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Making History Along the Way

By DOMENICK DIPASQUALE

Barack Obama's unique biography and successful campaign for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination have opened a new chapter in U.S. politics.

Barack Obama, the first African American presidential candidate to win the nomination of a major U.S. political party, brings a life story unlike that of any previous nominee. The biracial son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from the American heartland, Obama shot to national prominence with his electrifying keynote speech at the Democratic national convention in 2004, the same year he was elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of Illinois. Just four years later, he rose to the top of a field crowded with Democratic heavyweights to clinch his party's nomination for the White House.

With a polished speaking style, a command of eloquent and uplifting rhetoric, the ability to inspire the enthusiasm of young voters, and the sophisticated use of the Internet as a campaign tool, Obama is very much a 21st century candidate. Yet, he has demonstrated the timeless skills common to all campaigns, including the ability to

Above: Barack Obama waves to the audience after his speech at the Victory Column monument in Berlin, Germany.

effectively wage old-fashioned political trench warfare as he ground through a long and sometimes divisive five-month primary season to defeat his chief rival, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton.

In his campaign, Obama stressed two overarching themes: changing Washington's traditional way of conducting the nation's business and invoking Americans of diverse ideological, social and racial backgrounds to unite for the common good.

"There's not a liberal America and a conservative America—there's the United States of America," Obama said in his address to the 2004 Democratic national convention. "There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America....We are one people,



all of us pledging allegiance to the Stars and Stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.”

The early years

Obama's parents came from vastly different backgrounds. His mother, Ann Dunham, was born and raised in small-town Kansas. After her family moved to the Hawaiian Islands, she met Barack Obama Sr., a Kenyan scholarship student enrolled at the University of Hawaii. The two married in 1959, and on August 4, 1961, Barack Obama Jr. was born in Honolulu. Two years later the senior Obama left his new family, first for graduate study at Harvard and then for a job as a government economist back in Kenya. The young Obama met his father again only once, at 10.

When Obama was 6, his mother remarried, to an Indonesian oil executive. The family moved to Indonesia, and Obama spent four years attending school in Jakarta. He eventually returned to Hawaii and went to high school there while living with his maternal grandparents.

In his first book, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama describes this period of his life as having more than the usual share of adolescent turmoil, as he struggled to make sense of a biracial heritage then still relatively uncommon in the United States. Being rooted in both black America and white America may have helped give Obama the expansive vision he brought to politics years later, one that understands both points of view.

“Barack has an incredible ability to synthesize seemingly contradictory realities and make them coherent,” his law school classmate Cassandra Butts told *New Yorker* magazine. “It comes from going from a home where white people are nurturing you, and then you go out into the world and you're seen as a black person.”

Obama left Hawaii once more to attend Occidental College in Los Angeles, California, for two years. He later moved to New York City and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Columbia University in 1983. His relatively short stay in New York shaped a desire to work at the grass roots level, as Obama saw first-hand the chasm separating the city's wealthy elite from ghetto dwellers struggling with a host of devastating social ills.

The Illinois years

In search of his identity and a purposeful direction in life, Obama subsequently left his job as a financial writer with an international consulting firm in New York and headed to Chicago, Illinois, in 1985. There, he worked as a community organizer for a coalition of local churches on the city's South Side, a poor African American area hard hit by the transition from a manufacturing center to a service-based economy.

“It was in these neighborhoods that I received the best education I ever had, and where I learned the true meaning of my Christian faith,” Obama recounted years later in the speech announcing his presidential candidacy.

Obama enjoyed some tangible successes in this work, giving South Side residents a voice in such issues as economic redevelopment, job training and environmental clean-up efforts. He viewed his primary role as a community organizer, however, as that of a catalyst mobilizing ordinary citizens in a bottom-up effort to forge indigenous strategies for political and economic empowerment.

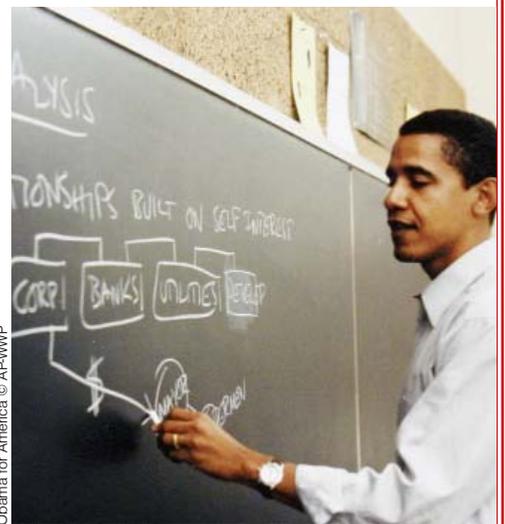
After three years, Obama concluded that to bring about true improvement in such distressed communities required involvement at a higher level, in the realm of law and politics. Accordingly, he attended Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he distinguished himself by being elected the first black president of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review* and graduating *magna cum laude* (with great honor) in 1991.

With such impeccable credentials, “Obama could have done anything he wanted,” says David Axelrod, now his presidential campaign strategist. Obama returned to his adopted hometown of Chicago, where he practiced civil rights law and taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago. In 1992 he married Michelle Robinson, another Harvard Law graduate, and worked on voter registration in Chicago to help Democratic candidates such as Bill Clinton.

With a continuing strong commitment to public service, Obama decided to make his first run at elective office in 1996, winning a seat from Chicago in the Illinois state senate. In many ways the race was a logical progression of his earlier work as a



MARY ANN CHASTAIN © AP/WIDEWORLD



Obama for America © AP/WIDEWORLD

Top: Michelle and Barack Obama dance as Oprah Winfrey (right) looks on at the Williams Brice Stadium in Columbia, South Carolina.

Above: Obama teaching at the University of Chicago Law School.

community organizer, and Obama brought much of that same expansive outlook—the politician as an enabler of citizen-directed grass roots efforts and a builder of broad-based coalitions—to his vision of politics.

“Any African Americans who are only talking about racism as a barrier to our success are seriously misled if they don't also come to grips with the larger economic forces that are creating economic insecurity for all workers—whites, Latinos and Asians,” he said at the time. Among his legislative accomplishments by the end of eight years in the state senate were campaign finance reform, tax cuts for the working poor, and improvements to the state's criminal justice system.

The national stage

In 2000, Obama made his first run for the U.S. Congress, unsuccessfully



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challenging Bobby Rush, an incumbent Democrat from Chicago, for Rush's seat in the House of Representatives. Dispirited by his lopsided primary loss to Rush and searching for influence beyond the Illinois state legislature, he sold Michelle on the idea of his running for the U.S. Senate in a last-shot "up or out strategy" to advance his political career.

The 2004 U.S. Senate race in Illinois had turned into a free-for-all the year before, when the Republican incumbent, Peter Fitzgerald, announced he would not seek re-election. Seven Democrats and eight Republicans contested their respective party's primary for the senatorial nomination. Obama easily captured the Democratic nomination, winning a greater share of the vote—53 percent—than his

six opponents combined.

With the Republicans then holding the 100-member U.S. Senate by a razor-thin majority of 51 seats, Democrats saw the senatorial contest in Illinois as critical to their chances of retaking the Senate that November (in fact, they only regained control in 2006). The desire to give Obama's campaign a boost through a prominent convention role, the well-known oratory skills Obama possessed, and the very favorable impression he already had made on Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry, clinched the decision to select Obama as the convention's keynote speaker.

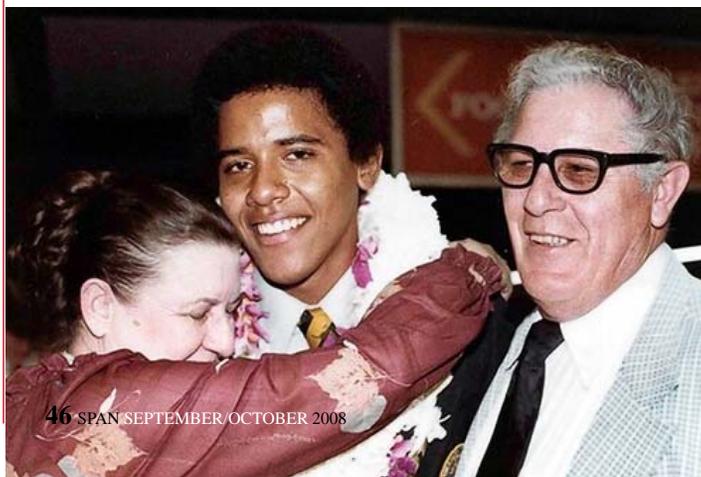
Obama's speech, with its soaring, polished language on the need to transcend partisan divisions and its call for a "politics of hope" rather than a politics of cynicism,

did more than rouse convention-goers; it catapulted Obama into the national media spotlight as a rising star of the Democratic Party. He went on to win handily in the Senate race that autumn, capturing an overwhelming 70 percent of the popular vote. Although the near-total disarray that year among Republicans in Illinois undoubtedly contributed to the landslide margin, Obama's victory was impressive in its own

Above: Barack Obama, holding daughter Malia, and wife Michelle, holding daughter Sasha, after winning the U.S. Senate race in 2004.

Below left: Obama with grandparents, Madelyn Payne and Stanley Armour Dunham, at his high school graduation in Hawaii.

Below: Obama and Sasha ride bumper cars at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines.



Obama Presidential Campaign © AP/WWP



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Right: Barack Obama with Anbar province Governor Maamoun Sami Rashid al-Alwani (right), in Ramadi, Iraq.

Right center: Obama and top U.S. military commander in Iraq, David Petraeus, take a helicopter ride over Baghdad.

Right bottom: Obama at the Victory Column in Berlin, Germany.

right, as he won in 92 of the state's 102 counties and captured white voters by a better than two-to-one margin.

Obama's reputation as a new breed of politician, one able to overcome traditional racial divides, grew steadily. In a *New Yorker* profile of Obama, writer William Finnegan, noting Obama's talent at "slipping subtly into the idiom of his interlocutor," said Obama "speaks a full range of American vernaculars." Obama offered his own explanation why he could connect with white voters.

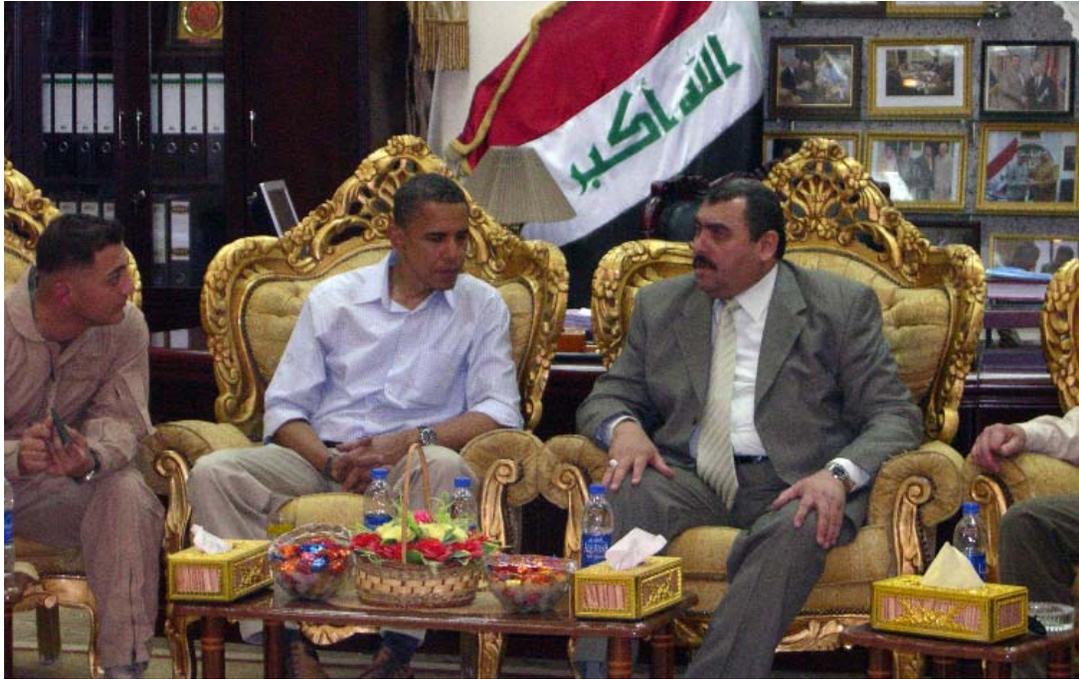
"I know these people," he said. "Those are my grandparents....Their manners, their sensibilities, their sense of right and wrong—it's all totally familiar to me."

In the Senate, Obama amassed a voting record in line with that of the Democratic Party's liberal wing. His criticism of the war in Iraq has been one of his trademarks, dating back to a speech in 2002, even before the war started, when he warned that any such military action would be based "not on principle but on politics." He has also worked to strengthen ethical standards in Congress, improve care for military veterans and increase use of renewable fuels.

Running for president

As Obama and seven other contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination began to organize in 2007, opinion polls consistently put Obama in second place behind the presumed favorite, New York Senator Hillary Clinton. Obama, however, was highly successful in this early stage of the race at enlisting an enthusiastic cadre of supporters, especially among youth, establishing a nationwide grass-roots campaign organization, and fundraising through the Internet.

With Clinton enjoying greater name recognition, a well-oiled campaign machine, and support at the state level from leading Democrats, the Obama camp devised an innovative strategy to negate these advantages: targeting states



Anbar Governorate, Handout © AP/WWP

SSG LORIE JEWELL, Handout © AP/WWP

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that used caucuses rather than primaries to select delegates, and focusing on smaller states that traditionally voted Republican in the general election. This approach capitalized on the Democratic Party's system of proportional representation—awarding convention delegates in each state in rough proportion to a candidate's share of the vote—as opposed to the Republicans' system of awarding most or all convention delegates to the winner in each state.

The strategy paid off with the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008, when Obama scored an upset victory over Clinton. The Iowa win was a game-changer; as *The Washington Post* put it, “Beating Clinton...altered the course of the race by establishing Obama as her chief rival—the only candidate with the message, organizational muscle and financial resources to challenge her front-runner status.”

It paid off once more on Super Tuesday—the elections held simultaneously in 22 states on February 5—when Obama dueled Clinton to a tie and swept rural states in the West and South. And it paid off yet again when Obama went on to win 10 more consecutive contests in February, cementing a lead in delegates Clinton never again could catch.

Despite a difficult March and April—losses in the major states of Ohio and Pennsylvania; inflammatory remarks by Obama's long-time pastor; and harsh criticism of Obama's comments about how rural voters “cling” to guns and religion out of bitterness—Obama's delegate lead inexorably grew to the point where it became almost statistically impossible for Clinton to win. Finally, on June 3, exactly five months after the contest began, the exhausting race was over. The combination of a victory in Montana and growing support from previously uncommitted superdelegates gave Obama the majority of delegates needed to clinch the presidential nomination.

“Because you chose not to listen to your doubts or your fears but to your greatest hopes and highest aspirations,” Obama told supporters that evening at a victory rally in St. Paul, Minnesota,



Barack Obama reads through the keynote address he delivered at the 2004 Democratic national convention in Chicago.

“tonight we mark the end of one historic journey with the beginning of another.”

An Obama presidency?

If elected, Obama would be the fifth-youngest U.S. president. Born at the tail end of the 1946-1964 Baby Boom generation, he also would be the first president to have come of age in the 1980s, which of itself might portend change. The atmosphere in which he grew up was markedly different from the socially tumultuous 1960s that shaped earlier Baby Boomers' outlook. As Obama once said about the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, contested by candidates from a much earlier cohort of that post-war generation, “I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the Baby Boom generation—a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago—played out on the national stage.”

Obama's “Change We Can Believe In” slogan reflects his campaign's emphasis on taking the United States in a new direc-

tion. Obama has advocated a steady timetable for withdrawing U.S. combat troops from Iraq, although he would leave some for training and anti-terrorism missions. Other positions include increasing military and development assistance to Afghanistan, closing the Guantanamo Bay prison for terrorism detainees, and strengthening nuclear non-proliferation efforts. Domestically, Obama wants to invest \$150 billion over 10 years to spur development of clean energy technology, increase investment in education and infrastructure to make the U.S. economy more globally competitive, and restore fiscal discipline to government spending.

The *New Yorker's* Larissa MacFarquhar offered one theory on Obama's noticeable appeal across traditional political lines. “Obama's voting record is one of the most liberal in the Senate,” she observed, “but he has always appealed to Republicans, perhaps because he speaks about liberal goals in conservative language.”

“In his view of history, in his respect for tradition, in his skepticism that the world can be changed any way but very, very slowly,” she wrote, “Obama is deeply conservative.”

Win or lose in November, Obama has broken new ground in U.S. politics. His candidacy came at precisely the time when many Americans believed their country needed a fundamental transformation in its direction. *Washington Post* political columnist E.J. Dionne may have summed up perfectly the serendipitous confluence between Obama's candidacy and the American zeitgeist when he wrote:

“Change, not experience, was the order of the day. Sweep, not a mastery of detail, was the virtue most valued in campaign oratory. A clean break with the past, not merely a return to better days, was the promise most prized.”



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