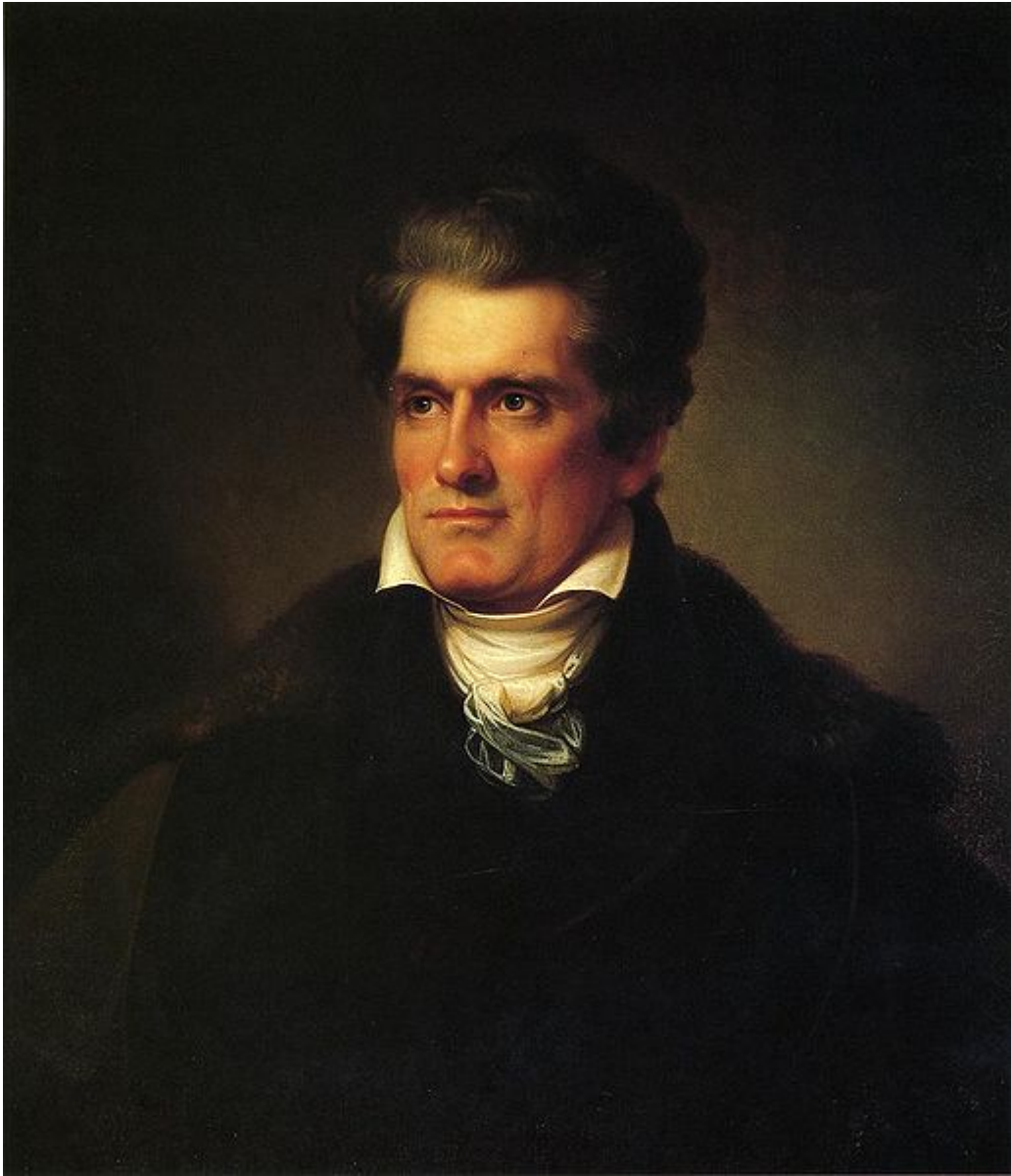


## Public Occurrences 2.0 September 2008



**Historians, find the pattern**

Assuming there is one, besides electoral fear. Any thoughts? Any other maps this resembles?





## September 28, 2008

### St. Louis not good enough for Palin “debate camp”

Be insulted, my fellow Missourians and swing-state voters, be very insulted.

[From CNN.com:](#)

Gov. Sarah Palin will now spend two and a half days near Sedona, Arizona, to prepare for Thursday’s debate, instead of prepping in St Louis, as originally planned.

Sarah Palin will be at John McCain’s rustic creek side home outside Sedona [a.k.a. his 5-building “Sedona compound”] for what a top aide calls “debate camp.”

Gee, I went to debate camp in Emporia, Kansas and I survived. That’s where I learned that you could eat anything an institutional kitchen produced if you just added enough steak sauce. Call me a liberal elitist, but that’s how I saw it.

Actually, I suspect this has more to do with keeping Sarah away from reporters and voters, and near at hand for Daddy Mac, where she won’t be able to say anything [he has to retract](#).

## September 23, 2008

### The Bailout of Abominations?



The nasty, mendacious creativity of the present,

cornered GOP really does seem to know no bounds. The near economic collapse that occurred on their watch, fostered by their ideology and their mismanagement, Republicans have decided [to blame](#) on poor non-whites. "[Loaning to minorities and risky folks is a disaster](#)" that Congress should have warned the lenders about, they were saying on Fox News, as though someone forced the financial industry to go out and make all those sub-prime loans and sell them to each other. ("Allow under pressure of furious lobbying" would be the more appropriate verb phrase for Congress's attitude toward virtually unrestricted lending lately.) A century or so ago GOP jurists called those kind of bad deals "freedom of contract," and unlike the 19th-century workers whose complaints were usually rejected, our modern financiers actually did have a choice when they made these bad bargains. For instance, they had the choice of actually requiring proof of borrowers' source of income, a standard that I gather had been largely abandoned by many lenders.

This latest conservative meme is a breathtakingly yet typical effort to project and racialize systemic, top-down economic failures – it's only *those people* who go bankrupt, lose their homes, etc.

Of course, lots of ordinary middle-class Republicans and business page columnists, raised on the small government gospel, are suffering tremendous cognitive dissonance at sight of their party engineering what must be dollar-wise the largest public invasion of the private sector in American history. GOP leaders have naturally seen in their followers' confusion a chance to spin more fantasies and try to turn the responsible efforts of others to clean up the mess they have made into one more desperate political ploy. Here's [Ed Kilgore](#), writing in *The Democratic Strategist*:

Every Democrat should read Patrick Ruffini's post from yesterday at NextRight. He is, I strongly suspect, perfectly reflecting the game that Republicans, including Team McCain, want to play with the Paulson Plan:



Republican incumbents in close races have the easiest vote of their lives coming up this week: No on the Bush-Pelosi Wall Street

bailout.

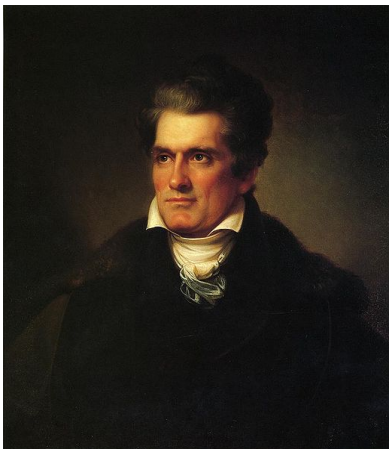
God Himself couldn't have given rank-and-file Republicans a better opportunity to create political space between themselves and the Administration. That's why I want to see 40 Republican No votes in the Senate, and 150 in the House. If a bailout is to pass, let it be with Democratic votes. Let this be the political establishment (Bush Republicans in the White House Democrats in Congress) saddling the taxpayers with hundreds of billions in debt (more than the Iraq War, conjured up in a single weekend, and enabled by Pelosi, btw), while principled Republicans say "No" and go to the country with a stinging indictment of the majority in Congress....

In an ideal world, McCain opposes this because of all the Democratic add-ons and shows up to vote Nay while Obama punts.

History has shown us that "inevitable" "emergency" legislation like the Patriot Act or Sarbanes-Oxley is never more popular than on the day it is passed – and this isn't all that popular to begin with. All the upside comes with voting against it.

Ruffini is exactly right about the politics of this issue, especially for Republicans. Think of this as one of those periodic votes on raising the public debt limit. It has to pass, of course, but there's zero percentage in supporting it for any one individual. The speculative costs of the legislation actually failing are completely intangible and ultimately irrelevant, while the costs it will impose are tangible and controversial from almost every point of view. For McCain and other Republicans, voting "no" on Paulson without accepting the consequences of that vote is the political equivalent of a bottomless crack pipe: it will please the conservative "base," distance them from both Bush and "Washington," and let them indulge in both anti-government and anti-corporate demagoguery, even as Democrats bail out their Wall Street friends and big investors generally.

Josh Marshall has links to more material in this vein [here](#).



So, to go historical for a second here, current

Republicans apparently want to turn the Paulson bailout plan into the new "Tariff of Abominations," a policy of theirs that they hope will reflect even worse on their opponents. The fabled Tariff of 1828 was a Democratic-originated bill that their hated enemy President John Quincy Adams signed into law. Adams was then furiously denounced for signing it in the ensuing campaign, which he lost, especially by tariff-hating southerners who had no choice (by their proslavery lights) but to keep supporting Democratic candidate Andrew Jackson whatever his northern allies had done. The [traditional stories](#) that this was all a plot by Martin Van Buren to allow Jackson to run as both pro- and anti-protection, and that the bill was intended to fail, are now thought to be somewhat mythical. ([Wikipedia](#) seems pretty good on the topic, or you can read [Frederick Jackson Turner about it on Google books](#).) If the Tariff of 1828 was a Van Buren plot, it was a little too clever. Jackson would probably have won anyway, John C. Calhoun-led South Carolina would soon try to destroy or hamstring the Union over the issue, and the enmity of many southern Democrats for Van Buren would burn for decades, eventually getting him thrown out of the presidency.

I am guessing any serious effort to boomerang the Bush administration's bailout against the Democrats or to help John McCain will also turn out to be a little too clever. It might help soothe the aching heads of some in the GOP base, but the Bush brand of Republicans-as-irresponsible-rich-people is a little too well-established by now. That's what a lot of Republican voters I know seem to *like* about them.

## September 22, 2008

### A Pollster's Dilemma

I have not seen that it got a lot of play nationally – though admittedly I did not watch much TV over the weekend – but a couple of the local papers were full of mischievous AP material seemingly aimed at turning the clock back to the ugly part of this year's Democratic primaries, if not much, much further. In particular, AP's Ron Fournier takes the opportunity of this week of national economic crisis to [publicize a poll done with Stanford University](#) that gave whites a chance to apply various racially charged adjectives to describe blacks:

WASHINGTON (AP) – Deep-seated racial misgivings could cost Barack Obama the White House if the election is close, according to an AP-Yahoo News poll that found one-third of white Democrats harbor negative views toward blacks – many calling them "lazy," "violent" or responsible for their own troubles.

The poll, conducted with Stanford University, suggests that the percentage of

voters who may turn away from Obama because of his race could easily be larger than the final difference between the candidates in 2004 – about 2.5 percentage points.

Historians will be shocked – shocked – that racism has not evaporated overnight because an African-American won a major party presidential nomination. To round out the story, Fournier and company find the grumpiest old guys in some working-class Ohio diner to make a few racist remarks, all along making various defeatist insinuations about the Obama campaign.

The underlying message seems to be that Republicans should rest easier, even now that McCain has started to fall behind in the polls again. Thanks to racism, McCain is ahead of Obama even if he is way behind. So, congratulations, GOP, prejudice is still your friend.

But guess what? AP implies that the real problem is actually *Democratic* racism. “Lots of Republicans harbor prejudices, too, but the survey found they weren’t voting against Obama because of his race. Most Republicans wouldn’t vote for any Democrat for president – white, black or brown.” That’s right, GOP voters in white-flight suburbs never ever vote for black candidates or a candidate friendly to black people, but only because they care about the *issues*. Voting for the GOP in the first place has nothing at all to do with race. Riiiiight. Of course, the m.o. in many of these ‘burbs, especially the wealthier ones, is not being a racist by never personally encountering poor people of other races in a non-employee context.

[Political scientist Nate Silver explains](#) why the AP’s leap from the racial attitudes found in the poll to measurable race-based voting effects is not borne out by the data. I don’t have Silver’s statistical expertise or mathematical voting models, but it is easy to enough tell that national Democratic candidates of any race almost never run as well the local Democrats in white working-class areas. And haven’t since the late 1960s. These were the fabled “Reagan Democrats” of yore, at least the northern division of them. I am guessing that Obama will not do much worse than John Kerry or Al Gore in those places, but in some of them he will do a lot better.

Presumably the tactic behind Fournier’s story is to continue the “Democratic screw-up” meme by implying that if the liberals had only let Hillary Clinton have the nomination, instead of Obama, then white working-class voters would now be enthusiastically supporting the ticket. Uh, right. Tell me the guy who would say this to a reporter in a public place would be singing Hillary’s praises instead: “‘We still don’t like black people,’ said John Clouse, 57, reflecting the sentiments of his pals gathered at a coffee shop in Somerset, Ohio.” They sure seem like probable feminists to me. (Joke! I suspect they were against wimmin’s-libbers before the idea of black presidential candidate ever crossed their mental transoms.)



What I really don't understand is why responsible scholars of public opinion would be involved in releasing such a poll just before an election, other than money and attention. Especially if you sincerely believe racism remains a problem in this country, as I suppose the scholars in question must, it does not seem helpful to encourage whites in the idea that their prejudices are secretly shared by their neighbors. Or does this poll emanate one of Stanford's conservative think-tank branches? That would explain a lot.

## September 19, 2008

### **Barack Obama and Jackie Robinson: An Historical Analogy that Works for Me**

It was partly the St. Louis angle, I admit, but I was quite moved by Boyd Reed's reader blog post at *TPM*, "[How Racism Works for Me](#)." The post chiefly concerns Reed's own experiences as an African American who does not fit into white stereotypes about African Americans, and how those experiences inform his work as an active supporter of Barack Obama. One passage that particularly struck me was Reed's comparison of the challenge Obama faces to that met by the first black man in *baseball's* big leagues, Jackie Robinson. My sons were making this comparison at dinner the other night, and Reed made me feel that they were even more perceptive than I thought they were. Frankly, it is analogy that a lot of adult white liberals I know or read should consider very seriously before they moan again about Obama's seeming centrism or apparent failure to rip the Republicans with sufficient ferocity on a given day.

Here's Boyd Reed:

I've made the comparison between Obama's candidacy and Jackie Robinson's major league debut before. As you read the various histories that have been written about Robinson, you come to understand that he had a great deal of inner anger about the way he was treated at the start of his career with the Dodgers.

Of course, he had every right to be angry. But the whole reason Branch Rickey picked Robinson to break the color barrier in baseball wasn't just because of Robinson's playing ability, which was unquestioned. Rickey picked Robinson because he believed Robinson would be able to endure being spat on by fans, openly cursed by other players and defamed by the press, and keep playing without complaint. Robinson excelled, even with all that negativity towering over him.

It's now been 61 years since a Black man hit the big leagues, and Blacks have come a long way since then. We've seen Black billionaires, Fortune 500 CEOs,

entertainers, moguls, movie stars, designers, entrepreneurs, professors, activists, race car drivers, jockeys, and politicians. But never have we seen a truly viable Presidential candidate of color before now.

**So, when I go out canvassing, I keep all that in mind. When I talk to an undecided voter or a hostile voter on the phone, I remember that we're working against virtually everything in our nation's relatively short history to get this man elected.**

I hold my anger at the injustice. I hold my despair at the seemingly irreversible backward thinking and illogic. I hold my horror at the idea that this man, so uniquely qualified for this time in our history, may not have a chance to do what so many of us so desperately want him to do – lead this country.

I carry hope – not just Obama's hope, but my hope, and the hopes of my family. The oldest girls actually talk about politics – with knowledge, no less! It's all I can do to keep from keeling over in shock whenever they talk about electoral votes or Sarah Palin's latest lie. My five-year-old son shakes me and says, "Daddy, look! It's Barack Obama!" whenever he sees Obama's face on TV. And my wife registered to vote this year for the first time – then promptly contacted a field office and planted an Obama sign on our lawn.

And, above all else, I do what so many of all colors have always done when confronted with injustice. **I dig in, and I work. I work against the tide. I work in places where conventional wisdom says Obama can't win.** I volunteer to call southern Missouri. I call South Carolina. I call central Pennsylvania. I canvass in West Virginia. I canvass in southern Ohio. I go to the places where "Obama" is one of the seven words you can't say on television.

**Then, I silently say a prayer of thanks whenever I encounter racist reaction in my election work. For me, it only adds fuel to my urgency in getting Obama elected.**

There is a lot more to Reed's post, and I suggest reading it from the beginning. I would also advise skipping the comments, because some of the ugly attitudes Obama is up against show up right there.

## **September 17, 2008**

### **Sarah Palin, Natural Aristocrat?**

In [a rare non-worthless column](#) today, David Brooks took issue with a typically

insincere [Weekly Standard piece](#) that professed to find in former local sportscaster and present tanning enthusiast Sarah Palin the fulfillment of the Founders' fondest dreams. (It's funny how everything conservatives favor seems to bring smiles to the statues' faces.) In one of those faux-populist jags conservatroids like to go on only when discussing Democrats, Europeans, academics, or the media, writer Stephen F. Hayward ends up bringing both Harry Truman and Thomas Jefferson on board the Palin dogsled, busting out Jefferson's [famous dialogue with John Adams on the "natural aristocracy"](#) in the process:

The issue is not whether the establishment would let such a person as Palin cross the bar into the certified political class, but whether regular citizens of this republic have the skill and ability to control the levers of government without having first joined the certified political class. But this begs an even more troublesome question: If we implicitly think uncertified citizens are unfit for the highest offices, why do we trust those same citizens to select our highest officers through free elections?

In his reply to Adams, Jefferson expressed more confidence that political virtue and capacity for government were not the special province of a recognized aristocratic class, but that *aristoi* (natural aristocrats) could be found among citizens of all kinds: "It would have been inconsistent in creation to have formed man for the social state, and not to have provided virtue and wisdom enough to manage the concerns of the society." Jefferson, moreover, trusted ordinary citizens to recognize political virtue in their fellow citizens: "Leave to the citizens the free election and separation of the *aristoi* from the pseudo-*aristoi*, of the wheat from the chaff. In general they will elect the really good and wise."

Today's establishment doubts this. The establishment is affronted by the idea that an ordinary hockey mom—a mere citizen—might be just as capable of running the country as a long-time member of the Council on Foreign Relations. This closed-shop attitude is exactly what both Jefferson and Adams set themselves against; they wanted a republic where talent and public spirit would find easy access to the establishment.

OK, down with that "closed-shop attitude," though neither Jefferson nor Adams dreamed of opening the shop to non-white males, and they weren't too sure about shopkeepers, either. But even if we don't take Hayward's argument too literally, did Jefferson's willingness to allow the voters to separate the wheat from the chaff mean that he discounted the importance of education and experience in candidates for public office? Well, not so much. Later in [the same letter](#), Jefferson explained his elaborate plan for a steeply graduated public education system that would provide basic skills to all while selecting out only the very best students in each area to move on to the higher levels of the system and *possibly* qualify for leadership roles. Outlining his program for eliminating the "artificial" aristocracy of birth and wealth in Virginia during

the Revolution, Jefferson regretted that one key piece of legislation never passed:

It was a Bill for the more general diffusion of learning. This proposed to divide every county into wards of 5. or 6. miles square, like your townships; to establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing and common arithmetic; to provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools who might receive at the public expense a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools to select a certain number of the most promising subjects to be compleated at an University, where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and compleatly prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts.

In appointing officials to his own administration, Jefferson applied even more stringent educational standards, giving most of the jobs to men with college educations at a time when only a tiny handful of men even had the opportunity to go. Would Jefferson be celebrating over the idea of elevating nearly to the presidency a book-banning small-town mayor (and religious fanatic, by his lights) who cobbled together her education from five different miscellaneous institutions and acquired not an ounce of intellectual or cultural sophistication in the process?" Not hardly, as John Wayne used to say. For Jefferson, the value of a governance system could be measured by whether "worth and genius" tended to find their way to power under it: "May we not even say that that form of government is the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government?"

I will leave to the reader what the Sarah Palin pick says about the health of our current form of government.

## September 10, 2008

### The Deference Strategy

I linked to one of my recent deference posts on the blog for my "Age of Jefferson" course, and [the comment below](#) was submitted. I thought I would answer it here, in a somewhat more comfortable environment for overt politics. At any rate, "cheese" had this to say:

I think in this situation she wants to have a fair interview. His choice of words probably could have been better but all in all everybody on both sides reads way too much into these small comments. I think he is just trying to talk about the media being respectful and courteous.

As far as her not wanting to talk about her political record, this is simply not true. She is a candidate with an executive record who is intelligent enough to know that everything she has done is going to be called into question. The simple fact is that people like Keith Olbermann and Rachel Maddow are not going to give her a fair interview. She won't do an interview with word twisting NBC commentators. I can guarantee that she will do Meet the Press with a real reporter of the news. No matter how liberal Tom Brokaw is he will still give a fair interview to Palin. I think we should let her pack her bags in Alaska and get out on the campaign trail full force before we start saying she is afraid of the media.

The gloves have come off in this election and the interesting thing is that Senator Obama has to fight it out with the VP nominee of the GOP. The top of the Dem ticket is fighting it out with the VP of the Rep ticket and the press but not so much with McCain. Palin does not feel the need to fight it out with the press like Obama is doing with Hannity. She is going after the Democrats and not after whatever commentator wants to take the gloves off and battle it out with her. It is more child-like to have this Obama-Hannity type of banter with the top of a ticket going after a political commentator rather than talking about actual policy. I believe this comment of "respect and deference" is more directed at commentators with outside agendas rather than true reporters.

For the record Palin has talked to the media and very intelligently about energy I might add. As you can see from the interview she knows her information and has no problem answering the questions of a true reporter. It is very recent she mentions Obama and Biden.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAYPxIJSdg0>

I suspect "cheese" is right that Palin can handle herself quite well with the press. She is obviously an adept and feisty public speaker. (As far as energy issues go, that's pretty much what Alaska's political economy revolves around, so I should hope she is strong in that area.) Indeed, Palin's obvious talent for public speaking, far outstripping that of the top name on the GOP ticket, makes the McCain campaign's protective attitude a little mysterious.

The best explanation is that most of the recent McCain campaign's "defenses" of Palin, including the demand for "deference" to her from the media and the howls of "sexism" over minor Obama comments that weren't aimed at her personally – are all rooted in conscious political strategy. However capable Palin may actually be, the McCain people chose her as a symbol, of small-town motherhood, in an effort to pump up the GOP's conservative Christian base and perhaps bring in some of the older female and Catholic voters who went for Hillary Clinton in the primaries. As a symbol, Palin's family decisions are her qualifications more than anything she has or has not done or could or could not do in government. (Almost any other criteria for the veep pick would have generated a

different result, especially if they were really looking for a qualified female Republican.)

As a symbol aimed at groups of voters who often perceive themselves as slighted and/or persecuted by the culture at large (especially small-town and exurban Christian women), Palin is actually better for McCain if she too is perceived as beset by sneering elitists and haters. Hence the rush to “protect” her, even if she doesn’t need it, from personal attacks that are largely not even being made, at least by the Democrats. NYU journalism professor [Jay Rosen saw what was happening](#) even before Palin made her now-famous convention speech last week:

John McCain’s convention gambit [the Palin pick] is a culture war strategy. It depends for its execution on [conflict](#) with journalists, and with bloggers (the “angry left,” Bush [called](#) them) along with confusion between and among the press, the blogosphere, and the Democratic party. . . . It [dispenses with issues](#) and seeks a trial of personalities. It [bets](#) big time on backlash.

Readers may remember [the GOP self-pity party](#) that went on all the day before Palin’s speech last Wednesday, with the McCain people moaning about their former buddies in the D.C. media being “[on a mission to destroy](#)” the Alaska governor. They screamed about the “smears” against Palin’s pregnant daughter, [many of which the McCain campaign itself was the first to publicize](#). McCain campaign officials also went out of their way to tell the world about [their threats to sue the National Enquirer](#) for an upcoming story alleging that Sarah Palin had had an affair with one of her husband’s business partners. Last Wednesday may also have been the day many conservative Republicans first discovered the formerly liberal concept of sexism, as their vice-presidential nominee’s many quasi-scandals came out and her remarkably thin credentials were parsed. In retrospect it all looks like a set-up to bring the Christian Right’s blood to a boil at seeing one of their own pitched into the proverbial den of lions.

This game of strategically stoking up white Middle America’s sense of moral superiority and victimization by sinister elites has a long history, which I will blog about soon. In recent times, it has worked out a lot better for the Republicans politically than it has for small-town America in reality. Read Kansas City native Thomas Frank’s *Wall Street Journal* essay, “[The GOP Loves the Heartland to Death](#),” for an eloquent explanation of what I mean.

**September 9, 2008**

## More Deference

The [Anchorage Daily News suggests some questions](#) that ABC's Charlie Gibson will doubtless not be asking between licks of Sarah Palin's cute ankle boots later this week. Our friend "deference" makes a reappearance:

There's no polite way to say it: Sarah Palin has been hiding out from hard questions. [Who does she think she is, George Washington?]. . .

McCain's camp has handled their vice-presidential pick like some celebrity who will only deign to give an interview if conditions are favorable. McCain campaign manager Rick Davis told Fox News Sunday, Palin would take questions "when we think it's time and when she feels comfortable doing it." . . .

Here are some of the questions Palin should be answering, for Alaskans and the rest of the country: . . .

- McCain spokesman Rick Davis told Fox News the media didn't show you enough "deference." How much deference do you expect to get from Vladimir Putin or Hugo Chavez?

It seems like the McCain people may have been a bit too open in their contempt for the media, their own supporters, and elementary standards of honesty.

Palin's flat-out lies about her record on the "bridge to nowhere" and earmarks are [being widely reported](#). The bridge, particularly, has a bit too much mainstream notoriety for even the MSM to let that pass. It would be nice to think there are some limits.

## September 7, 2008

### Deference: Not just for historians anymore

I was just talking to one of my classes last week about the concept of political "deference." In early American history, "deference" refers to the much-disputed interpretation that before some (also-disputed) era of democratization, common people tended to follow the lead of the wealthier, better educated, and more socially prestigious men in their community, even if they didn't have to. That is, even in communities where political rights were widely distributed and overt coercion and bribery relatively absent – as was the case in most of early America, at least compared to Europe – voters still elected the same sort of local bigwigs from the same set of leading families (especially large landowners), year after year, decade after decade, usually

without much competition or complaint.

Imagine my surprise to learn that “deference” has come back into fashion, at least for Republican vice presidential candidates. [Washington Monthly](#) had a good round-up of the story and blog comments:

‘DEFERENCE’... So, when might we see Sarah Palin talk to the media about, well, anything? According to Rick Davis, McCain’s campaign manager, Palin won’t tolerate an interview “until the point in time when she’ll be treated with respect and deference.”

Who would have thought a just-folks “hockey mom” would need the kid gloves treatment? At the last hockey game I attended, they took the gloves *off* before going after each other.

Actually, my serious observation here is that all conservatives seem to want “deference,” no matter what their era, gender, or particular ideology. Puritan town fathers, “big house” planters, and modern GOP “change agents” alike want citizens and reporters sitting kinder and gentler at their feet, to borrow a phrase from [a song about the 1992 election](#).

## September 5, 2008

### From Old Tip to Old Mac: “Bragging War Heroes” Then and Now

Today there was an incendiary post by M.J. Rosenberg at TPM Cafe called [“Bragging War Heroes.”](#) The post got quite tough with the McCain campaign’s heavy reliance on their candidate’s POW experience, in the acceptance speech and before. Rosenberg made some claims about past war heroes and their comparatively modest political use of their military backgrounds that are devastating, if true (to paraphrase my old graduate adviser). I would be interested to know what other historians think:

You would never know it from the media coverage, but John McCain is not one of America’s greatest war heroes. He is a former POW who survived, heroically. He deserves to be honored for that heroism.

But one thing distinguishes McCain from other war heroes, the kind whose heroism changes history rather than their life stories.

America’s two greatest war heroes were Ulysses Grant and Dwight Eisenhower. Grant saved the union. And Ike saved civilization.



And neither one ever bragged about their experience. (Can you imagine Ike smacking down Adlai Stevenson by saying that while Adlai ran a nice medium-sized state, he was the Supreme Allied Commander who ran D-Day, defeated Hitler, and liberated Europe?).

Impossible. Like Grant, Eisenhower did not brag.

Actually, modesty about military accomplishments is typical of war heroes and not just here. In Israel, it is unheard of for great military leaders to brag about their service.

Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak was the most decorated soldier in Israel's history (he was a commando who, among other amazing feats, dressed as a woman – with a handful of soldiers – invaded a terrorist stronghold in Beirut, killed the terrorists, and then fled to a waiting dinghy and headed home). Yitzhak Rabin led the IDF in its Six Day War victory. Ariel Sharon saved Israel from destruction in 1973 when he snuck up behind the Egyptian army and encircled them in the Sinai.

None of these guys talked about it. McCain does. Continuously. His lack of modesty – about something war heroes tend to be modest about – does not become him.

Now it might well be true that Grant and Eisenhower were this reticent about using their military careers, but if so their modesty stands apart from a long pre-existing tradition. Perhaps President-Generals Washington, Jackson, Harrison, and Taylor did not personally make speeches about their war experiences, as far as I am aware, but the people who campaigned for them had no such compunctions, to say nothing of their lower-ranking successors Frank Pierce and Teddy Roosevelt. In the middle of the 19th century, bragging about war heroism was practically the default strategy of American presidential politics. There were campaign biographies galore, but probably more important were my true love (historical evidence division), the [campaign songs](#). It was "[The Hunters of Kentucky](#)," promoting Andrew Jackson's role in the Battle of New Orleans, that really launched the trend:

I s'pose you've read it in the prints, how Pakenham attempted  
To make old Hickory Jackson wince, but soon his schemes repented;  
For we with rifles ready cocked, thought such occasion lucky,  
And soon around the general flocked the hunters of Kentucky.

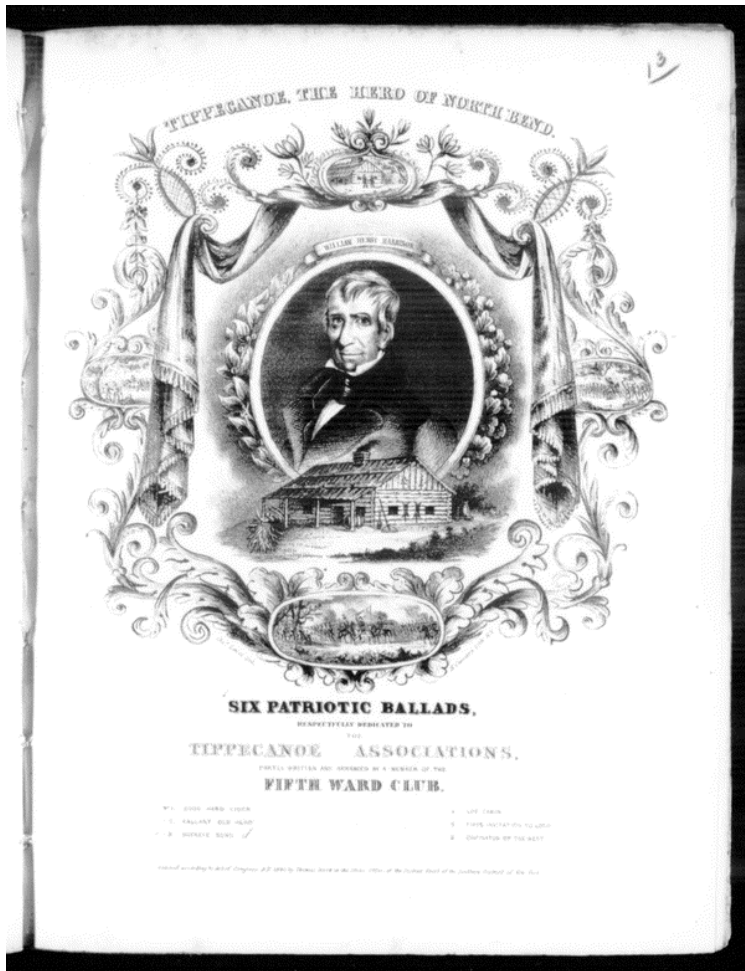
You've heard, I s'pose, how New Orleans is famed for wealth and beauty  
There's girls of every hue, it seems, from snowy white to sooty.

So Packenham he made his brags, if he in fight was lucky,  
He'd have their girls and cotton bags in spite of old Kentucky.

But Jackson he was wide awake, and wasn't scared at trifles,  
For well he knew what aim we take with our Kentucky rifles;  
So he led us down to Cyprus swamp, the ground was low and mucky,  
There stood John Bull in martial pomp, and here was old Kentucky.

A bank was raised to hide our breast, not that we thought of dying,  
But then we always like to rest unless the game is flying;  
Behind it stood our little force, none wished it to be greater,  
For every man was half a horse and half an alligator.

Jackson won two terms against non-military opponents partly on the strength of such epic bragging. But his opponents were not to be outdone, unseating Jackson's hand-picked successor in 1840 with an elderly veteran named William Henry Harrison. The Whigs' campaign songs boasted even more broadly and folksily about Old Tippecanoe's triumphs during the War of 1812 than Jackson's had. Everybody knows "[Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too](#)," but there were many more, like "[The Buckeye Song](#)":



**2**

Far out in the west, where there lives the squatter,  
 Who hunt with the rifle, and trap for mink and otter,  
 Old Harrison dash'd, when the fuss was just a brewin,  
 And he made things fly, like a streak of blue ruin:  
 He knock'd 'em just as strait, as eels on a platter,  
 The red skins, or red coats, it made no matter;  
 He didn't let them stand long, to play or to blubber,  
 For they had to start soon, either one way or other.  
 Oh, Tipp a duden &c.

In the end, I have to demur from M.J. Rosenberg's broader interpretation of past American political practice. What is more unique and distinctively modern about John McCain's politicization of his wartime service is the McCain story's emphasis on suffering and endurance in the midst of military *failure*. There is a personal triumph there, to be sure, and a spiritual and psychological success. But surely there is a tremendous difference between the war record of a long-term POW in a losing cause and success as a field commander in a winning one. One might be said to make a bit more sense as a qualification for Commander-in-Chief than the other. Truly it took our modern therapeutic culture, in which people routinely publicize their past personal traumas as badges of honor and the subjects of best-selling books, to turn McCain's sort of war heroism into a recommendation for high national office. [Probably the closest previous example at the presidential level would be the carefully

retailed legend of JFK and PT-109. Even there, the war was won even if the boat was sunk.]

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