

Los Angeles Times

FALL SALE

USE YOUR SAVINGS PASS
WEDNESDAY-MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 24-29



ROLL O
this ad to
and to ge

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-gitlin28-2008sep28,0,7896539.story>

From the Los Angeles Times

Opinion

Race for president builds characters

Once again, we're treated to not just a campaign but a collision of myths.

By Todd Gitlin

September 28, 2008

This election campaign is about more than its issues, slogans, proposals, strategies, tactics, attacks or counterattacks. Like most presidential elections, it represents a collision of myths. Every four years, various versions of America wrestle with one another, and through this combat, the nation inspects itself, turns itself over and over, striving to choose not only how it wants to be led but what it wants to affirm, how it wants to be known -- really, what it wants to be.

Americans, of course, aren't always focused on these grand stakes; day to day, they see a more down-to-earth campaign -- the stump speeches, the barbs and one-liners, the attack ads. Pettiness consumes the attention of journalists and the prurient interest of the jaded. Sometimes the combat rises to the level of issues and policies. Sometimes it even approximates a rational contest as the candidates try to explain what they think is wrong and what they propose to do about it. Petty or substantive, all these are elements of the surface campaign, which may, in the end, determine who wins and loses but also obscures what is really at stake.

The true campaign is the deep campaign, the subsurface campaign, which concerns not just what the candidates say but who they are and what they represent -- what they *symbolize*.

In July, Barack Obama took some criticism for saying that "the crowds, the enthusiasm, 200,000 people in Berlin, is not about me at all. It's about America. I have just become a symbol." Some people thought that sounded a bit arrogant, but he was right. It was not a boast, it was a fact. People look at the candidates and project onto them something they value.

The candidates become, in a sense, walking archetypes. To warm to a candidate is to align not just with a person but with a myth, an ideal. Sometimes we say that people prefer the candidate they "feel more comfortable with" or the one they "would like to have a beer with," but to put it that way is to trivialize the deeper truth.

Part of what makes this year's race so volatile -- and so absorbing -- is the range of archetypes it has mobilized. Sen. John McCain is relatively familiar. He is the leathery man of the West, of exactly the sort who has entranced the Republican Party for almost half a century now. It is the role that Barry Goldwater, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush played before him.

McCain himself invokes Theodore Roosevelt, the Rough Rider who, despite his New York origins,

ranching in South Dakota and hunted throughout the West. Those who admire McCain tend to believe that it was men of this sort -- rugged individualists, plain-spoken, straight-talking, self-sufficient men at home in nature (not in our effete cities) -- who settled the West on their own. The myth discounts the immense role of the federal government in conquering the natives, seeing that the railroads were built, adjudicating disputes, arranging for water. No matter: Print the legend. In this image of the Old West, history belongs to the man who takes charge, the warrior in command who knows how to shoot and how to lead others to shoot as well.

To McCain's incarnation of this powerful archetype has been added the sidekick Sarah Palin. Palin mobilizes a powerful and unusual -- powerful partly because it is unusual -- supplementary combination of myths. She is Annie Oakley, the sharpshooter who foolhardy men underestimate at their peril even if she has a penchant for tall tales. But Palin is also Wonder Woman, the superheroine whose exploits and attractions appeal to both sexes. And she is Aimee Semple McPherson, the onetime revivalist and moralist of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. In the imagination of her followers, Palin is some combination of Glamour, Outdoor Life, Playboy and DC Comics.

If the Republican ticket harmonizes with deep mythic currents, the Democrats this year are pioneering, and a bit scrambled, in their mythic significance. Obama is the quintessential outsider -- a "sojourner," the New York Times' David Brooks has called him. He hails from exotic Hawaii, alien Indonesia, elegant Harvard and down-and-dirty Chicago, all at the same time. To his devotees, he is part city-slicker, part man of the world; to his enemies, precisely this combination makes him suspect. Like the Lone Ranger, he rides into town to serve a community in need, but in a surprising twist, this Lone Ranger is closer to the color of Tonto.

Mythically, therefore, Obama is elusive, Protean, a shape-shifter who, when not beloved, arouses suspicion. Perhaps he is that object of envy and derision, a "celebrity," as the McCain campaign suggested, but he's also an egghead. He's the professor -- but one who can sink the shot from beyond the three-point circle. He too has a sidekick, but, if you judge by their resumes, it is as if Robin has chosen Batman. One thing is clear: He is not a man of the ranch. Personifying a welter of archetypes, he thrills some, confounds others and jams circuits. Some people ask, "Who is this guy?"

So that's the clash. McCain, the known quantity, the maverick turned lawman, fiery when called on to fight, an icon of the old known American story of standing tall, holding firm, protecting God's country against the stealthy foe. Obama is the new kid on the block, the immigrant's child, the recruit, fervent but still preternaturally calm, embodying some complicated future that we haven't yet mapped, let alone experienced. He is impure -- the walking, talking melting pot in person. In his person, the next America is still taking shape.

The warrior turned lawman confronts the community organizer turned law professor. The sheriff (who married the heiress) wrestles with the outsider who rode into town and made a place for himself. No wonder this race is thrilling and tense. America is struggling to fasten a name on its soul.

Todd Gitlin, a professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia University, is the author, most recently, of "The Bulldozer and the Big Tent: Blind Republicans, Lame Democrats, and the Recovery of American Ideals."

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

partners:

