



Full Court Press

Charles Kaiser on Texas, Ohio and a story that serves no purpose

By Charles Kaiser

If the visible desperation of one campaign is a reliable forecaster of the success of its rival, Barack Obama is headed for easy victories tomorrow in Ohio and Texas. But none of the senior political editors and reporters contacted by Full Court Press said anything like that yesterday.

"Do I want to predict the outcome?" a very senior *New York Times* man asked me. "Are you *insane*?" That was the universal consensus. Or, as Adam Nagourney summarized it in his excellent situationer on Sunday: "Polls show that the race is deadlocked in Texas. Mrs. Clinton's lead in Ohio has been whittled away, though she does still lead."

Money and momentum were clearly in Obama's favor — in that same story Nagourney noted that Obama had outspent Hillary in Texas on TV \$10 million to \$5 million since early February, and \$5.3 million to \$3 million in Ohio. But today's Real Clear Politics average still gave Hillary a 6.4 percent lead in Ohio, with a late poll from Suffolk University putting her ahead by nearly twice that margin. In Texas, the RCP average showed a dead heat: 46.9 for Obama to 46.4 for Clinton, although several of the reporters I spoke to *did* predict that Obama would win the Texas caucus even if he lost the primary — and therefore would take the bulk of the delegates from the intricate, bifurcated contest.

In the *Boston Globe*, Peter S. Canellos came closest to predicting an outright victory for Obama in the Lone Star state: "In Texas, where size matters, Obama is mounting what may be the most elaborate primary campaign in any state in history: His ads are ubiquitous on radio and television, his famed online operation is bringing together people in towns way off the normal campaign trail, and his rallies — in dramatic settings, showcasing the rampant enthusiasm of his youthful supporters — are advertisements in themselves, for the pure momentum of his candidacy. ... With two days until the voting, Obama has been so successful at building the appearance of momentum that he has reversed the conventional wisdom: What was once considered fertile ground for Hillary Clinton is now assumed to be Obama country."

And in the *New York Times* today, the estimable Andrew Jacobs did the best job of capturing the fierce enthusiasm of young people on both sides of the contest: "This is a young person's game," said Isaac Baker, a Clinton spokesman, who at 28 is considered a senior member of Ohio's field operations. "No one else could endure these kinds of hours."

Despite the extreme closeness of the contests, the desperation of the Clintons was on display in several ways, including Hillary's hissy fit over Obama's supposedly misleading mailings in Ohio, Harold Wolfson's desperate attempt yesterday on *This Week* with George Stephanopoulos to get the press to pay more attention to many already asked and answered questions about Obama's unfortunate ties to indicted Chicago developer Tony Rezko, and Sean Wilentz's ludicrous 5,000 words on the *New Republic* website accusing the Obama people of being mainly responsible for the "race card" in this campaign — because they cleverly exploited every stupid thing the Clintons have said, including Bill's denigration of Obama's win in South Carolina as something even Jesse Jackson had managed. Wilentz was at his shrillest and most idiotic when he attacked the *New York Times* for "an utterly inaccurate and possibly wishful story" that civil rights lion John Lewis

was switching his support from Clinton to Obama. Lewis' official confirmation of that story was announced the same day Wilentz's story was published, but Wilentz didn't bother to correct himself.

As Jim Sleeper put it at TPMCafe, "in today's *New Republic* ... Sean Wilentz shows us only the arrogance and opportunism of a man who'd hoped to be the Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. of a Hillary Clinton administration."

The bottom line: Unless Obama scores a clean sweep of all four primaries tomorrow (Vermont and Rhode Island are also voting), look for a long, hard, nasty slog on to Pennsylvania's primary on April 22.

Writing About the Unthinkable

As the possibility of an Obama nomination becomes more real, parts of the press are abandoning their self-imposed ban on writing about fears of an assassination. It's a bad decision.

The first of three stories on this subject was written by Adam Reilly in the *Boston Phoenix*. Under the headline "Is There One Political Story the Press Shouldn't Report?" Reilly quotes a variety of wise men on why this kind of speculation serves no purpose, including former *New York Times* managing editor Gene Roberts, who put it this way:

"Reporting about it in a matter-of-fact manner, when there is something tangible to report, is valid journalism, I think," says Roberts. "Saying more about it than the situation warrants, or stretching for a story where no real evidence other than hearsay and speculation exists, is not."

After blithely ignoring Roberts' advice (there *is* no real evidence, other than hearsay and speculation, Reilly has the chutzpah to suggest that "Perhaps ... it's time for the press to consider a self-imposed moratorium on the subject. (This may sound hypocritical," Reilly added, "given this column, but when you're urging the media to drop any problematic theme— McCain's authenticity, Clinton's weepiness, etc.— it's necessary to describe the theme in question.)"

A week later, the Associated Press followed suit with more pointless speculation: "For many black Americans, it's a conversation they find hard to avoid, revisiting old fears in the light of bright new hopes. They watch with wonder as Barack Obama moves ever closer to becoming America's first black president. And they ask themselves, their family, their friends: Is he at risk? Will he be safe?"

That, in turn, led to a similarly unnecessary story in the *New York Times* three days later, headlined "In Painful Past, Hushed Worry About Obama." The paper had been working on the piece for weeks. The AP story and a trip by Obama through Dealey Plaza in Dallas (where JFK was killed) apparently gave editors the final push to put the article into print.

The only aspect of this that was worth pursuing remained largely a Fort Worth *Star-Telegram* world exclusive. On February 21, the paper reported that "Security details at Barack Obama's rally Wednesday stopped screening people for weapons at the front gates more than an hour before the Democratic presidential candidate took the stage at Reunion Arena" — in Dallas, no less. The order to stop the searches came from the Secret Service — apparently to speed up the line. A spokesman for the Secret Service insisted there had been no security breach, but no official was willing to discuss publicly why it made sense to check some but not all of those attending the rally for weapons. The *New York Times* story never mentioned this event.

A week later, in Fort Worth, the *Star-Telegram* reported that at an Obama rally in the paper's hometown, this time everyone attending *was* checked for weapons — but no one would explain this change of policy, either. Perhaps it was the power of the press.

