

By SHARON BEGLEY

CONSERVATIVE COMMENTATOR PEGGY NOONAN MADE TWO mistakes when she was caught on MSNBC riffing on John McCain's choice of Sarah Palin: "The most qualified? No! I think they went for this, excuse me, bull—t about narratives." Noonan's first mistake was not realizing her mic was on. Her second had nothing to do with taste and everything to do with a misimpression of what resonates with voters. In fact, it was the man who has the most to lose from Palin's appeal who got it right. Palin, said Barack Obama, "is a great story."

Note the use of "is" rather than "has." A candidate's personal story, whether captured in snapshots (Jack Kennedy, PT boat captain; Teddy Roosevelt, Rough Rider) or in a biography spanning decades (Bill Clinton, "The Man From Hope," per the 1992 video), and whether fully accurate or not, comes to define him or her. Narratives have been used to attract voters at least since Lincoln's campaign managers cast him as the rugged rail-splitter from the country's frontier, not the prosperous railroad lawyer and sophisticated writer he was, notes historian Michael Beschloss: voters are drawn to someone they can relate to, and the way to make that happen is by offering them stories. (The human brain is wired so that we can follow a chain of events that have people doing things in chronological order more easily than we can follow abstractions.) But the power of the narrative has grown as party identification has weakened—putting more voters in play—and as the culture has changed. Television has made voters expect to, and think they can, "see into people's souls to take their measure," says Beschloss. To do that, "they need clues," and there are few clues so potent as the challenges a person has faced and how he or she has met them. "The feeling that we need to know who these people are has become so enormous that a good part of Sarah Palin's appeal is her life history, the choices she made, things that let voters form a bond with her," says Beschloss. "It was almost as important in the selection of Joe Biden, with his story of pulling himself up by the bootstraps from a tough childhood in Scranton, Pennsylvania."

The outsized power of the personal narrative today compared with even a generation ago (in 1980, Ronald Reagan ran not on personal narrative, but on hope and the promise of change) reflects something that has become almost a cliché in political analysis—namely, that emotions, more than a dispassionate and rational analysis of candidates' records and positions, determine many voters' choice on election day. The emotion can be hope or fear, pride or disgust. And don't be too

quick to pat yourself on the back for thinking you cast your vote based on a logical parsing of a candidate's positions. For all but the most wonkish wonks, what matters is how the prospect of pulling out of Iraq or expanding oil drilling or any other policy makes you *feel*, and not a pro-and-con analysis of its pluses and minus-

than vice-versa. But none of this means that we are always slaves to our passions. Which pathway dominates depends on circumstances, and one of the most salient circumstances of this campaign is the sheer amount of information voters are bombarded with, says Damasio. You can barely pass a screen (TV or computer) or overhear a radio without being pummeled with the latest brouhaha over lipstick-wearing pigs or which candidate was cozier with lobbyists for the failed mortgage giants. When FDR was making radio addresses, "people had the time needed for reflection, to mix emotion with facts and reason," says Damasio. "But now, with 24-hour cable news and the Web, you have a climate in which you don't have time to reflect. The amount and speed of information, combined with less time to analyze every new development, pushes us toward the emotion-based decision pathway." And not even emotions such as hope. Voters are being driven "by pure like and dislike,

Heard Any Good Stories Lately?

A candidate's personal narrative might sway more voters than experience, positions on issues and policy proposals. Blame the power of emotions.

es, which few people can figure out. (Would it be better to set up universal health insurance through a mandatory opt-in or opt-out? Exactly.)

All of this has been true for decades. What's new is that the circumstances of this election have conspired to push people away from the reason- and knowledge-based system of decision-making and more down the competing emotion-based one. The latter is more ancient and has, throughout the course of human evolution, "assured our survival and brought us to where we are," says neuroscientist Antonio Damasio of the University of Southern California, a pioneer in the study of human emotions and decision-making. In addition, brain circuitry is such that emotion can override reason much more easily

comfort or discomfort with a personality," says Damasio. "And voters judge that by a candidate's narrative."

That is especially true when it comes to moral choices. There's nothing we're more interested in than ourselves and our own life story, and someone else's can seem like a dress rehearsal: what if I have to face that? what would I do, and how might it come out? (This is also the appeal of novels, of course.) When those questions involve ethics, the narrative can shed light on a candidate's values. And to most voters, there is no more telling indication of where leaders will take the country and what decisions they will make than their core values as revealed in their life stories. Sit back and get ready for seven more weeks of story-telling. ■