

Mr. Obama's Waffle

His commitment to pursue public financing for the fall campaign suddenly looks soft.

Editorial Staff

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AS RECENTLY as November, Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) was unequivocal about whether he would agree to take public financing for the general election if his Republican opponent pledged to do the same. "If you are nominated for president in 2008 and your major opponents agree to forgo private funding in the general election campaign, will you participate in the presidential public financing system?" the Midwest Democracy Network asked in a questionnaire. Mr. Obama's answer was clear. "Yes," he wrote. "If I am the Democratic nominee, I will aggressively pursue an agreement with the Republican nominee to preserve a publicly financed general election."

Or maybe not. Mr. Obama deserves credit for obtaining a ruling from the Federal Election Commission that allowed him to raise money for the general election campaign but reserve the right to return the funds if he were to win the nomination and manage to arrange a cease-fire with the other side. That outcome, once improbable, is now within reach. The presumptive Republican nominee, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, agreed long ago to Mr. Obama's deal, back when his prospects for securing the nomination seemed slim. Mr. McCain's campaign manager, Rick Davis, reaffirmed that pledge this week at a lunch with reporters sponsored by the Christian Science Monitor.

But Mr. Obama's campaign, which has been raking in money at an astonishing clip of more than \$30 million a month, is starting to hedge. Speaking to the Associated Press, Mr. Obama's spokesman, Bill Burton, downgraded the Obama plan to "something that we pursued with the FEC and it was an option that we wanted on the table and is on the table." Asked about the campaign's earlier position, Mr. Burton said, "No, there is no pledge."

It must be tempting for a campaign that has reached dizzying new financial heights to give up the guarantee of \$85 million in federal funds for the prospect of being able to rake in even more -- and to get a financial edge over an opponent whose fundraising has been lackluster and whose party seems dispirited. It must be chastening to think about the financial advantage that Mr. McCain will have in the months leading up to the convention, when Mr. Obama and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.), his remaining Democratic opponent, may still be battling for the nomination while Mr. McCain is spending "primary" money to build the necessary architecture for the general election.

But this kind of backtracking and parsing isn't what the millions of voters who have been inspired by Mr. Obama are looking for. It's not befitting Mr. Obama's well-earned image

as a champion of reform. Instead of waffling, Mr. Obama should be pushing Ms. Clinton to go beyond her spokesman's statements that she would "definitely consider" forgoing public financing.

Why not let the candidates raise as much cash as they can and save the taxpayers' money? Because it's better for voters if candidates spend more time talking to them and less time cozying up to donors. It's better for democracy if candidates are less indebted to big bundlers who have raked in six- or seven-figure amounts for their campaigns. Mr. McCain seems to understand this. What about the Democrats?