

Obama's Feet of Clay

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by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

To adopt a technical term widely used in Pennsylvania politics, Democrat Barack Obama “stepped in it” last week during a talk in San Francisco. He did so when he described working class Pennsylvanians as a “bitter” lot who “cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who are not like them.” The longer passage from his remarks gives the full flavor of them:

"You go into these small towns in Pennsylvania and, like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them. And...each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are going to regenerate and they have not. And it's not surprising then they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."

There is no doubt about what he said. The question now is will it matter: first to his tight race with Hillary Clinton in Pennsylvania, and secondly to the ultimate outcome of the Democratic nomination contest.

The Pennsylvania part of the question is easier to answer. Obama's loose lips late in the campaign are not without precedent in Keystone state politics. In fact, as Time observed in 2006: “Pennsylvania actually has a rich tradition of politicians and their handlers putting their foot in their mouths during a crucial moment of a political campaign.”

The list of those who have is surprising long and includes former U.S. Attorney General and former Pennsylvania Governor Dick Thornburgh, former gubernatorial candidate Barbara Hafer, former celebrity US Senate candidate Lynn Yeakel, and former gubernatorial candidate Bill Scranton. You will note here the frequent use of the adjective “former.”

What these candidates or their handlers did--and what now places them in historical parallel to Obama -- was to say things in public that revealed in them political flaws that ultimately undermined their candidacies.

Each did this in his or her own way. For Thornburgh it was his campaign manager who in the heat of the campaign--overcome apparently by a rush of candor-- referred to Thornburgh as “the salvation of this sorry-ass state” thereby assuring that the seemingly hopeless underdog Harris Wofford would defeat Thornburgh and retain his Senate seat. Barbara Hafer's version was to dismiss her opponent, then Governor Robert P Casey, as a “red necked Irishman,” thus hastening him onto one of the most lopsided landslide victories in state history.

U.S. Senate candidate Lynn Yeakel's sin is illustrative of the genre--for it was not so much what she said as what it said about her. Running in the so called “year of the women,” against Arlen Specter and in the aftermath of the Clarence Thomas, Anita Hill controversy, she was thought by many to be the one to retire Specter. But her candidacy collapsed after she made herself seem like an out of touch elitist by mispronouncing the name of a Pennsylvania county when visiting there.

Finally the latest example of state politicians' succumbing to an advanced stage of lapsus linguae came during the 2006 gubernatorial contest. Locked in a tense GOP nomination fight with Lynn Swann, the African-American all-pro former Pittsburgh Steeler wide receiver, the campaign manager for former Lt. Governor Bill Scranton described Swann as "the rich white guy in this race." Scranton fired his manager and soon withdrew from the race.

All of these foot-in-the-mouth moments ended badly for the offending candidate--causing or contributing to their defeat. Pennsylvania journalist Al Neri has neatly summed up the lesson to be learned here: "... as Pennsylvania history shows, when you did have to admit an error, apologize and ask for forgiveness, it always meant one thing: you were going to lose."

And lose they did, every one of them. But why they lost is important to understand. It was not just that they were poor candidates with bad ideas. Nor was it even bad timing or simply bad luck that took them down. Fateful for these campaigns was that the unguarded comments suggest problematic personal traits or attitudes that the voters somehow earlier had suspected, but had not seen. They all had fatal flaws.

And for Obama what possible flaws do his remarks reveal? For many the answer will be that they expressed his inner beliefs toward the working class, exposing an elitist and patronizing attitude towards them. Some will conclude that when hobnobbing in private with rich donors his real sentiments were on display, and the sentiments he expressed in private were his real views. Further some will believe Obama's remarks raise serious questions about his authenticity. They call into question whether his appeals to working class voters have been mere contrivances, mere vote getting activities. And even more profoundly Obama's remarks reinforce the belief of those who say there is much more to know about the Senator's real values and real attitudes. Some will say Obama has become a candidate with feet of clay.

For Obama the consequences seem both short and long term. In the short run, Obama's words are likely to do serious damage to his campaign in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania working class voters constitute about 40 percent of the Democratic vote. Obama's claim to understand and to identify with them has been dealt a serious blow after a largely successful two week surge in the state. The Clinton campaign is already capitalizing on the controversy. It may be enough to propel her to that big victory that seemed so unlikely only a few days ago.

Longer term his comments deriding the religious and cultural values of working class Americans will cause some to dismiss his claim to be a national unifier. Indeed, his remarks make his unity theme sound like little more than a campaign con. He has probably assured that the nomination race will now go on well past Pennsylvania--to an ultimate fate that few if any can predict.

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