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# A boost not only for Obama

By Robert P. Baird  
February 3, 2008

The Kennedy mantle is the glass slipper of American politics: at once irresistibly attractive and notoriously ill-fitting. At a rally in Washington last week, Sen. Edward Kennedy made a case that Sen. Barack Obama is its rightful heir.

I volunteer for the Obama campaign, but even I had to wince when Kennedy said Obama "will be a president who refuses to be trapped in the patterns of the past."

The irony seemed too much. After all, this was a day dedicated to the patterns of the past -- the patterns of the Kennedy past, in particular.

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The Obama rally brought Kennedy together with his niece Caroline and his son Patrick, a congressman from Rhode Island. I appreciated their efforts on behalf of Obama, but it was too depressingly easy to imagine them as cardinals at a coronation who had come to confer their blessing on the young prince.

Their presence brought to mind a familiar but uncomfortable question: How can a country that was founded in explicit opposition to hereditary aristocracy be so congenial to political dynasties? The continued activity of the Kennedys, Bushes and Clintons (not to mention the Rockefellers and Daleys) sometimes seems to confirm an unhappy truth about American politics:

Whatever our hopes for real change, political dynasties remain the tectonic plates that move beneath the political landscape's surface.

Perhaps such pessimism isn't warranted. Seen in another light, the Kennedy endorsements are anything but a sign of aristocratic strength.

Consider an argument that T.S. Eliot made about art. He said that "what happens when a new work of art is created is something which happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it." It strikes me that the same is true in politics. How we think about the political past is determined in large part by how we think about the political present.

I suspect the Kennedys know this. As much as any American family, they recognize that the past is the hostage of the present.

The Kennedy name is the gold standard in Democratic politics, and it will remain so as long as John Kennedy's assassination is a part of living memory. But the youngest people to vote for him in 1960 are 68 today, and seven out of eight Americans are too young to remember him as anything more than a historical figure, no more or less real than Roosevelt, Lincoln or Jefferson.

Edward Kennedy himself is 75. Besides his son, no third-generation Kennedy holds national office.

And thus, when Kennedy said Obama would not be trapped by the patterns of the past, it might not be because he was comically or tragically unaware of his own or his family's

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position. It might be exactly the opposite: Perhaps he was too aware of that position. If that's the case, then last week's endorsements should be seen as an acknowledgment of just how fragile the patterns of the past can be.

By midnight Tuesday, after more than 20 states have weighed in on the Obama-Clinton race, we'll have a better sense of how the Kennedy calculus affects the election in the short run. We'll know whether endorsements by the daughter, brother and nephew of JFK add up -- as the Obama campaign would have us believe -- to an implicit endorsement by the king of Camelot himself; or whether they are more accurately comparable -- as Clinton's campaign insists -- to the endorsements she has collected from three of Robert Kennedy's children.

But in the long run, I wouldn't be surprised if the endorsements do as much to help the Kennedys as they do to help Obama. Casting Obama in the Kennedy mold offers him authority, but it also offers the Kennedys a future, a way to keep the mystique alive.

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