

DOES POLITICAL CHANGE MEAN ANYTHING MORE THAN SLIGHT ADJUSTMENT? February 4, 2008.

Since “change” has become the mantra of this election, it’s time we took a close look at the word.

It captivates millions of voters because it speaks to our restlessness, our loathing for the policies of the Bush administration, our longing to put them behind us. But unlike “revolution,” the rallying cry of the sixties, it doesn’t signify upheaval or wholesale abolition of the status quo. It doesn’t even assure us that things will change for the better, though of course it wants us to believe they will. (Can a word have wishes? You bet!). But above all, it gives no indication of just how much they are likely to change.

On this point, the records of the two remaining candidates for the Democratic nomination speak far more eloquently than their campaign slogans do.

For a start, what does Senator Hillary Clinton’s record tell us about her capacity to shift our foreign policy from the battlefield to the negotiating table? We know of course that in the fall of 2002, she voted to authorize the invasion of Iraq and also voted against the Levin amendment, which would have required us to seek UN approval for the invasion but still left us free to invade without it. (Her attempt to rationalize this vote was the weakest moment in her latest debate with Barack Obama.)

In defense of those votes, we must remember that in 2002, it would have taken extraordinary political daring for any new senator from New York—let alone a female senator-- to oppose war against a nation that Bush and Cheney had not only branded with the numbers 9 and 11 but had also billed as a major threat to the survival of Israel. She could not have voted against the war at that time without signing her own political death warrant.

But what are we to make of the fact that just a few months ago, even while running on a pledge to end the war in Iraq, she voted to brand Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard a terrorist

organization? Now that the government of Iraq is dominated by Shiites and run by a man who considers Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a partner, Iran will be absolutely crucial to any diplomatic or political solution we might hope to achieve in Iraq. But Senator Clinton has voted to demonize Iran, and thus to give the Bush administration yet another reason to keep on blocking its diplomatic channels to Iran. Just how much change in our foreign policy does her vote promise?

Now let's turn to Barack Obama, who promises to end our subservience to lobbyists, corporations, and special interests. In Iowa last December, he trumpeted his fight against the Exelon Corporation, which for years had failed to disclose a radioactive leak at its nuclear plant in Braidwood, Illinois, because the leak didn't rise to the level of an "emergency." Taking arms on behalf of outraged constituents, he introduced a bill that would have made all plant owners report even small leaks immediately to state and local authorities.

But guess what? Exelon has given far more to Barack Obama than to any other candidate for president. Since 2003, executives and employees of the company have donated at least \$227,000 to his campaigns for the U.S. Senate and now for the White House. His Exelon donors include John W. Rowe, Chairman of the company, who is also chairman of the Nuclear Energy Institute, the Washington-based lobbying group for the nuclear power industry.

Very well, then, given the conflict between the demands of his outraged constituents and wishes of his corporate donors, just what sort of common ground did he find?

He found a marshland of compromise. As the bill worked its way through a Senate committee, it was watered down to satisfy Exelon, Senate Republicans, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which Obama himself has called "a captive of the industry it regulates." By the time Senator Obama rewrote his bill for the full senate last October, it no longer required prompt

reporting of radioactive leaks and simply urged the NRC to “consider” taking action to see that radioactive leaks are publicized. But not even this soggy version of the bill got through the full Senate. Instead it was sunk by parliamentary wrangling.

As a supporter of Obama, I believe that he truly wants to change this country for the better, and the presidency would surely give him more power to do so than the Senate does. Also, in fairness to Senator Clinton, I would have to say the same thing about her.

Nevertheless, as we run together to the great goal of change, I can't help feeling just a little like Charlie Brown on New Year's Day, running up to the ball that Lucy is holding for him and hoping—just this once—that she'll let him kick it.