

Tell me again: who's who in this game?

Joan Chittister | Sep. 8, 2008 From Where I Stand

With the political conventions over for this electoral season, I found myself haunted by the memory of an old child's game called "Pickup Sticks." In the game of "Pickup Sticks" somebody throws a bundle of long, thin pieces of balsa wood into the air. What had been an orderly assortment of wire-thin skewers is now a higgledy-piggledy mound of wood with each stick of different value.

Task: Pick up each one of them without moving any of the other sticks, accrue as many points as you can and then start again, like darts, toward an established series score. I never really liked the game.

I woke up the morning after the Republican National Convention feeling like I'd just found myself sitting in a pile of pickup sticks. Whatever had defined the two parties before their national conventions suddenly seemed to have blurred a bit. In fact, it's getting more difficult by the day to tell who's who anymore.

For instance:

- Change, I had been led to believe, was the purview of the Democrats. The Old Guard, they said, was the Republican brand, their candidate simply a third-term Bush surrogate.
- Third parties, the pundits said, were silly in a two-party system, political spoilers, maybe, but not a serious challenge to the status quo.
- The Democrats would get us out of war, they promised. The Republicans thrived on it, it seemed.
- Finally, in party politics, I'd been made to understand, program analysis, not the development of a cult of personality, was the purpose of election campaigns. No razzle-dazzle here, just the facts, folks.

But think again. If what we saw in the conventions is what's really going on, the present political game may be changing right before our eyes.

Instead of what we were led to expect, it is the Republicans who laid claim to being the party of change by putting a woman on the national ticket. It is the Democrats who put the Old Guard in the vice-presidential slot.

Instead, it is the Republican candidates who are running against their own party as if they themselves were a Third Party of their First Party.

Instead, if we take both acceptance speeches at face value, it was the Democratic nominee who campaigned against war who called for a surge in Afghanistan. He said, "I will end this war in Iraq responsibly and finish the fight against Al Qaida and the Taliban in Afghanistan. I will rebuild our military to meet future conflicts, but I will also renew the tough, direct diplomacy that can prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons and curb Russian aggression." And the Republican nominee, praised for securing the surge of troops in Iraq said in his acceptance speech, "I hate war. It is terrible beyond imagination. I am running for president ... to prevent other

families from risking their loved ones in war as my family has. I will draw on ... all the tools at our disposal -- diplomatic, economic, military and the power of our ideals to build the foundations for a stable and enduring peace.?

Instead, after a primary race involving racism and sexism, it is Republican women who are calling the attention of the country to the strains of sexism. A woman candidate for the vice presidency, they point out, has triggered media comments about her political viability because of her ?motherhood? responsibilities, her ?shrillness? when she?s clear, and her ?pit-bull personality? when she confronts her male counterparts. No word, however, about anybody?s failed fatherhood, or any man?s irascibility when he calls his followers to ?fight with me; fight with me? for the programs he espouses or the danger to the country when most male senatorial candidates of both parties have, by definition, limited executive experience.

Point: Somehow or other, someone threw all the political pickup sticks into the air, just when we thought things were pretty well settled down. Sarah Palin, in other words, is just one of the new factors in this race that needs to be considered before people go into a voting booth in November.

The fact is that under all the theater, there are themes that stand to be missed in the new cult of personality. It may, in fact, be on the brink of strangling this election. Where those issues are concerned, some things haven?t changed much at all.

Eight years ago people were given to saying that it didn?t really matter which party you voted for because they were both the same. People aren?t saying that this year. Now everybody knows it matters. It really matters. On a number of fronts. The choices with which the candidates confront us are more obvious. (See ?What They Promised: [McCain](#) [1] and [Obama](#) [2]? Saturday, September 6, 08) The questions are clearer this time. Or at least they were.

We have questions about strict constructionism and the role of the Supreme Court in both keeping the Constitution and developing its values at the same time.

We have questions about the philosophy of exceptionalism in a global world. Is the United States different, better than other countries and other peoples? Do our needs and rights and ideas and plans deserve more attention than theirs?

We have questions about the relationship between nationalism and globalism in a global world. Should we be observers or collaborators on the world stage? Are we a ?One World? people or a ?Put America First? people?

We have questions about whether or not this election is about issues or about individuals, about the personality of a candidate or the policies and programs of a candidate?

We have questions, just as George Washington did, about whether or not party politics, the smothering of the conscience of individual legislators for the sake of party unity isn?t the very reason we have gridlock in Washington.

We have questions about what it means to ?defend? a country, about what it really takes to protect it, about the best way to really bring peace: through a stronger military or through a more moral and imaginative model of national policies.

The president who deals with these questions will affect this country for years to come. But Instead of program analyses, the election is shaping up as a contest between persons and personalities, between ?straight-talking? and ?nuance,? between youth and age, between one kind of ?experience? over another kind of ?experience.?

From where I stand, the temptation right now, of course, is to wade into the Sarah Palin issue, which certainly deserves a great deal more attention as time goes by but for completely different reasons. That pickup stick, however, as serious as it may be, simply does not have enough points yet to qualify for immediate attention, despite the fact that it has apparently moved a lot of other sticks. It may, at best, only serve at the present time to distract from the major themes of this election. In fact, maybe that's what it's designed to do.

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