

**The New Children's Crusade:**

**Lessons for College Presidents**

from the **2008 Presidential Campaign**

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By Ronald R. Thomas

Lately I have been feeling like it's 1968 instead of 2008, and I am a freshman in college again. The parallels are eerie. The nation is immersed in a controversial and unpopular war overseas that has been costly in human life and treasure. We live in fear of a sinister foreign enemy who, we are told, wants to take over the world and destroy our way of life. There are deep anxieties about the health of our economy, a decline in American prestige among historic allies abroad, concern over attenuations of our civil rights, and a cloud of innuendo and distrust around issues of race and gender here at home. I can almost hear Joan Baez and Bob Dylan singing.

And now, the national presidential election, still in the primary stages, has galvanized the country like none since, well, 1968. Sounding a chord with college students and generating on our campuses a level of political passion and excitement the likes of which we haven't seen for four decades, the election of 2008 is being figured in the press as (among other things) a new "Children's Crusade." College presidents, many of us having been on the other side of the barricades and marches and teach-



ins in the earlier version of the Children's Crusade, should take note of both the similarities and the differences, and be prepared. There's something happening here.

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At a time when there is so much for us to be concerned about in higher education (and in the state of the union in general), it is exhilarating to see so many young people, our students, engaged in the democratic process in such great numbers for the first time in generations. As I watch the drama unfold, I can't help thinking that there are lessons to learn in all this for us college presidents about the who, the what, and the how of higher education in the future. It is certainly true that there is also much to ignore and even to lament in this election cycle as well. As in any campaign, there is a good deal of sound and fury that signify nothing or, worse, that manifest the darker side of our political process and culture. But amidst all their heat and hot air, political campaigns, and this campaign in particular, can teach us something about effective presidential leadership on our campuses as well as in the capital.

#### **Lesson One: Rebels with a Cause**

First, this election is about us. Not about college presidents themselves, of course, and, sadly, not about a visionary strategy for prioritizing higher education policy or investing in its funding. But the campaign is very much about colleges and universities. We are witnessing in this election as historic a generational shift in political activism as we saw in 1968, once again being led by our principal constituency, college students. What is clear in even the most superficial demographic analysis of the primary voting this year is that this is a transitional moment.

While the electorate may never have been more fractured into interest groups around race and gender and ideology, or more polarized around issues like the war and the environment, it has never been more unified around age. Rarely have we seen such consistent voting patterns among citizens within an age group, cutting across geographic and economic categories, with voters under 30 largely rallying around one candidate (whose campaign themes have been distinctly future oriented) and those over 50 heavily favoring the other two still in the race (who have both, for all their differences, focused their campaigns on records of experience and demonstrated competence).

This should tell us something about our students and ourselves. Whether their energetic involvement in the caucuses and primaries in such spectacular numbers will translate into the general election and into broader political engagement beyond is yet to be seen. But we should note well what is moving our students to take such interest and action in ways we haven't seen since the 1960s, a time when the American college campus became deeply politicized and was transformed forever. For them, the future is now.

This moment may well signal the emergence of another new culture of commitment and activism on

our campuses, a significant divergence from the status quo. We have seen its harbingers in our students' enthusiasm for environmental sustainability and community service in recent years. But where that fervor will go next and in what form are yet to be seen. Many campuses were not prepared for these changes in the 1960s, and the costs were great. If we are doing our jobs well, we should be prepared to engage affirmatively with the high-test energy we see being generated on and off campus by college students, in whatever ways it manifests itself. As presidents, we must anticipate the possibility of other dramatic transformations in the character of the academy in the days ahead and get ready.

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#### **Lesson Two: Mothers of Invention**

This election is not just about a new generation, and this is the second lesson: It is about, if you will pardon the expression, change. Whatever your politics and whatever your party, the sorting of the candidates by the electorate this year has been revealing about this subject and about the kind of leadership that is—and is not—attracting followers in this generation. Already eliminated have been several contenders, any of whom might have been regarded as the ideal traditional candidate for the job—current and former congressmen and governors and cabinet members with long careers of professional political accomplishment. But their campaigns have failed, whether they positioned themselves as brainy business consultants who will finally make the system work, as populist defenders of the underclass who will do battle with the privileged elites and overturn the system, as ideological purists who will protect our literal and cultural borders and will keep the system in order, or as spiritual leaders who will usher in a righteous new system and purge Washington of its corrupt ways.

At the time of this writing, there remain in the race three candidates from the two major parties who have taken a somewhat different tack. As sitting senators all, they hardly represent the revolutionary or even the nontraditional, even if the U.S. Senate is an institution from which presidents are rarely elected. But each also has a claim to being someone who breaks the mold: one would be the first to hold the office as an African American, one the first woman to do so, and one the first Viet Nam War hero (each one, by the way, unimaginable in 1968). Moreover, all of them have assiduously sought to present themselves as candidates of change, instigators of discontinuing business as usual: the inspiring and eloquent change-agent of a new politics, the competent and experienced fighter for the average American, the time-tested maverick of independent principle and conviction. The times, it would seem, they are a changin'.

To be sure, some of the universal appeal of a change agenda is an effort to establish a clear separation from the historically unpopular current administration immersed in a controversial war and foundering in the rough seas of a dramatic downturn in the economy. But the chorus calling for change also echoes a broad popular fatigue and even frustration with things as they are, a sense that the system no longer works, a sentiment that links directly to the fact that we are experiencing an epochal generational shift that longs for new paradigms, newly independent thinking, and as yet unimagined possibilities.

These are the forces that have buoyed the Obama campaign in particular, which cannily anticipated this mood among the electorate in crafting its message and has most successfully capitalized on student leadership in the campaign. Whether the Senator from Illinois can convincingly deliver on that promise to the public or whether the politics of the long electoral season will move the public to gravitate toward a more familiar image of leadership cannot now be known. Regardless, both the Clinton and McCain campaigns have echoed the same refrain and present their candidates as change agents, too, even as they tout their long experience.

But the larger point for us on campus remains: This is a time for changing the way we do things as well, for looking at them anew and moving past the categories that have defined the way things have always been done. We have heard expressions of that same sense of fatigue with the status quo aimed against higher education, both from the public and from the federal government. We are losing our prestige and respect in the culture. We are increasingly unaffordable, even if the parties that decry it the loudest bear some blame for making it that way. The academy is, rightfully, an institution that moves

slowly and is not subject to the shifting winds of fashion and the whims of the market. It is a place of tradition, but one of innovation as well. College campuses are libraries where the best of what has been thought and done is captured, studied, and honored; and we are also laboratories where critique and analysis lead to the discovery of new kinds of knowledge and understanding, new ways of approaching old problems, and new possibilities for human aspiration and endeavor.

If we as college presidents are wise in this time of generational empowerment and transition, and of a general desire for change, we would do well to fortify the elements of our campuses that are innovative and imaginative and forward looking, and be prepared to think and do things both credibly and differently in sustainable ways.

### Lesson Three: Ghosts (and Gifts) in the Machine

The third lesson, and this is no revelation, is that this campaign provides ample evidence that technology rules. I mean it *really* rules. This campaign is unimaginable without the web, texting, cell phones, e-mail, podcasts, YouTube, MySpace, PDAs, MP3s, CMS, blogs and logs, and all manner of both conventional and unconventional media outlets. The Internet has made possible the broad-based bankrolling of prodigiously expensive campaigns by producing contributions from millions of individuals who can log on and pay up with a touch of the keyboard or cell phone. It has made possible virtual mass rallies and viral movements organized and executed at a moment's notice, events that took months to stage in the real streets of the prior Children's Crusade. Then, television was a medium transforming the landscape. Now, we are experiencing another revolution, and it is digital.

Like many voters, I am on the e-mail list of one candidate. My wife is on another's. We each get daily e-mail updates from the campaigns. I regularly receive a refined but friendly one directly from the candidate, addressing me with a familiar version of my first name. I get another every day from the candidate's campaign manager or one of the campaign volunteers, which takes a different tone. The candidate's message is inspiring, strategic, and principled; the volunteer's is passionate, pragmatic, and tactical. All the messages are brilliantly coordinated, although they intentionally don't seem to be. They are different every day: They may celebrate a victory, reassure me about a setback that might break in the media over the next few hours, rally me for a comeback, link me to a live streaming of a spectacular speech now being given, rebut the opponent's talking points, supply me with a list of names and numbers from a category of voters of my choice to call in an upcoming primary state (so that I can help get out the vote), offer me

(just me!) the chance to be the millionth donor to the campaign this month—for the first time in history. This time, it's personal.

Our lesson? I, for one, wish that we were half as effective on our campus in deploying technology to enhance learning, recruit students, communicate within our campus community, reach out to and engage our alumni, and develop relationships with our donors. Of course, technology has been with us on campus for a long time now. Most of us are now pretty well wired, wireless, and webbed. We have made spectacular investments in hardware and software, and appointed chief technology officers and large staffs of programmers, software technicians, and IT specialists without whom we could not function.

And it's a good thing. Because if we are to communicate with our primary audience, our students, if we are to understand them, be reached by them, and reach out to them, if we are to educate them in a language they understand and in which they are already fiercely fluent, we better do it in a high-touch, personalized way that is technologically sophisticated, but that also integrates effectively into our particular missions and institutional cultures.

That's the trick the most effective political campaigns have mastered: It's both personal and digital, and it's a good lesson for all of us.

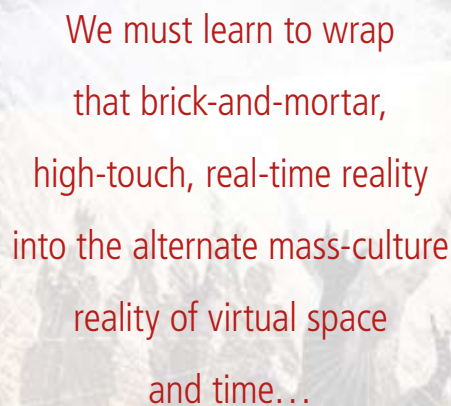
I've always been a face-to-face guy, a proponent of the handwritten note on personal stationery, the personal phone call, the casual stop by the office of a colleague. As president of a residential liberal arts college, a humanist, and former English professor, I am no Luddite. But I have always favored the intimate seminar setting and the close mentoring relationship that happens between faculty and students in small classes on small campuses, the things we learn together over a cup of coffee at the café or sitting next to each other at a lecture hall, a ball game, or a concert. I still do. But we must learn to wrap that brick-and-mortar, high-touch, real-time reality into the alternate mass-culture reality of virtual space and time in which we also live our parallel lives. And we each have to do it in ways that are true to the particular character and personality of our institutions and constituents.

#### Lesson Four: Déjà vu (Not Necessarily All Over Again)

There are other lessons in the campaign, too, of course. Racial bigotry and gender bias are both still very much alive in our cultural conscious and unconscious (as they are on our campuses), and will manifest in the most shocking ways from the most surprising places. The politics of personal destruction still has mysteriously potent powers among the populace. Patriotism is still the last refuge of scoundrels and the ultimate cudgel with which to pound an opponent. Everything can change in a day. It is painful to recall how the early heady days of the 1968

Children's Crusade led to such disappointment and tragedy in the shocking assassination of a popular candidate and a great civil rights leader, the bloodshed and chaos of the Chicago convention, and the destruction and loss of life that followed on the streets of our cities and the quadrangles of our campuses. We won't see these unthinkable things this time, I trust, at least not if we have learned some of the lessons of history. But we don't know what lies ahead in the weeks and months to come, and we should be ready for anything that might be blowing in the wind.

These are a few of the lessons I take from this presidential campaign. It is about our students, a newly engaged, activist generation; the course of their instruction is change, innovation, transformation; and the pedagogical approach for them is a creative combination of high touch and high tech, in which technology is a tool that can enable a more genuine human interaction and truly connected and diverse campus communities. As college presidents, we would do well to heed these lessons as we celebrate the possibility of electing candidates whose viability was unimaginable in the earlier Children's Crusade, honor the newly discovered political engagement of our students, and prepare to meet the enthusiasms of a new generation with opportunities for authentic personal and cultural transformation on our campuses and beyond them. That, after all, is the revolution we have always wanted, and the one in which we are all engaged. ■



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