



GREG SCHNEIDERS

Candidates themselves often reveal their brand weaknesses

John McCain would keep American troops in Iraq for 100 years. Barack Obama thinks white working class voters cling to their guns and religion out of economic frustration. Hillary Clinton thinks the 2008 Democratic nomination battle could end as horribly as the one in 1968. What do these statements have in common? First, the candidates actually said them. Second, they wish they hadn't. Third, they each illustrate how the weakness of a candidate's "brand" often projects the mirror image of its strength.

What McCain really meant to say about Iraq is, "Look, it's not about how long it takes; it's about not losing. I'm a tough guy and we should be a tough country willing to stick it out as long as it takes. Try five and a half years in a Viet Cong prison." The problem with this is that it reinforces both the strength and the weakness of Brand McCain. He is tough – scary tough. Most Americans probably would have accepted the early release offered McCain by his Viet Cong captors. He turned it down. Is that the balance between principle and practicality we want in our next commander in chief?

What Obama really meant to say is, "I'm a smart and well-educated guy who has read *The Problem With Kansas* and understands the economic frustrations of those less fortunate (and less thoughtful) than myself. A little erudition in the White House might be a good thing for a change." Unfortunately, the strength and the weakness of Brand Obama is that he is the anti-Bush – smart, thoughtful, well read... and an intellectual

Ivy League elitist. Do we want our next president to analyze us or identify with us?

What Clinton really meant to say is, "Stuff happens. I'm not just talking about assassination... This guy Obama is a walking time bomb and, with luck and tenacity, I'll still be in the race when that bomb goes off." This also reinforces the strength and the weakness of Brand Clinton – she is tough as nails and never quits. But, do we want our next president to be capable of thinking the unthinkable – if it is her only way to win?

We want our next president to be tough, smart, and tenacious... just not too tough, too smart, or too tenacious. In their scripted moments, the candidates project the positive side of their brands while stopping short of revealing the negative flip sides. But presidential campaigns are long, grueling exercises in stamina like the dance marathons of the '20s that left contestants clutching one another lest they both fall over and, inevitably, self-revealing mistakes are made.

Political observers often fret over the control of campaigns by pollsters, media consultants, and other "handlers." The fact is, when we listen closely, it is usually the candidates, themselves, who tell us in their own ill-chosen words who they are, what kind of president they would be, and what make up their greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses. ■

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