

Obama October 6, 2009  
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## **Background**

First African-American – has this made a difference?  
Inexperienced – has this hindered him?

Different, exotic, black: Obama is the first black president. If presidencies were awarded according to the proportion of African-Americans in the US, of the 43 US presidents so far 6 of them should have been black.

Obama's victory certainly not the end of racism in the US, currently no elected black Senators or Governors in the US. Only ever one elected Governor, Doug Wilder from Virginia, and three elected black Senators.

The view that Obama is exotic, racially different can be overstated. DNA testing shows that high proportion of white southerners have black ancestors (some estimates up to 40%), so being of mixed parentage is not that unusual. More unusual is his upbringing in Indonesia and Hawaii and having a Kenyan father.

Funny name, doesn't look like the men on the dollar bill. Obama used to mention these things to get them out of the way and then move on.

Post-racial candidate, certainly didn't highlight race in his campaign in the way that earlier black candidates did. Obama's reaction to the arrest of the Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates for breaking into his own home is one of the few times Obama has taken up racial discrimination as President or as a presidential candidate. No Bradley effect: in fact more people possibly voted for Obama because he was black). Bradley effect named after the African-American Mayor of LA Tom Bradley who lost the 1982 Governor's race to George Deukmejian (pronounced duke-MAY-jee-unn) after being ahead in the polls – the theory being that while people claim in public that they aren't racist their real anti-black attitudes surface in the polling booth.

Is some of the opposition to Obama racially motivated? Yes but it is a minority, but most of the opposition is anti-government and highly conservative. America is a fairly politically divided place, at least amongst those active in politics. The conservative side of

politics is used to success, well organised but without effective leadership it will look populist and somewhat conspiratorial.

Obama's relative inexperience makes it hard to tell how he will go, but his short political career had the advantage of reducing cronyism and in Chicago and Illinois that is a big problem. Obama owed less to less people than George W. Bush or Clinton (with his long list of friends of Bill).

### **Why did he win against Hillary?**

Winning the Iowa caucuses was huge – it gave people a belief that a real outsider could win.

It helped bring on board the black vote (Bill Clinton's comments also helped out with the black vote. In fact Bill Clinton was quite a liability to his wife in this regard)

Obama had a better organisation than Hillary

Valued the caucuses more than Hillary – played to the electoral system for the party nomination better than the Hillary campaign which was generally overconfident.

Position on the Iraq war – clear early opposition – was crucial to gaining Obama massive Democratic party support and the energy of many of his volunteers.

It was often said winning the primaries is about **Chemistry** not mathematics; in Obama's case, it was crucially about both.

I have written that with slightly different rules Hillary Clinton would have won. And the contest between Hillary and Barack obviously had many twists and turns (see for further detail:

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=6933>)

And that for all of Obama's talent he was also lucky.

In fact his early political career benefited from a lot of luck and some pretty questionable tactics. (People have objected to this – I often see these objections as signs of hero-worship). See for further detail:

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=8167&page=0>)

## **General Election**

Let's try to move now from RANK punditry to Political Science!

3 Political Science voting theories looked very shaky after the 2004 election:

1. Economic voter theory (2000 and 2004 contradicted it)
2. Medium-voter theory – go to the centre. Base strategy – Rove – clear blue sky
3. Higher turn out will lead to a Democrat victory – around 56% voted up from 51% in 2000 (side point – sounds terribly low would be a few percentages higher if only counted US citizens instead of total population of residents).

2008 economic voter theory back in vogue!

The financial crisis was probably the key event in 2008 election. The polls narrow around the Conventions. In fact McCain-Palin were in the lead after the GOP convention.

The Financial Crisis and McCain's mishandling of it, and Obama's steady and unflappable performance in the debates created a clear lead. Palin started to cause problems, and at the very least turned out to be a major diversion for the McCain campaign.

Once again – organisation caught up with Republicans. Micro targeting, volunteers, computers and MONEY!

I wonder how effective it is for the Democrats to send Harvard college students and New Yorkers into the field to convince West Virginians and people in rural Pennsylvania to vote for Democrat candidates. This tactic was definitely reduced with the Obama team compared with the Kerry campaign.

The most effective person to lobby for a candidate is generally a neighbour, a workmate or someone in your social circle.

Obama won but his appeal is clearly GLOBAL

**WHY?**

My experience in Australia when I told people I teach American politics is usually at best “interesting” or grimace. But last year was different - I had conversations with removalists, bus drivers and relatives about Obama – he was seen as something different from the norm. Led to a lot of hope and enthusiasm.

## **WHY?**

Obvious answer - Not-Bush – antidote to Bush in fact

President as symbol of the Nation –  
A narrow Bush victory apparently signifies a deeply conservative nation whereas an Obama victory equals a new dawning of progressive America (I am pretty sceptical of such generalisations)

The other reasons Obama is popular is he is: Young, gives a great speech, smart, good-looking (man-crush)

The aspect of Obama’s appeal I have been particularly interest in is the belief that he is a more Authentic/ more genuine politician.

Many non-Americans see the United States as having a particularly phoney culture: with its silicon-enhanced bodies, compulsory “have a nice day” customer service and overwrought performances in every second Hollywood movie.

However, when it comes to choosing their politicians Americans seem rather quaintly attached to the notion of authenticity.

Realising this, politicians are acutely aware that they need to appear as personable and as genuine as they can possibly manage.

Arguably the most down-home (or depending on your perspective, phoney) American president in living memory was the guy who wore jeans to the White House and told Americans to just call him Jimmy.

In the 1980s there was of course Ronald Reagan who some saw as the most genuine American legend since Davy Crockett. Others said he was continuing his acting career in the Oval Office.

More recently there was the ill-fated Al Gore who was condemned for having multiple personalities ranging from wooden to a super competitive high school debater

And then there was the Botoxed “flip-flopper” John Kerry.

Instead of treasuring the brains of Gore and Kerry, Americans were drawn to the personality of the flawed Texan George W. Bush whose malapropisms and long adolescence were seen as signs that he was a genuine guy.

Obama’s unusual family background (by presidential standards) and his very charming and reflective memoirs have also allowed him to tap into this want for a truly authentic politician.

The authentic Obama is first outlined in a deeply personal manner in his memoir *Dreams from my father* (1995) and then with much more direct political reference in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006).

In an era of sanitised, often ghost-written biographies, *Dreams* offers an unusually candid self-portrait of a politician before his star has risen.

Despite Obama’s rise to the presidency, there is a dearth of biographies. Consequently, these two self-authored books have become the touchstones in analysis of Obama and his motives. Common sense would tell us that it is troubling that Obama has to date been the greatest authority and source of information on himself. Still, Obama’s charisma, freshness, charm and unusual personal biography have led to wide acceptance of his personal version.

Obama seems to have ignited in readers, campaign participants and world citizens fresh hopes and positive emotions, the like of which they never imagined feeling about a politician.

His supposed authenticity and also some of the opposition to him derives significantly from how different he is from the average American (or Western) politician: he looks different, he sounds different, and his genealogy is so very different. However in reality 75% of black people in South have white blood, a point not widely acknowledged.

His two books effectively highlight his unusual family background.

In *Dreams from My Father*, he movingly and candidly chronicles his often lonely and restless search for identity during his childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia, as a peripatetic university student in Los Angeles and New York, while working as a community organiser in one of America's most disadvantaged urban communities in Chicago, and during a lengthy trip to Kenya (searching for who his father was).

The contents of *Dreams from My Father* provides ample evidence of a politician from an unusual background with a cast of characters who include his scholarly and charismatic Kenyan father, Indonesian step-father, and *anthropologist peacenik mother* who, in Obama's own words, taught him 'to disdain the blend of ignorance and arrogance that too often characterized Americans abroad'. Obama also offers details of the radical student:

To avoid being mistaken for a sellout, I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets ... we discussed neo-colonialism, Franz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy. When we ground out our cigarettes in the hallway carpet or set our stereos so loud that the walls began to shake, we were resisting society's stifling constraints.

*Dreams* moves on to document his near monastic life in New York while at Columbia University and immediately afterwards: fasting on Sundays, attending socialist conferences and African cultural fairs, and reading voraciously. But he does not seem the most obvious candidate for a future political career.

Obama's mother and her values emerge as far more important than his father in shaping his personality and concerns. He has written 'that what is best in me I owe to her', and he is fond of using her words 'our common humanity' in his speeches.

The phrase, which featured in his inaugural address, encompasses her empathy and secular humanist belief in the worth of every person's life.

In the most inspiring passages of *Dreams from My Father*, Obama recalls the struggles of ordinary individuals and families in Altgeld (a housing project in Chicago) and how he tries to understand these people, empathise with them and make a concrete difference in their lives.

Obama's autobiography is a far more reflective, open and indeed melancholy book than many would expect from the pen of a politician and provides hope that Obama is indeed different.

Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, derives its title from the sermon delivered by Reverend Wright at his Trinity church on Obama's first visit there. Wright was Obama's long-time pastor before Obama terminated their relationship during the 2008 campaign when video tapes emerged showing Wright declaring after 9/11 'Not God bless America, God damn America.' *The Audacity of Hope*, a far more traditional pre-campaign book, combines biography with long sections of political analysis and a few policy proposals.

Obama asserts his difference by presenting the case for a new post-partisan politics that is unashamedly progressive, but he avoids demonising Republicans.

Civility, empathy and fairness are his guiding values throughout the book.

Like Obama's speeches, the book reads crisply and he is mighty convincing, but what it all means in practical policy terms is not exactly clear. On one level, Obama seems full of new answers to intractable political stalemates; however, given his gift with words, maybe all he is really offering is platitudes rather than hard choices.

Or, as Mendell puts it: 'While talking or writing about deeply controversial subjects, he considers all points of view before cautiously giving his often risk-averse assessment, an opinion that often appears so universal that people of various viewpoints would consider it their own.'

Now that he is president, this tension between the risk-averse and pragmatic side of Obama's political temperament and his promise of real change will be more starkly on display, with the potential of disappointing many star-struck supporters.

On the question of race, these books provide plenty of evidence to suggest that, in his personal life, Obama has strongly emphasised his black heritage and identity. Although Obama's father was an almost entirely absent physical presence from his life, his legend (and skin colour) cast a significant hold on Obama's life.

At school and university, Obama identified with African-Americans more so than whites, despite being raised by his white mother and white grandparents. Describing his upbringing, he has said he saw himself as 'like an orphan' who was 'trying to raise myself to be a black man in America'.

After finishing his studies, when he chose a calling (more than a career) he was drawn towards community organising in the nearly entirely black public housing projects. When he chose a church it was the black congregation of Reverend Wright. When he chose a wife, it was a black woman (race had been an issue in the breakup of at least one relationship with a white girlfriend).

## **POST-RACIAL POLITICIAN**

Obama is clearly proud to be a successful black leader and is mindful of the legacy he has inherited; nonetheless, he emphasises racial inequalities and lingering racism far less than other prominent black leaders like Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton. Obama's emphasis of his racially mixed background even led to some commentators referring to him as a 'post-racial leader'.

Looking at the statistics, however, I would claim that those who suggest Obama's election signifies the end of racism in America are being overly-optimistic, as per the stats I have on governors etc at the beginning of this lecture. And according to exit polls, only ten per cent of the white population of Alabama and eleven per cent in Mississippi voted for Obama.

Racial difference is key to Obama's claims to authenticity.

### **100 Day Assessment:**

Remarkably confident and activist.

The times suit Obama – far more opportunity to act and to make mistakes than Clinton had in 1993. (Too good a crisis to waste)

His team's strategy has been good - not to be dragged down by missteps such as the failure to appoint certain people to his administration or scandals like the Blagojevich affair. Much better start than Clinton in 1993.

Policy Action – Liberal change agent or pragmatist

Bold Domestic Agenda – Right the economy, reform health care, education reform, address global warming.

Internationally – Iraq, Afghanistan, Global Financial Crisis management

Public Diplomacy is something I have focused on recently and want to comment on.

- Obama's releasing of the torture memos,
- Closing Guantanamo Bay prison,
- Recording a speech to the Iranian people where he calls them part of a great civilisation,
- Healing tour to Europe where he talked about America being arrogant in the past and needing to listen more to Europe
- Seeming criticism of America's use of the Atom bombs in WWII,
- Statements in Turkey that America is not a war with Islam.
- Clearly aimed to distance this administration from Bush's policies and approach.

Will this make a difference? Perceptions matter is my general view. They lead to support or opposition to US-led campaigns. Public opinion could be crucial in years to come in Afghanistan. The war against al Qaeda is largely a war of ideas – botching this war was one of the great failings of the Bush administration.

100 days in is early days. There is a lot on Obama's plate. I see the big tests for him in leaving a mark as a transformative president as Global Warming and Health Care reform.

**Assessment at 258 Days**

Health Care tactics  
Afghanistan  
Public Diplomacy

### **Health Care tactics**

Why care in Australia about health care? Well if you care about reform on global warming, a defeat for Obama on health care would a significant setback to his agenda on other issues.

On the details of health care reform Obama in my view wants to help low income people and people with prior or emergency conditions to get proper medical treatment. The problem is his solutions do little to reduce costs. US spending 16-17% of GDP on health care, whereas the Canadians spend about 9% of GDP.

### **Afghanistan**

Very difficult decisions to make. Obama's campaign rhetoric of Iraq "bad war", Afghanistan "good war" (which he talked tough on) was possibly necessary during the campaign but pushed him to increase troops in Afghanistan earlier this year as president. Whether this was a good idea and whether still more troops should be sent is a very difficult question Obama currently faces. I personally think clearer goals need to set and articulated to the public.

Obama's dilemmas over Afghanistan reflect a wider problem with his foreign policy that is he has a mix of rhetorical distinction from the Bush administration's policies, greater attempts at multilateralism with little noticeable reward, and thus a great deal of continuity on the ground in actual policies particularly in the war on terror.

On Afghanistan: a review of policy is a good thing:

In the Iraq War, which was a mistake from the outset the situation was made much worse by not having a major review of administration policy in late 2003 or 2004 (see Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* for the best over of the post-war period); it took until late 2006 until a strategic review was carried out (after Rumsfeld was gone). An earlier review could have reduced the estimated 85,000 Iraqi lives lost and the tens of thousands of U.S. casualties.

Read more: <http://swampland.blogs.time.com/2009/10/19/the-afghan-strategy-review/#ixzz0UiQd18TR>

US 70,000 troops in Afghanistan now, doubled since the end of the Bush period. Worth remembering that the Bush administration went to war in Afghanistan in 2003 with about 10 million troops.

Iraq 125,000 troops still in Iraq (165,000 during the surge)

Vietnam total number of US troops got to over ½ million troops (540,000)

But Iraq 190,000 US Contractor (1: 1 ration with troops; Vietnam war 1 contractor to for every 5 troops

### **Public Diplomacy**

Good speech in Cairo, rightly sees the lack of Palestinian state as massive point of frustration with the US. Wants a Palestinian state soon...

Pew Poll, see below:

Question: Do you have an unfavourable or favourable attitude towards the United States?

#### **Global attitudes toward the United States (% unfavorable)**

|          | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Britain  | 16   | 40   | 34   | 38   | 33   | 42   | 47   | 31   |
| France   | 34   | 67   | 62   | 57   | 60   | 60   | 58   | 25   |
| Germany  | 35   | 71   | 59   | 54   | 60   | 66   | 69   | 36   |
| Spain    | -    | 74   | -    | 50   | 73   | 60   | 67   | 42   |
| Poland   | 11   | -    | -    | 23   | -    | 31   | 32   | 33   |
| Russia   | 33   | 68   | 44   | 40   | 47   | 48   | 54   | 56   |
| Turkey   | 55   | 84   | 63   | 67   | 76   | 83   | 88   | 86   |
| Pakistan | 69   | 81   | 61   | 60   | 56   | 68   | 81   | 84   |
| Jordan   | 75   | 99   | 93   | 80   | 85   | 78   | 81   | 75   |

*Source:* Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2007 and 2008

Popularity surprisingly low.

Compare to other presidents at this stage in the cycle (1<sup>st</sup> year)

## **How do you assess Presidential ability?**

Stanley Greenstein, Presidential Difference

### 1. Public Communication

Gifted speaker. Great use of language. Style and substance?

### 2. Organizational Capacity

Senators don't make presidents. No executive experience? Great campaign organisation, planning and execution, not converting to Governing?

Too much on Obama's shoulders, not enough on other members of the team. Obama on TV too much?

### 3. Political Skills

Political Skills, both dealing with public and parties (leadership)...

### 4. Political Vision

Liberal, pragmatic, confused?

### 5. Cognitive Style

Very bright. Wants to consider differing opinions, fears group think. Style in meetings is to pose questions, listen to differing opinions which he will elicit, remain analytical and detached and then summarise meeting and how it may impact on his actions.

Problem: Or, as Mendell puts it: 'While talking or writing about deeply controversial subjects, he considers all points of view before cautiously giving his often risk-averse assessment, an opinion that often appears so universal that people of various viewpoints would consider it their own.' Now that he is president, this tension between the risk-averse and pragmatic side of Obama's political temperament and his promise of real change will be more starkly on display, with the potential of disappointing many star-struck supporters.

### 6. Emotional Intelligence

Neither gets too high or low. Sets very high expectations of himself, too much pressure?