

# Obama's Blues

Despite enormous structural advantages for Democrats in fundraising, voter registration, and party identification, national polling and Electoral College projections

continue to show that Barack Obama would eke out only the narrowest of wins over John McCain if the general election were held today. Following a brief blip of increased support after wrapping up the Democratic nomination, Obama's meager three- to four-point lead in both the Gallup and Rasmussen tracking polls has returned. Obama consistently runs behind and McCain runs far ahead of their respective parties in the generic presidential polls.

The distribution of Obama's support in the Electoral College gives McCain a chance at victory in November, as the candidate who famously attacked "red" and "blue" political divisions in his 2004 convention speech has become identified completely with the culture of "blue" America in ways that turn his popular antiwar position into a liability.

According to the Electoral College map at RealClearPolitics.com, 110 electoral votes come from states considered toss-ups, but when these states are assigned to the candidates that narrowly lead in recent polling, Obama wins by just 32 electoral votes, 285-253. But that possible Obama victory depends heavily on success in Ohio, where Obama encountered some of the stiffest resistance to his candidacy and where, despite the 2006 electoral devastation of the state Republican Party, McCain has either led or remained within striking distance in most polling. Contrary to the Obama campaign's hope of using its significant fundraising advantage to "scramble" the electoral map, the two parties' coalitions in presidential voting remain impressively stable.

More strikingly, despite the enduring opposition of two-thirds of the public to the war in Iraq and his position as the major party antiwar candidate, Obama so far seems unable to build a coalition larger than those organized around Gore and Kerry in their close defeats. Thanks to the fiction created and maintained by mainstream journalists, McCain has been able to identify himself almost entirely with every major policy of the Bush administration yet retain the public persona of a rebellious and independent-minded reformer. At the same time, on the war itself, the public continues to have greater confidence in McCain than Obama. According to Rasmussen, 49 percent trust McCain more on the war, compared to just 37 percent for Obama. On the signature issue of his campaign and the policy that has done more than any other to destroy the GOP electorally, Obama cannot translate the public's war weariness into support because of this question of trust.

McCain does not seem to be weighed down by his uncompromising defense of one of the worst foreign-policy blunders of the last 40 years. Rather, he is rewarded for having given the same stock answer to every military situation for the last decade: send additional troops. When the air war against Yugoslavia was dragging on, McCain urged President Clinton to prepare to send ground forces; by early 2004, he was demanding an increased presence in Iraq; and again in early 2007, he supported the party line on the surge. Escalation has been McCain's default

response for every engagement since he started running for president in 1999.

By repeating his "more soldiers" mantra at every turn, McCain has somehow won credibility as an expert on national security. He avoids much sustained criticism of the substance of his policy views, or lack thereof, by alluding to his military service and mentioning his hatred of war, both of which sway public emotion more than Obama's cerebral critique of bad strategy. These allusions have combined with fawning media attention to make McCain strangely untouchable on crucial matters of war and peace. Against such manufactured credibility, Obama's actual prescience about the folly of invading Iraq does not have much of a chance of winning over a public skeptical about his very real lack of national-security experience.

Open presidential elections held immediately after or during deeply unpopular wars, such as the 1920 and 1952 elections, have typically been unmitigated disasters for the candidate representing the incumbent party. But as in so many other ways, the 2008 election does not seem to be following established patterns. One of the reasons for the difference is that there has never been an open election in American history held during the fifth year of a foreign war, and there has never been a wartime open election following eight years of the same administration, so the victories by Harding and Eisenhower make for poor precedents. Under these circumstances, McCain's military service, reflexive hawkishness, and unabashed Americanism make for a powerful combination that appeals viscerally to many voters who might otherwise rally to the candidate who represents their views on the war. ■

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*The Happening*]

### The Allergy Apocalypse

By Steve Sailer

M. NIGHT SHYAMALAN, an Indian immigrant raised in suburban Philadelphia, is a Crunchy Con *auteur* who makes mild, relatively wholesome high-concept genre flicks. His 1999 ghost story, "The Sixth Sense," was an instant landmark, while his 2002 alien invasion movie, "Signs," was another popular New Age parable about the need for faith and family. His lesser hit in 2004, "The Village," offered an empathetic fable about middle-class flight from urban crime.

Film nerds increasingly despise Shyamalan, though, because his sketchy "Twilight Zone"-style plot devices—such as space invaders who can span the unfathomable void between the stars but have to communicate with each other using crop circles strike these overgrown adolescents as fundamentally childish.

The flimsiness of Shyamalan's conceits is particularly noticeable because his preferred pacing as a director is slow and atmospheric, allowing ample time to anticipate his twists.

In his prime, Shyamalan didn't care what the geeks thought. When the little boy in "Signs" asks what kind of people would work together all over the world to make crop circles, his washed-up jock uncle, played by Joaquin Phoenix, hisses, "Nerds! Nerds who don't have girlfriends."

Unhappily, in his latest film, "The Happening," Shyamalan lets the nerds' nit-picking rattle his once unbreakable ego. "The Happening" is an ecological disaster flick in which New Yorkers in Central Park suddenly start stabbing themselves, and nearby construction workers leap to their deaths.

As the mass suicides spread throughout the Northeast, a Philadelphia biology teacher (Mark Wahlberg), his wife (Zooey Deschanel), and math teacher best friend (John Leguizamo) flee randomly through the ominously verdant hayfields of rural Pennsylvania. After much brow-furrowing, Wahlberg discerns the horrible truth. Polluting humanity is enduring the righteous vengeance of ... plants.

Although his dopey plot is inevitably reminiscent of "Attack of the Killer Tomatoes," Shyamalan has the mood-manipulating skills to pull it off, if only he'd left the vegetable menace unexplained, the way Alfred Hitchcock didn't bother rationalizing the avian assault in "The Birds." After all, Shyamalan's notion of innocent people dying from barely visible wind-borne spores is creepily reminiscent of the still unsolved 2001 anthrax attacks that helped stampede America into the Iraq invasion.

Instead, as he told an interviewer, "When I came up with the idea, I said to the research people... 'I want to know from one to ten whether this idea is totally, totally possible, probably, or completely impossible.' They came back with a stack of information about how the environment works and the plants work..."

Uh-oh.

To out-nerd the nerds, Shyamalan injects jargon like "neurotransmitters" into his slabs of expository dialogue, raising the quantity but not the quality of his story's logic.

Worse, the film's camera and acting styles are intentionally disconcerting. The director frames his actors dead center, shooting them with wide-angle lenses that make their eyes bug out. (A more highbrow director would have critics concocting theories about Brechtian audience alienation.)

The aesthetics of "The Happening" are so unappealing that the entire movie, originally entitled "The Green Effect," might be a covert satire on greenhouse-effect alarmism over global warming. The environmentalists in the film appear demented, and there's little sign of pollution. Pennsylvania looks plenty green.

But can a movie be a satire if it's not funny?

More plausibly, "The Happening" could be an allergy allegory. Every year in the greener parts of America, plants do afflict millions, making them feel like life isn't worth living. Shyamalan bumbled, "One of the things that I guess was in the back of my mind was that one in six emergency room cases for the United States is asthma-related. I'm going, 'What? ... Everybody's like wheezing and there's a line outside the nurse's office for an inhaler. What's that about? We're becoming allergic to what?'"

Perhaps that's why Shyamalan has his normally likeable stars act as if their heads are stuffed up and they're just not in the mood to deal with the end of the world. With the state their sinuses are in, the apocalypse leaves them irked and ineffectual. Maybe they could cope if Armageddon were postponed until the pollen count dropped.

Shyamalan, who is still only 37, should direct better scripts and reserve his own storylines for a half-hour TV series that he could host in the manner of Rod Serling. ■

Rated R for violent and disturbing images.