

**THE BLOG**

# President Giuliani. President Romney. President Huckabee. President Just-Shoot-Me.

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By Marty Kaplan

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In America, anyone who wants to can grow up to be president. That's the problem.

There is no guarantee at all that the next occupant of the Oval Office will be as opposed to the Iraq war as the vast majority of the American people have been for several years. There is no reason to assume that the White House will be held in 2009 by someone who believes that what George W. Bush and Dick Cheney have done to the Constitution constitutes impeachable high crimes. It is today entirely possible that the next president will leave health care to the pharmaceutical lobby, energy policy to the oil companies, and science to the Scriptures. There is nothing remotely comforting about our current system for selecting presidential candidates, about the way presidential campaigns are conducted and covered, or about the process in which ballots are cast, counted and translated into electoral votes. To think otherwise is denial, wishful thinking — the magical thinking of children.

Despite all this country has gone through, anything can happen next November. Why should we believe that 2008 will not produce a president as incompetent and lawless as 2004 did, or as unelected as 2000 did?

If we think the news media in 2008 will rescue us from lying and demagoguery, we must have slept through its coverage of the run-up to Iraq, its yawning at Valerie Plame's outing and the Justice Department's corruption, its enabling of the Social Security "crisis," of "amnesty" propaganda, of the "other side" to evolution and climate change.

If we think that three billion dollars' worth of campaign ads in 2008 won't persuade Americans that day is night and black is white, we must not recall the Swift Boating.

If we place our faith in the critical thinking skills of the American people, we must have amnesia about the majority persuaded that Saddam Hussein was behind 9/11.

If we believe that turnout in November 2008 will be unprecedented, we must also believe that voter caging, voter roll-purging, voter intimidation, papertrail-free machine voting, dubious election eve indictments, and the rest of the Rovian coup technology will somehow, perhaps out of the goodness of their own hearts, have been renounced by the Republican executive branch overnight.

What I'm trying to get at is the stupendous sense of powerlessness among our citizenry that our current political system has created. It's as though the best democracy can do is to cough up this beast that we're being required yet again to ride. The nominating system, despite the folksy patina that quadrennially makes reporters swoon, is thoroughly idiotic, and it's gotten worse every time than the cycle before, yet we treat it like a force of nature, not an act of hacks. Money is more important than ever. And though the Web has enabled unprecedented citizen pushback on candidate deception and media spinelessness, its reach feels puny, compared to the paid messages that special-interests can buy in the marketplace; its impact feels impotent, compared to the partisan fearmongering posing as news and the circus acts masquerading as information on our mass media.

Electability is much on Democrats' minds. But no matter who runs against the GOP next fall, the political system we pretend to have inherited from the Founders could still produce a President Giuliani, a President Romney, a president more Bush than Bush, more Cheney than Cheney. This is not the genius of American democracy. This is the pathology of a terrible systemic illness. Some people may be too busy waving flags or scarfing corn dogs to notice the symptoms. But for many, perhaps most, our political system's sickness is so clinically depressing that sleep seems the only available alternative.

I fully understand the conventional wisdom among insiders. Impeachment? Off the table. Reform? Been there, done that; the unintended consequences'll kill ya every time. Revolution? Puh-leeze. Call me when there's a draft. The closest I hear to a call for the kind of change we need is the mushy-mouthed bipartisanship so beloved by editorialists; if that means finding common ground with the likes of Mitch McConnell and James Dobson, then count me out.

I know, too, that polls put issues like campaign finance reform, political reform and media reform way down low. But I wonder whether Americans, given the choice, might actually put "I feel totally bummed out and disenfranchised by what democracy and politics have become" near the top of their presidential season bitch list. The only problem is, given our melodrama-lovin' media, I wouldn't put it past some two-bit despot or third-party opportunist to ride that wave of outrage all the way to the White House.

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