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# OPINION

By Jeff Greenfield

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**A**h, yes, presidential politics: the thrill of victory, the agony of—victory? That's what it must have seemed like to Bill Clinton after Tuesday's quadra-fecta in the New York, Wisconsin, Kansas and Minnesota primaries. To judge by the press coverage, Clinton's triumphs were greeted by the Democratic Party as if he had shown up on the podium with a case of dynamite strapped to his chest.

"Clinton Wins, But . . ." was the New York Daily News headline. "Dems in Vote of No Confidence." "Clinton's Win Prolongs Party's Plight," said the Philadelphia Inquirer.

"Rarely has a candidate on the verge of winning a presidential nomination found himself facing as many doubts about his character as Bill Clinton," said a Knight-Ridder analyst.

The networks' exit polls held equally grim news for the winner: Nearly two-thirds of New York's

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Democrats said they wished someone else was in the race; nearly half doubted that Clinton had the "honesty and integrity to be President."

And then there was the turnout: Only 25.5% of New York's 3.8 million registered Democrats voted, down 38% from the 1988 primary and the lowest turnout since New York established a direct presidential primary in 1980. A little arithmetic demonstrates that the all-but-certain nominee of the Democratic Party managed to get barely 10% of his own party's voters to come out for him.

No wonder New York Gov. Mario M. Cuomo, who attacked Clinton in January, then embraced (but did not endorse) him the weekend before the primary, told an interviewer, "The campaign isn't working. There's no clear message. The voters hear the captain and the officers and the crew squabbling, and they aren't impressed with our ship."

For Clinton, the answer to all this discontent begins by understanding its roots, not by explaining it away, as some of his supporters have tried.

They note that many candidates move toward the nomination with "high negatives"—poll-ese for the blunter statement that a lot of voters don't like them. John F. Kennedy, in 1960, was seen as too young, too

inexperienced—and he was Catholic at a time when America had never chosen a Catholic as President.

Ronald Reagan was seen as too old, too extreme, not to be trusted with power in a nuclear age. Hubert H. Humphrey in 1968, and George Bush in 1988, looked too weak, too tethered to the Presidents who had selected them.

These recollections are historically true; but they offer little comfort to the Clinton campaign. Why? Because the doubts about Clinton are fundamentally different from the questions raised by the earlier candidacies—and far more difficult to solve.

Voters' questions about competence, experience and judgment can be changed by how a candidate campaigns, by what he says and does during his efforts to win their votes.

Thus, Kennedy could take the religious issue head-on in 1960, in his famous appearance before the Houston ministers, giving a well-reasoned speech and answering often hostile questions. By debating Richard M. Nixon to a draw, he could answer the "inexperience" charge.

Thus, Reagan could figuratively remove his finger from the button in 1980 by reiterating, "A nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought." His

## When Winning Isn't Enough

Bill Clinton takes state after state, so what else does he have to prove?

commercial, stressing his eight years as governor, helped remind voters that he had grappled with policy issues and was far more than an ex-actor.

Humphrey and Bush demonstrated their independence from presidential mentors—Humphrey by calling for a halt to the bombing of North Vietnam in 1968, Bush by implicitly criticizing Reagan with his 1988 call for a “kinder, gentler” nation.

Clinton’s challenge is different. He must cope with a more generalized sense that he is not to be trusted, that he shades the truth about himself, that he is, as the British say, “too clever by half.” When you come into a campaign with a “Slick Willie” tag, it is like Nixon trying to deal with his image as “Tricky Dick.”

It’s not the sort of liability that can be handled with a speech. To use a more extreme example, imagine Edward M. Kennedy in 1980 trying to design a speech or a photo opportunity to deal with Chappaquiddick. There is no such animal. Either voters will look past that, and decide Kennedy’s long Senate record merits their support, or they do not.

Nor is it the kind of question that Clinton can answer by reciting his seemingly endless list of policy proposals. Usually, a presidential candidate must demonstrate his or her grasp of the business of government; ironically, Clinton has already passed that test—at least among Democratic primary voters. His strongest support comes from voters who say that experience, leadership and new ideas are the most important qualities they look for in a President.

Indeed, it’s easy to see Clinton as a mirror image of the last Southern Democrat to make a serious bid for the White House. In 1976, Jimmy Carter emerged out of nowhere with exactly the kind of personal characteristics a Watergate-weary nation was looking for: decency, honesty, small-town values of work and family. The doubts he had to address had to do with what he stood for.

For Clinton, then, the next three months must be not simply about the business of gathering delegates, but about redefining himself, and what kind of person he is. It means, for example, a return to the pre-primary Clinton, who wowed audiences and much of the press by challenging his audiences instead of reciting their legislative agendas. One way to get high marks for honesty is to tell people what they may not want to hear, as Paul E. Tsongas did.

It means a painful willingness to understand how unconvincing his evasions about his past life are. He needs to acknowledge, probably with the humor he displayed during some New York broadcast appearances, that his “didn’t inhale” footnote to his youthful marijuana use was a howler. He needs to acknowledge that no one in the press remotely accepts his claim that it didn’t seem relevant to note that he’d received his induction notice.

For that matter, Hillary Clinton needs to understand how primed the Bush campaign is to run against her: as a symbol not of a committed, brilliant activist, but of an ambitious, aggressive feminist hungry for power, willing to tolerate an unfaithful husband in the interest of gaining the White House, contemptuous of women who have chosen home and family and so combative that she is willing to spread unfounded rumors about the President’s private life.

When Clinton meets voters face-to-face, his supporters say, he wins them over; that explains how he climbed back from oblivion in New Hampshire, and why so many people who have met Clinton, from high-school days through his governorship, enthusiastically support his bid. But Bill and Hillary Clinton cannot meet 90 million voters face-to-face. Other

When Clinton meets voters face to face, his supporters say, he wins them over; that explains how he climbed back from oblivion in New Hampshire, and why so many people who have met Clinton, from high-school days through his governorship, enthusiastically support his bid. But Bill and Hillary Clinton cannot meet 90 million voters face-to-face. Other vehicles must be found.

One possibility is a series of no-holds-barred television discussions with voters, pro and con—in which every question, however embarrassing, is asked and answered. In the era of Phil and Oprah, most voters are used to such give and take. Another is an open acknowledgment of personal shortcomings, something more convincing than his “I’m not a perfect person” line. No one is more forgiving than the American voter who hears a clear statement of regret; no one less forgiving than the American voter who thinks someone is trying to fool him.

The Clinton campaign believes if it can shift attention from Clinton’s character to Bush’s public performance as President, Clinton will win. Clinton himself says of the American people, “I don’t want them to love me; I want them to respect me.” Fair enough. But when voters choose a President—as opposed to a prime minister in Europe—they are choosing someone who embodies the secular religion that is American politics. If they do not trust you as an individual, they will not choose you as President.

Without doubt, Clinton is smart enough, resourceful enough, tenacious enough to deal with this burden. But is he wise enough? □