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Foreign Press Fixed on U.S. Politics as Historic Race Rambles On

by Judson Berger
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The historic implications of the 2008 presidential race have the foreign press sharply attuned to American politics this season, a demand that is forcing campaigns and their surrogates to carve out extra time for overseas media.

At the height of the primary season in January and early February, a gaggle of journalists from France, Germany, Denmark, Japan, Great Britain and other countries were trailing the leading candidates. Though the field has thinned, newspapers from The Daily Telegraph in London to The Jerusalem Post are still publishing original stories on the U.S. campaign every day.

“It’s unquestionably more elevated than usual,” Trevor Butterworth, contributor to the London-based Financial Times, said of the foreign media’s interest in American politics.

John McCain, who is known for his open access with the media, at one point attracted a press corps that was about one-quarter international. Most recently, reporters from France, Germany and Japan were trailing the Arizona senator. His March visit to the Middle East also generated broad global coverage.

Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, while still commanding pointed interest from European media outlets, are a bit more reserved, as they are with the press in general. American reporters are usually given priority on both candidates’ campaign planes — after all, foreign observers don’t vote — but aides have tried to manage the onslaught of interest, granting interviews and inviting foreign reporters to participate in press availabilities with the candidates.

Clinton media strategist Mandy Grunwald has a loose practice of taking American reporters’ questions first in the so-called “spin room” after debates.

That tack prompted a Daily Telegraph reporter to complain in a February blog about the treatment of international reporters. Citing Clinton’s foreign policy platform that stressed cooperative relationships across the globe, he wrote: “I guess that doesn’t include the media.”

Media and political analysts say a few poignant factors are driving international curiosity in this year’s horse race. Aside from a sheer fascination with America’s Byzantine primary election

process, the potential to change course on the Iraq war and to elect the first black or female president have worldwide media fixed on the race.

“I think a lot of it is just general fascination with the American political process. The way we elect a president is unlike any other place on the planet,” said Michael Steele, former Maryland lieutenant governor and a FOX News contributor.

“This time around, there is great interest ... They see what everybody else sees — the potential for the first female or black president,” said Robert Lichter, president of The Center for Media and Public Affairs. “Like journalists everywhere else, they see something new and they jump on it.”

Butterworth, who is from Ireland but works out of Brooklyn, told FOXNews.com that among Europeans, there’s “a huge desire to like America again” and to change the post-Sept. 11, 2001, “narrative” of American politics.

Of course, talking to the foreign press has caused some candidates to change their own campaign’s narrative. The Canadian television network CTV in February forced Obama to respond after it reported that one of his economic advisers met with Canadian officials to assure them that Obama’s tough talk on NAFTA was little more than political posturing. The campaign disputed the account.

Former Obama adviser Samantha Power got into trouble when she called Clinton a “monster” during an interview with Scotland’s *The Scotsman* newspaper. That interview ended up splashed on the Drudge Report and later picked up by media around the world. The unpaid foreign policy adviser resigned in early March, after apologizing and facing heated criticism from the Clinton campaign.

She apparently told the newspaper the “monster” comment was off the record, but the newspaper explained that because Power asked that it be off the record after the fact, it was “too late” to retract it.

Clinton superdelegate Missouri Rep. Emanuel Cleaver caused a stir when he bluntly told the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in a recent interview that he thinks Obama will be the next president.

He also said that as black orators go, Obama is only “mediocre,” despite the impression among white voters that he is “articulate.”

Cleaver later tried to deny he ever called Obama a “mediocre” speaker when asked about the interview by FOX News, but then defended and elaborated on his comments.

“This thing with Cleaver, it’s almost as if he’s talking to his neighbor,” said Dan Palazzolo, political science professor at the University of Richmond, of the Canadian radio interview.

“They should know that anything in the public sphere right now can be broadcast. Drudge can get a hold of anything,” he said, urging candidates and their supporters to be just as deliberate and careful with foreign reporters as they are with American reporters.

“In a world in which you’ve got to stay on message every moment, foreign media give you a chance to open up a bit,” Lichter said. “They can actually be expressive with foreign journalists. But those boundaries are coming down with the click of a mouse.”

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