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Sweating in South Carolina

By Jackie Gingrich Cushman

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The sweat somehow made the moment more real. There we were, standing on the stage at the Hilton Hotel in Downtown Columbia, S.C., on Saturday night with my dad, Newt Gingrich, celebrating his primary victory. It was the sweat rolling down the faces and dripping off the noses of the television cameramen, photographers, audience members and even those on stage celebrating that transformed the almost surreal scene into reality.

The room was hot and humid; cameramen were wiping the condensation from their lenses as they fogged up, only to wipe them again a few minutes later. I longingly looked over at my daughter, who was on the other side of the podium, her hair in a ponytail, wearing a short-sleeved dress. She looked cool as a cucumber. My wool jacket and long hair were adding to the temperature in the room. I felt as though I were in a sauna, rather than a ballroom for a victory party.

It was indicative of the momentum of the campaign itself. It was hot. People were excited, enthusiastic and working hard for the campaign. The campaign had barreled through South Carolina and would soon be turning to Florida, whose primary will come only 10 days after South Carolina's victory.

The room was packed. Clearly a fire marshall had not been by, or half of the people would have been gone. There were risers set up in the back of the room, where the TV cameras were located. In front of the stage, dozens of photographers and men with cameras on their shoulders were pressed against the stage; a few of the more assertive ones were on the stage with us.

The podium itself was filled with people: family, South Carolina supporters and security, along with the few press people who were determined to get a different shot than the rest.

Looking out on the crowd, I saw many longtime friends and longtime supporters. They, too, were thrilled to be celebrating a victory. As Dad spoke, the crowd cheered with enthusiasm for the win, albeit with an understanding that there was much more work to be done.

Through this presidential primary season, I have totally lost track of time. Days of the week run into each other. A week seems like a month; a month seems like two years. The speed, the volume, the complexity -- everything is amped up. As my sister Kathy noted last week, it's like getting on a roller coaster, pulling down the bar to lock yourself in and raising your hands up to enjoy the ride.

The difference is that you can't tell when the ups and downs of the campaign trail are going to happen, so it's more like Space Mountain at Disney World than a normal roller coaster. You can't anticipate what is going to happen, but can only feel what is happening at the moment that it occurs.

The heat was also an indication that as the number of candidates dwindled, the fires of the campaign would burn brighter and hotter. Out of the nine people who had announced for the Republican presidential primary, only four are left. The number of podiums at the debates has dwindled, reminiscent of a "Survivor" series.

Possibly the sweat rolling down our faces was a good window into the process itself. The way is not easy, and the work is hard, but in the end America is worth the work, the sweat and even, occasionally, the tears.

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