

Opinion & Analysis

‘Strong horse’ McCain saddled and ready for US race



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Clinton and Obama each have the same massive Achilles' heel – they want the US to withdraw from Iraq

NOT EVERYTHING the late Osama bin Laden said was wicked; it was sometimes wise. For example, in December 2001 he observed that “when people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse”. It’s true: everyone wants to back a winner. The US presidential shenanigans can be a reminder of this universal truth, as they transfix and fascinate not just Americans, but the rest of the world as well.

For the first time in two generations, neither the Democrats nor the Republicans have a pre-ordained candidate, and this has provided an object lesson in open, competitive democracy. (Compare with Russia’s presidential “election”.)

No other candidate for any governing position anywhere in the world is subject to such rigorous, merciless public examination and attack as the would-be nominees have been undergoing. Regardless of what you think of their politics or personalities, you have to be filled with admiration at the sheer doggedness and toughness under fire of each one of them.

John McCain’s campaign is developing particularly well for him. He has secured the Republicans’ nomination with a string of

decisive victories in primaries and caucuses, which means that the many anti-McCain Republicans, who hate him for some of his slightly leftist ideas (soft on illegal immigrants, pro-Kyoto, critical of big business, iffy on tax-cuts), now have no one else to support. At least they all love his conservative positions on defence and finance.

Moreover, now that he’s the indisputable “strong horse”, it’s much easier for sceptical Republicans to stifle their moans.

By late February, March, Barack Obama looked like the Democrats’ “strong horse”. So much so that there were nearly daily defections of delegates, legislators, and politicians on Hillary to Obama, stampeding to be well clear of Clinton’s perceived “weak horse”.

But that turned out to be premature. For Obama failed to deliver the expected knockout blow at the Texas and Ohio primaries, which means the nomination battle may well carry on until June, and the party will therefore remain divided. Even then, victory is expected to come by a close margin, so the differential equine strength will probably not arouse much passion.

So, while McCain can now quietly plan and raise money for the actual presidential

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campaign, Obama and Clinton are forced to spend everything they can raise in order to sling mud at each other for another three months. Only then can one of them begin doing what McCain is doing now. Moreover, all that extra mud-slinging will provide him with ammunition for the final campaign.

Not that he needs that much. For Barack and Hillary each have the same massive Achilles’ heel. Iraq. Each wants to extricate America from Iraq as quickly as possible, while trying to make it look like they are not cutting and running. A year ago when they started campaigning, this was a rather popular position, and arguably it had some

merit, in that the only progress that seemed under way in Iraq was of the negative variety, with suicide-homicide atrocities, American casualties and fervid insurgency at every turn, every day. It might not have been honourable to withdraw, but you can understand that people at a certain moment might say enough is enough, I want out of here.

But that’s all changed thanks to the brilliance of Gen David Petraeus. Against all expectations, his “surge” has resulted in a dramatic turnaround in the fortunes of the US military, and more importantly, of ordinary Iraqis. Thousands of once-disgruntled Sunnis have turned against al-Qaeda, ceased most resistance, and begun flocking to government security forces and begging the Americans to stop both al-Qaeda and Shia militias.

With tribal sheikhs driving the so-called “Anbar Awakening”, Iraqis are volunteering information about terrorists and mines, and clamouring to sign up with the joint security force. In short, al-Qaeda is being comprehensively defeated, driven out of its strongholds, and at the same time, exposed not as religious zealots but more like criminal thugs, bent on extortion, gasoline and food racketeering, petty theft, pornography, barbarity, murder. All this is providing space

for Americans to rebuild government facilities, arbitrate tribal feuds, repair utilities, train Iraqi army and police personnel, and generally improve life on the ground.

This may not be victory (yet), but it certainly isn’t defeat. And there is now no doubt about who is the “strong horse” (the Iraqi and American security forces) and who the “weak” (al-Qaeda). That in itself must be helping to influence Iraqis of all clans and religious persuasions to support the emergent new Iraq over the criminal thugs.

Meanwhile, back in America, the very absence of Iraq from the front pages bears witness to its successes there. The longer this progress continues, the more inescapable will it become, and the more inexcusable will become the retreatism of the two Democratic candidates. If America is seen as the “strong horse” in Iraq, the American people will want to back anyone who supports it. So unless Hillary or Barack make a humiliating U-turn on Iraq, they will undoubtedly become, in the eyes of US voters, the “weak horse” to be crushed by “strong horse” McCain.

No wonder he is beaming. If only bin Laden had stuck to philosophising, he could have made himself a fortune on the lecture and after-dinner circuit.