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Run. Win. Lead.

In an historic election, AAs — and the country — may be finding their voice.

STORY Jack d'Annibale

January 8, 2008. Senator Barack Obama takes the stage in Nashua, N.H. The self-described “skinny kid with a funny name” from Illinois is the underdog in the race for the Democratic Party’s nomination for President and he’s just dropped the New Hampshire Primary to Senator Hillary Clinton. Obama begins to speak about the journey ahead and the assembled crowd witnesses the defining moment of his candidacy. “Yes We Can.”

On this night, to hear Obama speak is to think that somehow, some way, events transpired differently inside the Ambassador Hotel and outside the Lorraine Inn — that Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. are alive and well in the year twenty-zero-eight. The upstart Obama, despite his primary defeat, despite the tremulous hearts and minds of so many Americans, promises that anything — that everything — is possible.

Election watchers agree, it has been a very long time since a candidate as inspiring as Obama has been characterized as stepping onto the American political stage.

As this story goes to press, votes are being counted in the Ohio Democratic primary. Obama has evolved from long shot to front-runner since “Yes We Can,” in just two months time. He has campaigned in the Buckeye State, searching for a decisive victory to secure the Presidential nomination. For Clinton, she must win Ohio for her campaign to continue. And, as the early returns come in, signs point to a Clinton victory in Ohio — meaning the impossibly close, intense, sometimes nasty struggle for the nomination will continue into the spring and — possibly — the summer.

Exactly how Obama and Clinton have arrived at this point makes for quite a story. Americans are flocking to the polls in historic numbers (25 million so far) to choose which candidate will face Republican Party nominee Senator John McCain in November. By one account, however, this story should be *over*. Obama, who up to this

point has won more states, delegates and votes, should be his party’s nominee for President; he should be spending the spring not in pitched battle with Clinton, but in preparation to vanquish McCain. This is not the first time Obama has been faced with the opportunity to finish Clinton off. Before Ohio, there was California.

Super Tuesday — February 5, 2008. Voters in 22 states march to the polls. At stake — the richest delegate haul thus far. Obama has all the momentum after a brilliant performance in a recent debate with Clinton in Los Angeles. Clinton must win California to stay in the race. After a long day where Obama and Clinton trade primary victories across the East and the heartland, nighttime descends upon the West. Clinton is declared the winner in California — Super Tuesday’s biggest prize — capturing 52 percent of the total vote. A crucial component of Clinton’s win is her overwhelming popularity with Asian American voters. The decisive impact of the AA vote in the California primary is unprecedented and Clinton’s victory means Super Tuesday is called a draw. The race between Clinton and Obama rolls on.

Much has been made about the historic quality of this race. A youngish man of mixed race. A woman. The vast number of Americans heading to the polls. Yet, what is not making headlines is the sleeping giant that is the AA vote. The story behind the AA vote provides a unique perspective through which to view an unforgettable race for the Democratic nomination. A story whose culmination — come election day this November — may change the political reality of Asian Americans forever.

Setting the Stage: The Path to California

It’s a little less than three hours till the polls close in the Iowa Caucus. It’s cold as hell and Elena Ong is trying to find someone who speaks Vietnamese in the middle of

Des Moines. Asian Americans make up only 1.5 percent of Iowa's population, meaning that limited-English speaking assistance at the polls can be scarce. Ong — the Southern California co-chair of AAPI's for Hillary Clinton — is in Des Moines to campaign. Recent polls show the crumbling economy as the dominant issue of the day and Ong finds herself trying to explain the fine points of Clinton's fiscal plan to a Vietnamese American voter. "Even though the woman spoke English well, she felt more comfortable having the conversation in Vietnamese," she recalls. Ong works the phones at the Clinton Campaign Field Office, eventually tracking down a colleague named Trung Ta, the national co-chair of Vietnamese Americans for Hillary Clinton. From his office in California, Trung gets on the phone with the voter. "She was pleased to learn he was Vietnamese. From this point on, she and Trung spoke for 20 minutes in Vietnamese," says Ong. Afterward, the woman steps confidently off to vote.

Despite the well-oiled machinery of a Clinton operation capable of connecting a lone voter with a campaign co-chair halfway across the country in a matter of moments, Obama wins the Iowa Caucus. His victory shocks politicians and pundits alike, knocking Clinton from her perch as the prohibitive favorite to win the Democratic nomination. The next few weeks see Clinton and Obama trade wins in New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina. The stage is set for a showdown on Super Tuesday. As Obama and Clinton head west to prepare for their debate at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles, an intense behind-the-scenes battle for control of the Asian American vote is coming to a head.

The Fight for the Golden State

It's one month before the California primary. S. B. Woo, former lieutenant governor of Delaware, is busy trying to get Barack Obama to say "Yes." Woo is the founding member of the political action committee known as the 80-20 Initiative. Woo says 80-20 is "dedicated to winning equal opportunity and justice for all Asian Americans through a bloc vote, ideally directing 80 percent of our community's votes and money to the presidential candidate who best represents the interests of all Asian Americans." 80-20 submitted a questionnaire to both the Obama and Clinton campaigns in June. Answering "Yes" to the document's questions represents an official commitment to nominate qualified Asian Americans to the Circuit, Federal and

Supreme Courts as well as support for equal opportunity in the workplace for Asian Americans. With a month to go before Super Tuesday, Clinton has signed the questionnaire. Obama has yet to respond.

The Obama campaign attributes their delay to the language of the questionnaire. "80-20's Yes-No questions about judicial appointments amounted to a de-facto quota. Our policy department was not about to sign off," says a source within the Obama camp, speaking on deep background. (Obama, a former constitutional law professor, has made his opposition to quotas quite clear.) Campaign spokesperson Madhuri Kommareddi adds via email, "The campaign proactively reached out to 80-20 to discuss their questionnaire, and suggested minor wording changes that would allow the campaign to answer 'Yes' to all of the questions. Unfortunately, 80-20 initially rejected the campaign's efforts to finalize the questionnaire." In response, Woo claims, "The Obama campaign was trying to weaken the questionnaire by altering its language."

Through an email blast, which he claims reaches as many as 1.7 million AA voters nationwide, Woo urges 80-20 members to protest Obama's failure to sign the questionnaire. Woo's email questions Obama's experience, his commitment to courting AA votes and the role Obama's Asian American brother-in-law Konrad Ng plays in the campaign. Obama's forces counter, claiming these emails are indicative of "misunderstandings and misrepresentations." In response, Woo states, "I understand the Obama campaign's position, but our actions are necessary to get results, to ensure our voices are heard."

The questionnaire remains unsigned. With the Golden State primary fast approaching, 80-20 endorses Clinton in California, angering a bloc of its own constituents. "We received so many emails criticizing our decision not to support Obama from our young members," says Kathleen To, president of 80-20. "Obama is an inspiring, culturally diverse candidate. I think this is why he enjoys great support from the younger generation in our community and beyond." Eventually, 80-20 and the Obama campaign reach an accord brokered by Chris Lu, the legislative director in Obama's Senate office. The Obama campaign modifies the language of the question-

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naire to strengthen its declaration of support for the AA community. Obama signs the document on January 31, 2008 — the same day he takes the Kodak Theatre stage to debate Clinton.

In accordance with their endorsement of Clinton, however, 80-20 issues a nationwide email blast to its membership, urging voters to cast bloc ballots for Clinton in California. All other voters, in all other states, are urged to vote their “personal choice.” Woo notes, however, “I think most of our members in states outside California thought we were endorsing Clinton as well.”

Once California is called for Clinton, CNN hones in on the AA vote. Its own exit poll reveals that 71 percent of AA voters in California cast their ballots for Clinton. Exit polls conducted by Margaret Fung, executive director of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, reveal that Clinton has garnered the same overwhelming support from the East Coast AA community en route to her primary victories in New York and New Jersey.

Clinton's must-have victories in California, New York and New Jersey enable her to make the case that the Democratic Party needs a candidate who can win large battleground states to have any chance of beating the Republicans in the general election. The must-have wins also provide a large influx of money to the cash-strapped Clinton camp. Thanks to the AA vote, the neck-and-neck race rolls on.

AA Electoral Math

The AA vote has traditionally been marginalized on the national political stage. In a two-party system, numbers are power and Asian Americans make up only 5 percent of the U.S. population. Janelle Wong, a political science professor at the University of Southern California, reports the number of AA voters is even smaller. “About 1 in 3 Asian Americans is ineligible to vote because they are not citizens, so that means Asian Americans make up only around 2-3 percent of the American electorate,” Wong writes via email. Even though a majority of Asian Americans vote Democrat, a healthy chunk — as much as 40-45 percent — votes Republican. This contributes to further marginalization. “This kind of split in partisanship combined with relative small numbers makes them (Asian Americans) less attractive targets for the campaigns,” Wong notes.

So how does a group making up 2-3 percent of the American electorate influence a critical vote? In this unprecedented year of primary politics, is it actually safe to

say “As the AA vote goes, so goes California? — so goes the nomination?” As to California, the electoral math is clear. AA voters made up 8 percent of the total primary vote in the Golden State. Clinton took home more than 70 percent of that vote. (This equates to roughly 6 percent of all votes cast.) If Obama — a multicultural candidate with a strong base of support amongst young Asian Americans — had captured 70 percent of the AA vote instead, he would have won the California primary with just under 49 percent of all votes cast. As to the nomination fight as a whole: given that Obama has reeled off 11 straight primary and caucus wins since Super Tuesday, it is arguable that — with a Golden State win added to Obama's tally — Clinton would likely be out of the race altogether, before it even got to Ohio.

Can a situation like the 2008 California primary happen again? All signs point to a strong possibility. Census numbers show that Asian Americans are the fastest growing minority group in the U.S. By 2030, the total population is expected to swell to 35 million. Though culturally and linguistically diverse, the AA community is rapidly becoming much more assimilated, with English serving as a unifying force. If organizations like 80-20 are successful in convincing the AA community to vote as a bloc, the potential for profound political impact is undeniable.

On the Job Training

Woo and To of 80-20 believe the results of Super Tuesday were — in large part — due to their endorsement of Clinton following their dust-up with the Obama campaign. “We commend them for signing in the end, but the Obama campaign handled our questionnaire poorly,” says Woo. Kathleen To adds, “I don't point a finger at the senator, but I think people in the campaign didn't have enough experience to handle the situation.” Woo goes on to claim that 80-20, “delivered a bloc vote for Senator Clinton in California and beyond on February 5th.”

In response, the Obama campaign downplays 80-20's role in tilting California, New York and New Jersey Clinton's way. They attribute her wins to a factor of machine politics. They claim to face a daunting task in combating the entrenched political relationships and resources of Clinton and her campaign surrogate — the 42nd President of the United States, William Jefferson Clinton. Kommareddi writes, “In the earlier states like CA, NY and NJ, our campaign did not have the same resources and built-in advantage of the Clinton campaign in many of those state's ethnic communities. The Clinton campaign had a considerable head start in reaching out to a

number of communities in California and New York/Jersey, including the endorsements of high-level AAPI elected officials.”

The macro-argument of the Obama campaign is that the more time they have to combat the Clinton machine — the more time they have to campaign — the more Americans of any stripe discover Obama. The more they embrace him. The more they vote for him. Kommareddi touts the Obama campaign's evolving strategies to converse and connect with AA voters. He writes, “Senator Obama's sister Maya Soetero-Ng and her husband Konrad Ng are Asian Americans and have been extremely active in reaching out to the Asian American community. The Obama campaign has produced multiple detailed policy papers for Asian Americans, created the only campaign-sponsored Asian American outreach webpage, worked with supporters to translate campaign materials into Asian languages ... and developed a targeted call feature — we believe the first in Presidential primary history — to allow Asian American supporters nationally to call Asian American voters in states like Iowa, Minnesota, California and Texas.”

The weeks that followed Super Tuesday support this argument with regards to voters in general and the AA electorate in particular. Obama's 11-straight win streak has

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— S. B. Woo, a founding member of 80-20 Initiative

been fueled by wins in Washington state, Virginia, Maryland and Hawaii — states respectively ranking fifth, seventh, eighth and first nationally in AA population. Kommareddi makes special note of the Hawaii victory. “We believe Obama's overwhelming victory in Hawaii, a majority Asian American state, reflects the resonance of Barack Obama's message with Asian American voters. ... The more time voters get to know Barack Obama, the more they are inspired by his message of change,” he writes.

Their argument has merit, but there is more to the story. The campaign's defeat in the Golden State underscores the sharp learning curve of an operation that defies conventional wisdom — whose stated end game is nothing short of a complete and utter overhaul of business as usual politics. To defy the Clinton machine, to defy history itself is no easy task, and the Obama campaign exhibits the growing pains of a group of men and women who —

like their candidate — are playing on the Presidential primary stage for the very first time. In the Marine Corps handbook this evolution is called O.J.T. — on the job training. Or, more simply put, “You don't know sh—t till the bullets start flying.”

The Obama campaign admits they were not prepared for their operation to come so far, so fast. What began as a grassroots operation has become a coast-to-coast political movement. If there's a unifying theme to this chapter of their story so far, it's that the campaign has been a step slow to read and react to the changing landscape of the AA vote. Mistakes were made in California. Case in point: Susan Ahn Cuddy.

Cuddy is the daughter of Dosan Ahn Chang Ho — a legendary figure in the Korean independence movement in the early 1900s and the progenitor of the Korean American community in the United States. Cuddy is 93 years young, a decorated veteran of the United States Navy, a former director with the National Security Agency and a lifelong Republican. She also supports Barack Obama. Recently, at home in Los Angeles, Cuddy explained her party-switching support. “Obama has lived the nitty-gritty of life. He is a man of the people. I admire how he speaks to so many, how he inspires them to be in politics,” she said.

Frank Aum knows all about Susan Ahn Cuddy. He is a Washington D.C.-based attorney working on AA community outreach for the Obama campaign. Aum came up with a plan to have Cuddy speak on the same stage with Obama during a rally in Los Angeles, two weeks before the California primary. This plan never came to fruition, however. “The Obama campaign missed the opportunity when it came to utilizing Susan Ahn Cuddy,” wrote her son, Phillip Cuddy, a community activist, in a recent email. “We spent a lot of time trying to alert the Obama people about how to use her in their campaign. They spent time doing a background check to see if her story was real — maybe they weren't too impressed.”

The delay may have cost Obama the chance to woo crucial AA voters and donors in the critical weeks before the California primary. “If a prominent Korean figure makes a move, many in the Korean American community will follow that lead, providing votes and dollars,” asserts Phillip Cuddy. In time, Susan Ahn Cuddy and her family were able to work with Aum and Obama backer California State Senator Mark Ridley-Thomas. She eventually spoke to more than 8,000 supporters at a Los Angeles rally attended by Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Caroline Kennedy and Maria Shriver. This was likely a case of too

little, too late, however. The rally was just 48 hours before Californians headed to the polls.

What Comes Next

With Ohio in the Clinton column, the race will likely be decided in the Pennsylvania primary and a backroom brawl about potential do-overs in the discounted Michigan and Florida primaries (because they were held early against party rules, the votes and delegates were not counted). When it's all over, Democrats will have embraced Clinton's hardscrabble argument of counting experience over rhetorical flourish or Obama's promulgation that the machinery of American Democracy must, can and shall be remade. Regardless of the outcome in the confused and conflicted fight for the Democratic nomination, one of this election cycle's most surprising trends has been revealed — the AA vote is an emerging force to be reckoned with in the Golden State and beyond. In light of this development, AA activists and organizers predict a profound change is soon to come for their community.

Looking back to the California primary, S. B. Woo makes a bold claim. "From here on, any rightful cause taken up by 80-20 on behalf of Asian Americans will get the attention of America's power elite," he says. "This is the dawn of a new era in Asian American politics." Woo and To look forward to the 80-20 Initiative's nominating convention this summer. The group's membership will choose Democratic, Republican and Independent delegates for its convention. The nominees of the three major parties — McCain, third-party candidate Ralph Nader, and either Obama or Clinton will be invited to speak at the convention. After some healthy debate, 80-20 will officially endorse a candidate . Woo and To believe 80-20's endorsement will be crucial to success in the November election, particularly in California. They hope to convince their endorsed candidate to make history by guaranteeing the appointment of an AA activist to the transition team should he or she be elected. This would give the AA community a primary voice in the construction of the next Presidential administration.

As she continues to campaign for Clinton, Elena Ong takes a moment to consider the political future of all AAs. Ong believes that three conditions must be met before the community as a whole flourishes politically as never before. "Asian Americans — particularly Asian American women — must run for elected office, must win elected office and must lead by skillfully executing the responsibilities of elected office. This is the way to expand who we are."

Run. Win. Lead. The story continues. ... ❁

Voter Snapshot

A sample of who AA women are supporting in the Democratic race and why.

Senator Hillary Clinton

I have admired her since I was a young teenager, studying her life and the courageous path she has taken since her days at Wellesley where she was marching for civil rights and single-handedly created more admittance for black students and staff. As a woman, I am intrinsically drawn to and inspired by strong women. She speaks to all women: poor, single, educated, struggling, insured, uninsured. ... I do feel that experience trumps everything here, and Hillary is far more experienced and ready.

Nancy Pak, 27, Los Angeles, CA

We don't choose what families we are born into, what economic background, our race or sex; it was all decided for us before we were born. I've always admired Hillary because she understood this about people. This is why she fights for the greatest good for the greatest amount of people. If someone happens to be born in a city where it is [rife] with violence and poverty, Hillary has made it clear it isn't that person's fault and they shouldn't be penalized for it. That is why improving our economy, education, healthcare, cutting taxes and foreign policy is extremely important for her.

Andrea Chung, 24, Los Angeles, CA

To me, Hillary just seems like she's made for this job. Way before she was molded into Politician Hillary, she was this fearless, brainy chick who questioned authority like no other. Today, she simply knows the ropes better. She's reasoned, experienced, capable and tough. And she's ready.

Michelle Woo, 26, Torrance, CA

Senator Barack Obama

Normally I am a Republican, but I'm going to vote for Obama because I feel like he's concerned about social justice and wants to help people who don't necessarily have a voice/advocate. I think he will bring the most change to the White House and this country.

Cindy Park, 34, Orange, CA

There is something magnetic about him and I think having a black/multiracial president with his beliefs would be amazing.

Sarah Lee Peterson-Guada, 32, El Cerrito, CA

He represents a new face of America that I would like the rest of the world to see. If a black intelligent [man] such as Obama gets elected as president, I feel that as a woman of color, there is hope in this country. I like Hillary too, but as white women are the ones who benefited from Affirmative Action, I am less reluctant to pick her. Plus she feels like old news; Obama is fresh and echoes Kennedy.

Lily Chien-Davis, 35, Berkeley, CA