks are about to start.

On the other hand, Republicans may stick with a likely loser, someone many insiders dislike, go for a 1976 repeat, turn things over to a Democrat, let him deal with their mess, then retake the presidency next time around. Either way, whoever takes over next year faces an unenviable task. Maybe one too great for any head of state.

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