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Snatching Defeat from the Jaws of Victory

By Hans Meyer

Recently, while reading political opinions on Internet message boards I ran across this comment:

"Once again Democrats snatch defeat from the jaws of victory."

The author was commenting on the Democratic primary process, and the possibility that it will be the party's Superdelegates who will ultimately decide the nominee at the convention in August. The assumption is that the Democrats will doom their nominee's prospects in November by nominating the candidate who did not get a majority of the primary election votes.

While I don't necessarily dispute the "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory" part of this comment, considering the chances for the Democratic Party in this election, I did start to wonder about the "once again" part. Have Democrats "snatched defeat from the jaws of victory" in presidential elections, time and again, therefore justifying the "once again" part of this comment?

Before we review the history let's define "snatching defeat from the jaws of victory." This comment means having a candidate for president who has the appearance of victory leading into the election, only to ultimately lose on Election Day. This "appearance of victory" has three key elements:

1. The candidate has a substantial-to-overwhelming lead in national opinion polls. And while this lead may (and usually does) dwindle, the outcome, based on the polls, seems inevitable.

2. The historical precedence indicates that the candidate should win. This includes being in a political party different than the one which has held the White House for eight or more years prior to the election. It also includes the job approval rating of the current or outgoing incumbent, as well as national economic indicators and the state of international affairs (including war).

3. The media elite, including commentators, columnists, editorial writers and pundits, after reviewing items 1 and 2, “declare” that a candidate has the “appearance of victory,” and will, therefore, be the next president. This “inevitability” becomes the conventional wisdom.

Now, let’s review the history of modern day (1932 and forward) presidential elections.

In the elections of 1932, 1936, 1940 and 1944, Franklin Roosevelt was expected to win, and he did. There was much “conventional wisdom” among some commentators regarding 1936; some pointed to The Literary Digest poll showing a decisive win by Alf Landon, although George Gallup (and his new organization) indicated otherwise. Landon, of course, won only two states. So no Democratic “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory” in any of those elections.

In the election of 1948 it was the Republican candidate, Tom Dewey, who had all the appearance of victory behind him. Even George Gallup suspended polling two weeks before Election Day since the outcome was a foregone conclusion. Of course, Harry Truman won, so in this case you could say that it was the Republican candidate who “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.”

Dwight Eisenhower had the appearance of victory and easily won election in 1952 and 1956.

In 1960, one of the closest elections in American history, the Democrat, John F. Kennedy defeated Republican Richard Nixon. And, in 1964, Lyndon Johnson, the Democrat, easily defeated his opponent, Republican Barry Goldwater, as expected. No Democratic “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory” in either of those elections.

Like 1960, 1968 was a very close election. And while the Democrat in that race, Hubert Humphrey, lost, he certainly never had the “appearance of victory” on his side. So, once again, no Democratic “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.”

Republican Richard Nixon easily defeated his opponent, George McGovern in 1972, as expected.

Democratic candidate, Jimmy Carter, defeated incumbent Jerry Ford in 1976, in a close election.

In 1980, incumbent Jimmy Carter had both domestic economic problems and international problems (the Iranian hostage crisis), which contributed to his defeat by Republican Ronald Reagan. Carter hardly had the “appearance of victory” on his side, so no “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory” in this election.

Republican Ronald Reagan easily defeated his Democratic opponent, Walter Mondale in 1984, as expected.

Which brings us to the election of 1988. This is an election in which the Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, like Republican Tom Dewey in 1948, could be said to have “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.” It is best “summarized” in the Saturday Night Live “debate” between “Dukakis” (played by Jon Lovitz) and “Bush” (played by Dana Carvey). At one point “Dukakis” says “I can’t believe I’m losing to this guy.”

In 1992 and 1996, Democrat Bill Clinton defeated his Republican opponents.

While 1998 was not a presidential election, I am including it here for the reason that it might reasonably fall into the “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory” category. Historically, the party out-of-power in the White House gains seats in the House of Representatives in the mid-term elections of a president’s sixth year in office. In 1998 the Republicans had this historical precedent on their side, plus the added advantage of a Democratic president who had been impeached by the House (but acquitted by the Senate). Yet, despite these advantages the Republicans lost seats in the House of Representatives in that election.

The famous (or infamous) 2000 election was another very close decision, with the Democratic candidate, Al Gore, receiving over 500,000 more votes than his Republican rival,

George W. Bush. Of course, Bush won with the majority of electoral votes (271), which is what really matters in presidential elections. Regardless, this election hardly falls into the “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory” category.

Some might argue that Democrat John Kerry would fall into this “snatching defeat from the jaws of victory” category, pointing to his failure to respond to the so-called “Swift Boat” attacks throughout September of 2004, before the general election. Yet, Kerry never enjoyed the three elements of the “appearance of victory,” so while his campaign was definitely flawed, his election was not a foregone conclusion before Election Day.

As we have defined, the presidential candidate who has the appearance of victory, yet loses on Election Day, can be said to have “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.” History shows that this was the case in the elections of 1948 and 1988, with the six-year mid-term Congressional elections, in 1998, also falling somewhat into this category. And with that summation the tally of elections where the presidential candidate “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory” would be:

Republicans: 1948 (Dewey losing to Truman)

Democrats: 1988 (Dukakis losing to Bush)

So, in over 75 years (and 19 elections) have the Democrats “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory” in election after election, justifying a “once again” comment? History would seem to indicate otherwise.

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Hans Meyer is the host of *Situation Awareness*, a [Free World Radio Network](#) program airing on BlogTalkRadio. A life-long resident of Florida, Hans has been active throughout the years in political, educational, professional and civic organizations. This includes serving as president and executive director of the **Florida Young Democrats**, serving as an officer in **Phi Rho Pi**, serving as chair for the **Florida Jaycees** Governmental Affairs Leadership

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Hans' career in computers and computer networks spans over twenty-two years, from MS-DOS 3.x to Vista, from Novell to VINES to Server 2003. He is a certified (and certifiable) Webmaster, and a professionally-trained bartender.

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