

The great American race for power

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NOTES FROM DELHI

By M.J. Akbar

SINCE the only functional law of democracy places perception above facts, logic can only be a secondary guide to the fate of fortune hunters in an election. Let us attempt a new methodology. Why not throw random facts, picked arbitrarily from a day's reading of newspapers and a special issue on politics of the New Yorker, into a kaleidoscope and see if any pattern emerges about the Great American Race.

In the days of studio domination of Hollywood, when stars were given weekly wages, Warner Brothers used a scientific audit to rate the popularity of the stars on its payroll. The winner in 1941-42 had more support among girls of 17 than women of 30 or more; received more applause from moviegoers who earned \$25 or less a week than those taking home \$60 or more; and sold more tickets in towns with a population of 10,000 or less than in the big cities. His name? You guessed it. Ronald Reagan.

At the time he was still surging ahead in the primaries, the Democratic meteor Howard Dean permitted an enthusiast to pour a milkshake into a glass perched on his head. Dean retained his physical balance, but the first doubts began to creep in about his mental balance.

The Democrats cut short their primary process, gave John Kerry the nomination and then watched him cool down on the electoral thermometer even as George

bly win by a smaller margin than last time, so he couldn't possibly avoid the conclusion that he had been given a more expansive mandate." Lemann also recalls what Bush told Bob Woodward in December 2001: "I have no outside advice... First of all, in the initial phase of this war, I never left the compound. Nor did anyone come in the compound. I was, you talk about one guy in a bubble."

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On August 6 this year, five billionaires and six liberals met at the Aspen Institute, situated in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, and swore themselves to secrecy. They then concentrated on a single purpose: how to defeat Bush. The moneybags were Peter Shore, chairman of an insurance company, John Sperling from Arizona, Herb and Marion Sandler from California — and George Soros, king of Wall Street.

did not tell you that with each passing day our enemies are getting bolder — that Pentagon officials report that entire regions of Iraq are now in the hands of terrorists and extremists... You deserve a president who will not play politics with national security, who will not ignore his own intelligence, while living in a fantasy world of spin."

Stanley Presser, professor of sociology at the University of Maryland, believes that opinion polls should not be trusted if they merely ask whether respondents are for or against X or Y. There is no certain answer to "How are you?" There is a far better answer to "How are you compared to yesterday, or compared to someone?"

A Gallup poll released on September 17 showed a 13-point lead for Bush. A Pew poll a day earlier found the candidates to be almost tied.

The first polling was done by a magazine called *Literary Digest*. It would send around 20 million postcards and receive an average of five million answers. It correctly named the winners of the 1924, 1928 and 1932 American presidential elections, and predicted in 1936 that Alf Landon would defeat incumbent Roosevelt by five percentage points. A young pollster who sampled only thousands, but went door to door, made a public bet that the *Digest* would be wrong. Roosevelt won. George Gallup went on a roll, and is still rolling.

Have you heard of the Push Poll? It is designed to push the respondent towards the answer the client wants. When Zogby did a poll for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) it asked Americans whether they would give up eating

Bush warmed up by stoking up a fear psychosis. A guest on the Jay Leno show, a bitter sort of comic, told Leno, "Jay, the poop I made in your dressing room has more heat than John Kerry".

Kerry was sitting onstage at the time. He kept his cool.

The 20 electoral votes of the Midwest, and therefore currently conservative, state of Ohio will make the difference between victory and defeat as the contest goes to the wire. An executive of a company called Diebold proudly claimed that he was "committed to helping Ohio deliver its electoral votes to President (Bush)". Diebold is a maker of the voting machines that will be used in the United States on November 2.

When Bush's daughter Jenna got stuck in the elevator of a nightclub while on the campaign trail, she opened the door with a chopstick and later calmed herself with a tequila. Jenna is now so popular that she introduces her dad in the Republican heartland before he delivers his stump speech. In the first of the three debates Bush attacked the "moolah" of Iraq. He didn't mean the moolah paid out to Cheney-crony companies like Halliburton. It was his preferred pronunciation of "mullah".

Last year, he ended the nuanced Clinton policy towards Iran, in which the elected Mohammad Khatami was the good guy and leader of the clergy Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was the bad guy. Iran was placed unambiguously on the axis of evil. The word from the neocons around Bush is that once Bush is elected Iran will be punished with a military attack on its nuclear facilities, since moolahs are not going to be permitted the luxury of a nuclear arsenal. The military operation could be outsourced to Israel.

Nicolas Lemann notes in the *New Yorker*: "If voters give Bush a second term ... he would pursue ends that are now outside what most people conceive of as the compass points of the debate, by means that are more aggressive than we are accustomed to. And he couldn't possi-

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Bush. The moneybags were Peter Shore, chairman of an insurance company called Progressive Corporation and owner of a 250-foot yacht, Lone Ranger, that is often his home; John Sperling from Arizona; Herb and Marion Sandler from California; and George Soros, king of Wall Street.

Soros, who started with \$6 million in 1969 and turned it into \$7 billion, is the most public face of this alliance. He donates some \$400 million a year to causes he likes. He believes Bush is terrible for the world, America and him, in that order. Officially the Kerry campaign keeps him at arm's length, worried about any radical outburst. Former president, Bill Clinton, once kept him waiting so long that he had to send officials after him when he walked out. Soros was convinced in May that Bush could be defeated although the opinion polls put him so far ahead Kerry couldn't see where the frontrunner had gone. Since George Soros is a Jew, rightwing attacks on him include more than a hint of racism. He says he is too old to care. His philosophy is simple. "If I want it, I own it." He is convinced that the Iraq invasion was a disaster, and America should pull out as soon as is decently compatible with national interest.

Kerry relaunched himself on September 16 in Las Vegas at the annual convention of the National Guard Association which, two days before, had cheered Bush to the rafters. Senator John Kerry said, "I believe he (Bush) failed the fundamental test of leadership. He failed to tell you the truth. (He) did not even acknowledge that more than a 1,000 men and women have lost their lives in Iraq. He did not tell you that with each passing day we're seeing more chaos, more violence, more indiscriminate killings. He

meat if they knew that chicken, only days old, get their beaks seared off with hot blades to prevent them from pecking one another in jam-packed cages. Or that bulls and pigs are castrated without painkillers. Politicians

who find they have won in the polls but lost in the ballot box may want to check if they have been flattered to deceive.

Incidentally, when you read that a particular poll has been conducted on the telephone, remember a few facts: women answer the phone more than men, and young people don't hang around at home.

Zogby got the Bush-Gore election right with an unusual question. "You live in the Land of Oz, and the candidates are the Tin Man, who's all brains and no heart, and the Scarecrow, who's all heart and no brains. Who would you vote for?" The response was a dead heat: 46.2 per cent per cent for each. He asked the question again in the last week of September. The Tin Man was ahead this time by 10 points.

The share price of Halliburton, the Cheney-propped American multinational that received a multi-billion dollar grace-and-favour contract in Iraq, has shed sharply on the New York Stock Exchange, from \$50 to around \$30.

The day after Bush lost the third straight debate a news report from Baghdad said: "Prime Minister Ayad Allawi threatened Wednesday that a military assault would be mounted against Fallujah if the rebel bastion did not surrender Iraq's most wanted man, the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi." Translation: Musharraf can't deliver Osama bin Laden before November 2. Hamid Karzai hasn't been asked to pick up Mullah Omar. So it's Allawi's turn to deliver an also-ran. Does it matter that the CIA says that Zarqawi had no links with Saddam Hussein, and that official investigations confirm that Saddam had neither weapons of mass destruction nor any connections with Al Qaeda? No.

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