

BY LAURA S. WASHINGTON

# The Second Clinton Ascendancy



**O**N A POST-ELECTION edition of PBS's "The News Hour with Jim Lehrer," presidential historian Richard Norton Smith told Lehrer: "The Democrats clearly have an opportunity to demonstrate that they're the Bill Clinton party. You know, historically, I think the real winner this week is Bill Clinton."

Smith, a scholar in residence at George Mason University, argued that in recent years "we saw the Democrats veer off" to the wilderness of the left, much to the delight of the Bushies. But the 2006 election sweep, according to Smith, gives the Democrats "an opportunity, particularly with a new crop of moderate and relative conservatives, to reclaim plausibly the middle of the road. And if they succeed at that, I'm telling you, Bill Clinton looks like a prophet with honor."

Got it. When I noted Smith's point to my leftie friends, they all had to agree, though grudgingly.

So let's acknowledge this Second Clinton Ascendancy, and move on.

Next: What does this move to the middle mean for Hill and Bill? In 2008, will it translate into a Hillary victory or a Clinton calamity? I surmise it will be a little bit of both. A nomination, but no coronation.

Speaking of coronations, Clinton faces the little problem of the "skinny guy with the funny name." In 2004, Barack Obama was a lowly state legislator from the South Side of Chicago. In 2008 the freshman U.S. Senator has a good shot at becoming the first black president of the United States. The tea leaves are overwhelming me with their predictions. There is no doubt that he is going to make his presidential bid official in the next few months. No surprises here, but look for his top political guru, David Axelrod, to orchestrate a Wagnerian drama.

One troubling tea leaf for Obama could be the loss of another black rising star. In his run for one of Tennessee's senate seats, U.S. Rep. Harold Ford of Memphis was defeated, by 51 percent to 48 percent, by former Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker. Ford was vying to become the first black senator from the South since Reconstruction.

Ford's loss might indicate that he fell victim to the sentiments of Southern whites who still can't stomach an African American in high office. That's bad news, the logic goes, for a black candidate who needs some Southern states to win the White House. Indeed, an election exit

poll by the Associated Press found that 40 percent of white voters in Tennessee voted for Ford, compared with 95 percent of the state's black voters.

But another culprit may be afoot here. Ford ran well to the right of his party. He carved out conservative positions on abortion, immigration and Iraq. He even voted for the Defense of Marriage Act. He catered to the holy rollers. Tennessee pundits and activists called Ford a phony. That might have been a key factor in his narrow defeat.

Obama could be headed in the same direction. He is also shifting to the right. Listen beneath the barrage of adoring arias in the national media and you'll detect grumbings from the Democratic left. They are infuriated by some of the centrist stances he's taken. For example, they say, he is ducking support of gay marriage in favor of civil unions.

And earlier this year he voted for the federal Secure Fence Act of 2006, which will create a 700-mile wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Still, I predict that by 2008, the whiners will be vanquished. Obama is in the right place on

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what will be the signature issue of the 2008 presidential contest—the war in Iraq. On that, there is a clear choice between him and the Democratic Party's other leading light. Even before the Iraq debacle began in 2003, Obama was a staunch opponent. Meanwhile, Clinton continues to backpedal on her 2002 vote for the war.

In the meantime, watch out, Washington. Look for the state of Illinois, particularly Chicago, to dominate the seats of power. Obama is just one of a wide and deep pack of clout-heavy characters from the Prairie State.

Take Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.), who headed the Democratic Campaign Congressional Committee. The Deaniacs may caterwaul, but I give Emanuel full and unconditional credit for the 2006 Democratic "thumping." This Israeli ballet dancer-turned-White-House-operative is expected to snare the chairmanship of the House Democratic Caucus.

Joining him is Sen. Dick Durbin, who becomes the Number 2 Senate leader. Jan Schakowsky, Jesse Jackson Jr., and Luis Gutierrez are also in line for leadership slots in the U.S. House. The Land of Lincoln is about to become the Home of the Heavies.

They all face a key challenge. They must resist using their newfound clout to exact partisan revenge. Impeachment is a tantalizing prospect for some, but I am salivating at the prospect of the Democrats reclaiming the middle, and letting the Bushies swing, ever so slowly, in the wind. ■

# Outing is In Again

## Did Bill Maher break the Barney Frank Rule?

BY JOHN IRELAND

**O**VER THE PAST YEAR, gay sex scandals have rocked right-wing political and religious circles in the United States. Jim West (mayor of Spokane, Wash.), Mark Foley (congressman from Florida), and the Rev. Ted Haggard (president of the National Association of Evangelicals) all learned the sting of a public flogging. The first two men were “outed” when their homosexual orientation was involuntarily exposed publicly by investigative journalists, while Haggard was outed by a gay male escort who claimed to have had sex with him. Historically, the press has been hesitant to give a voice to allegations of hypocrisy if they relate to hidden homosexuality, but the tide is beginning to turn, if only slightly.

On Nov. 8, comedian Bill Maher appeared on CNN’s “Larry King Live” and told the world that Ken Mehlman, head of the Republican National Committee, is gay. Here is what transpired:

**Maher:** A lot of the chiefs of staff, the people who really run the underpinnings of the Republican Party, are gay. I don’t want to mention names, but I will Friday night.

**King:** You will Friday night?

**Maher:** Well, there’s a couple of big people who I think everyone in Washington knows who run the Republican ...

**King:** You will name them?

**Maher:** Well, I wouldn’t be the first. I’d get sued if I was the first.

**Maher:** Ken Mehlman. Okay, there’s one I think people have talked about. I don’t think he’s denied it when he’s been, people have suggested, he doesn’t say ...

**King:** I never heard that. I’m walking around in a fog. I never ... Ken Mehlman? I never heard that. But the question is ...

**Maher:** Maybe you don’t go to the same bathhouse I do, Larry.

In a frenzy of self-censorship, the network, a subsidiary of Time-Warner, edited out 12 seconds of tape, removing the mention of Mehlman before the program was re-aired later that night, also redacting the transcript as if to pretend the comments were never uttered.

Nevertheless, on Nov. 10, a GOP spokeswoman announced that Mehlman would resign his post at the end of his term in January. That evening, despite his teaser on CNN, Maher had nothing to say about gay Republicans on his live broadcast of *Real Time with Bill Maher*. It seems that Maher took his own words, “I’d get sued if I was the first,” to heart. Maher did elaborate some on *Nightline* on Nov. 15, explaining:

Larry kept pressing me about this issue, about gays and names. And I thought that well, you know, I’m a political junkie, probably like you are. And so, you know, in my writers’ room, this is anything but news. And by the way, I’m not a million percent sure it’s true. I mean, I never dated the guy. But I don’t feel especially bad about if this happened to a Republican who is very much part and parcel of this administration, which has used gay issues so divisively. It’s hugely hypocritical.

### The Frank rule

“The press still feels it’s such a horrible thing to even say it,” says Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.). “It’s in their psyches ... deeply ingrained homophobia.” In 1989, the openly gay legislator turned gay-baiting around on Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), who had begun a “whisper campaign” about Rep. Thomas Foley (D-



**“Ken Mehlman!  
You’ve just been  
called out of  
the closet!”**