

Barack Obama took some heat a couple of weeks ago for calling someone “sweetie” in public. A *professional* someone.



The sweetie in question was Michigan TV reporter, Peggy Agar, who had asked Obama at a campaign stop: “How are you going to help the American auto workers?”

Obama replied, “Hold on, sweetie,” and said he would address the issue later. Agar never got the answer to her question. Later that same day, Obama left a voice mail for Agar, which – shockingly! – ended up all over the radio, TV, and internet. In it, he apologized for not answering the question and for calling Agar “sweetie.”

“That’s a bad habit of mine,” said the courtly Obama. “I do it sometimes with... all kinds of people. I mean no disrespect, and so I am duly chastened on that front.”

Chastened like a *fox*...

The way I see it, leaving that voice mail may have been the smartest political move Obama’s made yet. First, it enabled him to get out in front of the feminists-for-Hillary crowd – offering a mea culpa before they had a chance to demand one. Second, it endeared him to women like me, who actually like being called “sweetie” by attractive men like Barack Obama. Had I never heard his apology – which I found utterly charming, by the way, right down to the “duly chastened,” which you just don’t hear enough of – I might never have known Obama was capable of such refreshingly natural, casual, politically-risky conversation. I really warmed up to Barack when I heard him drop that “sweetie,” and I bet some other closet girly-girls did, too.

This can only be a good thing for The Candidate. You see, according to a recent *Newsweek* cover story, Obama has a “Bubba Gap” to worry about. Thanks, in part, to the crafty Clinton campaign, and in part, to some of his own comments – not to mention his bowling scores – Obama has been labeled an “elitist” by certain groups of “regular folk” throughout the country who just can’t relate to his rarified, Ivy League-educated elegance. Of course, the notion of Obama as Sir Silverspoon is patently ridiculous – both Hillary Clinton and John McCain hail from much more privileged backgrounds – but that is neither here nor there. In politics, perception is everything, especially in these media-mad times. Besides, there are many kinds of elitism – not just the kind you’re born into. And, as Michael Gerson wrote in a recent Washington Post column, “the arrogance of the aristocrat is nothing compared to the arrogance of the academic.” It’s this perception of intellectual elitism, I think, that poses a real threat to Obama in the general election.

Which is why I say to The Candidate, with regard to Sweetie-gate: Well, played, sir! You came across as “just folk” when you called that reporter “sweetie.” In a more perfect union, the apology would have been unnecessary, but you knew you had to make it – we live in sensitive, silly times – and you did so with grace. And the fact that you called the reporter *yourself* – and used that friendly, chit-chatty tone – well, that had “regular guy” written all over it, too. Again, well-played.

By “well-played” I don’t necessarily mean “insincere.” On the contrary, I think Obama was completely sincere, both in his use of the word “sweetie” and in the apology he left later. Still, he and his campaign had to have known the apology would quickly go public, and I have no doubt there was great strategizing behind the scenes as to who should make it, what should be said, etc. etc. The call, itself, sounded very genuine to me. I’d guess this was one of those rare

occasions in politics when the campaign handlers actually allow The Candidate to go with his natural instincts.

I've always liked Obama, but I *really* like *this* Obama... the one who occasionally calls a gal sweetie (apparently, it's happened more than once!) despite knowing better... the one who makes a personal phone call instead of issuing a press release.

I also like the Obama who recently told the Tennessee GOP to lay off his wife. We all know Michelle Obama is perfectly capable of defending herself – that she's hardly a damsel in distress – and some might argue that the opposing party and the media have every right to scrutinize a woman who may be our next First Lady. Madame Obama hasn't exactly been a wallflower during her husband's campaign, and isn't likely to be a "silent partner" in the White House, either. For this reason, alone, you might say she's fair game, and you might even be *right*.

Still, how it delighted my old-school sensibilities to see her husband on TV, gallantly defending his lady's honor! The subject was Michelle's now infamous statement, made back in February, that "for the first time in my adult lifetime, I'm proud of my country." Apparently, the Tennessee GOP featured Michelle's quote in a TV add, and Barack was none too happy about it. He told the TV reporter: "If they think that they're going to try to make Michelle an issue in this campaign, they should be careful. Because that I find unacceptable, the notion that you start attacking my wife or my family.... And I think most of the American people would think that as well. Whoever is in charge of the Tennessee GOP needs to think long and hard about the kind of campaign that they want to run, and I think that's true for everybody, Democrat or Republican."

Then, with a twinkle in his eye, The Candidate abandoned the rhetoric about The American People, bi-partisan agreement, and high-minded campaigns, and got to the beef: "But I also think these folks should lay off my wife. All right? Just in case they're watching."

Obama grinned, cocked his head a little, and suddenly looked... *kinda macho*. It was a light, playful moment, and I'll bet it went a long way toward closing that Bubba Gap.

Despite what some may think – and despite the fact that I know and like and even *admire* plenty of Bubbas – I'm not exactly a Bubbette. If I don't vote for Barack Obama, it won't be because he likes arugula. I've never found the man the least bit cold or off-putting. But according to

Newsweek,

a sizable number of his own party members do, which, in my mind, just highlights the great disconnect at the heart of the Democratic Party. It purports to be – and traditionally *has*

been – the party of the working class, but is increasingly made up of intellectual and cultural elites. While I believe those elites may have a sincere desire to do what's best for "Bubba," they don't seem to understand him very well. Or even

like

him very much.

My advice to Barack Obama? Now that you're almost certainly headed for the general, don't worry too much about those elites. You had them at "hello." And don't worry about wooing the feminists-for-Hillary bunch, either. They're not going to rush out and vote for John McCain just because their sister wasn't given her due. They'll sulk for awhile – and who can blame them? – but they'll come around.

You *should* pay attention to the Bubbas, though; not just because you need their votes, but

because they're good guys, and so are you, and you just might learn from each other. Talk to them, listen to them, try to understand what it's like to "walk in their shoes." But do

not

patronize them. Contrary to popular opinion, Bubbas are smart; just not in the same way as you and your Harvard friends. They may not read Niebuhr (your favorite philosopher, according to *Newsweek*

), but they can spot a phony from a mile off. Don't pull a Dukakis, and have yourself photographed in a tank helmet. Don't pull a Mitt Romney and talk about "varmint hunting." Earn their respect by giving them

yours

... not by pretending to be one of them.

In other words, just follow your instincts. You seem to have good ones. Next time you feel like defending your wife – even if she doesn't need defending – go for it! The Bubbas will admire you, and women like me will swoon. The women who don't like that knight-in-shining-armor stuff? You've already got *their* vote. You still need women like me.

Oh, and to that end... next time you feel a "sweetie" on the tip of your tongue, just go ahead and let it fly. Maybe even throw in a wink.