

The Casey Fly in the Clinton Ointment

March 31, 2008

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Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey has finally entered the high stakes game of presidential endorsements after months of studied neutrality. And he did it with some uncharacteristic pizzazz. The endorsement, much coveted by Obama and much covered by the state press, was delivered last week in Pittsburgh. Since then it has been analyzed closely for why Casey did it. Perhaps too closely!

Indeed much attention has been paid to why Casey endorsed, but little attention to what it means for the race.

Not that the whys are uninteresting. Indeed the political calculations in Casey's endorsement of Obama do not seem favorable to Casey. He has risked much with his endorsement in a contest that has become increasingly bitter and divisive. It positions the junior senator against virtually the entire Democratic political establishment in the state—while it pits him even in his home town of Scranton against Clinton, the "home town girl."

Many in Pennsylvania are chalking up the Casey endorsement made against the prevailing political winds as just another example of the famed Casey reputation for stubborn independence and political iconoclasm. Both he and his father, a popular state governor from 1987-1995, have been disposed to dance to their own political music. The elder Casey sought the governorship four times before finally succeeding. And his celebrated fight with the Clinton campaign over his request to address abortion at the 1992 New York Democratic convention led to a snub of the governor and the Pennsylvania delegation that still lingers.

Those who best know Senator Casey think that he endorsed Obama simply because he thought it was the right thing to do. But whether Pennsylvania's junior senator has qualified himself for inclusion in the next edition of Profiles in Courage or whether he has simply made a shrewd political calculation is not the immediate question.

Much more to the point of the nation's ongoing struggle for the Democratic nomination is the question of what if anything the Casey endorsement will mean in that contest. This is the "So What Question."

First what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that Obama will now win Pennsylvania. In reality he still remains a long shot to actually beat Clinton in the popular vote. And it doesn't mean, as did Governor Ed Rendell's earlier endorsement of Clinton, that impressive organizational support or vast new sources of political money are now available to Obama. Casey has little organization and even less fundraising capacity to offer with his endorsement.

But what Casey's endorsement might mean trumps mere political resources like organization and money. It might mean the ballgame—the quickened end of the Democratic primary battle and the ultimate nomination of Barack Obama.

Just how the endorsement of a junior U.S. senator without money or organization can mean so much is due to the unique circumstances now prevailing in the Democratic Party. Hillary Clinton, behind in both delegates

and popular votes, is still alive at this late point for two reasons: one of them a compelling fact and the other a plausible premise.

The compelling fact is that she won critical victories in electorally crucial Ohio and Texas in March. These wins moved her then faltering campaign off life support. The plausible premise is that she will win Pennsylvania in April and win it big. And with the Pennsylvania victory, sail through the remainder of the state primaries closing in on Obama's delegate vote lead and perhaps surpassing him in popular vote, ultimately pushing the super delegates her way at the convention.

For this scenario to play out, Clinton needs a victory in Pennsylvania. And not just any victory will do. She needs to win impressively and overwhelmingly. She needs margins large enough to buttress her argument that only she can win critical Electoral College states like Pennsylvania and margins large enough to allow her to harvest a significant proportion of pledged delegates to make some gains on Obama in that critical category.

At the end of the day, Clinton must win Pennsylvania big—Obama, on the other hand, must only avoid losing big.

Enter the Casey endorsement: the proverbial fly in Clinton's political ointment. Before Casey, the Clinton scenario was entering final rehearsals. She had corralled virtually every major politico in the state, was leading by double digits, and was apparently on her way to an impressive win. The Casey endorsement changes all that in both subtle and not so subtle ways.

In particular it threatens to undercut Clinton's support with some key constituencies, especially blue collar, working class, white voters, many of them Catholic, who so far have been hot for Hillary but only lukewarm for Obama. Casey, who won his Senate seat with almost 60 percent of the vote, is popular with these groups and might persuade many of them to take a second look at Obama.

Casey's endorsement will also offer Obama some much needed momentum during the final three week push in Pennsylvania. Rather than stall the Clinton campaign, it's more likely to energize the Obama campaign, and what Obama critically needs in Pennsylvania during the final push is a lift. Casey, who will personally travel to many campaign stops with Obama and help him navigate through the often Byzantine world of state politics, will give him that momentum.

Finally the Casey endorsement may also help Obama corral more super delegates. Not widely reported has been the considerable deficit in Pennsylvania super delegates for Obama. Of the state's 29 supers, Casey becomes only the fourth to side with Obama. His endorsement now offers the yet undeclared super delegates cover and an excuse to endorse Obama.

The take away point here is that the Casey endorsement may be a game-ender, a final speed bump for Clinton that blocks any remaining viable path to the nomination. She needs to win Pennsylvania big, and Casey's presence in the race makes it hard for her to do that. Clinton probably still wins the state—but not by enough to allow her to continue the race past Pennsylvania.

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