



"I would rather be right than be President."  
—Henry Clay

04-Jan-08

## *'By Any Other Name'*

President Barack Obama. Frown. President Mike Huckabee. Grimace.

These names just do not sound Presidential or even quite American. Despite their respective victories in the Democrat and Republican Caucuses in Iowa, putting them in the driver's seat for their parties' nominations for President of the United States, they have a long way to go. Winning Iowa does not make a candidate's nomination certain; in fact, over the past several decades, the Republican nomination went to the Iowa winner about half the time, and the Democrat nomination, about sixty percent of the time. Nothing is a foregone conclusion at this point.

In covering elections, pundits talk about name-recognition all the time. If a candidate's name is well-known—even if he or she has done a shoddy job in office, or has never been in office but is publicly popular—he or she will likely garner a sizable number of votes just because his or her name is immediately recognizable. This is especially true when the well-known person's opponent is not known from Adam. People will pull the lever for someone they have some knowledge of rather than the one they would fail to pick out of a police lineup.

Yet, in this country and probably in many others, the name itself—its origin, its form, its sound—is important. The forebears of a majority of this nation's citizens emigrated from Europe, and European names feel familiar and comfortable to them. Beyond this, most citizens have some English, Scots, Irish, and Welsh blood in them, even if they are of German, Italian, Scandinavian, Polish, or some other European derivation. Frankly, many blacks also have British surnames, given to their ancestors when brought in

slavery to these shores or taken after emancipation. Thus, to a large majority of Americans, even though we proclaim our acceptance of "your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," a British name has immediate value.

In this time of multiculturalism, such a statement sounds terribly discriminatory and provincial. No matter how it sounds, it is true nevertheless. Why do agents of talented artists insist that many of them change their names? Sometimes, it is because their real names simply clank when spoken. For instance, "Margaret Hyra" is a bit clumsy in the mouth, but "Meg Ryan" sounds great. At other times, a person's name is changed to project the right image: "Marion Morrison" sounds like a wimp, but one could never back down with a name like "John Wayne." The same is true for why the very normal Mark Vincent became tough guy "Vin Diesel."

However, in many cases, a potential star's name is changed because it just sounds too foreign, not American enough. This is why Jennifer Anastassakis became "Jennifer Anniston," instantly changing her immediate persona from Greek-American to simply American. From a talented Spanish-Irish family, actor Emilio Estévez, part of the 80s "Brat Pack," uses his real Spanish name on screen. Yet, his dad, Mondergard Ramón Gerardo Antonio Estévez, is best known as "Martin Sheen" (naming himself after Catholic Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen), and his youngest brother, Carlos Irwin Estévez, is of course, "Charlie Sheen." In like manner, Robert Allen Zimmerman could never have become America's premier modern folk singer, but "Bob Dylan" could. And who would want to see a magic show performed by [David](#) Kotkin? But people flock to see "David Copperfield's" illusions.

The importance of having the right name is especially true in Presidential politics. A cursory scan of America's forty-three Presidents finds only one obviously non-British name, Dwight D. Eisenhower, a name of German origin (however, Van Buren and Roosevelt are technically Dutch names). Eisenhower's two election wins are the exceptions that prove the rule. As a first-time candidate, he was the war hero who had overseen the defeat of the Third Reich, overshadowing his German name, and the second time he was a proven leader, having had a successful first term in office. Besides, in 1952 and 1956, he was contested by Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, a weak, intellectual candidate, who in each election failed to muster even 90 electoral votes.

Evidently, "Huckabee" is an English name, a variant of Huckaby and perhaps of Huxtable. In Devonshire, England, a place exists by the name of "Huccaby" (from Anglo-Saxon, meaning "crooked river bend"), while in North Yorkshire there is an "Uckerby" (from Old Norse, meaning "farmstead"). Yet, Huckabee is just strange

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enough not to sound common or normal to the average American. Hearing it, many immediately think of Mark Twain's character, Huck Finn, and relate it to a "hick," a hillbilly, a hayseed, a redneck. In this regard, it does not help Mr. Huckabee that he hails from Arkansas, not the most cosmopolitan of states.

"Obama" is even more foreign-sounding. It is of African origin, most likely Swahili, but what it means is anyone's guess at this point. Its similarity to "Osama," the first name of America's number one enemy, Osama bin Laden, is unsettling to some. Of even more controversy has been his first and middle names, Barack Hussein. "Barack," is an Anglicization of a Swahili name, *Baraka*, of Arabic origin (from *bariki*, meaning "blessing"). His middle name, "Hussein," is obviously Arabic, and means "handsome one." It was the name of one of Mohammed's grandsons. It is ironic that, while the fight against Muslim extremism continues, a leading candidate for President has two Arabic names.

However, as mentioned earlier, one caucus does not a nomination win. While these two head their fields at the moment, the situation will probably change over the next few weeks as more primaries are held. We will see if America is ready for a President with an untraditional name. Ancient Israel followed [Moses](#) for forty years, and his name was Egyptian ([Exodus 2:10](#)).

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## *From the Archives: Featured Sermon*

by

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## *From the Archives: Featured Article*

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by David F. Maas

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