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!!!ObamaPluralismSpectacle: Barack Obama, the Power Elite and Media Spectacle

Douglas Kellner

(University of California, Los Angeles)

Power elite theory played a significant role in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s among certain sectors of the academic establishment, and among some individuals who would come to constitute the New Left. C. Wright Mills, for instance, in *The Power Elite* argued that Big Business, Big Government, Big Labor and a growing military-industrial complex were coming to dominate American society and politics.¹⁾ Mills was also one of the first to see that emergent mass media were coming to be a powerful force that served the interests of dominant elites. In *White Collar*, Mills stressed the crucial role of the mass media in shaping individual behavior and in inducing conformity to middle class values. He argued that the media are increasingly shaping individual aspirations and behavior and are above all promoting values of “individual success.” He also believed that entertainment media were especially potent instruments of social control because

1) C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956).

“popular culture is not tagged as ‘propaganda’ but as entertainment; people are often exposed to it when most relaxed of mind and tired of body; and its characters offer easy targets of identification, easy answers to stereotyped personal problems.”²⁾

Mills analyzed the banalization of politics in the media, by which means “the mass media plug for ruling political symbols and personalities .”³⁾ Perceiving the parallel between marketing commodities and selling politicians, Mills analyzed tendencies toward the commodification of politics, and, in *The Power Elite*, he focused on the manipulative role of media in shaping public opinion and strengthening the power of the dominant elites. In an analysis that anticipated Habermas’ theory in *Structural Changes in the Public Sphere*, Mills discusses the shift from a social order consisting of “communities, of publics,” in which individuals participated in political and social debate and action, to a “mass society” characterized by the “transformation of public into mass.”⁴⁾ The impact of the mass media is crucial in this “great transformation” for it shifts “the ratio of givers of opinion to the receivers” in favor of small groups of elites, who control or have access to the mass media.⁵⁾ Moreover, the mass media engage in one-way communication that does not allow feedback, thus obliterating another feature of a democratic public sphere. In addition, the media rarely encourage participation in public action. In these ways, the mass media foster social passivity and the fragmentation of the public sphere into privatized consumers.

The rise of media power in the succeeding decades followed the

2) C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 336.

3) *Ibid.*, 338.

4) Mills, *The Power Elite*, 298ff.

5) *Ibid.*

logic of Mills' power elite arguments. Successful Presidential candidates in the U.S. had the backing of one of the two major Big Government parties, the Democrats and Republicans, and tended to carry out policies that would serve the interests of corporate elites, the military-industrial complex, the two major political parties, and Big Government. In the next section, I will argue that the presidency of the Bush-Cheney administration (2000-2008) followed the logic of power elite theory, but that the victory in the 2008 presidential election by Barack Obama points to a new political logic governed by the rise of media spectacle and a pluralization of U.S. politics.

From the Bush-Cheney Administration to the Obama Era

The Bush-Cheney administration carried out an agenda serving the interests of big corporations, the military-industrial complex, and the rightwing of the Republican Party during its eight years in office.⁶⁾ Many major figures in the administration came out of the corporate sector, especially the oil and energy industries, and many came from the conservative wing of the Republican Party that served the military-industrial complex. Within its first days in office, the Bush-Cheney administration began the process of undoing the socially liberal regulatory politics previously enacted by the Clinton administration. Although its ambitious rightwing agenda was initially stalled, following

6) I refer to the Bush-Cheney administration rather than to the George W. Bush administration because of the immense role played by Dick Cheney. For my analysis of the Bush-Cheney administration that documents the claims made in this section, see Kellner, *Grand Theft 2000* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); Kellner, *From September 11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); and Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2005).

the terror attacks of September 11 on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the Bush–Cheney administration was yet able to put through a rightist political agenda under the frame of the so-called U.S. Patriot Act. What is more, through military excursions into Afghanistan and Iraq, the administration furthered the interests of the military–industrial complex and awarded billions in contracts to corporations to which the conservative regime was tied, including Dick Cheney’s Halliburton corporation.⁷⁾

Eventually, the oil and energy industries, the military–industrial sector, the housing and financial sector, and other corporations who had supported the Bush–Cheney administration were rewarded as the government passed legislation that deregulated these sectors and provided copious public contracts to corporations like Halliburton. The media largely went along with the turn toward the right, and, especially following the 9/11 terror attacks, did not directly criticize the Bush–Cheney administration. After the Hurricane Katrina fiasco in 2005, followed by the apparent collapse of the U.S. financial sector in 2008, the media finally began critique of the Bush–Cheney agenda.

In retrospect, the Bush–Cheney era can be explained by the elite theories of C. Wright Mills in that during this era, Big Business, Big Government, and the military–industrial complex were aligned to carry out an agenda in the interests of these elites. The election of Barack Obama seemed to put in question classical power elite theory, although Obama’s challenges in office and the defeats received by Obama and the Democratic Party in the 2010 elections, suggest that

7) On the September 11 terror attacks and how they enabled the Bush–Cheney administration to push through a rightwing and corporate agenda, see Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

elite theory still has purchase in explaining American politics and should not be abandoned out of hand in favor of a new pluralist theory of a postmodern politics. I will, however, argue that the phenomenon of media spectacle has become a central factor in contemporary American politics and society, and that this creates new political opening and politics.

I argue that in the contemporary era of media politics, image and media spectacle are playing an increasingly important role in presidential politics and other domains of society. With the growing tabloidization of corporate journalism, lines between news, information and entertainment have blurred, and politics has become a form of entertainment and spectacle. Candidates enlist celebrities in their election campaigns and are increasingly covered by journalists in the same way as celebrities, with tabloidized news obsessing about their private lives. In this context, presidential candidates themselves become celebrities and are packaged and sold like the products of the culture industry.

In this study, I will suggest some of the ways that the logic of the spectacle promoted the candidacy of Barack Obama and how he has become a master of the spectacle and global celebrity of the top rank. I will discuss how he became a super-celebrity in the presidential primaries and general election of 2008 and utilized media spectacle to help his win the presidency. Finally, I will discuss how Obama and his administration came up against the forces of traditional power elites, including relatively new forces of rightwing political power, that weakened his presidency and threatened his continued power after the 2010 midterm elections. But first I want to elucidate the power of media spectacle in contemporary U.S. and global powers and

the emerging role of political figures as celebrities.

Media Spectacle, Celebrity, and Contemporary U.S. Politics

In the contemporary era, celebrities are mass idols, venerated and celebrated by the media. The media produces celebrities and so naturally the most popular figures promoted by the media industries become celebrities. Entertainment industry figures and sports stars have long been at the center of celebrity culture, employing public relations and image specialists to put out positive buzz and stories concerning themselves, but business tycoons and politicians have also become celebrities in recent years. Chris Rojek distinguishes between “ascribed celebrity,” which concerns lineage, such as belonging to the Royal Family in the United Kingdom, or the Bush or Kennedy families in the United States; “achieved celebrity,” which is won by outstanding success in fields like entertainment, sports, or talent in a particular field; and “attributed celebrity,” through which fame is achieved through media representations or spectacle, as in scandals or tabloid features⁸⁾, with Paris Hilton being an obvious example.

Celebrity is dependent on both constant media proliferation and the implosion between entertainment, news and politics. The proliferation of media outlets has created an ever more intense and diffuse celebrity culture with specialized publications, internet sites, and social networking fanning the flames of celebrity culture and mainstream media further circulating and legitimating it. Celebrities have thus become the most popular figures in their field and publics seem to have insatiable appetites for inside information and gossip about their idols, fueling a media in search of profit in a competitive market to provide

8) Chris Rojek, *Celebrity*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 17ff.

increasing amounts of celebrity news, images and spectacle.

Indeed, celebrity culture is such that there is a class of faux celebrities—think Paris Hilton—who are largely famous for being famous and being in the media, a new type of fame enabled by the circulation of gossip through new media and social networking sites. In this context, it is not surprising that politicians, especially political leaders frequently in the media spotlight, have become celebrities, as publics seek news, information and gossip about their private and public lives, turning some politicians into media superstars and relegating politicians caught in scandal to tabloid hell and damnation.

In addition, politics in the United States and elsewhere have become propelled in recent years by media spectacle.⁹⁾ It is my position that the mainstream corporate media today in the U.S. and elsewhere increasingly process events, news and information in the form of media spectacle. In an arena of heightened competition between 24/7 cable television networks, talk radio, internet sites and blogs, and ever proliferating new media like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Twitter, competition for the public's attention is evermore intense, leading the corporate media to turn to sensationalistic tabloidized stories constructed in the forms of media spectacle.

Spectacles are media constructs that are out of the ordinary and habitual daily routine and which thereby become popular media events, capturing the attention of the media and the public. They

9) On my concept of media spectacle, see Kellner, *Grand Theft 2000*; Kellner, *Media Spectacle*; Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis*; and Kellner, *Guys and Guns: Domestic Terrorism And School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombings to the Virginia Tech Massacre* (Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Press, 2008).

involve an aesthetic dimension and often are dramatic, bound up with competition like the Olympics or the Oscars and featuring compelling images, montage and stories. In particular, media spectacle refers to technologically mediated events, in which media forms—like broadcasting, print media or the internet—process events in spectacular ways. Natural disasters are presented as media spectacle or “Breaking News!” Highly dangerous hurricanes, tsunamis, fires, and other natural events dominate the news cycle when they hit, as the Asian Tsunami of 2005 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 both did, and are processed as media spectacle. Global pandemics can also become major media spectacles as with the SARS spectacle of 2003 and the so-called Swine Flu crisis of 2009 (although the latter soon fizzled out, surpassed by the deaths of Michael Jackson, Farrah Fawcett, Walter Cronkite, and other celebrity spectacles).

Examples of political events that became media spectacles would include the Clinton sex and impeachment scandal in the late 1990s, the death of Princess Diana, the 9/11 terror attacks, and the meltdown of the U.S. and global financial systems concurrent with the 2008 presidential election and new presidency of Barack Obama. Celebrity spectacles include the O.J. Simpson trial which dominated corporate media news in the mid-1990s¹⁰, the ongoing Britney Spears saga, or, most striking, the spectacle of the life, death and aftermath of Michael Jackson which is becoming one of the most enduring and far-reaching media spectacles of all time.

In next section, I suggest some of the ways that the logic of the spectacle promoted the candidacy of Barack Obama and indicate how he has become a master of the spectacle and a global celebrity of the first

10) Kellner, *Media Spectacle*.

rank. I will discuss how he became a “supercelebrity” during the presidential primaries and general election of 2008, and how he utilized media spectacle to help win the presidency. Finally, I will discuss how Obama has, in the first months of his presidency, deployed his status as global supercelebrity and utilized media spectacle to advance his agenda, while confronting the limits of spectacle politics and the enduring power of traditional elites.

Media Spectacle and Politics: The Democratic Party Spectacle

Looking at the 2008 Democratic Party primaries, we see exhibited the triumph of the spectacle. In this case, the spectacle of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton—the first serious African American candidate versus the first serious woman candidate—generated a compelling spectacle of race and gender as well as a campaign spectacle in the incredibly hard-fought and unpredictable primaries. As a media spectacle, the Democratic Party primary could be seen as a reality TV show. For the media and candidates alike, the Democratic primary was like “Survivor” or “The Apprentice” (“You’re fired!”), with losing candidates knocked out week by week. With the two standing candidates Obama and Clinton, it was like “The Amazing Race,” “American Gladiator” and “American Idol” all rolled into one, with genuine suspense building over the outcome.

The primary was also a celebrity spectacle because Hillary Clinton was one of the major celebrities in U.S. culture, as well as a former First Lady and New York Senator, while Barack Obama, a community organizer, Illinois state legislator and then Senator was emerging as one of the major celebrity figures in U.S. and even global politics.¹¹⁾

11) In this article, I am ignoring Obama’s earlier pre-celebrity history. He first

The spectacle of race and gender in a major U.S. party primary was unprecedented, as presidential politics had previously largely been the prerogative of white males. As Jackson Katz argues in a forthcoming study, masculinity and presidential packaging of the candidate as the strongest leader, a protective father and a true man has been a major determinant of presidential elections in the media age.¹²⁾ Having both a woman and an African American as candidates thus broke with the dominant code of Great White Leader; in addition (as we shall see), Barack Obama came to challenge dominant conceptions of presidential masculinity as well as race.

From the first primary in Iowa, where in January he won a startling victory, Obama emerged as a spectacle of hope, of change, of color and of youth. In addition to his everyday campaign stump speeches that mobilized record crowds, on every primary election night Obama made a spirited speech, even after his unexpected loss to Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire, proclaiming: "'Yes We Can' was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot ... and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land."

On Super Tuesday, in one of the most watched events of the primary season's first weeks, Obama gave a compelling victory speech, which became the most circulated speech on the internet that week. With that multi-state primary victory, Obama pulled slightly ahead in delegate

came to national attention through his dramatic keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic Party convention where he emerged as a rising star followed by setting his own political trajectory and philosophy in two well-written and best-selling books, *Dreams from My Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004) and *Audacity of Hope* (New York: Vintage, 2008).

12) Jackson Katz, *Presidency as Pedagogy*.

count. Obama then won 11 primaries in a row, made another striking speech after the Wisconsin primary in which he took over the airways for about an hour, offering a vision of the U.S. coming together that included mobilizing people for change, carrying out a progressive agenda, getting out of Iraq, and using the money spent there to rebuild the infrastructure, schools, health care system, and so on. Even when Obama lost primaries, he gave inspiring and impassioned speeches.

There was also an impressive internet spectacle in support of Obama's presidency. Obama raised an unprecedented amount of money on the internet, generated more than two million friends on Facebook and 866,887 friends on MySpace and reportedly had a campaign listserv of over 10 million e-mail addresses, enabling his campaign to mobilize youth and others through text-messaging and e-mails.¹³⁾

13) On Obama's mobilization of the internet, see Rezayazdi, "New Politics, New Media," *Little Village*, January 14, 2009, <http://www.littlevillagemag.com/content/2009/01/new-politics-new-media/>; Gulati, "No Laughing Matter: The Role of New Media in the 2008 Election," in *The Year Of Obama: How Barack Obama won the White House*, ed. L. J. Sabato (New York: Longman, 2010), 187-204; and Cornfield, "Game-Changers," in *The Year Of Obama: How Barack Obama won the White House*, ed. L. J. Sabato (New York: Longman, 2010), 205-230. Although the latter two articles by political scientists provide detailed analysis of Obama's use of new media and social networking sites, neither engages with the Obama spectacle that was the content of the Obama campaign. Diana Owen asserts that the majority of people polled claimed that they depended on conventional media, especially television, for their news and information on the election, although significant age-related differences in media appeared "leading to speculation that a dual media system may be developing in response to the preferences of older and younger audiences." See Owen, "Media in the 2008 Election: 21st Century Campaign, Same Old Story," in *The Year Of Obama: How Barack Obama won the White House*, ed. L. J. Sabato (New York: Longman, 2010), (pp. 179ff.) In her study of the role of the media in the 2008 election, Owen also neglects the role of media spectacle.

Videos compiled on Obama's official campaign YouTube site were accessed over 11.5 million times¹⁴), while the YouTube (UT) music video "Obama Girl," featuring a young woman singing about why she supports Obama interspersed with images of his speeches, received well over 5 million hits and is one of the most popular in the site's history.¹⁵)

Indeed, grassroots campaigns for Obama illustrate the impact of YouTube and internet spectacle for participatory democracy. Among the enormous numbers of internet-distributed artifacts for the Obama campaign, Will.i.am's "Yes We Can" music video manifests how grassroots-initiated media artifacts can inspire and mobilize individuals to support Obama. This MTV-style UT music video breaks with conventional ways of producing music video, as Will.i.am assembled a variety of artists' grassroots participation in its production. In his words:

I wasn't afraid to stand for "change" ... it was pure inspiration ... so I called my friends ... and they called their friends ... We made the song and video ... Usually this process would take months ... but we did it together in 48 hours ... and instead of putting it in the hands of profit we put it in the hands of inspiration ...¹⁶)

In addition to this video made by professional musicians, there emerged grassroots-based videos made by ordinary people who produced their own videos and narratives to support Obama, collected

14) Gulati, "No Laughing Matter," 195.

15) "Obama Girl," accessed December 14, 2009,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU>.

16) Will.i.am, "Yes We Can," accessed January 30, 2009,
<http://hopeactchange.com/creators/song>

on a YouTube (UT) website.¹⁷⁾ Traditionally underrepresented youth and people of color enthusiastically created UT-style self-made videos, containing their personal narratives and reasons why they support Obama for President, and used these videos as an innovative platform for grassroots political mobilization with which to inspire and consolidate potential Obama supporters online and off-line.

Throughout major cities like Los Angeles, hundreds of Obama art posters and stickers appeared on stop signs, underpasses, buildings and billboards, with Obama's face and the word "HOPE" emblazoned across them. Even street artists began creating Obama graffiti and urban art in public places with Obama's image competing with those of Hollywood stars, sports figures, and other celebrities as icons of the time.¹⁸⁾

So in terms of stagecraft and spectacle, Obama's daily stump speeches on the campaign trail, his post-victory and even post-defeat speeches in the Democratic primaries, and his grassroots internet and cultural support have shown that Obama is a master of the spectacle. As for Hillary Clinton, she simply was not as good as Obama in creating spectacles, although she became proficient as the primaries went along, and near the end of the presidential primaries, the new spectacle of "Hillary the Fighter" emerged as she relentlessly campaigned day and night and was just barely beaten by Obama.

Refusing to give up, Clinton campaigned tirelessly and gave rousing

17) Videos 2-30, accessed January 30, 2009, <http://www.dipdive.com/dip-politics/ywc/>. For detailed analysis of the YouTube videos assembled here, see D. Kellner and G. Kim, "YouTube, Politics and Pedagogy: Some Critical Reflections," in *Media/Cultural studies: Critical Approaches*, ed. by R. Hammer and D. Kellner (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 615-635.

18) K. Linthkium, "Tagged, He's It," *Los Angeles Times* (August 23, 2008, 11)

speeches to her hyped-up forces, so that in the two weeks before the Ohio and Texas primary, the Hillary the Fighter spectacle competed fiercely with the Obama spectacle and helped win her these primaries. Clinton had mobilized an army of highly motivated, largely female, supporters, aided by politicians associated with Bill Clinton and Democratic Party professional operatives. Hillary the Fighter was becoming quite a spectacle herself, going on the attack in the Texas debate, criticizing Obama on the stump and in ads, going on popular TV shows like "Saturday Night Live" (SNL) and "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," to promote her policies and increase her "likeability." During this time, Clinton was a fireball of energy, campaigning daily to impressive crowds, appearing on every imaginable TV show, and getting on the cover of *TIME* magazine on May 17, 2008 with a dramatic cover picture of "The Fighter."

With momentum going her way, Clinton won three party primaries in early March; then the media started to become more critical of Obama after a satirical SNL skit spoofed how the media was hyping Obama relentlessly and promoting him as "The One." Clinton referenced the SNL coverage and even made a complaint in a debate that the media was totally uncritical of her opponent, as *Saturday Night Live* had pointed out. Media pundits and Clinton accelerated their daily attacks on Obama, putting him on the defensive, and Obama appeared to be losing his momentum in the two weeks before the Texas and Ohio primaries, both of which Clinton won, making it a tight and exciting race.

The Clinton forces mobilized a celebrity spectacle for the campaign, getting Jack Nicholson to make ads for her and sending younger stars on the campaign trail in Ohio and Texas. After these big primary

losses, *The New York Times* featured an article, "Lesson of Defeat: Obama Comes out Punching" on March 6, 2008, and a new theme—Obama the Fighter—emerged, supplementing Obama the Visionary, the Charismatic, the Redeemer, and JFK Reborn. Obviously, Obama had to become more aggressive and become a fighter in response to Hillary's fierce attack-dog mode.

As noted, usually the spectacle of masculinity is decisive in U.S. presidential elections.¹⁹⁾ George W. Bush bought a Texas ranch so that he could wear cowboy boots and cut brush, images mocked by Michael Moore in "Fahrenheit 9/11." In 2004, John Kerry went hunting and smeared rabbit blood on himself to project the spectacle of Kerry the Hunter, but the Bush-Cheney campaign played images of Kerry windsurfing on a boat, an aristocratic sport, and used the images of him wind-surfing from one side of the boat to another to illustrate the "flip-flop" motif used against Kerry.

Against Obama, Clinton had become increasingly masculine, positioning herself as the Fighter, the Commander-in-Chief, the aggressive campaigner, assuring white working class voters that "I'll fight for you." One of Clinton's subordinates said she alone had the "testicular fortitude" to do the job, while another praised her, saying that, "She makes Rocky Balboa look like a pansy."²⁰⁾ (In Pennsylvania, Clinton even played the gun card, recalling how her grandfather had taught her respect for guns and how to shoot them—a statement that led

19) Jackson Katz, *Presidency as Pedagogy: A Cultural Studies Analysis of Violence, Media and the Construction of Presidential Masculinities* (dissertation, UCLA, 2009).

20) M. Leibovich and K. Zernike, "Seeing Ruthlessness in Clinton's Love of the Fight," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/05/us/politics/05clinton.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print.

Obama to joke that Hillary Clinton “thinks she’s Annie Oakley.”

In March, as the campaign rhetoric heated up with each team trading insults, Clinton played the fear card with her ad proclaiming that “It’s 3 a.m.,” suggesting that the American public needed an experienced Commander-in-Chief to deal with a crisis. In mid-March, Obama was subjected to especially nasty attacks concerning his Chicago associates, particularly his pastor Jeremiah Wright, whose inflammatory speeches were circulating on YouTube and through the media and the internet. In response, Obama’s remarkable March 18 race speech became one of the major spectacles of the primary season. TV network commentators were immediately comparing it to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I have a dream” speech and calling it the most important political speech on race since King’s. Pundits, including conservative ones, gushed praises of the speech that dominated TV news throughout the day and the internet and print media in the days following.

Perhaps Obama’s low point came when he told a group of supporters at a fundraiser in Marin County, California, that he was having trouble getting white working class support in Pennsylvania because small town residents were “bitter” and “clinging to guns and religion.” The Clinton and Republican response teams attacked Obama as an elitist, out of touch and contemptuous of guns and religion, but he continued to hang on to his lead in the delegate count and won primaries on May 5 in Indiana and North Carolina. Eventually Obama eked out a close win in the Democratic Party primary after a close and momentous battle of the spectacle.

Barack Obama secured the Democratic presidential nomination, setting himself to run against John McCain, the Republican Party candidate. Following Obama's impressive performance on the stump in the Democratic Party primaries, coverage of both the party conventions and general election were dominated by the form of media spectacle. While the McCain camp engaged in petty anti-Obama ads and attacks in summer 2008, Obama went on a global tour that itself became a major media spectacle as he traveled from Afghanistan and Iraq to Europe. Obama gave a rousing speech in Berlin, which attracted hundreds of thousands of spectators and a global TV audience, and was shown meeting with leaders in all of these countries, as if he were the presumptive president. This established him as a global celebrity.

Since Obama had become an extremely effective creator of political spectacle, McCain presumably had to produce good media spectacle himself. From the time Obama clinched the nomination, McCain largely attempted to create an anti-Obama spectacle through TV ads, planting anti-Obama stories in the press and circulating them through the internet, and eventually attacked Obama everyday on the campaign trail.

Although Obama benefited significantly through his supporters' internet and other cultural productions, he was temporarily put on the defensive in the summer when the inflammatory speeches of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the Chicago pastor of his church, were released on YouTube. The deluge of Republican and then mainstream media circulating the Wright speeches, combined with the reverend's appearances on television, led Obama to break with his pastor. However, Obama gave what many believed to be a brilliant speech on race in Philadelphia, another spectacle that became a major cultural

event both on the internet and in the mainstream media.

Underneath the spectacle of the broadcasting media, a Republican campaign circulating through the internet claimed that Obama was really a Muslim, was anti-American like Wright, and was even an Iranian agent.²¹⁾ In addition to these underhanded sneak attacks, which paralleled the Swift Boat attacks made against John Kerry in 2004, the McCain campaign released TV ads equating Obama with such empty celebrities as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears; this led Paris Hilton to create an ad attacking “the wrinkly old white dude”—i.e., John McCain—and arguing why she’d be a better president (this YouTube video received over one million hits in a single day).²²⁾ Quite obviously, the Republicans did not understand that Obama’s rising celebrity status was helping him become more popular, getting him more attention, support and, eventually, votes from a population that is generally attracted to celebrity status and culture.

In another ad, McCain attacked Obama for policies that would lead to high energy prices and ridiculed Obama’s proposal to “inflate your tires,” as if this were the entirety of Obama’s energy program. Obama was able to counter that he had a much more sophisticated energy program and that McCain had voted against many of the alternative energy sources that Obama supported. Desperate for attention and needing a little spectacle of his own, McCain appeared with his wife, Cindy, at the Sturgis Biker Festival with the pop musician, Kid Rock.

21) See “Obama’s Secrets,” *National Enquirer* (March 17, 2008); and “An Attack That Came out of the Ether,” *The Washington Post* (June 28, 2008).

22) Paris Hilton, “Paris Hilton for President,” accessed July 6, 2009, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4WDjuiQmxA&feature=Playlist&p=D2B5F8D06FBB2B7&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=25.

As the bikers roared their engines in approval, McCain engaged in blustering, if often incoherent, demagoguery, shouting that Washington was broken; that while the country was in crisis, its Congress was on vacation and insisting he would make them come back to work during the summer. He received his loudest cheers and shouts of approval as he offered up his wealthy trophy wife, Cindy, to enter the beauty contest the next day, perhaps not knowing, as the TV images of past contests made clear, that this involved nudity and he was essentially offering his wife as a sex object before a drunken crowd.

As the campaigns neared the time of their party conventions, traditionally great TV spectacles of the campaign, the presidential race seemed to be establishing once again the primacy of network television as the major site upon which election battles play out, although print media, internet and new media were also significant, as I have suggested. Following the great spectacle of the Democratic convention in late August 2008—with memorable speeches by Obama, Al Gore, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and a moving appearance by Senator Ted Kennedy—McCain desperately needed a compelling spectacle and got it in spades when he announced and presented his vice presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, who generated one of the more astounding media spectacles in U.S. political history.

The Curious Sarah Palin Spectacle

Sarah Palin, the first-term Governor of Alaska and former small-town mayor, who few knew much about when McCain selected her, was a genuinely surprising pick. It turned out, however, that Palin certainly provided good spectacle. She was a gun owner and NRA activist, and television networks aired footage all day of her

shooting guns. She was also a high school basketball star, so TV showed repeated footage of her playing basketball. Palin's husband, Todd, was a snowmobile champion, providing yet additional sports spectacles throughout the media barrage that was the Palins' introduction. Moreover, Palin was a former beauty pageant winner, triumphing in local contests and finishing runner-up as Miss Alaska, with various images of her as a pin-up girl circulating that first day as well. A mother of five children, including a newborn baby with Down syndrome, provided the media with a great deal of picturesque family photos. After her initial speech with McCain introducing her to the American public, her family and the McCains went shopping where she was shown as an enthusiastic shopper, marking her as a typical American.

One might think this is all pretty ridiculous, but American elections are often won on image and spectacle, and obviously Palin provided good spectacle. Republicans initially hoped that she would draw in Clinton supporters and other female voters because she was herself a woman, but that did not happen for a number of reasons. Palin was militantly anti-abortionist, had a poor record on environmental protection and believed environmental crisis was not man-made. Furthermore, Palin supported drilling oil everywhere without environmental regulation, preached the teaching of creationism and religion in the schools (as well as the removal of offensive books from libraries) and was militantly anti-gay, so it was quite unlikely that any true Clinton supporters would vote for this right-wing ideologue.

Then on Labor Day, September 1, a tabloid-besotted media revealed that Palin's 17-year-old daughter was pregnant and unmarried, creating an all-day sex scandal spectacle and leading to debates on whether a mother with all these problems should run for vice

president and submit her family to the associated media scrutiny. More seriously, many political scandals involving Palin herself came out: she had fired state employees who would not do her bidding and had appointed unqualified high school friends and cronies to state jobs; she had supported corrupt politicians, lied about her record, and consistently taken positions to the right of Dick Cheney. This all made Sarah Palin suddenly a spectacle of scandal as well as the object of adulation by the Christian and Republican Right.

The Republicans were forced to postpone their convention because of another spectacle: Hurricane Gustav, which was initially projected to be twice as dangerous as Katrina but turned out to be relatively minor. Once the Republicans got their convention started, Sarah Palin gave an electrifying speech that mobilized the right-wing Republican base and a new star was born. For a couple of weeks after the Republican convention, Sarah Palin was the spectacle of the moment and the media buzzed around the clock about her past and her record, her qualifications or lack of them, and her effect on the election.

The Spectacle of Economic Crisis and Impending Collapse

After the “Stupid Season” of presidential party conventions and the orchestrating of party spectacle was over, however, on September 15, 2008 the collapse of the investment company Lehman Brothers helped trigger what appeared to be one of the greatest U.S. and global financial crises in history. Suddenly, the election was caught up in the spectacle of the possible collapse of the U.S. and global economy, and so economics took a front-and-center place in the campaign. In two wild weeks of campaigning, McCain first insisted that the “fundamentals” of the U.S. economy were sound, and when everyone

ridiculed him, he recognized the significance of the crisis and said that as president he would fire the head of the Security Exchange Commission, even though this official does not serve directly under the president and everyone from *The Wall Street Journal* to the television networks admonished McCain for trying to scapegoat someone whom experts knew was not responsible for the crisis. Zigzagging wildly, McCain thundered one day that he was against federal bailouts and then, when the Bush administration announced the biggest bailout in history that was allegedly necessary to save the whole economy, McCain flip-flopped into supporting bailouts. By the end of the week, he resorted to blaming Obama for the crisis, since Obama was part of a corrupt Washington establishment. This baseless allegation overlooked that McCain's top economic advisor Phil Gramm had been instrumental in pushing deregulation of the economy through Congress. Further, top lobbyists were running McCain's campaign, including his campaign manager who was instrumental in lobbying for the failed FreddyMae and FreddyMac financial institutions that some in the McCain-Palin campaign were trying to blame for the economic meltdown and present as a Democrat party debacle.

Obama seemed to gain the initiative during the economic crisis as he made measured and intelligent statements about the economy, and so the Republicans desperately began a strategy of "The Big Lie": endlessly distorting his tax proposals, accusing him of crony relations with disgraced federal officials whom he hardly knew and making ridiculous claims about Obama's responsibility for the economic mess. It was becoming apparent that the Republicans were pursuing the Karl Rove-George W. Bush strategy of simply lying about their opponents, and trying to create an alternate reality.²³⁾ For instance,

from the beginning, Palin's candidacy was arguably based on Big Lies, as McCain introduced her as the woman who had stopped the "Bridge to Nowhere" in Alaska and was a champion of cutting "earmarks," pork barrel legislation to benefit special interests in one's district. Palin repeated these claims day after day, but research revealed that she had supported the bridge's construction from the onset of its plans, had hired a public relations firm to secure earmarks for her district and her state, and had enabled Alaska to receive more earmarks per capita than anywhere in the country.

With the September 22, 2008 economic meltdown, however, McCain embarked on one of the truly incredible political spectacles in U.S. history, trying to position himself as the savior of the economic system and then making an utter fool of himself as, day after day, he engaged in increasingly bizarre and erratic behavior. Just before the first presidential debate on September 26, McCain announced he was suspending his campaign to go to Washington to resolve the financial crisis and would stay there until it was resolved, thereby threatening to miss the presidential debate. After a lot of negative publicity, he showed up for the debate, where he viciously attacked Barack Obama in one of the most thuggish debate performances in U.S. political history, with his Web site declaring him the winner before the debate even took place (subsequent polls showed that Obama got a bounce from the debate and his performances in response to the financial crisis).

Over the weekend, McCain went to Washington, claiming he was

23) On "The Politics of Lying" during the Bush/Cheney era see Kellner, "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the 'War On Terror,'" *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 37, no. 4 (December 2007): 622-645.

bringing together Congressmen to resolve the financial crisis while attacking Obama for staying on the campaign trail. The morning of the Congressional vote on the stimulus package McCain and his surrogates claimed it was John McCain alone who had brought Democrats and Republicans together to resolve the financial crisis. When, hours later, it was revealed that the bailout package, pushed by the Bush–Cheney administration and supported by McCain, Obama and both the Democratic and Republican Party House leaders, failed because two-thirds of the Republicans, who McCain was supposed to be leading, voted against it. McCain ended up with more than a little egg on his face as the stock market plunged in the biggest one-day drop in its history.

Trying in the face of his buffoonish spectacle to keep the initiative, McCain said that this was not the time to engage in partisan behavior, but rather to pull the country together; then he blamed the failure of the bailout bill on Obama and the Democrats—surely a partisan claim!

The Sarah Palin spectacle momentarily took focus off of McCain's erratic efforts to take advantage of the worsening economic crisis and the unpopular trillion-dollar-plus bailout, when the Republican vice presidential candidate debated the Democrat's choice, Senator Joe Biden. The lead-up to the debate featured daily sound bites of Palin's interview with CBS's Katie Couric in which Palin was unable to mention one specific newspaper or journal that she read regularly, could not think of a Supreme Court decision she opposed beyond *Roe vs. Wade*, and generally could not complete a coherent sentence, let alone provide a clear answer. During the debate, she proved herself to be a good scripted performer as she acted out the predigested

sound bites to each question, winked and talked folksy if she wanted to distract the audience and generally played cutesy rather than actually debate answer the questions; Biden, on the other hand, provided coherent answers to questions and offered criticism of McCain which Palin ignored.

Palin's conservative base, however, loved her down-home hockey-mom performance, and so Palin was unleashed as the attack dog on the campaign trail. McCain had become desperate, with polls indicating that votes were going Obama's way in key states, and he decided to attack Obama's personal character as a last-ditch way to try to win votes. After *The New York Times* published an article on Obama and former Weather Underground member Bill Ayers, Palin started saying daily that "Obama's pallin' around with terrorists," and McCain began personally attacking Obama, raising the question "Who is the real Barack Obama?" to which the audience replied, screaming, "Terrorist!"

Throughout the second week of October, Palin and McCain continued to make the Ayers connection in their campaign rallies, media interviews and TV ads, personally attacking Obama, and at these rallies, the frenzied Republican mob would scream things like "Kill him," "Traitor and "Bomb Obama!" When one confused woman in the Republican mob told McCain that she "didn't trust Obama" because of things she'd been hearing about him, stammering, "He's an Arab," it was clear that the Republicans' lies and demagoguery had influenced their rabid right-wing base to believe that Obama was an Arab, a Muslim, a terrorist, and not an American. It was also clear that Palin and McCain had stirred up significant levels of mob fear, ignorance and violence that were becoming extremely volatile and dangerous.

Investigative reporters indicated that Obama had only a casual relation with Ayers, whereas Palin and her husband were involved in an Alaskan secessionist party whose right-wing and anti-Semitic founder had a long history of outrageous anti-American ranting, racist ramblings and ultra-right politics; Palin's husband had belonged to that party and in 2008, Sarah Palin had addressed that party's convention, wishing them "good luck." Another investigative report linked Palin to a number of extreme right-wing groups and individuals who had promoted her career (McCain, too, it was later revealed, had been associated with an unsavory lot).²⁴⁾ But Palin's week of infamy came to a proper conclusion when the Alaskan Supreme Court ruled on October 10 that a report into the "Troopergate" scandal could be released and the report itself pointed out that Palin had "abused her authority as governor" and violated Alaska's ethics regulations. Thrown off her moralistic high horse, Palin nonetheless continued to be McCain's attack dog and raise controversy on the campaign trail, even claiming that the Court had claimed that she had not abused her authority or violated ethical regulations, when clearly the court had ruled otherwise.

It was clear that Republicans were playing a politics of association to feed their media spectacles, just as the Bush-Cheney administration had associated Iraq with 9/11, Al Qaeda and "weapons of mass destruction," connections that were later proven false, but those associations worked to sell the war to the Republican base, gullible

24) On Palin's unsavory connections, see M. Blumentahl and D. Neiwert, "Meet Sarah Palin's Radical Rightwing Pals." On John McCain's radical right associations and involvement with the corrupt Savings and Loan tycoon Charles Keating that won him ethical rebuke in the Senate, see Kooperman, "The Return of Charles Keating."

Democrats, and the media. Republicans had long marketed their right-wing corporate class politics to voters by associating the Democrats with gay marriage, abortion and secularism. Would the public and media wake up to the Republicans' politics of lying and manipulation or would the GOP continue to get away with their decades of misrule and mendaciousness?

The Joe the Plumber Spectacle

Economic news got worse by the day as the stock market continued to plunge and the global economy appeared to be collapsing. In this atmosphere of crisis, the McCain-Palin spectacle of distraction appeared increasingly appalling. With a backlash against Palin's rabble-rousing and McCain's negative campaigning, the Republican candidates toned down their attacks on "The One," although their direct mailings and robocalls continued to associate Obama with Bill Ayers and terrorism and to raise doubts about his character. In the final presidential debate on October 15, McCain had a chance to bring up Obama's associations to his face, which he did in a generally aggressive debate in which Obama coolly and calmly answered claims concerning his alleged radical associations.

But the major theme of the debate, as pushed by McCain and one that would become a touchstone of his campaign, was how Obama's answer to "Joe the Plumber" on the campaign trail proved that Obama would raise taxes on small businesses if elected. In an Obama campaign event the previous weekend, the man who McCain referred to as Joe the Plumber told Obama that he had been a plumber for 15 years and was trying to buy the business he worked for—and since it cost over \$250,000, he would be forced to pay higher taxes since

Obama's tax reform proposal would increase taxes on those making over \$250,000 a year and lower the taxes of those making less. It turned out Joe was not even the man's first name, and his real name was Samuel J. Wurzelbacher; that he was not a licensed plumber; that his income the previous year was around \$40,000; and that he owed over \$1,000 in unpaid back taxes.²⁵⁾ These paltry facts did not stop McCain and Palin, who continued to extol Joe the Plumber in every campaign stop. This became a major theme of their campaign: generating opposition for Obama, the tax-and-spend liberal who would raise your taxes, and building support for McCain and Palin, who took the side of Joe the Plumber, Ted the Carpenter, and a daily array of allegedly working class people who opposed Obama, leaving out only Rosie the Riveter.²⁶⁾

The McCain-Palin "Joe the Plumber" tour narrative, however, was interrupted daily by the scandals and juicy news stories that tend to dominate news cycles in the era of media spectacle. It was revealed that the Republicans had spent more than \$150,000 on the Palin

25) For a dossier of articles on Joe the Plumber, see "Joe Wurzelbacher," *New York Times* website, accessed November 14, 2008, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/joe_wurzelbacher/index.html?inline=nyt-per. For a video in which he exposes his right-wing views, see "Joe in the Spotlight," *New York Times* website, accessed November 14, 2008, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/joe-in-the-spotlight/>.

26) For reporting that shows McCain was on a "Joe the Plumber" tour see E. Bumiller and J. Zeleny, "McCain and Obama Hurl BroadSides at Each Other over Taxes And Jobs," *The New York Times* (October 23, 2008), http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/24/us/politics/24campaign.html?hp=&pagewanted=print.NO_PAGES_ON_URL As it turns out, Obama's grandmother, who he visited near the end of the campaign and who died the night before the election, was a "Rosie the Riveter," working on factories during World War II, when the men were overseas fighting.

family wardrobe and that Palin's stylist was paid twice as much in early October as McCain's major campaign consultants. In her first policy address—on the need for spending on special needs children—Palin denigrated research spent on studying fruit flies, a basic tool of genetic research which has helped produce understanding of autism, among many other genetic disorders. That same day, Palin's campaigning was interrupted by the need for her and her husband Todd to do another deposition in the Troopergate scandal. All this led to a rise in Palin's negative ratings, as did data suggesting she was a drag on the McCain campaign.²⁷⁾

That same week went badly for the rest of the McCain campaign. A young woman who worked for the McCain campaign made accusations that a big black man had raped her and carved a "B" for Barack on her face; these allegations led to a bevy of right-wing attacks on the Obama people, but the police quickly questioned her and by the next day the young woman admitted she had made it all up, a rather scandalous incident of race-baiting, which the McCain campaign encouraged and did not disavow or apologize for. And to top the week of October 20 off, John McCain's brother, Joe McCain, called a 911 number to report a traffic jam he was stuck in, and when the operator retorted that it was not proper to use the number for this purpose, Joe said, "Fuck you," and hung up.

As the two campaigns entered their last week of campaigning before the November 4 election, Obama made speeches with his "closing arguments" to the American people, hoping to "seal the

27) The daily campaign trail of both camps is tracked at "War Room," *Salon.com*, accessed October 24, 2009, http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/.

deal.” During that September, Obama had raised an unprecedented \$150 million, much of it from small internet and personal donations, and was soaring in the polls, which showed him pulling ahead of McCain nationally and in the significant battleground states. As he entered the last week of the campaign, Obama presented the spectacle of a young, energetic, articulate candidate who had run what many considered an almost flawless campaign.

The McCain–Palin campaign seemed to close with the same basic argument with which most Republican candidates end their campaign: the Democrats want to raise taxes and spread around the wealth—an accusation increasingly hyped by the right–wing base and, by McCain and Palin themselves, that Obama was really a “socialist.” McCain continued to raise questions about Obama’s experience and the risk that the country would be taking with such an untested president, while Obama retorted that the real risk was continuing with more of the last eight years of catastrophic economic policies and failed foreign policy.

There were also signs of disarray and defeat in the Republican camp. McCain insiders were presenting Palin as a “diva” who had gone “rogue” and failed to reproduce the campaign lines they wanted, suggesting her goal was not to aid McCain but to position herself for a 2012 presidential race. One McCain operative even dismissed her as a “whack job.” Meanwhile, Palin complained about the McCain campaign giving her the \$150,000 worth of clothes that had become a media obsession, insisting she usually got her own clothes from thrift shops, and often ignored the McCain handlers who were trying to keep her from the press and script her speeches and comments.

As the campaigns came to a close, Obama tried to seal the deal with

a multi-million dollar infomercial played on major networks during prime-time just before the World Series game on October 29. In a Hollywood-like production, the Obama spectacle came together with "American stories" about hard times and struggles and how Obama would deal with these problems and help people; an acknowledgment of the seriousness of problems with the economy and what Obama would do to deal with the crisis; a reprise of his personal story, highlighting his biracial heritage and close relations to his white mother and grandparents; testimonies from a variety of individuals concerning Obama's experience in community, state politics and the national level; and highlights from some of Obama's greatest speeches.

This event was followed by a live appearance with Bill Clinton in a midnight campaign rally in Florida, Obama's first campaign event with the former president and husband of his primary campaign rival Hillary Clinton. Former President Clinton enthusiastically endorsed Obama, indicating that Obama was regularly calling him for advice concerning the economic crisis and praising Obama for reaching out to experts on the issue, suggesting that the Clintons and Obama had made up, at least for the present. Obama returned the compliments with praise of Clinton's presidency and compared the good times experienced under Clinton and the Democrats to the messes of the past eight years under the Republican Bush-Cheney regime, which Clinton and Obama both claimed McCain would basically continue.

As the presidential campaign entered its final days, it was clear that these contemporary U.S. presidential campaigns were organized around the production of daily media spectacles that embodied narrative themes of the campaign. In a hard fought Democratic Party primary, the Obama spectacle of youth, change, hope, and a new

multicultural America narrowly bested the spectacle of Hillary the Fighter, with the prospect of the first president of color defeating the prospect of the first female president. This spectacle gripped the nation and the global media, and set up intense interest in the spectacle of young Obama going up against war hero and veteran Senator McCain in the general election.

Obama continued to draw large and adoring crowds throughout his fall campaign, but also consistently tried to present the image of being cool, calm, competent, and presidential on the campaign trail, and during media interviews and the presidential debates. Unlike McCain and Palin, he avoided dramatic daily shifts and attention-grabbing stunts; instead, he tried to present an image of a mature and intelligent leader who is able to rationally deal with crises and respond to attacks in a measured and cool manner, giving him the moniker "No drama, Obama."

The spectacle of masculinity also played out in the election in novel ways. Obama represented a cool, hip, black urban masculinity, in tune with popular culture, breaking with the tough father and defender masculinity typical of most previous presidential candidates, especially Republicans (Katz, forthcoming). Obama was a devotee of basketball but not working class sports like bowling or hunting, and was highly sophisticated and multicultural. Clinton played the gender card against Obama unsuccessfully in the primary, claiming she was the true man and fighter, while in the general election both Palin and McCain tried to unman Obama, presenting themselves as tougher, more masculine and better able to protect the country in a mean world. Palin constantly talked about hunting and sports, was a highly aggressive campaigner and mocked Obama relentlessly. McCain in turn

represented a military macho masculinity, constantly playing up his military background and toughness in foreign affairs. But for the first time, an electorate was not significantly swayed by the gender or race card, as we discovered on election night.

The Election Night Spectacle

Election night is always a major political spectacle when the country, and parts of the world, watch the election results come in with maps flashing red and blue colors on the states, with the exciting swoosh of breaking news, followed by results and trends of the election, all in the inevitable countdown for a candidate getting the magic number of electoral votes to gain the presidency.

All day long, the television networks provided exciting spectacles of record turnouts all over the country, with images of people patiently waiting in line to vote, the candidates making their last electoral stops and pitches and then voting, followed by the period of waiting for polls to close so that the networks could release vote tallies and determine the winner.

The November 4, 2008 election night started slowly with Obama getting the predictably Democratic states in the Northeast and McCain getting predictably Republican Southern states. Excitement mounted when Obama was awarded the plum of Pennsylvania, which McCain and Palin had campaigned hard for, and when an hour or so later Obama was given Ohio, it was clear that he was on the way to victory. At 11:00 p.m., the networks opened the hour with the banner heading "Barack Obama Elected 44th President of the United States," or just "Obama Elected President." His sweep of the West Coast states of California, Oregon and Washington, plus the bonus of Hawaii and the hard-fought southern state of Virginia, sealed it for Obama, who

was on his way to a big win.

But on the television networks, spectacle trumped analysis as McCain took the stage in Phoenix with his wife Cindy and Sarah and Todd Palin by his side to make an extremely gracious concession speech, laced with appeals to his followers to support Obama and the country in this time of trouble. Some of the Republican base in the Phoenix ballroom did not like this message and McCain had to repeatedly silence their booing and screaming.

Meanwhile, in Chicago's Grant Park—the site of the spectacle “The Whole World is Watching” during the Democratic convention in 1968, when the police tear-gassed antiwar spectators, and the site a year later of the Weather Underground abortive “Days of Rage” spectacle—the city hosted a peaceful assembly of a couple of hundred thousand spectators, mostly young and of many colors, which had assembled to celebrate Obama's historical victory. In the crowd, television networks showed close-ups of celebrities like Jessie Jackson, tears streaming down his face, a jubilant Spike Lee, a solemn and smiling Oprah Winfrey, and others who joined the young crowd to hear Obama's victory speech. The park hushed into silence as McCain gave his concession speech and the audience nodded and applauded respectfully, suggesting that the country could come together.

When Obama, his wife, Michelle, and his two beautiful girls took stage, the crowd went wild and the eyes of the world watched the spectacle of Barack Obama celebrating his victory in the race for United States. Television networks showed the spectacle of people celebrating throughout the United States, from Times Square to Atlanta, and even throughout the world. There were special celebrations

in countries like Kenya and Indonesia where Obama had relatives or had lived; his connections to these countries even led to the production of national shrines that would come to be tourist destinations. Obama had become a global spectacle and his stunning victory would make him a world celebrity superstar of global media and politics.

Politics of the Spectacle in the Contemporary Era

In this study, I have focused on the dimension of U.S. presidential campaigns as media spectacles and have described the spectacles of the 2008 presidential election, surely one of the most exciting and fascinating political spectacles in U.S. history. While I have argued that presidential campaigns in the U.S. and elsewhere are primarily orchestrated as media spectacles, I do not want to suggest that this is the most important aspect of determining who wins an election, or the master key to victory. Obviously, money plays a major part in presidential elections and often whoever raises the most money wins. In a media age, money allows candidates to produce their own spectacles in the form of TV ads and candidates need to raise millions to orchestrate campaign events and produce an organization capable of winning the presidency. Obama raised an unprecedented amount of money, with record donations from small contributors and a record amount of money raised through the internet.

People also vote because of political affiliations and ideology, their economic interests, and sometimes even because of issues and substance, no matter what the spectacle of the day has to offer. While there is no consensus on the reasons for Obama's victory and no doubt there will be debate over this for years, I would suggest that certain resonant images and media spectacles contributed significantly to Obama's victory. People obviously wanted change and hope, and Obama

offered a spectacle of both since he was the first candidate of color and represented a generational change in leadership. The Obama campaign pushed daily the spectacle of the connection between McCain and the Bush administration in TV ads, daily rallies, debates, and other forums. This was complemented by TV news playing endlessly pictures of Bush and McCain embracing and graphics showing that McCain had voted with the most unpopular and failed president in recent history 90% of the time.

The global collapse of the financial markets and crisis of the U.S. and global economy produced one of the major media spectacles of the campaign. The McCain spectacle of erratic pronouncements and daily stunts to exploit the crisis obviously turned voters off; meanwhile, Obama remained cool and rational during this spectacle and time of danger, showing he was more presidential and better able to deal with crises.

During this difficult period in U.S. and global history, voters appeared to react against the politics of distraction, with the Republican spectacles of daily attacks on Obama backfiring and the negative spectacle of Republican crowds screaming "terrorist," "traitor," "kill him!" and the like producing an extremely negative spectacle of a Republican mob, stirred up by McCain and Palin. All this seemed to help inspire rational voters to line up, for hours if necessary, and vote for Obama and a new brand of politics.

Thus campaign spectacles can backfire. While the Sarah Palin spectacle alone did not destroy the Republican campaign, it certainly did not help recruit many independent voters, even if it made Palin a darling of the Republican extreme right and a media superstar. I might note that in the last weeks of the election, Bill and Hillary Clinton

invested their star and spectacle power into the Obama campaign. The midnight rally in Florida in the last days of the election provided a memorable spectacle, one that might have unified the Democratic Party and brought Clinton supporters into the Obama camp in swing states like Florida and Ohio, where the Clintons had campaigned heavily.

During the last weeks of the presidential campaign, there was intense speculation concerning how the race factor would influence the outcome of the election and whether the so-called "Bradley effect" would kick in, referring to African-American candidate Tom Bradley who ran for governor of California in 1982 and appeared to be ahead in the polls but narrowly lost the election. Commentators suggested that although white voters might tell pollsters that they would vote for popular African-American candidates, racism kicked in while in the voting booth and they would then vote for white candidates instead.

Preliminary surveys indicated that there was no Bradley effect in the 2008 presidential election. While there was much discussion of whether the Bradley effect would kick in against Obama, who was leading in the polls going into the election, there was no evidence of white voters saying they would vote for Obama and then voting against him in the polls. These results put in question the applicability of the Bradley effect and suggested that there was a post-racial dimension to the Obama phenomenon.²⁸⁾

28) Elizabeth Drew notes that no evidence appeared concerning a "Bradley effect" in the 2008 presidential election and claimed that: "Some of the smartest political analysts I know had already dismissed the Bradley effect as a myth. And there was no evidence of such a phenomenon in this election. In fact, a considerable number of whites said that they voted for Obama because he is black." Drew, "The Truth about the Election," *The New York Review of Books* (December 18, 2008),

The Obama Era

Following Obama's election, there was no question of his unique celebrity status. Obama's face appeared on the cover of every news magazine and his post-election vacation to Hawaii and return home to Chicago were covered by a paparazzi horde perhaps never before equaled. Pictures of Obama shirtless on the beach in Hawaii and walking hand-in-hand with his daughters in Chicago became iconic, the picture of the handsome man who had ascended to the pinnacle of political power.

The pre-inaugural spectacle in January was memorable and perhaps unparalleled in recent U.S. history. Following a precedent of Abraham Lincoln, Obama took a train ride to Washington, starting in Philadelphia where he made a speech and then picked up Vice President Biden and his family in Wilmington, Del., for a few more photo opportunities. Along the way, large crowds assembled in train stations to greet Obama and there were even cheering crowds along the track en route to the capital city.

January 19, 2009 happened to be Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday and a national holiday, and that Monday fittingly became a day of memorials with a major concert at the Washington Mall featuring Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Wonder and other A-list musical performers entertaining the large crowds. A record one million or more people were already in the nation's capital and the festive mood was palatable as the television networks covered the day's festivities and the joyous crowd, which itself became a spectacle of celebration and happiness.

The Obama inaugural spectacle was as well-planned and performed as the primary and presidential campaign. An unprecedented two million people braved the cold and the crowds to come to Washington for the transformative event of inaugurating Obama as president of the United States. Never before has the country seen such a massive number of happy, celebrating people from all walks of life and parts of the country take part in the traditional inaugural ceremony, an event marred only by the bumbling conservative Supreme Court Justice John Roberts, who bungled the oath of office, throwing Obama off stride momentarily. The spectacle included the last four presidents and their families, plus Dick Cheney in a wheelchair after allegedly throwing out his back from lifting boxes in his new home. While Obama's traditionally short inaugural speech did not have the lofty and soaring rhetoric and crowd-pleasing chants of his most memorable discourses, its recognition of the severity of the crisis confronting the country, the need for fundamental change in politics and values from those of the Bush-Cheney administration, and determination to confront these problems satisfied the crowds and most serious observers.

Seeing the Bushes leave the White House by helicopter after the ceremony and Cheney being lifted from his wheelchair into his car was an aesthetic delight and a real spectacle for members of the TV audience at home, as they watched the least popular president and vice president in U.S. history leave town in disgrace, signaling that a new era had truly begun.

Obama's first 100 days were highly ambitious, starting by pushing through emergency measures to try to get the economy back on track, specifically a \$787 billion stimulus—described as a “recovery and

reinvestment”—plan, a controversial bank bailout package that constituted a government takeover of “toxic” bank assets, a housing recovery program, an expansion of the Federal Reserve, and a budget geared to stimulate the economy, rebuild the infrastructure and create jobs. Obama made good on his middle class tax cut and promised a radical overhaul of the health system, Congressional spending and even military spending. Furthermore, President Obama transformed policy on stem cell research, women’s reproductive and labor rights, the environment and national security through executive orders. To be sure, Obama’s hopes for bipartisan politics were dashed when Republicans voted unanimously against some of his economic programs and budget proposals, and now partisan division seems as heated as ever.

President Obama also launched a highly ambitious reversal of Bush–Cheney foreign policy and took multiple new foreign policy initiatives. He promised to close down the prison at Guantanamo Bay and to bring the prisoners there and elsewhere to justice; he also promised to put an end to illegal torture, rendition and wiretapping policies. After wavering and declaring that CIA and other agency operatives who carried out torture policies during the Bush–Cheney era would not be prosecuted, Obama later opened the door to prosecute previous administration officials who set the policies and ordered their implementation.

During his first 100 days, Obama’s world tours—in which he met with European, global and Latin America leaders—have shown how he has become a major global celebrity and how celebrity politics and spectacle is normalized as an important, perhaps key, segment of global and regional politics. On his visits to England, France and the G–20 summit, Obama received a rock star reception from people in all

the countries he visited, with people lining the streets for a glimpse of him, and Obama's image dominated the media in the coverage of his meetings with foreign leaders.

Obama was so popular globally that he was awarded the Noble Peace Prize for 2009 "for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples," even though he had only been in office nine months. Yet summing up the first two years of Obama's presidency, we can see the continued existence of powerful elites in U.S. society and the limits of being able to govern on the basis of spectacle and celebrity. Although Obama and the Congress passed a health care reform bill, because of the powerful interests of the health insurance, pharmaceutical and medical industries, it was impossible to pass a universal health care bill of the sort enjoyed by European democracies, and there were many concessions to the powerful insurance and medical industries.²⁹⁾ Although there was some reform of the financial sector, powerful Wall Street and finance industry interests blocked more serious regulatory reform.³⁰⁾ And after the debacle for the Obama administration in the 2010 Congressional elections, which gave the Republicans control of the House of Representatives and many state governments, spectacle and celebrity are unlikely to be powerful forces to advance his agenda.

Hence, I have argued that while power elite theory does not

29) See, for example, Michael Moore, *Sicko* (Weinstein Company, 2007), DVD, which depicts the universal care benefits received from citizens of Canada, France, and Great Britain.

30) See Charles Ferguson, *Inside Job* (Sony Pictures Classic, 2010), Film, for a cogent account of the magnitude of the financial crisis in the U.S., caused by unregulated banking and financial institutions, and the limits of the Obama administration in dealing with the crisis.

completely explain U.S. politics in the contemporary era, it has not lost its cogency. On one hand, an individual like Barack Obama can master the art of media spectacle and come from outside of the political establishment to win the presidency, especially if he has the support of groups, like youth, and social movements who will use new media to promote a candidate, raise money, and get out the vote. Once in power, however, any U.S. president faces a power elite of entrenched political parties, corporate lobbying, powerful rightwing media, and power elite centers willing to invest money to block a president or unseat him.

Hence, to grasp contemporary U.S. politics, one should combine traditional power elite theories with newer postmodern theories of new sources of power and a potential pluralization of political power. It remains to be seen if Obama's mastery of media culture and celebrity status can help him solve the overwhelming economic problems to reboot the U.S. economy and make progress on difficult global issues, or if old Washington partisan politics and the overwhelming challenges the Obama administration faces on multiple fronts will undermine Obama's popularity and efficiency as a leader. Spectacle and celebrity are certainly important tools of governing in a media age, but it remains to be seen if Obama and his administration can effectively deal with the multiple crises of the contemporary moment

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Abstract

**!!!ObamaPluralismSpectacle:
Barack Obama, the Power Elite
and Media Spectacle**

Douglas Kellner

(University of California, Los Angeles)

I argue that the presidency of the Bush–Cheney administration (2000–2008) followed the logic of power elite theory, but that the victory in the 2008 presidential election by Barack Obama points to a new political logic governed by the rise of media spectacle and a pluralization of U.S. politics. I discuss Obama's success through his mastery of media spectacle and mobilization of new media and social networking, but also argue that his policies have confronted traditional power elites during his turn as President. Hence, I conclude that contemporary U.S. politics can be explained by a combination of power elite theory and more postmodern pluralist theories of power.

Key Words

Media Spectacle, New Media and Social Networking, Power Elite, Pluralism