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Boomers mortality and 2008

By Terry Michael

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Many of us who came of age in the baby-booming, youth culture-obsessed, politically charged 1960s have been hectored by recent headlines to face another inconvenient truth: our own mortality.

Possible first lady Elizabeth Edwards, born in 1949, and presidential press secretary Tony Snow, delivered for his first briefing in 1955, remind us that no one gets off this planet alive.

About to enter my own 60s in June, I regularly bore my twenty-something political journalism students with hallucinations about uploading the contents of my brain to the nano-engineered youthful body of my choice, as soon as the singularity is here. (I read a lot of Ray Kurzweil.) So, it's more than a little disconcerting for us health fanatic, wrinkled-and-Botoxed flower children to be confronted in political news with the specter of our final days.

We were programmed to believe politics was about being young.

Forty-three-year-old John F. Kennedy challenged us to "move forward with vigor" and take 50-mile hikes. We watched 20-, 21- and 24-year-old civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi and we witnessed teen-age high school classmates coming home in boxes from Vietnam. Politics was serious business in a decade when the young took to the streets to demand racial, gender and sexual liberation, as well as an end to a war that directly threatened our presence on the planet.

Four decades later, during another elective war, politics and death collide again. With no draft, kids and grandkids of children of the '60s are not forced to die for a war in which they don't believe. Volunteers do that for them. But we Boomers, now the old establishment we resented, face death of a different sort, as we see candidates, wives and staffers our own age fight battles inside their bodies.

What does this mean in 2008, when the 1946-to-1964 generation, aged 44 to 62, will comprise a disproportionate percentage of those who will weigh qualifications for the very energy demanding job of president? The conversation started with the misfortunes of Mrs. Edwards and Mr. Snow, but there's more where that came from, I think.

On the Republican side, 70-year-old John McCain was operated on for skin cancer in 2000, and 62-year-old Rudy Giuliani was diagnosed with prostate cancer the same year. The



wife of another top tier Republican candidate, Mitt Romney, has Multiple Sclerosis, though apparently not currently life-threatening.

Among the serious Democrats, most seem more fortunate than the Edwards family, though a possible First Gentleman, Hillary's husband, had coronary by-pass surgery in 2004, and potential contender Al Gore is suffering from global girth, an un-youthful appearance problem that has also plagued Gov. Bill Richardson.

Anyone who thinks he knows how voters will react to health as an issue in 2008 is fooling himself.

However, if mortality is on the minds of voters in November 2008, it can't hurt Mr. Romney that he looks like he was genetically programmed to be a master of the universe, with Olympic bearing and industrial strength hair. And that picture of 45-year-old Sen. Barack Obama emerging shirtless from the surf is *deja vu* all over again for those of us who remember a famous black-and-white photo of a slender John Kennedy wading out of the water on a California beach. Ironically, JFK may have been the most health-challenged man to serve in the White House, suffering from a host of illnesses, all concealed from the voting public in a time when that was possible.

But if I were seeking to be leader of the free world in 2008, I'd make sure I got plenty of rest, counted my calories, took my daily 81 milligram aspirin and hit the gym hard.

American politics has shifted from an 18th and 19th century typographic exposition of ideas to a 20th and 21st century presentation of personalities, first marketed in still photos, then movie newsreels, after that television and now via the very visual YouTube'd Internet.

We youth-enchanted Boomers may find that healthy-looking faces and sturdy bodies weigh heavily in our decisions about "Leadership for our 60s," to slightly paraphrase the slogan on that big vibrant red, white and blue "Kennedy for President" poster stored in our collective memory.

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