

Media Start Falling Out of Love With Obama: Margaret Carlson Commentary by Margaret Carlson

Feb. 21 (Bloomberg) -- There's nothing easier than falling out of love. On this, as opposed to credit default swaps, I am an expert.

The wakeup moment usually follows the realization that one's dearly beloved reads the newspaper out loud and won't share the remote. He talks a good game about picking up his socks and making partner at the firm, but his argyles never quite make it into the hamper and he rarely burns the midnight oil except to watch ESPN. Friends say he's not good enough for you. You finally get it.

So it should be easy for Senator Hillary Clinton to get the country to dump Senator Barack Obama. She gave it a huge effort in Wisconsin, harping as much on what a sweet-talking, all-hat, no-cattle kind of man he is as she did on the deficiencies in his health-care plan. Wake up, Badgers, and smell the cheese.

"Words are cheap. Speeches don't get your mortgage paid. Speeches don't put food on the table," Clinton said once, if not 100 times.

Thank you, Senator Clinton. The candidate of reality comes to us pre-shrunk with a Surgeon General's Warning that hoping can be dangerous to your health. With Clinton, there's no dream to wake up from, no false hopes to dash. Being president means never thinking about tomorrow or believing you can completely reverse how business gets done in Washington. It's about grueling, daily, hand-to-hand combat, chipping away at problems against people who hate you.

Still the Loser

But as much as voters might have needed a dose of reality, it didn't work. After a solid week of advice that there will be no happily ever after with Prince Charming, Clinton lost Wisconsin by 17 points.

The tack may yet take hold. Clinton's attacks are working with the media, which are reacting to charges that they have gone easy on Obama. Besides, it's time for a change in the story line that Obama is the new, new thing, a gifted speaker who gains votes the more people see him.

And since it's the nature of the press to have severe morning-after regret for having gotten a lump in the throat over a candidate, you have a definite backlash that may help Clinton win the next big races: Ohio and Texas.

On primary day, David Brooks of the New York Times, a conservative columnist who doesn't hate liberals, diagnosed Obama Comedown Syndrome, which manifests itself with unexplained pangs of sympathy for Clinton as "another fading First Wife thrown away for the first available Trophy Messiah."

'Cult of Personality'

Paul Krugman, also of the Times, fearing he'd been too subtle in his criticism of Obama, went ballistic over the Illinois senator's rhetoric. "I won't try for fake evenhandedness here," he wrote. The Obama campaign is "dangerously close to becoming a cult of personality."

Chris Matthews, the host of MSNBC TV's "Hardball" who felt a "thrill going up his leg" during an Obama victory speech on Feb. 12, snapped out of it this week. When Texas State Senator Kirk Watson, an Obama supporter, looked as if he might describe his own thrill over the candidate, Matthews cut him off.

"Name some of his legislative accomplishments," he demanded of a shell-shocked Watson, who was making his national TV debut. "Name any. What has he done, sir?"

Poor Watson. It's fair to ask that question, but of him? Let's hope his family wasn't watching as he had the bad luck to be on the hot seat as the pendulum swung back, when hope and dreams dare not speak their names. It's brass tacks, or the hook.

'Obamania'

Over at ABC, "Nightline" anchor Terry Moran picked up the mantle with a piece called "Obamania," a phenomenon as "baffling" to adults as "Beatlemania," he said. He described "impassioned fans" screaming and tearing their clothes.

"Is this a political movement or a personality cult?" he said. He asked if "there's going to be some kind of reckoning or hangover."

The answer is a qualified "yes" if the media stick with the developing theme that Obama is akin to Jim Jones serving Kool-Aid to gullible followers in Jonestown.

The Clinton folks are crying all-talk-no-action and plagiarism after an alert staffer found that a line in Obama's speech rebutting Clinton's charge he was just too much poetry mirrored one given by Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, another black-American success story and an Obama friend.

Patrick told Obama to try out his defense. Obama did, and got negative headlines on network news and in major newspapers in the 24 hours before the Wisconsin vote.

Incompetent Charlatan

It wasn't enough to stop Wisconsin from drinking the Kool-Aid. But this line of attack is Clinton's best chance to turn things around. She has to reduce Obama to an incompetent charlatan whispering sweet nothings in the country's ear.

She also has a chance to make Michelle Obama fodder for the campaign after her ill-considered remark about feeling "proud" of her country for the first time in her adult life. Clinton may feel some hesitation after the beatings she took for blurting out things she didn't mean, like insulting Tammy Wynette for standing by her man, then proceeding to do just that.

There aren't many choices for Clinton. She has to make her campaign run at least as smoothly as Obama's, keep up the drumbeat that he can't be trusted, force a huge error at one of the debates, and be ready to hijack Michigan's and Florida's delegates.

If Obama were in her place, his obituary would have been written today. But no one gets rich betting against the Clintons.

(Margaret Carlson, author of "Anyone Can Grow Up: How George Bush and I Made It to the White House" and former White House correspondent for Time magazine, is a Bloomberg News columnist. The opinions expressed are her own.)

