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SOOTHSAYING

## A Scorecard on Conventional Wisdom

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RHETORICAL pop quiz:

- ¶Who was more dead, Hillary Rodham Clinton a week ago or John McCain six months ago?
- ¶Whose nomination was more inevitable, Mrs. Clinton's six months ago or Barack Obama's two weeks ago?

Both questions are of course moot — if not ridiculous in retrospect (as fleeting as Rudy's front-runner status or the media swoon over Fred Thompson).

Yet they inspire a proclamation that might actually be true: The accuracy rate of "conventional wisdom" in this presidential election has plummeted to new lows.

The economist John Kenneth Galbraith coined the term "conventional wisdom" in "The Affluent Society," his 1958 book. He was describing expectations commonly ascribed to an omniscient "public sentiment." In that time, a small, powerful class of broadcasters, columnists, thinkers and political leaders trafficked in such assumptions, often faulty (e.g., "a Catholic will never become president").

Today, new swarms of self-styled pundits can formulate conventional wisdom, or merely advance it, in any number of forums — e-mail, cable, blogs, talk radio. Conventional wisdom now just seems to bubble up, fatherless, with minimal brain work or reflection behind it. Its life cycle — the creation, debunking and subsequent hand-wringing of "old" conventional wisdom — has been radically compressed.

"The enemy of the conventional wisdom is not ideas but the march of events," Mr. Galbraith wrote, and never has the march of events trampled so harshly upon conventional wisdom as it has in this election.

Granted, some conventional wisdom does prove true, and seems rightly indisputable at its conception. Former Senator Mike Gravel, for instance, was given no chance of becoming the Democratic nominee — a palm tree's chance in Alaska, if you will — and sure enough, it's not looking good for President Gravel these days, wherever he is.

Still, it has become almost impossible to invoke "conventional wisdom" without some sense of irony, or some implicit warning label that it could turn out to be very wrong.

Conventional wisdom is dogged and determined — or at least its purveyors are. And even as "widely held beliefs" keep succumbing to reality, new ones flower like artichokes in spring. This year has brought a particularly brutal harvest. What follows is a crop report. And remember, it will all be settled by Feb. 5 or, at the latest, March 4.

## What Proved to Be False

Bill Clinton will be a great asset to Hillary. For all we know, the former president has been showering his wife with brilliant strategic advice in the background. But as a public surrogate, Mr. Clinton has run disastrously off the tracks at times (see Carolina, South), engaging in red-face tirades on camera, offending black voters, infuriating party leaders and generally consuming way too much oxygen. He has gone conspicuously Off-Broadway since South Carolina — no sign of him (only Chelsea) at Mrs. Clinton's victory speech last Tuesday.

Money is everything. Certainly, it's better to have it — lots of it — than not. But there have been numerous examples in this campaign of candidates with no money (John McCain last year) or little money (Mike Huckabee this year) surviving, even thriving.

Inversely, the stout coffers of Mr. Obama did little for him in Texas (where he spent about \$10 million in television advertising between early February and early March) and Ohio (\$5.3 million). And despite spending \$42 million of his own money, Mitt Romney developed little traction beyond his actual and adopted home states of Massachusetts, Michigan and Utah.

That's amazing, the comedian Jimmy Kimmel said after Mr. Romney dropped out. "I was able to not win the presidency for free."

Barack Obama has a glass jaw. For many months last year, it was assumed that Mr. Obama would be too soft, or timid, to endure the attacks to come. "Obambi," he was dubbed by a Chicago Tribune columnist. A parallel assumption emerged that the 46-year-old Mr. Obama was merely running in 2008 to sow good will for a campaign in 2012 or 2016. As it turned out, Mr. Obama has proven adept at deflecting punches, shrugging off criticism from opponents as "the same old politics."

Caveat: Mr. Obama has gotten bad reviews in recent days for his ability to parry attacks from Mrs. Clinton and tougher questions from the news media in the run-up to Texas and Ohio. "He may have a glass jaw," CNN's Wolf Blitzer said last week. He was one of many media types to raise the suspicion anew.

Hillary Clinton has no sense of humor. Several commentators described Mrs. Clinton and her campaign as overly cautious, all business and humorless, and efforts to combat this — a clever send-up of the last "Sopranos" episode featuring Bill and Hillary — had little effect.

But while her campaign staff can still seem besieged, defensive and perpetually indignant, some of Mrs. Clinton's best moments in this campaign have been spontaneous turns of humor.

After finishing third in Iowa, she was essentially asked in a debate in New Hampshire why she was so unlikable, to which she replied, "That hurts my feelings," drawing belly laughs. Her appearances on "Saturday Night Live" and "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart" were also generally well received last week and (like the debate line in New Hampshire) presaged a big comeback at the polls.

The presidential race goes on too long. This is a particularly common lament among political reporters (and of course, everyone cares what they think). Likewise, the actor Tom Hanks declared himself "bored" with the campaign last week, and his view is no doubt representative of some people (and of course everyone cares what Hollywood types think about politics).

But while the race has seemed endless at times, there has also been consistently high interest, particularly in the Democratic race. Several primaries and caucuses have featured record voter turnout, and many debates and political talk shows have had huge ratings.

Besides, if the nomination fight is really past due, why can't Democrats just decide on a candidate and we'll call it over, at least until summer?

Hillary Clinton is surrounded by a cohesive, loyal and disciplined team of advisers. This would be the cohesive, loyal and disciplined team that burned through \$100 million, spent \$7 million on a state it lost by 29 points (South Carolina), was unwilling or incapable of organizing in caucus states and unprepared for much after Feb. 5. In addition, some of Mrs. Clinton's top advisers — namely her chief strategist, Mark Penn, in The Los Angeles Times last week — engaged in egregious backside-covering in the days before March 4.

Campaign insiders have credited Mrs. Clinton with surviving despite her organization, not because of it. "She was better than her campaign," one longtime adviser, Harold Ickes, told Adam Nagourney of The New York Times.

ÉJohn McCain will be done in by immigration in the Republican primaries. Mr. McCain's willingness to compromise with Senate Democrats on immigration reform infuriated many Republicans. But in the end, immigration receded somewhat as an issue late in 2007, and Mr. McCain's chief opponent - Mike Huckabee - was also attracting suspicion on the issue from the right.

ÉYoung people don't vote.

ÉPrimary campaigns are dominated by party activists.

ÉA Republican can't win without the love of evangelicals.

If A, B and C were true, Mr. Obama would be nowhere, Mrs. Clinton would be the nominee-in-waiting, and Mr. Huckabee would be one too.

ÉIowa is everything. Just ask President Huckabee. Iowa was roundly viewed as the Everything State of 2008. Reporters swarmed there in December relative to New Hampshire, as did candidates. (One Democrat, Senator Christopher Dodd of Connecticut, even moved his family there.)

The Iowa-is-everything school was popularized in late 2003 and early 2004 by the faltering campaign of John Kerry, who devoted virtually all of his time and resources to Iowa. This resulted in an upset victory there, which snowballed into New Hampshire and rolled him to the nomination.

But while Iowa set off Obamamania in 2008 - no small thing, to be sure - Mr. Huckabee's victory there had little shelf life, while big losses by Mrs. Clinton and Mr. McCain had little bearing on what followed. Both won in New Hampshire five days later.

ÉBlacks will be loyal to the Clintons. Certainly having a black opponent has cut into Mrs. Clinton's presumed support among African-Americans. But the degree to which Mr. Obama dominates among black voters - spurred by offending remarks from Mrs. Clinton, Mr. Clinton and surrogates of the campaign - has clearly tweaked the calculus of the Democratic race in Mr. Obama's favor.

ÉJohn Edwards's withdrawal will be a boon to Barack Obama.

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### **What Proved to Be True**

ÉHillary Clinton is resilient.

ÉBarack Obama gives a great speech.

ÉRudolph W. Giuliani's Florida strategy is a nonstarter.

ÉOne of the second-tier Republicans will emerge (Sam Brownback, Duncan Hunter and - ding-ding-ding, we have a winner - Mike Huckabee).

ÉMr. Huckabee's early success was unsustainable.

ÉFred Thompson isn't really exciting anyone.

ÉThis will be a historic election.

### **What Is Yet Unproven**

ÉMr. McCain's fortunes will rise or fall on Iraq.

ÉConservatives will stay home in November if Mr. McCain is nominated.

ÉBlacks will stay home if Mrs. Clinton is nominated.

ÉMr. McCain will pick a much younger running mate, preferably a governor.

ÉThe Democratic race will come down to the convention.

ÉThe convention will be a blood bath.

ÉMr. McCain is too old.

ÉMr. Obama is too young.

ÉMrs. Clinton is too divisive.

ÉMrs. Clinton and Mr. Obama will never share the ticket.

ÉThis will be a "change election."

ÉThis will be a "national security election."

ÉThis will be an economy election.

ÉThis will be the year of the Democrats. It seems so inevitable. Or at least it did.

