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## Oil Price Decline Helps -- McCain? Obama?

The price of oil has dropped 23% during the past month, from a high of \$147 a barrel to a closing price of \$113 on August 12. In turn, the price of gasoline has also declined, from a record high of \$4.16 a gallon a month ago to \$3.81, a drop of 35 cents a gallon.

With gasoline prices taking center stage in campaigns in both parties, does this significant trend help or hurt either **John McCain** or **Barack Obama**, or down-ballot, either the GOP or the Democrats?

The issue cuts both ways. For the Democrats, the fact that gasoline prices have soared on the Republicans watch -- from an average of \$1.91 a gallon from 2000 to 2007, according to the US Energy Information Agency, to the recent high of \$4.16 -- puts McCain and his fellow Republicans on the defensive. Indeed, Democratic candidates for congress and the senate have been hammering away at Republican incumbents on the issue. In Kentucky, **Bruce Lunsford** (D) pumped gas and discussed the issue with motorists across the state, attacking Senate Minority Leader **Mitch McConnell** as part of the problem. In North Carolina, challenger **Kay Hagan** (D) is attacking US Sen. **Elizabeth Dole** (R) for not supporting the drilling compromise of the

Senate's "Gang of 10" moderates. In North Carolina's 8<sup>th</sup> District, second-time challenger **Larry Kissell's** (D) first TV spot blamed five-term **Robin Hayes** for high gasoline prices. In Oklahoma, challenger **Andrew Rice** (D) credited US Sen. **Jim Inhofe's** (R) refusal to support the Senate's compromise drilling bill for Congress's lack of action on the issue.

Indeed, as the party out of power, Democratic candidates, from the presidential nominee on down, should be the obvious beneficiaries of record high energy prices. But the GOP found a chink in the Democrats' armor and bore down with a vengeance. Aware of polls that found up to 70% of Americans support offshore drilling to develop domestic oil sources, Republicans in congress seized the initiative, staging an out-of-session protest on the House floor, demanding that House Speaker **Nancy Pelosi** cancel her current book tour, call the House back into session, and pass legislation to allow offshore drilling on both coasts, potentially including Alaskan oil and shale oil in the Rocky Mountains.

In addition, McCain has taken advantage of his recent attention in the media to forcefully support offshore drilling, as well as measures to increase other forms of energy, in the



process attacking Obama for his more limited support for such efforts and deriding his urging Americans to change the air pressure in their tires to increase gasoline mileage.

Just how will the recent declines in oil and gasoline prices affect the parties' gains -- or losses -- on this issue? A month or so ago, an operative in a Southern Democrat's US Senate campaign told me that gasoline prices were the hottest issue in his state. "And they're talking about \$5 a gallon by September," he added, suggesting the issue would intensify. With the trend in gasoline prices reversing, does it hurt or help either party?

Again, the change in energy price direction is cutting both ways. As long as gasoline prices are nearly twice what they were two years ago, the issue won't go away. If the prices continue to decline, however, motorists may cease to give the issue the priority they now give it. That could lessen the urgency the public feels to "do something" about oil and energy prices. That might cut some of the ground from congressional "drill now" Republicans, but it could also take some of the wind out of the sails of Democratic challengers who have sought to take advantage of the issue.

For now, it appears that McCain and the GOP are gaining more from this issue than Obama and the Democrats. This pro-Republican impact could grow if energy prices continue to decline, the dollar continues to strengthen against the Euro, and in the process, the stock market manages to get on a solid upward track.

However, if the Russo-Georgian War impedes the oil flowing through several important pipelines in Eastern Europe, petroleum prices could quickly rise again. Moreover, if other economic problems -- a continued increase in unemployment, a decline in consumer confidence and spending, and possibly more

failures in major financial institutions -- take energy's place on center stage, then any benefits the GOP may have gained from their push for more domestic energy production could be lost in the shuffle.

### Edwards' Fall from Grace

"There is nothing new under the sun," **King Solomon** proclaimed in Ecclesiastes, and no words better express the essence of the scandal that former presidential candidate **John Edwards** has precipitated.

Going back to about 1000 B.C., when **King David** saw **Bathsheba** in her bath, sent her husband **Uriah** to be killed in battle, then took her as his wife, sex outside the bounds of what is deemed right and proper has often been a fact of life among leaders of nations.

If there is a big difference today, it's that the news media gives its gossip-hungry audience every detail it can uncover. **John F. Kennedy's** romps in the White House swimming pool with the fairer sex *au naturel* never got noticed beyond Washington's rumor mills. Today, however, not just the media, but political opponents, as **Bill Clinton** well knows, find grist for the mill in the supposedly private behavior of public figures.

This is not to excuse Edwards' affair. In 2006 when he initiated his relationship with video-film maker **Rielle Hunter** (nee **Lisa Druck**), he was already running for president, though he didn't officially announce until late December. His personal morals aside, he must have understood the political risk in such behavior. Had he won his party's presidential nomination and this story come out, it would have ruined a superb opportunity for the Democrats to regain the White House.

As it is, the political implications are few. For a short while, the bad press takes away from



Obama's usually favorable attention in the media, but there is no direct involvement between his campaign and Edwards' scandal, so the fallout will be limited. Longer term, Edwards, who endorsed Obama in May, will not be able mount the hustings on Obama's behalf; he might have been of significant help to the Illinois senator among white rural and blue collar voters. That, however, is not likely to be the make-or-break feature for Obama's drive for the presidency.

Republicans can chortle for a while. Now they can change the subject from the gay-related alleged misdeeds of Congressman **Mark Foley** (R-FL) and Senator **Larry Craig** (R-ID). But they probably won't laugh too loud. Who knows who's next? As Democratic strategist and pundit **James Carville** said in a television discussion of the Edwards' affair, "It'll happen again, I'll guarantee you."

Finally, Edwards has seriously damaged his own political career. Among Edwards' former backers, word was that he might become attorney general in an Obama Administration. Edwards might eventually recover some measure of public respectability, but not by the time the next president chooses his cabinet.

If the political fallout is limited, the media and public attention focused on the scandal are probably not healthy for the nation. It would be nice if great leaders had perfect morals, but in the real world, they often don't come in the same package. Few think less of **Franklin Roosevelt**'s role in giving the country hope during the Great Depression, or in leading the nation in World War II, because of his alleged affair with **Lucy Rutherford**. When such matters come up, we would probably be smarter to wink and nod and move on.

That, however, is easier said than done. If England is the "Mother Country" that most

strongly stamped its character on the United States, public obsession with sexual scandals is strong evidence of our birthright. Whether it's the libidinous royal family caught up in multiple bed-swappings, or a cabinet minister sharing a mistress with a Russian spy (**John Profumo** and **Christine Keeler** in 1963), the British press always feeds its readers every morsel it can find.

Were we like the French, who recently ho-hummed at the news that their new First Lady, former model **Carla Bruni Sarkozy**, once posed in the nude, we might be ignoring the Edwards story as well.

As it is, we -- including yours truly -- flip back and forth between the Olympics and **Wolf Blitzer** or **Anderson Cooper** or Fox News to hear the details of the scandal. Is Edwards the father? Will there be a paternity test? Did he really not know that a former key financial backer of his was sending major money to Ms. Hunter and the alleged father (who is married to yet another woman) of her child? Why was the money being sent? If the affair was over, why did Edwards stay in Ms. Hunter's hotel suite until nearly 3am on a recent visit?

Meanwhile, about those energy policy differences between Obama and McCain...

## US House Updates

**Tennessee 1** (Johnson City, etc.). In this historically "mountain Republican" district, in the GOP primary, Johnson City Mayor **Phil Roe** (R) narrowly defeated freshman US Rep. **David Davis** (R). Challenger Roe had 25,916 votes (50.5%) to Davis's 25,416 (49.5%). In 2006, Davis won the GOP nomination -- tantamount to election in this district -- with 22% to 17% for Roe, who came in fourth in a 13-candidate contest. There is no runoff in



Tennessee. Davis briefly considered challenging the result, but has conceded.

Roe, a wealthy retired obstetrician and gynecologist, had significant editorial endorsements from local papers. As of June 30, Davis had \$222,000 on hand, Roe \$309,000. Roe, who did not accept PAC contributions, charged Davis with accepting campaign funds from “Big Oil.” Davis had the backing of the House Conservative Fund and other right-leaning and business groups. Roe will be a heavy favorite in November in this mountain district with a Republican voting history dating back to the Civil War era.

**Tennessee 4** (Sewanee, etc.). In the GOP primary for the nomination to oppose 3rd-term US Rep. **Lincoln Davis** (D), businessman (hospital equipment) **Monty Lankford** received 13,362 (63%) to Don Strong’s 4,198 (20%) and **Kent Greenough**’s 3,749 (18%). At mid-year, Lankford had \$100,000 on hand and Davis had \$414,000.

**Tennessee 7** (Brentwood, etc.). Three-term US Rep. **Marsha Blackburn** (R) easily turned back a challenge from Shelby County Register of Deeds **Tom Leatherwood** (R), a former state senator, who hoped to turned a geographical advantage -- his end of the district has more voters -- into a successful strategy. Blackburn won 30,979 votes (62%) to Leatherwood’s 19,008 (38%).

In addition to June 30 cash-on-hand lead (\$862,000 to Leatherwood’s \$9,000), Blackburn had some topflight national conservative support from the National Rifle Association and the National Federation of Independent Business. Leatherwood conducted an aggressive campaign, attacking Blackburn for having to amend her campaign finance report to correct initial errors. Blackburn is a safe bet for re-election this November.

**Tennessee 9** (Memphis). In the Democratic primary, freshman US Rep. **Steve Cohen** (D), who is Jewish and white representing a 60% black district, soundly defeated his aggressive opponent, African-American corporate lawyer **Nikki Tinker** (D). Cohen received 50,284 votes (79%) to Tinker’s 11,814 19%, with the rest divided among three minor candidates. The campaign turned especially bitter in its closing days, with Tinker running an ad that juxtaposed Cohen with an image of a hooded Ku Klux Klan member, based on Cohen’s opposition to removing a statue of Gen. **Nathan Bedford Forrest**, a Confederate general and later founder of the KKK. **Barack Obama** and the district’s former congressman, **Harold Ford Jr.**, both denounced the ad.

Although Cohen had a money lead (\$727,000 on hand as of June 30 to Tinker’s \$247,000), Tinker had the backing of Emily’s List and a \$5,000 contribution from the Congressional Black Caucus. Cohen is the prohibitive favorite in the General Election.

**Louisiana 4** (Shreveport, etc.). A survey taken for Democratic congressional candidate **Paul Carmouche** shows him leading each of the three Republicans running by a minimum of 13 points to a high of 19 points. The poll was taken by the Kitchens Group July 16-21. The campaign did not release the head-to-head breakdowns. On the GOP side, the Kitchens’ poll, as well as a Southern Media and Opinion Research survey taken for Republican physician **John Fleming**, show Fleming in first place in the September 6 Republican Primary. In the Kitchens’ survey, Fleming led with 27% to businessman (trucking) **Chris Gorman**’s 20% and ex-chamber of commerce official **Jeff Thompson**’s 14%. In the Southern Media poll, Fleming led with 43% to Gorman’s 17% and Thompson’s 15%. The race is for the congressional seat being vacated



by eleven-term US Rep. **Jim McCrery** (R), who has endorsed Thompson.

## US Senate Developments

### Kentucky: McConnell Lengthens Lead

Senate Minority Leader **Mitch McConnell** (R) had a 52% to 40% lead over Louisville businessman **Bruce Lunsford** (D) in the latest SurveyUSA poll, taken earlier this month for WHAS-TV. McConnell's 12-point margin is significantly higher than his 4-point lead in the same firm's survey taken eight weeks ago.

### Oklahoma: Rice Runs Poorly in Primary

In this week's Sooner State Democratic Primary, perennial candidate **Jim Rogers**, who did no campaigning and spent no money, managed to hold the favorite, state Sen. **Andrew Rice**, to a 60%-40% victory. Rice, who spent \$720,000, lost the counties along the state's Southern border and in the Panhandle, most of which normally vote Democratic. The conventional wisdom is that party conservatives voted against Rice, who has a liberal history. He is the underdog in November against US Sen. **James Inhofe** (R).

### Tennessee: Tuke Wins Senate Nod

In the Democratic US Senate primary, **Bob Tuke**, a former state party chair, won the US Senate nomination to oppose incumbent **Lamar Alexander** (R). Tuke had 58,990 (32%) to 39,122 (21%) for **Gary Davis**, a perennial candidate who spent no money and filed no financial report; 33,453 (18%) for former Knox County Clerk **Mike Padgett**, Tuke's more active -- though under funded -- opponent; 32,294 (18%) for **Mark Clayton**; 14,689 (8%) for **Kenneth Eaton**; and 4,696 (3%) for **Leonard Ladner**. Tuke had a major money advantage, with \$260,000 on hand as of June 30, to Padgett's \$32,000. The small

campaign budgets undoubtedly contributed to the large vote totals for the unknown candidates, including Davis, who had some name ID from US Senate bids in 2006 and 2002. Tuke remains very much an underdog to Alexander, who had \$3,216,000 on hand.

### Texas: Cornyn's Post-Election Ambitions

US Sen. **John Cornyn** (R-TX) is donating \$250,000 of his campaign war chest to the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) in an effort to shore up the GOP's senate campaigns across the nation, according to Washington's *Roll Call* newspaper. Word is that next year Cornyn wants to succeed NRSC Chairman **John Ensign** (R-NV) as the group's head. Cornyn can afford it: At mid-year, he had \$9.4 million on hand, to \$916,000 for his opponent, state Rep. **Rick Noriega** (D). However, Cornyn's poll numbers are not overly impressive for an incumbent. In the latest Rasmussen Poll, taken in July, Cornyn had 47% to Noriega's 37%. Nevertheless, the Texas betting is on Cornyn.

### Presidential Race in Dixie

**Kentucky: McCain Strong.** It's **John McCain** 55%, **Barack Obama** 37%, in the latest SurveyUSA poll, taken earlier this month for WHAS-TV. McCain led across the state except in Louisville and environs, where Obama had a 4-point lead.

**Oklahoma: McCain Rules.** The latest Oklahoma Poll, taken July 19-23 for the *Tulsa World*, showed **McCain** with a 56% to 24% lead over **Obama**, an extraordinarily high 32-point lead.

**Florida: McCain Ahead.** An August 11 poll of voters taken by InsiderAdvantage/Poll Position gave McCain a 48% to 44% lead over Obama. A SurveyUSA poll taken August 1 showed McCain with 50% to Obama's 44%.



**North Carolina: McCain Leads.** A Research 2000 survey, taken July 12-30, showed McCain with 47%, Obama 43%, a toss-up kind of number in line with other recent polls in the state.

**Virginia: Even-Steven.** An InsiderAdvantage/ Poll Position survey taken August 12 showed McCain and Obama with 43% each.

### Registration Trends Favor Democrats

Recently released voter registration numbers in three states show a strong increase in voters who are likely to vote Democratic.

? **Kentucky** Since 1989, the Democrat's share of Kentucky's registered voters has steadily declined, from 67.6% to 56.9% in 2007. That may be about to change, however. According to the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, Blue Grass registration figures through July 15 show the Democrats reversed the trend, rising to 57.3%. From November 2007 to mid-July, the Democrats added 30,554 new voters, the Republicans 5,470.

? **North Carolina:** Black voter registration has increased about 9.8% over November 2004. White registration increased 4.6%, less than half the rate of black registration. However, black voters remain at 20% of the total registration, to 75% for whites, about the same as in 2004.

? **Virginia:** Since January, more than 200,000 new voters have registered and 64% of them are 35 years old or younger.

The Democratic gains have not been without critics. In Louisiana, where registrars' offices

have been "swamped" with applicants, according to press reports, Secretary of State **Jay Dardenne** (R) is investigating whether some registrars have accepted incomplete or duplicate applications, or those with erroneous information, such as using the name "George W. Bush." In Virginia, where Gov. **Tim Kaine** (D) is helping get pardons approved so those who have served prison sentences can vote, the GOP has complained about paid canvassers who submitted false names to registrars.

### Grits

? **Senate to Apologize for Slavery.** The betting is that when Congress reconvenes in September, it will pass a resolution apologizing for the enslavement of African Americans. While there may be disagreements over details -- such as the relevance to reparations -- the apology is expected to pass handily. The House passed a similar measure earlier this month, sponsored by US Rep. **Steve Cohen** (D-TN), which apologized for the "fundamental injustice, cruelty, brutality and inhumanity of slavery and Jim Crow [segregation]."

**Texas: Sessions Puts "Party" in GOP.** US Rep. **Pete Sessions** (R) is catching flak from the Grand Old Party's Mrs. Grundys, as well as a few hoots from the Democrats, after his 2007 fundraiser for Dallas Republicans got too much publicity last week. Seems as how Sessions hosted the event in Las Vegas at the Forty Deuce, an adult club. The *Dallas Morning News* says the dancers "feature elaborate costumes, but dancers do eventually strip to near nudity." This year's fundraiser, also in Las Vegas, is supposedly a step up; it's at rapper Jay Z's 40/40 sports bar.