



# SWING STATES GIVE MCCAIN SOME HOPE

By JAMES MORROW

In not much more than 72 hours, Americans go to the polls. And providing that Ohio's ballots aren't subject to more litigation than the tobacco industry, that Floridians figure out how to exercise their franchise, and that no other event occurs to kick the game into overtime, some time on Wednesday evening (Canberra time) we will finally draw a curtain on what has been the longest, most interesting and most unpredictable United States presidential race in recent history.

Although polls are all over the map, most experts point to a Barack Obama win, if not landslide, with the Democrats consolidating control over Congress in the process. Despite this, John McCain, the man who, according to the experts, should never have been nominee – much less in what some surveys have as a three-point race – is powering on, with his campaign seeing the possibility of a long-shot win thanks to movement in key swing states such as Pennsylvania.

If McCain does win, it will be a great come-from-behind win – up there with Harry Truman's famous victory over Thomas E. Dewey. It is worth noting about McCain that even as he fights from the rear against a candidate spruiking a mantra of "hope" and "change", during the 2000 primaries the Arizona senator and Vietnam War POW essentially filled the role Obama plays today. Back then, when his plane landed in a small town at 3am, thousands of university students lined the runway to greet him; *Rolling Stone* sent the novelist David Foster Wallace to spend a week with the candidate. Eight years ago, until he was sideswiped by the Bush campaign, he was the change we were waiting for.

But just as it is amazing that McCain is keeping the game close, it is also amazing that he isn't streets ahead. Yes, he is hampered by the mantle of the Republican Party and the George W. Bush presidency, with its mismanagement of issues and policy at home and abroad. But as McCain is keen to remind us, the Arizona senator is a reformer who has often been at odds with his party and his president.

Meanwhile Obama, the junior senator from Illinois, has voted with his party 95 per cent of the time, and has a CV brief enough to be printed on a matchbook ("community organiser", whatever that is, followed by brief stints in the Illinois and US senates). Hardly an experienced reformer.

And while decrying media bias is as common a hobby on the right as blaming Karl Rove for all the world's evils, in this year's news cycle there is absolutely something to that complaint that explains much of Obama's success.

While hardly organised along the lines of Hillary Clinton's "vast right-wing conspiracy", there is a conspiracy of attitudes in an awful lot of newsrooms that holds that asking tough questions of Obama is somehow rude. Since Obama finally fell across the line in the longest and most brutal nomination fight in recent history, the American media has been very quick to follow the Obama campaign's talking points.

At this point it is helpful to engage in a little thought experiment. Imagine if the Republican candidate – McCain or anyone else – had once sat on a board with and blurred a book of, say, an unrepentant bomber of abortion clinics who, though his crimes are many decades in the past, still publicly repents that he did not do more during his criminal career. The Republican would be lambasted, and rightly so. Yet when it comes to former 1960s Weather Underground terrorist Bill Ayers, who had the misfortune to be quoted in *The New York Times* on the morning of September 11, 2008, of all dates, saying, "I don't regret setting bombs, I feel we didn't do enough," the media is happy to accept the Obama campaign's talking points.

Similarly, another US newspaper, *The Los Angeles Times*, is refusing to release a videotape it has received of Barack Obama toasting a former spokesman for PLO terrorist Yasser Arafat.

And for as much of a dim-bulb Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin is portrayed to be, her quick study of foreign policy has given her a grasp of international issues that, if still thin, seems to be based on a commonly accepted reality. Imagine the reaction if Palin had declared at the vice-presidential debate, as Joe Biden in fact did, that "along with France, [the United States] kicked Hezbollah out of Lebanon". Huh? Yet this and his countless other gaffes are barely winced at (though not taking any chances, the Obama campaign is these days keeping Biden under tighter lockdown than the Pope, lest any unscripted questions pierce the bubble).

Indeed so much of Obama's success seems to depend on a self-hypnosis by so many of his supporters who would

otherwise not touch his policy platform with a barge poll and instead delude themselves that someone who came up through the mire and morass of the Chicago patronage machine will somehow be a cleansing influence in national politics.

That someone whose associations and friendships with a whole class of tenured radicals deeply uncomfortable with the idea of America will somehow prosecute the US's best interests abroad. That someone whose party is protectionist and anti-globalisation will somehow signal new re-engagement with the world.

That someone with one of the most pro-abortion voting records in the business is in fact somehow the more pro-life candidate.

That someone whose policy proposals will result in at least a quarter of a trillion dollars in new spending and roll out government involvement into every sphere of life will somehow be a voice of restraint.

If Barack Obama wins, let's hope he does like so many other American presidents, and governs against type.

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