

Barack Obama and the black phoenix

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By Okey Ndibe

Audacity could easily become the middle name of Senator Barack Hussein Obama, the 47-year-old junior senator from the State of Illinois who is on the verge of becoming America's first black president, and one of its youngest, most eloquent and intellectually vibrant. And audacity is a word so beloved by Obama that he titled one of his bestselling books *The Audacity of Hope*.

To get a picture of how dominant Obama has looked in this presidential campaign, one could just invoke the words of an anonymous Republican strategist: "If you believe in miracles, you believe John McCain is going to win."

That's right. Most political pundits in the U.S. conjecture that it would take a miracle for McCain, Obama's Republican opponent, to pull off an upset victory. They expect Obama, presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, to trounce McCain and emerge undisputed winner of today's presidential election. Obama's triumph would cap a political race that has shattered several historical records – and dramatically recast the political biography of the United States of America.

Most indicators point not only to an Obama victory, but indeed to a decisive one, a veritable landslide. As at Friday, more than 19 million Americans had cast early ballots in states that permit voters to make their choice before today. Pollsters

indicate that Obama is leading his opponent by close to twenty points among those who voted early. If this trend continues today, then the McCain team faces the prospect of a rout.

Obama's success owes as much to his force of personality, a charismatic image complemented by his oratorical powers, as to a disciplined, tenacious and politically brilliant campaign. Add to this Obama's flair for attracting campaign funds and you get a portrait of how the Obama political machine has twice defied the odds – first by winning a heated party primary contest and now by leaving McCain panting and playing (futile) catch-up.

Things have gone so clearly in Obama's favor that, at this point, an Obama defeat would be akin to an unprecedented political tsunami. Simply put, should McCain come from behind to win, it would be a record-making upset.

On the other hand, the Obama camp has more than earned a right to their presumption of victory. Over the last two months, Obama has consistently topped McCain in most national polls, and sometimes by double digits.

After clinching the Democratic Party nomination, Obama made a strategic decision in June to spurn public financing of his campaign. Under the federal presidential financing system in the U.S.,

each candidate would have received \$84.1 million in public funds to finance his general election campaign. A condition for accepting the funds is that the candidate is barred both from accepting private donations and spending more than the \$84.1 million.

Obama opted to raise his own campaign funds from private donors. That decision proved a coup de grace. It enabled Obama to raise mounds of cash. In October, his campaign announced that it had received \$150 million in donations in September. That record-breaking cash was close to twice the total campaign funds McCain got by accepting public financing. Incidentally, Obama's September fundraising broke an earlier record he set in August when he hauled in \$66 million. Since he started his pursuit of the presidency, Obama has raised an astounding \$600 million from more than three million donors. By comparison, McCain garnered \$240 million before he accepted the \$84.1 million in public financing that effectively shut down his private fundraising effort.

His pace-setting fundraising gave Obama the leeway to get his message across to voters - and in many ways to mute, or blunt, the effectiveness of his opponent's message. His adept fundraising and ability to inspire people with his eloquence have also transformed him from a candidate who might have been dismissed as a mere political curiosity to a man who is today seen by many as embodying the new face of American - even global - politics.

As a politician, Barrack Obama has an impeccable sense of timing and an appetite for bold gestures. In February 2007, when he first announced his

candidature for the presidency, his choice of venue was highly symbolic. He made the announcement outside the Historic Old State Capitol building in Chicago, Illinois. The venue lent an air of history to what otherwise might have passed as just another start-off for a politician's dream. The venue happened to be the spot where Abraham Lincoln delivered a moving speech that condemned slavery and made a case for the United States to unite.

With just two years as a U.S. senator to his credit, Obama told his supporters who came out to hear him that he intended to take up Lincoln's burden of healing a fractured nation. He said, "I recognize there is a certain presumptuousness in this, a certain audacity." Then he added: "I know that I haven't spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington. But I've been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change."

It was a chilly day, with the temperature hovering around 5 degrees Fahrenheit. Even so, an estimated 16,000 people came out to hear him articulate a vision of a new America, one able to confront its tragic history of racial oppression but finally capable of making amends and rising to achieve its lofty dreams. "I know it's a little chilly, but I'm fired up!" Obama told the spectators, among them a crush of reporters.

The tone for Obama's meteoric rise to national and global prominence was set by a stirring speech he delivered at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston. The speech, part autobiography, part exhortation, and part populist creed, introduced Americans to a star, a new breed of African American politician.

Obama's lack of credentials as a warrior of the civil rights struggle worked for and against him. For African Americans, Obama's debut signaled a discomfiting break with a tradition where America's black leaders - people like Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, and John Lewis - were validated by their direct involvement in the 1960's struggle to win basic rights for American blacks. Some blacks regarded the spotlight handed to Obama as white America's sly effort to impose its preferred kind of leader on the black community.

For many white Democrats, Obama's oratory - with its absence of rancor and accusing words - was something unusual coming from a black politician, and thus a breath of fresh air. They saw in the young man's electrifying performance a prototype of an emergent black politician - one who combines tact, reasonableness and moderation in speech with passionate advocacy of social issues that have broad appeal across racial and social lines. Obama's mix of personal drive and espousal of popular social causes resonated with the Democratic mainstream. Obama's harshest critics have tried to describe his political career as one born by a single passionate speech spiritedly delivered to a captive audience in prime time. They suggest that, in an America enthralled by celebrity, Obama was able to captivate his way to a cult following.

During the Democrat's particularly fractious presidential primaries, opponent Hillary Clinton ran a television ad that suggested that both McCain - who had then clinched the Republican nomination - and Senator Clinton had requisite experience. As for Obama, the advert concluded with wicked

degradation, his claim to fame was a speech.

It is a tribute to Obama's staying power as a strategist as well as a sturdy politician that he was able to withstand a barrage of such attacks without wilting. Instead, his political profile continued to grow the more his opponents tried to portray him as a neophyte and hollow celebrity. Even if the American public could not identify Obama with any large political deeds or even outstanding legislative legacy, they seemed content to hold on to their hunch that this young man has the instincts, vision and energy to become a transformative leader. Yes, Obama may have etched himself in the American public consciousness by means of a single speech, but Americans were willing to wager that a man who could speak so powerfully to their noblest dreams has what it takes to move them, and the world, to higher, more fertile ground. It is no longer in dispute that Obama has secured a place for himself at the table of American power.

His personal experience prepared him to seize the moment. Born in Hawaii on August 4, 1961 to a Kenyan father and a white American mother, Obama can trace his ancestry to his father's relatives in Kenya. Yet, his late father, who left his mother, was not a factor in his upbringing. It was left to his single mother and her parents to raise young Barack. These formative years, in the care of his grandparents, shaped Obama's outlook and political posture. In his grandparents he experienced both bounteous love and subtle racism. While doting on their bi-racial son, Obama's grandparents were not beyond open expressions of racist sentiments.

Growing up in such an environment, Obama developed a complex sense of identity and of human psychology as well as his famed knack for working with people from a variety of backgrounds. At a young age, he honed his speaking skills as well as a gift for leadership. He received his first degree from Columbia University in New York City. Rather than proceed immediately to graduate school, he chose to immerse himself in a challenging cause. He relocated to Chicago in 1985 and served as a community organizer with a church-based organization that sought to improve the social conditions in poor neighborhoods plagued by drugs, a high rate of violent crime, and unemployment. He soon left the job and enrolled to study law at Harvard. While at Harvard, he became the first African American to be elected president of the prestigious Harvard Law Review.

Soon after graduating in 1991, he returned to Chicago to start a practice as a civil rights lawyer and to teach constitutional law at the University of Chicago. Elected to the Illinois State Senate, Obama served for eight years in the state legislature. In 2004, shortly after his remarkable speech at the Democratic Party convention, he was elected into the U.S. Senate. He became the third African American to be elected to the U.S. Senate since after the American civil war.

Given Obama's antecedents, it is not surprising that he chose to cast himself as both an outsider and an agent of change. He is, in a sense, the consummate outsider: an outsider to his paternal Kenyan roots; an outsider in the civil rights stream of the African American community; an outsider in the white world of his grandparents; an outsider at

Harvard; an outsider in Chicago, and an outsider in the U.S. Senate. Yet, his is an outsider status that guarantees him a welcome in every constituency.

On a personal level, Obama's race for the presidency has been nothing short of audacious. When he first announced his interest, pundits treated him with respect, but few gave him much of a chance to best the formidable field of candidates that included Senators Joe Biden, Paul Edwards and Hillary Clinton. Mrs. Clinton, wife of former President Bill Clinton, who is regarded as an icon in many Democratic Party circles, was widely seen as the presumptive nominee. Her ambition had been well known for at least two years before Obama exploded onto the field, and she had cornered the most powerful donors as well as the insider operatives within the party. Political analysts conjectured that it was just a matter of time before the other candidates began to retreat in the face of the Clintons' awesome machinery of cash, organizational superiority, campaign personnel, and media reach.

Obama was not intimidated. The outsider who knows what it takes to capture the center, he devised a plan that was as unconventional as it was brilliant. In a nation fatigued by President George W. Bush's ruinous assault on cherished liberties in the name of prosecuting a war on terror, Obama quickly claimed the mantle of the candidate of change. This move guaranteed him media attention as well as a considerable audience. Wearied from deepening poverty, increasing rates of joblessness, and the rise in partisan bad blood, Americans craved a politician with a warm, reassuring image who could press the case for healing and a return to civility. Obama - part white, part black,

suave, intelligent and well spoken with a physique that is by no means threatening – was tailored for the role.

Where the Clintons had locked up the traditional big donors, Obama appealed to young professionals as well as to the nouveau riche, men and women with a lot of cash but not yet pedigree. These newly prosperous embraced a candidate who, like them, fit the bill of new kid on the block. Obama also blanketed the Internet in his appeal for cash. The result was dramatic. He received small donations from millions of fans that soon outstripped what Mrs. Clinton was taking in from her network of wealthy donors.

Obama also tapped into a deep mine of support when he announced that, if elected president, he would quickly arrange for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. Since Bush's ill-advised and unpopular invasion of Iraq, the U.S. has steadily lost respect around the world, seen in many polls as a sponsor of terror rather than a bulwark against it. In America itself, support for the war has run thin for at least two years – especially as the financial burden of prosecuting it has escalated and American casualties have exploded. In the days before U.S. soldiers swept through Iraq, White House economic adviser Lawrence Lindsay estimated that the war could cost anything from \$100 to \$200 billion. Incensed by what was considered an outlandish estimate, the White House fired Lindsay. Thereafter, American officials, including Vice President Dick Cheney, scoffed at suggestions that Americans would pay such a high cost for removing a minor tyrant and his ragtag

army. They offered radically scaled back estimates of between \$50 and \$60 billion. Not only did the administration leave the impression that the war could be fought and won at a cost below \$100 billion, but Cheney also famously predicted that Iraqis, liberated from Saddam Hussein's brutal regime, would flood the streets of Iraq with garlands for American soldiers.

Neither scenario played out. The Iraqi war now costs U.S. tax payers \$2 billion per week. Congress has so far approved more than \$500 billion for the war, and military experts expect the U.S. to pay billions more, even if a President Obama puts his withdrawal plan into gear. American forces made a quick job of defeating Saddam Hussein's overmatched army. But the Iraqi insurgency immediately began a violent resistance, using explosive devices and suicide bombers, that has resulted in the deaths of thousands of American troops as well as thousands more of Iraqi citizens. Considering the dire outlook, President Bush's defiant insistence that the U.S. must stay the course until victory is won has struck most Americans as the rhetoric of a president who is out of touch with reality.

Obama's role as chief critic of the Iraqi war and an unpopular president helped fuel his campaign's popularity. Even when Clinton joined the anti-war, anti-Bush chorus, Obama was able to depict her as a hypocritical politician who supported the war when it was expedient to do only to distance herself when it became clear that the war was a costly misadventure.

In June, Obama finally breasted the tape as the nominee of the Democratic Party when he garnered enough delegates to

clinch. His victory left the Clintons stunned, and sulking for a while. Some pundits predicted that, with many women voters upset about Clinton's defeat, McCain was likely to beat Obama in a general election. They misjudged Obama's sheer political intelligence, his can-do spirit, and the potent combination of sentiment and policy with which he connects to a broad spectrum of Americans.

In the end, Obama's triumph - if it holds - owes to four broad factors. One is his solid strategizing. A second factor has to do with McCain's grave missteps. A third factor is Bush's ground-level unpopularity. A final factor has to do with a grim turn of the American economy, evident in the collapse of several big credit institutions, rising unemployment, a harsh credit crunch, and a precipitous drop in consumer confidence.

Obama succeeded in tying his Republican opponent to Bush's questionable economic policies. While highly conservative on social issues, President Bush has left a legacy as a big fiscal spender. His presidential run has been marked by high tax breaks to mostly wealthy Americans in the name of encouraging or fertilizing new investments. Ideologically committed to lowering taxes, Bush ignored sound advice that it does not make sense to hand back revenues to tax payers at the same time the country is embroiled in a costly war in Iraq and Afghanistan. In expanding spending on everything from war to an expensive new medication plan for elderly citizens, Bush has helped to escalate the American public debt to a staggering \$10 trillion. The case for change from this ruinous economic

course is Obama's central message, and it has found an attentive and captivated audience.

McCain's choice of Governor Sarah Palin of Alaska as his VP candidate was a blunder. In picking her, the Republican candidate had hoped to achieve two goals. One was to win over the horde of disaffected female voters who still seethed over Hillary Clinton's failure to secure the Democratic nomination. The second goal was to appease the conservative wing of his own party that always viewed McCain as too liberal on certain causes. Before he invited Palin to join his ticket, McCain sounded somewhat persuasive in his contention that Obama lacked the mettle and experience to step into the office of president. After Palin, that argument became untenable. The Alaska governor may fit the ideological bill, but she struck many voters as too thin on substance and policy experience to be a credible president-in-waiting.

Even if Obama did not become U.S. president, his achievement would have remained - to invoke one of his favorite words - audacious. He is the first African American to hold the presidential ticket of one of America's two main political parties. That is a major accomplishment in itself.

One fact that became clear in the months since Obama stepped into the political arena to contest for America's highest political office is that he is a global phenomenon. He is, in fact, more popular in Africa, Europe, and Asia than in America. What would his presidency mean for, say, African Americans as well as Africans? Obama's election represents great symbolic triumph for America's

African descendants. They have come a long way from their days as captives whose labor was exploited by Caucasian plantation owners. They have endured the horrors of slavery as well as America's adamant refusal to apply to them the lofty sentiments of the U.S. constitution which holds that all people are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among these life, liberty and the pursuit of liberty. They have been betrayed again and again by the founding fathers of the American Republic. Their humanity was once called into question.

In 1787, the signatories to the Constitutional Convention proposed that the African should be accounted as three-fifths of a person. Placed in the context of this history of challenge, struggle and overcoming, Obama's victory represents a stupendous narrative of progress. African American youths will look at themselves in the mirror and invoke the Obamaian mantra: "Yes, I can."

But Obama does not hold the magic wand to compel the problems of the African American inner city to disappear. He may not have the will, or be up to the challenge, to address the residual crises in the African American community spawned by high unemployment rates, drug violence, absentee fathers, and gaps in educational achievements. He may not be equipped to combat the monster of racism that still stalks people of African descent in America and elsewhere. But his election presents an opportunity for America's black populace to strike a blow against a system that has held them back for several centuries. Djata Bumpus, a popular American blogger, put it in context when he told me that African Americans would vote for Obama not

because he is likely to commit himself to the cause of social justice for blacks. "When we cast a vote for Obama, we're in fact voting for ourselves," said Mr. Bumpus whose blog is www.djatajabs.com. "We're voting to end the ideology of whiteness."

Obama's relationship with Africa is bound to be complex. While embracing him as an extraordinary politician with African ancestry, African nations ought to realize that Obama is, at core, an American. He has warned, for example, that the U.S. is going to reduce its foreign aid to poor nations. At any rate, African nations should not be asking a President Barack Obama for aid. They should be demanding a reduction, even end, to America's meddlesomeness in Africa. They should be asking that Obama freeze the setting up of an African Command on the continent, a move that portends the re-colonization of Africa.

Obama - should he pull off his expected victory - would be assuming office as president at the worst and best of times. America faces fierce competition from the European Union as well as the emerging economic powerhouses of China and India. The U.S. is plagued by economic, military and social crises, including the gap between rich and poor that widened astronomically during the Bush years. Barack Obama has the tough task of restoring America's waning confidence and edge in the world. He has the complex challenge of nudging the U.S. economy in the direction of job creation and an era of renewed prosperity for a larger portion of the population. And he is called to do all this without endangering the environment or jeopardizing his popularity in the world.

If he succeeds at this difficult task, he will achieve the greatness that many of his supporters and fans already project for him. And he is likely to underscore the point - let's not shy away

from it - that racist prejudice against black people was always based on ignorance.

Readers' Favorites

1. Nigeria's savaged children
2. The war we ordered is here
3. What I saw in Nigeria
4. Murder Incorporated
5. No Longer at Ease
6. My Vote for Andy Uba
7. Achebe, Soyinka, and the Nigerian Mess
8. My Biafran Eyes
9. My Father's English Friend
10. A female speaker's manly vices
11. The education of Umar Yar'Adua
12. The triumph of barbarism
13. Achebe's apt censure
14. Andy Uba Goes to War (1)
15. Andy Uba Goes to War (11): What OBJ taught Uba
16. Why I Take It Personally
17. Andy Uba's highest bid
18. The folly of the Nigerian elite
19. Fraud Incorporated
20. Etiaba's father, not mine
21. Our laughing president
22. Fayose and God's response
23. My 419 Call
24. A feud of three bulls
25. More reasons to ignore Soyinka
26. Who does Obasanjo work for?

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About Okey Ndibe



Okey Ndibe is a novelist, poet, political activist from Yola, Nigeria. He is the author of *Arrows of Rain*, a critically reviewed novel published in 2000. Ndibe relocated to the United States in 1988, where he founded *African Commentary*, a magazine described as "award-winning and widely acclaimed." Ndibe is also a published poet, and a former associate professor of English at Bard College at Simon's Rock. He currently teaches fiction and African literature at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Okey Ndibe is finishing his second novel titled *Foreign gods, incorporated*.

Speaking Engagements

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