

**THE BLOG**

Dear Hillary

By Marty Kaplan

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This morning I caught your speech on C-SPAN at the DNC mid-winter cattle call of candidates. I liked it when you said, “If I were President in 2002, we would not have gone to war with Iraq.”

But the rest of it was pretty much the same stump speech that Democratic candidates have been giving since the ‘70s. The bargain with America’s middle class has been broken... Our children are our future... In Iowa, a mother came up to me and said... It’s not just a campaign, it’s a conversation...: Even with the stuff from your own bio that you wove in, it was, at best, reliable boilerplate, and at worst, a reminder that the idea of your candidacy is so far way more exciting than the experience of it.

Edwards, on the other hand, who preceded you on the dais, was on fire. Maybe it’s because he’s been developing this speech for three years, and didn’t need to swivel his head from one prompter pane to the other. Maybe it’s because he’s not a sitting Senator any more, and is less afflicted with the stentorian disease that chamber inflicts. Maybe it’s because he’s blessedly unaware of what the polls and focus groups are saying, and isn’t advised by an army of political veterans of previous, irrelevant political wars.

The wonderful columnist Mary McGrory once acidly said to Walter Mondale, and he was forced to agree with her, “Your instincts are better than your infrastructure.” Are yours? What was your instinct this morning at the DNC? Did you really want to go on that forced march through that canned stump speech? Or did you want to say something that lit up the skies?

If I’d been in the holding room with you before the event, I know what I’d have done. I’d have given you the National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq that was released this morning. I’d have highlighted a dozen lines in it. Lines that said how bad things are, and how worse they’re becoming. Lines that demonstrate the fault isn’t Iran’s, but the doomed strategy Bush insists on pursuing. Lines that make clear how insane this escalation is, how bad the civil war has become, and how the Iraqi government we’re betting on is itself the source of deterioration. I would have done my best to get you as furious as Bush as I could, and I’d have hoped that you’d go out there and make some news, and some new friends.

Of course, that’s why I wasn’t in the holding room. I’m sure you have a squadron of staff, backed by a sheaf of statistics, showing that your current positioning on Iraq is perfect for running a general election race against McCain,

or Romney, or whoever else will hit you from the right as an enemy-enabler. And I don't doubt that Bill thinks you're doing exactly the right thing. If you can just raise enough money, make as few enemies and as few mistakes as possible, give the GOP the minimum of soft-on-terrorism stuff to hang on you, you'll be able to sew this thing up early, unite the Party, and win in the general.

Well, maybe that's right. But don't forget what happened to Mondale after he won Iowa in a blowout. Gary Hart, who came in a lousy third there, nevertheless got enough momentum for his anti-frontrunner, anti-establishment "New Ideas" campaign to obliterate Mondale in New Hampshire. (It's a miracle Mondale recovered enough to get the nomination.) I'm sure there are folks telling you that the 2008 primary calendar, and the war chest thing, give you a lock on the nomination, as long as you don't blow it. But I wouldn't underestimate the passion that Edwards and Obama are tapping.

The 2004 primaries turned out to be about picking an "electable" candidate, not one who made the blood run hot. We all know how that turned out. This time around, it may be that primary voters will be choosing emotionally, not strategically; it may be that the general election will turn not on experience, but excitement — the rush of picking a President whose election means really turning a page. Yes, you've got the woman thing going. But in these miserable times, with so much to enrage us, I'm not sure that's the kind of history most Americans are most interested in making.

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