

**THE BLOG**

I Know Who's Going to Win

By Marty Kaplan

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When the conversation turns to politics, the question I'm most often asked, by a country mile, is, "What's going to happen?"

Usually, I suppress the two true-but-smart-assed answers I have — "How the hell would I know?" and "No one knows" — and draw a verbal diagram worthy of junior high geometry. If Obama's college kid supporters don't caucus, if Pakistan lifts Biden to a surprisingly strong fourth in the entrance polls, if Paul beats McCain and Thompson in western Iowa, then (skipping a few steps) Bloomberg jumps in in January to stop Huckabee from beating Clinton in November.

Yeah, sure. As my grandmother used to say, though not in English, 'If my grandmother had wheels, she'd be a bus.'

Political predictions are undeniably fun and profitable. So are fortune cookies, clairvoyants and horoscopes. The reading of tea leaves, entrails and crystal balls has traditionally meant power, money and entertainment. Plus, it's only natural to be curious about how the story turns out. From the time our prehistoric forebears spun tales around the campfire, to the nested-narrative trick that Sheherazade used to keep her head from getting cut off, to Tim LaHaye and the whole End Times *megillah*, wanting to know the ending has been a hard-wired human desire.

So it should come as no surprise that much modern media coverage of politics turns out to be a "scientifically" souped-up version of the voodoo that runs from the Delphic Oracle and the Cumaean Sibyl to the Amazing Kreskin and Bazooka Joe. Sure, we should know better. If the polls that drive the dominant horse race coverage were reported as numerical ranges, rather than as absolute numbers with margin-of-error fine-print footnotes, we would be rofl at the portentous meanings attributed to them. If there were a Pundit Accountability Act, requiring the record of previous predictions to accompany fresh fortunetelling, we would long ago have recognized our journo-priests as the jesters they actually are. If only we were regularly reminded of how historically unreliable the Iowa and New Hampshire results have been as presidential predictors, we might have spent way more of the past year reading novels and planting gardens than we did being bamboozled by picturesque early-state hype.

When predictions get media megaphones, they become expectations. When those expectations are politically motivated (think candidates, surrogates, and partisan "analysts"), they become the expectations game. When those expectations are journalistically motivated (think the press' bias for suspense and hairpin narratives), they become monetized. So Bill Clinton tells Charlie Rose that "it's a miracle" Hillary has a chance to win in Iowa, while David Brooks

tells Judy Woodruff that if Hillary doesn't win in Iowa, she's dead, and George Stephanopoulos tells *Good Morning America* that New Hampshire is do-or-die for McCain, while McCain tells CNN that New Hampshire is not do-or-die, it's must-win. And so also, on a parallel track, every network bombards us with breathless KEEP WATCHING! WHO KNOWS WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT! teasers, as though we will instantly be beheaded if we for a moment lose interest in these political Arabian Nights and the Cialis ads they exist to sandwich.

I spent three presidential campaign cycles working in Iowa. In 1980, Jimmy Carter's crushing two-to-one defeat of Ted Kennedy meant nothing to Kennedy's determination to continue his challenge for the nomination. In 1984, Walter Mondale's nearly three-to-one defeat of Gary Hart (not to mention five other Democratic candidates: Mondale was one point short of an absolute majority against a field of six competitors) was depicted by the press as a huge victory for Hart. In 1988, Richard Gephardt won, with 31%; Paul Simon came in behind him, at 27%; and Michael Dukakis, who was supposed to be establishing his credentials as a national candidate, came in at only 22%. I wrote his "victory" speech that night in Des Moines, which was broadcast live to his New Hampshire supporters by Boston television stations. Inspired by the 1980 winter Olympics, I came up with this line for Dukakis: "We won the bronze." Amazingly, the political press bought the desperate analogy, and a humiliating third in a four-man field was transformed into some kind of medal. The other day, when I read a *Time* headline above a picture of Thompson ("Republicans Battle for Iowa Bronze"), and when I heard Jake Tapper talking about winning the bronze on *GMA*, I had to laugh at how a brazen act of spin had been elevated into pious wisdom. (Huckabee's renovation — "There are three tickets out of Iowa — first, business and coach" — is novel, but since he offered it to put lipstick on a potential third-place showing of his own, rather than to give life-support to a defeated Thompson, Giuliani or McCain, I wonder how he may regard his metaphoric legerdemain in hindsight.)

The political question I'm second-most often asked is, Who are you for?

I'd like to answer by saying, I'm for the candidate who cares the most about my issues: the Constitution,* Iraq, climate change, real campaign finance reform, real media reform, real lobbyist/ethics reform, voting machine/Electoral College reform, single-payer national health insurance.

[*UPDATE: Thanks to commenter Venice, I've rectified my inexplicable omission and put the rule of law first.]

Unfortunately, that puts me closer to Kucinich than anyone else; I haven't yet found the Kool-Aid to convince me he has a chance in hell to win, and I'm in no mood to cast an idealistic (i.e., wasted) vote.

That's right: like a lot of Democrats, I'm for the candidate most likely to win in November. Who's that? You tell me.

And speaking of telling the future, happy New Year.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director