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March 2, 2004 Tuesday
SECTION: NEW YORK; Pg. 3
LENGTH: 788 words
HEADLINE: A Wager for Sharpton
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BODY:

I would like to make a friendly wager with the Reverend Al Sharpton. I think his capacity for chaos and polarization in New York politics will begin to dwindle after today.

Rev. Sharpton, you received 131,848 votes when you ran in the Democratic primary for Mayor in 1997 - 32% of the vote. You received 24% of the vote statewide when you ran against Patrick Moynihan in the 1994 senate primary. Here's the wager. Rev. Sharpton, I bet you can't match these numbers today, in your hometown. If you do, I will do my impersonations of Al Green and James Brown for you on the stage of the Apollo theater.

But if you don't, then you have to stay off television for a year, enroll in a reputable school of divinity, and enter a rehab program to break your dependency on Roger Stone's money and sinister strategies.

When Rev. Sharpton started running for president, he told me he would do as well as the Reverend Jesse Jackson did in 1988. That's when Rev. Jackson won New York City and got 16% of the white vote. That's not happening today. Rev. Jackson's showing set the stage for the election of David Dinkins the next year. Rev. Sharpton is not setting any stage.

Rev. Sharpton's national campaign has been a self-inflicted wound. His act was not portable to church-based southern blacks. He got only 20% of the black vote in South Carolina. He never made an effort to win white votes. In some states, he has collected more lawsuits than delegates. His campaign is almost \$500,000 in debt. He has failed to qualify for federal matching funds. His best advisers drifted away from the campaign when he gave control to Roger Stone.

Last week, his campaign reimbursed the candidate for \$30,000 in luxury hotel expenses and travel, but continued to owe campaign workers months in back salary.

For all of Rev. Sharpton's quick wit and intelligence, he has not seemed himself in this campaign. He never figured out how to duplicate his high moments - the Diallo and Vieques protests - on the national stage. He didn't do the intellectual work necessary to rise above one-liners.

And he was thrown off balance by Wayne Barrett's disclosure in the Village Voice that he was getting covert funding from Mr. Stone, the Republican dirty trickster. He didn't seem to understand what a low creature Mr. Stone is. After being an FBI informer and a rape hoaxer, this alliance knocked Rev. Sharpton's credibility back down to Pete Rose and Jayson Blair levels. Yesterday, I asked one former close campaign associate of Rev. Sharpton why the campaign never developed an organization.

"Al is paranoid," the former advisor told me, more in exasperation than hostility. "He doesn't trust anybody enough to delegate authority to them. He is a soloist. He promises to do things and never does them." This perceptive insider added, "Al is the campaign scheduler, the speechwriter, the advance man, the fund-raiser, the candidate, the travel agent, and the chairman of his exploratory committee. You can't run this way and do well."

One reason Rev. Sharpton's national campaign has diminished him locally is that he is running for the wrong reason - to usurp Jesse Jackson as the preeminent black leader in America. This is a motive rooted in ego and envy, not idealism.

His candidacy is also based on the obsolete paradigm of one black leader with "a seat at the table," being the dealmaker for a whole community. With dozens of black congressmen, mayors, and public intellectuals, no single leader is needed. Other racial and ethnic groups have many competing leaders. Rev. Sharpton seems to be operating on the old pre-Voting Rights Act model of Adam Powell being the singular power broker.

Rev. Sharpton's whole act has become incomprehensible. What is he doing with Roger Stone, who has tried to destroy all of Rev. Sharpton's professed goals? Has Rev. Sharpton become his own COINTELPRO operation? Who pays him? What is his purpose? Why is he still running? Why is he living in Don King's apartment? Why won't he make his tax returns public?

Rev. Sharpton's candidacy has no rationale. It is a different species than politics.

It may be some sort of Freudian father/son conflict with Jesse Jackson. It may just be an ego trip to get him face time on TV. Or it may be a racket to make money.

But it is not about popularizing a great idea ahead of its time, or building a mass movement with an infrastructure for the future. Rev. Sharpton, please accept my wager offer before the exit polls start coming in this afternoon.

I say that despite your impressive history of always doing better than expected, today you will not match your 1997 performance, when you received 131,000 votes and 32% of the total.

Publicity does not translate into popularity when most of it is bad.