

# *Letter from Washington / Searching for Barack*

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‘What then is the American, this new man?’ J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur asked in his *Letters to an American Farmer* in 1782 before describing the distinctly American character that was emerging on the eastern seaboard of a new world. Fast forward 226 years, substitute ‘Barack Obama’ for ‘the American,’ and you have the question at the heart of Election ‘08.

Like all U.S. presidential elections of recent vintage, this one has a candidate from each of the two major political parties. But unlike most elections, this one is less a contest between two candidates than an evaluation of one: ‘Who then is Barack Obama, this new man?’

Leading political indicators suggest this race should produce a Democratic blow-out of historic proportions. Not since 1976, in the aftermath of Watergate, and maybe not since 1932, with America three years into an economic collapse, have Democrats had such a strong political wind at their backs.

The best predictor of likely political outcomes might be the poll question: ‘Do you believe the United States is on the right track or the wrong track.’ Today, upwards of three-fourths of Americans say ‘wrong track,’ which means they’re ready for change. Americans are jittery about the economy, unhappy with the war in Iraq, and clearly ready to say good-bye to their two-term Republican President. Democrats are enthused about voting in November, Republicans are more lukewarm. Just 27 percent of Americans call themselves Republicans, down from 40 percent when Ronald Reagan left office. In special elections for three House seats over the last 18 months, Democrats have won every one, including two in traditionally strong Republican districts. Obama, though, is in a dogfight. Why?

Americans know John McCain. He is the happy warrior from the 2000 Republican presidential contest and a leading political figure for more than two decades; a man of considerable wit and charm; a former Vietnam POW whose national security credentials reassure many in an increasingly unsettled world; a maverick whose record of bipartisanship appeals to independents and even some liberals. He is

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struggling with his own stylistic deficiencies as a candidate, and he faces the twin obstacles of intra-Republican disarray and strong political headwinds that favor Democrats this year. Nevertheless, familiarity with McCain is breeding comfort; Americans overwhelmingly consider him the safer of the choices before them, and this 'safety gap' probably grows whenever Russia invades Georgia, Iran rattles a sabre, or al-Qaeda issues a threat.

They do *not* know Obama, at least not the way they desire – perhaps because he is less a candidate than a political phenomenon; a man of rare eloquence whose words can seem vacuous upon second reading ('we are the ones we've been waiting for'); a self-styled force for 'change' who lacks a discernable world view within which this change will occur (a visionary without a vision, if you will); a kaleidoscope through which many Americans see their version of a better future, whether that means a post-partisan politics to replace Bush-era bitterness, a more cohesive multi-racial society at home, or a more beloved America across the world.

That the contest is as close as it is – with Obama consistently up no more than 2-4 points in national polls heading into the Democratic and Republican national conventions and running only neck-and-neck in state polls that are more relevant for the Electoral College – reflects public uncertainty about the young, dashing but inexperienced Democrat.

### Where the trouble lies

As Obama struggles to 'seal the deal,' to convince enough voters that he has the strength, the skills, and the stature to lead America in a perilous time, he faces multiple challenges. They include:

*Racism.* Is America ready to elect its first non-white President? How many Americans who tell the pollsters that they support Obama will, in the end, vote otherwise because of his race? Obama faces some ominous signs. He had trouble securing the votes of working class whites during this year's primaries and, even where he won individual state contests, his margins were often smaller than polls had forecast. Race, however, will not be a complete negative for him. In the America of 2008, the issue cuts two ways. The country is less racist than 'racial-ist' – consumed with its racial legacy, sensitive about its shortcomings, but divided over the best way to right its wrongs. Plenty of Democrats say that, despite their doubts about Obama's readiness, they will eagerly vote for him precisely because he is multi-racial – that

his elevation to the Presidency will heal racial wounds and demonstrate America's progress. How these race-based cross-currents will affect the tally in November is anyone's guess.

*Liberalism.* Based on his Senate voting record, Obama was that chamber's most liberal member in 2007, according to *National Journal*, the respected magazine for Washington insiders. His record raises two problems. First, even with a liberal Democratic Party on the ascendancy, the American public remains somewhere between moderate and moderately conservative – resistant to large-scale policy changes and suspicious of big-government solutions. Second, Obama is promising to build bipartisan consensus in Washington with no record of leading bipartisan efforts or taking votes that challenge core Democratic constituencies.

*Elitism.* Speaking at a California fundraiser in April, Obama said that 'bitter' voters 'cling to guns or religion' or anti-immigrant or anti-trade sentiments 'to explain their frustrations.' A top Democratic insider who is active in his church tells me he was deeply offended by the comment, as many other church-going Americans of both parties surely were. Two months earlier, the candidate's wife, Michelle, said that, due to Obama's candidacy, 'for the first time in my adult life I am proud of my country.' Americans want a President (and First Lady) to whom they can relate, not one who doesn't share their traditional values of patriotism and faith, nor relate to their everyday concerns.

*Presumption-ism.* Americans like their would-be presidents humble. They want candidates to work for their votes, not take them for granted. Hillary Clinton, who ran her presidential campaign based on her inevitable victory (slogan: 'I'm in it to win.') is not the first unsuccessful aspirant to learn that lesson. But if Clinton ran on inevitability, Obama has taken presumptuousness a step further, running as if he's already won. He used a presidential-style podium for his public events before ridicule forced him to abandon it. He sought to emulate President Reagan by speaking at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate (Reagan: 'Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.') before German leaders nudged him toward alternative venues. During that same trip, he held joint news conferences with foreign leaders, with all the trappings of presidential events. No wonder McCain's campaign has mocked Obama's self-importance in recent commercials.

*Neophyte-ism.* Obama's candidacy truly reflects 'the audacity of hope,' to use the title of his second book. Here's a man who served eight years in Illinois' state

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legislature and less than four in the U.S. Senate, built no real record of achievement in either, and wants to lead the free world at a time of economic uncertainty and international instability. In Washington, some Democratic insiders admit that, in voting for Obama, they are ‘rolling the dice’ on the country’s future. What they can’t do, however, is repeal the rules of politics – one of which is that, as in sports, rookies make rookie mistakes. Neophyte-ism, for instance, may explain why Obama was slow to see the political impact of the ugly ranting of his long-time pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Or why he first said he would meet with the world’s most odious leaders but then, facing criticism, added caveats and conditions. Or why, when asked at a religious forum when a baby in development gets human rights, he said that’s ‘above my pay grade.’ Or why he cancelled a visit in Germany with wounded American troops. Or why he reiterated his 16-month timetable for withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq before he visited that country and talked to top U.S. commanders to assess the situation on the ground.

*Flip-flop-ism.* Since at least 1972, when new Democratic Party rules gave caucus and primary voters more power to nominate a president, successful candidates have tacked to the left to appeal to these more-liberal Democrats in order to win the nomination, then gradually tacked to the center to appeal to the broader American electorate. (Republicans dance to their version of the same tune, tacking first to the right and then to the center.) But moving gradually is one thing, abandoning once strongly-held positions is another. The former is acceptable, even expected. The latter seems craven. Perhaps further reflecting neophyte-ism, Obama followed his mathematical clinching of the Democratic nomination with a jarring series of rapid-fire policy abandonments, for which he has paid a political price. Though he remains an exciting political figure, a bit of bloom has fallen from his rose as some once-starry-eyed supporters have expressed disgust over his flip-flops.

- Remember campaign finance? Obama promised to rely on public financing for the general election. But, realizing he could far out-raise McCain if he did not limit himself to public funds, he reversed course. He explained, unconvincingly, that he was forced to do so by the coming campaign of privately-funded, Republican-leaning groups that would distort his positions. Only with the requisite funds of his own, he said, could he offset the dirty tactics.
- Remember trade? Seeking working class votes in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and other struggling rust-belt states, Obama vowed earlier this year to re-open the North American Free Trade Agreement that, he said, was killing American

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jobs. When news reports suggested his then-top economic advisor, Austan Goolsbee, privately assured Canadian government officials that Obama was merely scavenging for Democratic votes, the campaign denied that Goolsbee had done any such thing and stuck by the candidate's promises about NAFTA. In June, however, Obama told *Fortune* magazine that he won't unilaterally re-open NAFTA, saying his earlier vow reflected campaign rhetoric that was 'overheated and amplified.'

- Remember electronic surveillance? Pushed by civil libertarians, most Democrats opposed efforts to provide legal immunity for the telecommunications companies that cooperated with the federal government immediately after September 11th. Obama vowed to filibuster the electronic surveillance legislation of which this immunity would be a part. When compromise legislation came to the Senate earlier this year, however, he not only didn't filibuster the bill – he voted for it.
- That's not all. Speaking to Washington's most influential pro-Israel group in June, Obama said Jerusalem 'will remain the capital of Israel' and 'must remain undivided.' A day later, facing a backlash across the Middle East, he said Jerusalem's final status should be set through Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Obama had opposed drilling to solve America's foreign oil dependency, then said he'd accept it as part of a comprehensive energy package. He startled his supporters by suggesting that he would 'continue to refine' his approach on troop withdrawals from Iraq, then quickly reverted to his 16-month timetable in the face of palpable dismay. Meanwhile, he tacked to the center on other issues, supporting a Supreme Court decision that struck down a hand-gun ban, opposing another one that barred the death penalty for child rapists, and endorsing funding for faith-based programs.

Add it up – the inexperience, the flip-flops, the presumptuousness, and so on – and a race with all the leading political indicators to suggest a Democratic landslide is, instead, up for grabs. How will it turn out? Each election is different, of course. But American politics has recurring themes and rhythms, and aspects of Election '08 bring other recent presidential races to mind. They hold clues to where this race is going and who will take the oath of office in January.

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### Of elections past

On the Republican side, 2008 looks a lot like 1996. Twelve years ago, another former war hero and Senate veteran, Bob Dole, was struggling with a candidacy that offered Dole's long record of service but no unified vision. The conservative Republican base did not trust him, for he had led tax-raising efforts over the years, including some that undid parts of President Reagan's big tax cuts, and he had compromised with Democrats to secure other legislation. When he proposed big tax cuts during the presidential race and chose the tax-cutting Jack Kemp as his running mate, conservatives questioned his sincerity while Democrats belittled his inconsistency. Dole was awkward on the stump, and his campaign looked less like a well-oiled Mercedes than an old Chevy with dents on the side, running on worn tires.

This year, McCain is the voice of experience but no vision. He is more distrusted by conservatives than Dole had been (though his pick of Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, a committed conservative, as his running mate pleased them), for he has committed more ideological sins – opposing President Bush's tax cuts in 2001 and 2003, pushing successfully for limits on campaign finance that conservatives believe violate free speech, and proposing a centrist immigration reform bill that conservatives believe is soft on illegal immigration. He says that he now supports a permanent extension of all of Bush's tax cuts, which are due to expire in 2010, but here, too, conservatives don't buy it – especially because he recently said that 'nothing's off the table' (including tax hikes) to shore up Social Security. He admits that economics is not his strong suit, at a time when the economy is the top concern of American voters. McCain is awkward on the stump, he has trouble with a teleprompter, he's prone to the gaffe, he sometimes spars a bit too much with voters at town hall meetings, and his events seem cobbled together – a far cry from Obama's rallies with tens of thousands of adoring fans.

On the Democratic side, 2008 looks more like 1992 (which should delight Democrats) with a few touches of 1968 (which should scare them). Sixteen years ago, Bill Clinton ran as a 'New Democrat,' with a centrist agenda of free trade and incentives to spur innovation in Silicon Valley and other bastions of high technology. Party activists largely set aside any of their discomfort with the particulars of Clinton's agenda to work for the great good of a Democratic victory. Business leaders of the technology-driven 'new economy,' tired of the old thinking of incumbent President George H.W. Bush (the current President's father), flocked to support him. Around the country, many dispirited Republicans chose either to

sit out the election, to give the exciting governor from Arkansas a chance, or to register a protest vote by pulling the lever for third-party candidate Ross Perot.

This year, most Democrats are desperate for victory. They express far more enthusiasm for voting for their nominee than Republicans do for theirs, which constitutes the so-called 'enthusiasm gap' that could carry Obama to victory. Beyond their distrust of McCain, many Republicans are disgusted with the overall direction of the Republican Party, saying President Bush and GOP congressional leaders abandoned longstanding party principles for political expediency. Some party insiders privately desire an Obama victory in order to trigger the intra-party soul-searching that they believe is vital for future Republican vitality. Others, known as 'Obama-cons,' openly support the Democratic candidate. They include conservative blogger Andrew Sullivan, foreign policy scholar Francis Fukuyama, and former U.S. Chamber of Commerce economist Larry Hunter.

But, for Democrats, 1992 could morph into the nightmare of 1968. That year, many anti-Vietnam War liberals stayed home in November, helping to tilt the final result to Republican Richard Nixon. This year, some liberal activists are working to impose their own brand of ideological purity on the Democratic Party. They expressed outrage when Obama hired Jason Furman, a former top economic advisor to President Clinton, to develop his campaign's economic policy proposals. Despite the strong economic performance under Clinton, these liberals want the party to disavow Clintonian centrism and move boldly to the left, with big-government solutions to domestic problems. Some liberal activists are even working to unseat moderate and conservative Democratic members of Congress, saying they'd rather have smaller numbers on Capitol Hill than a larger contingent that's contaminated by non-liberal thinking.

The most potentially dangerous intra-Democratic rift this year, however, is less about policy than personality. Sizeable numbers of disgruntled Hillary Clinton supporters insist that her loss is somehow illegitimate, the product of media coverage that was absurdly favourable toward Obama and blatantly sexist toward Clinton. Just 72 percent of Clinton's supporters said they now back Obama, according to a Pew Research Center poll from mid-August, compared to 88 percent of supporters of McCain's rivals who now support him. Some of the unhappiest Clinton backers have joined the new group 'People United Means Action,' or PUMA, which critics have nicknamed 'Party Unity My Ass.' They say they won't vote for Obama but, rather, will vote for McCain, write in someone else, or not vote. The question now

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is how many unhappy Hillary-ites will support Obama in the aftermath of Bill and Hillary Clinton's strong calls for party unity at last week's Democratic convention.

### **A window into the future?**

In the end, though, it may be 1976 that provides the answer to the riddle of Election '08. Two years earlier, Nixon had resigned in disgrace over Watergate and, soon thereafter, the new Republican President, Gerald Ford, pardoned Nixon for all crimes that he may have committed. Democrats turned to the quintessential outsider, Jimmy Carter, an unknown one-term governor from Georgia who promised 'a government as good as its people.' An early summer poll had Carter leading Ford by a whopping 62-29 margin. Few gave Ford a chance.

Carter won but, by Election Day, the projected landslide of June had turned into a 50-48 squeaker. In the end, the strong Democratic winds blew aside the doubts that Americans had about the untested former governor. This year, Obama's lead has never approached the landslide margins of Carter's early lead over Ford and, barring a political volcano, it never will. But it may not matter. The country is itching for change. Once again, the political winds may be strong enough to overcome public doubts about an untested Democratic nominee.

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