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Where is Barack Obama coming from?

by Larissa MacFarquhar MAY 7, 2007

Begin in farm country, late last summer, no particular day. Carmi, Illinois—a town on the Little Wabash River, down in the southern tip of the state, twenty-five miles from Kentucky, population about fifty-five hundred. A group of twelve farmers—burly white men with ruddy complexions and very short hair—sitting around a rectangle of pushed-together tables in a nondescript room, talking with their junior senator, Barack Obama. It was long before Obama decided to run for President, and he wasn't in a rush. He sat at one end of the tables, leaning back in his chair, his knee propped against the table edge. He wore a tie but had removed his jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves. A young farmer complained about the Jones Act, a 1920 law that he felt was partly responsible for a detrimental consolidation in the barge market. Another farmer had a question about ethanol.

"My question first arose in my mind during the State of the Union address," the farmer said. "President Bush said I'm all for biofuels, and then he started talking about switchgrass. And I'm, like, now wait a minute, we've got a system where we can make ethanol out of corn. I guess cellulosic ethanol"—which can be made from switchgrass—"is more efficient. But we don't know how to do it, and we don't know if farmers are ever going to grow switchgrass, and we don't know if we would even want to grow switchgrass, so why so much emphasis on cellulosic ethanol?"

"Well, I'm not a scientist," Obama said, in a leisurely way, "so I gotta be careful when I start getting into this stuff that I don't wade too deep and then can't get back to shore. Right now cellulosic ethanol is potentially eight times more energy-efficient than corn-based ethanol, because you eliminate the middle step of converting it into sugar before you convert it into ethanol. That's my understanding. I know you're attached to corn, but if somebody came to you and said, you know what, if you take half your fields and grow switchgrass you'll make the same amount of money or more, then—"

"Not really," the farmer interjected. "Because I had a guy come to me before wheat harvest and said do you wanna sell your straw and I said no. I said, 'Don't even talk to me, I don't wanna sell my straw.'"

"Now that's interesting," Obama said. "Why wouldn't you want to sell your straw?"

"Organic matter!" the farmer said, triumphantly.

"Well, but if it's economical to you, if it's a good business decision, you'll be interested."

"If you paid me enough," the farmer conceded.

"If you were paid enough. Now, you know the economics of it better than I do. So we've got to sit down with farmers who are growing the crops and figure out what would make sense. Because, look, I'm not a farmer, and what you just described, I want to keep my straw because it's important, uh—"

"I thought I was the only person who had this idea," the farmer broke in, "and then in *FarmWeek* the guest editorial he said wait a minute, he said what we're talking about is against everything we've preached for the last twenty or thirty years, where we return organic matter to the soil."

"Exactly," Obama said in a soothing tone.

"And all of a sudden we're talking about denuding the ground—"

“Which we shouldn’t do. And so,” he said, returning to the topic, “the way to think about this is not to impose ideas on farmers that aren’t gonna work, by people who don’t farm. But we have to create more efficient ethanol if we want to see a significant growth in the market. The fact of the matter is that Brazilian ethanol is substantially cheaper than U.S. ethanol. Now, George Bush wanted to go ahead and let that come in, and myself and Durbin”—Richard Durbin, Illinois’s senior senator—“said no, we would continue to support the existing tariff so that we can have the development of a homegrown ethanol market. I want to make sure that whatever is being done is utilizing the fact that we’ve got some of the richest soil on earth and the best farmers on earth. But the flip side is that farmers need to be engaged and not just put out a hand and say I’m not interested because I’m used to growing corn and beans.”

There are three things that Democratic political candidates tend to do when talking with constituents: they display an impressive grasp of the minutiae of their constituents’ problems, particularly money problems; they rouse indignation by explaining how those problems are caused by powerful groups getting rich on the backs of ordinary people; and they present well-worked-out policy proposals that, if passed, would solve the problems and put the powerful groups in their place. Obama seldom does any of these things. He tends to underplay his knowledge, acting less informed than he is. He rarely accuses, preferring to talk about problems in the passive voice, as things that are amiss with us rather than as wrongs that have been perpetrated by them. And the solutions he offers generally sound small and local rather than deep-reaching and systemic. Take a recent forum in Las Vegas on health care. Here are Hillary Clinton and Obama speaking about the same subject, preventive care.

“We have to change the way we finance health care, and that’s going to mean taking money away from people who make out really well right now, so this is going to be a big political battle,” Clinton said. “The insurance companies make money by employing a lot of people to try to avoid insuring you and then, if you’re insured, to try to avoid paying for the health care you received.” She stood at the front of the stage, declining an invitation to sit down next to the moderator. She spoke energetically but composedly, conveying the impression that she had spent a great deal of time preparing for the event because it was extremely important to her. “A lot of insurance companies will not pay for someone who’s pre-diabetic or been diagnosed with diabetes to go to a nutritionist to find out how better to feed themselves, or to go to a podiatrist to have their feet checked,” she said. “The insurance companies will tell you this: they don’t want to pay for preventive health care because that’s like lost money because they’re not sure that the patient will still be with them. But if they’re confronted with the doctor saying we’re going to have to amputate the foot they’re stuck with it. That is upside down and backwards!”

Now here is Obama. “We’ve got to put more money in prevention,” he said. “It makes no sense for children to be going to the emergency room for treatable ailments like asthma. Twenty per cent of our patients who have chronic illnesses account for eighty per cent of the costs, so it’s absolutely critical that we invest in managing those with chronic illnesses like diabetes. If we hire a case manager to work with them to insure that they’re taking the proper treatments, then potentially we’re not going to have to spend thirty thousand dollars on a leg amputation.” A young man asked about health care for minorities. “Obesity and diabetes in minority communities are more severe,” Obama said, “so I think we need targeted programs, particularly to children in those communities, to make sure that they’ve got sound nutrition, that they have access to fruits and vegetables and not just Popeyes, and that they have decent spaces to play in instead of being cooped up in the house all day.”

In the past couple of months, Obama has hosted health-care forums of his own—in New Hampshire, in Iowa. In these forums, he is tranquil and relaxed, as though on a power-conserve setting. He paces slowly, he revolves, he tilts his head. He comments in a neutral, detached way. He doesn’t express sympathy for sickness, or scorn for bureaucracy, or outrage at unfairness. He says that the system is broken and needs to be fixed, but conveys no particular urgency.

This mode of his is often called professorial, and Obama himself likens these forums to the constitutional-law classes that he taught at the University of Chicago. But “professorial” implies that he seems cerebral or didactic, and he doesn’t. Despite the criticism he has received for being all inspiration and no policy, Obama has so far stuck to what appears to be an instinct that white papers belong on Web sites, not in speeches. It is surprising, given the recent electoral record of Democratic policy wonks, that he is not given more credit for the astuteness of this approach, but it’s true that it’s not just strategy—it’s who he is. “He doesn’t have the handicap that a lot of smart people have, which is that they come across as ‘You’re not smart enough to talk to me,’ ” George Haywood, a private investor and a friend of Obama’s, says. “Adlai Stevenson, another Illinois guy, had that—he came across as an egghead and it was off-putting to people. Barack is the opposite.” Probably one of the reasons for this is that Obama seems not to attach much value to cleverness as such. Even in law school, perhaps the place more than any other where sheer cleverness is prized and love of argument for its own sake is fundamental to the culture, he was not much interested in academic jousting.

No, Obama’s detachment, his calm, in such small venues, is less professorial than medical—like that of a doctor who, by listening to a patient’s story without emotional reaction, reassures the patient that the symptoms are familiar to him. It is also doctorly in the sense that Obama thinks about the body politic as a whole thing. If you are presenting a problem as something that they have perpetrated on us, then whipping up outrage is natural enough; but if you take unity seriously, as Obama does, then outrage does not make sense, any more than it would make sense for a doctor to express outrage that a patient’s kidney is causing pain in his back. There is also, of course, a racial aspect to this. “If you’re a black male, you don’t have to try hard to impress people with your aggression,” Haywood says. “There was a period when black politicians started to be successful, and it was understood that if you wanted to be mainstream you’d better have gray hair. Doug Wilder was an example. David Dinkins. Mayor Bradley in L.A. To be popular with the broader white electorate, you’d better look safe, you’d better not look angry. Now, I don’t think Barack made a conscious decision to come across this way, but it is a happy accident. Some people may have seen his speech at the Democratic Convention, or heard that he rocked the house, and they may be disappointed, but the mainstream is not ready for a fire-breathing black man.” (It seems likely that, consciously or not, Obama has learned from these examples, and knows that the election of a President Obama wouldn’t mean a revolution in race relations, any more than women prime ministers were a sign of flourishing feminism in South Asia. Bigotry has always made exceptions.)

Obama’s calm is also a matter of temperament. The first thing almost everybody who knows Obama says about him is how extremely comfortable he is with himself. “He was almost freakishly self-possessed and centered,” Christopher Edley, Jr., one of Obama’s professors at Harvard Law School, who is now a dean at Berkeley, says. There *is* something freakish about Obama’s self-possession—it’s conspicuous, it draws attention to itself, like the unnatural stillness of someone able to lower his blood pressure at will. He doesn’t strive for an Everyman quality: he is relaxed but never chummy, gracious rather than familiar. His surface is so smooth, his movements so easy and fluid, his voice so consistent and well-pitched that he can seem like an actor playing a politician, too implausibly effortless to be doing it for real. Obama has become known for his open-necked shirts—he may do to the tie what John Kennedy did to the hat—but he never looks casual. “Gore and Bush both have this jokey quality, and I’ve never seen that in Obama,” Robert Putnam, a Harvard political scientist who has spent time with all three politicians, says. “It’s not like he’s a sobersides, but Bush can be goofy, Gore can be goofy; Obama is not goofy.”

What’s strange about this is that the serene man his friends describe could not be more different from the person Obama himself describes in his memoir, “Dreams from My Father.” In that book, the young Obama is confused and angry, struggling to figure out who he is, often high, wary of both white condescension and black rage, never trusting himself, always suspicious that his beliefs are just disguised egotism, his emotions just symptoms of his

peculiar racial lot. Of course, the book is about his emergence from this state of mind—it's a traditional tale of self-finding which ends, traditionally, with a wedding, in which his confusions are resolved—but the contrast between the Obama of the book and the Obama visible to the world is nonetheless so extreme as to be striking. "He was grounded, comfortable in his own skin, knew who he was, where he came from, why he believed things," Kenneth Mack, a friend of Obama's from Harvard and now a professor there, says. "When I read the book, I was surprised—the confusion and the anger that he described, maybe they were there below the surface, but they were not manifest at all." Asked about this, Obama says, "You know, what puzzles me is why people are puzzled by that. That angry character lasts from the time I was fifteen to the time I was twenty-one or so. I guess my explanation is I was an adolescent male with a lot of hormones and an admittedly complicated upbringing. But that wasn't my natural temperament. And the book doesn't describe my entire life. I could have written an entirely different book, about the joys of basketball and what it's like to bodysurf as the sun's going down on a sandy beach."

Why didn't he write a book about the joys of basketball? Why focus on an aspect of himself that seems so politically unpalatable? When Obama was in law school, just before he wrote "Dreams," he talked about wanting to be mayor of Chicago, and since people tend for some reason to tolerate—indeed, to delight in—considerably more eccentricity and dubious conduct in mayors than they do in other elected officials, it may be that he wrote the book with that ambition in mind. He probably realized that revealing his druggy past was the best way to defuse the issue in the future. But Obama is a master storyteller, and it's likely that he also knows that the typical story of the political candidate—doing very well in school, followed by doing very well in a profession, meanwhile relishing a good life (victory, revenge, nice house, basketball, whatever)—is not moving or inspiring stuff.

When he was working as a community organizer in Chicago, Obama spoke to a number of black ministers, trying to persuade them to ally themselves with his organization, and in the course of these conversations he discovered that most had something in common. "One minister talked about a former gambling addiction," he writes. "Another told me about his years as a successful executive and a secret drunk. They all mentioned periods of religious doubt . . . the striking bottom and shattering of pride; and then finally the resurrection of self, a self alloyed to something larger. That was the source of their confidence, they insisted: their personal fall, their subsequent redemption. It was what gave them the authority to preach the Good News." Cassandra Butts, a friend of Obama's from law school, remembers, "Barack used to say that one of his favorite sayings of the civil-rights movement was 'If you cannot bear the cross, you can't wear the crown.' "

Obama rose to prominence at the 2004 Democratic Convention, describing his life as a celebration of the American dream: a "skinny kid with a funny name," the product of an improbably idealistic union between an African man and a girl from Kansas, he rose out of obscurity to attend Harvard Law School and would go on—it was by then clear—to become the third black U.S. senator since Reconstruction. But in another sense his life runs directly counter to the American dream, rejecting the American dreams of his parents and grandparents, in search of something older.

Obama's maternal grandfather, Stanley Dunham, grew up a small-time delinquent in El Dorado, Kansas. He didn't know what he wanted to do with himself, but he knew that he wanted to get out of Kansas—out of his parents' house, away from the airless parochialism of the small-town Midwest, where, as his grandson imagined it, "fear and lack of imagination choke your dreams so that you already know on the day that you're born just where you'll die and who it is that'll bury you." After a few false starts and eloping with a restless girl, he did what men of his type iconically do: he moved west. He moved to California, then to Seattle, and then, finally, to the last frontier, as far west as he could go without ending up east again, to Hawaii.

From a starting point eight thousand miles farther east, in Kenya, Obama's other grandfather, Hussein Onyango, moved in the same direction for similar reasons. Discontented and ambitious, he left his father's village, curious

about the new white people settling in a nearby town. He took to wearing European clothing and adopted European notions about hygiene and property with a convert's fervor. During the Second World War, he travelled to Europe as a cook for the British Army.

The children of these two men, Obama's parents, one generation removed from their native places, were freer than their fathers. Obama's mother, Ann, married first a man from Kenya and then, when that man left, a man from Indonesia, and when the second marriage fell apart, she briefly returned home to Hawaii to start a master's in anthropology, and then left again for Indonesia, to spend several years doing field work. She gave her son, then thirteen, the choice whether to come with her or stay behind at his school in Hawaii, and he chose to stay.

Obama's father was expelled from school, and his father cut him off, but he managed to obtain a scholarship to attend college in America. He left his pregnant wife and his son to study econometrics at the University of Hawaii. There he met Ann Dunham, married her, and had another child, Barack. He left his second family to return to Kenya to work for the government, where he married another American woman and had two more children with her. After a few years, this third family disintegrated, and, because he was unwilling to accept the unfairness of Kenya's persistent tribalism, so did his government position. Angry and penniless, he started to drink.

"What strikes me most when I think about the story of my family," Obama writes, "is a running strain of innocence, an innocence that seems unimaginable, even by the measures of childhood." Innocence is not, for him, a good quality, or even a redeeming excuse: it is not the opposite of guilt but the opposite of wisdom. In Obama's description of his maternal grandfather, for instance, there is love but also contempt. "His was an American character, one typical of men of his generation, men who embraced the notion of freedom and individualism and the open road without always knowing its price," Obama writes. "Men who were both dangerous and promising precisely because of their fundamental innocence; men prone, in the end, to disappointment." Stanley Dunham's restlessness didn't get him anywhere but far away. He ended up an incompetent, unhappy insurance salesman, his life not very different from the one he might have lived if he'd stayed in Kansas, except that, having travelled all that distance to end up there, he was all the more dissatisfied with it. His daughter saw his dissatisfaction but learned the wrong lesson: the trouble wasn't that he had wandered in a meaningless fashion, wandering for wandering's sake, expecting that a new place meant a new life; the trouble was that he hadn't wandered far enough. She would go farther. "It was this desire of his to obliterate the past, this confidence in the possibility of making the world from whole cloth," Obama writes, "that proved to be his most lasting patrimony."

Obama's mother is, in his portrayal, an American innocent out of Henry James: a young girl who ventures into the world believing that things are as they seem to be; that a person's story begins when she is born and her relations with other people begin when she meets them; that you can leave your home without fear of injury or loneliness because people everywhere are more or less alike. She had no idea what she was getting into when she left Hawaii—no idea that only months before she arrived Indonesia had suffered a failed but brutal coup and the killing of several hundred thousand people. Eventually, somebody told her what had happened, but the knowledge didn't change her. "In a land where fatalism remained a necessary tool for enduring hardship," Obama writes, "she was a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism." She had a faith, inherited from her father and resistant to experience, "that rational, thoughtful people could shape their own destiny." She should have counted herself lucky for emerging from the experience with only a second divorce and two bewildered children. "Things could have turned out worse," her son wrote. "Much worse."

Innocence, freedom, individualism, mobility—the belief that you can leave a constricting or violent history behind and remake yourself in a new form of your choosing—all are part of the American dream of moving west, first from the old country to America, then from the crowded cities of the East Coast to the open central plains and on to the Pacific. But this dream, to Obama, seems credulous and shallow, a destructive craving for weightlessness.

When Obama, as a young man, went to Kenya for the first time and learned how his father's life had turned out—how he had destroyed his career by imagining that old tribalisms were just pettiness, with the arrogant idea that he could rise above the past and change his society by sheer force of belief—Obama's aunt told him that his father had never understood that, as she put it, "if everyone is family, no one is family." Obama found this striking enough so that he repeated it later on, in italics: *If everyone is family, no one is family*. Universalism is a delusion. Freedom is really just abandonment. You might start by throwing off religion, then your parents, your town, your people and your way of life, and when, later on, you end up leaving your wife or husband and your child, too, it seems only a natural progression.

So when it came time for Obama to leave home he reversed what his mother and father and grandparents had done: he turned around and moved east. First back to the mainland, spending two years of college in California, then farther, to New York. He ended up in Chicago, back in the Midwest, from which his mother's parents had fled, embracing everything they had escaped—the constriction of tradition, the weight of history, the provincial smallness of community, settling for your whole life in one place with one group of people. He embraced even the dirt, the violence, and the narrowness that came with that place, because they were part of its memory. He thought about the great black migration to Chicago from the South, nearly a century before, and the traditions the migrants had made there. "I made a chain between my life and the faces I saw, borrowing other people's memories," he wrote. He wanted to be bound.

Of course, in a sense, by choosing to leave his family and move to a place to which he had no connection, he was doing exactly what his parents had done, but, unlike them, he decided to believe that his choosing self had been shaped by fate and family. There was, at least, something organic, something inescapable about that. "I can see that my choices were never truly mine alone," he wrote, "and that is how it should be, that to assert otherwise is to chase after a sorry sort of freedom." Choosing was the best that he could do. In time, the roots would grow. He married Michelle Robinson, a woman who already owned the memories and the roots, who was by birth the person he was trying to become: the child of an intact, religious black family from the South Side. He took a job organizing a South Side community that was disintegrating but that he hoped, through work and inspiration, to revive. Later, rejecting the agnosticism of his parents and his own skeptical instincts, he became a Christian and joined a church. "I came to realize," he wrote in his second book, "The Audacity of Hope," that "without an unequivocal commitment to a particular community of faith, I would be consigned at some level to always remain apart, free in the way that my mother was free, but also alone in the same ways that she was ultimately alone."

By the time he arrived at law school, when he was twenty-seven, he had become the man he had imagined. All his life, people had considered him black because he looked black, however confused he might be inside, and now he was no longer confused. His conversion was complete. "If you had met him, you would never get that he was biracial," Kenneth Mack says. "You would never get that he grew up in Hawaii. When I met him, he just seemed like a black guy from Chicago. He seemed like a Midwestern black man."

The victory of freedom over history is not just, of course, an American story about individuals but also a story that America tells about itself. Obama rejects this story even in one of its most persuasive incarnations, the civil-rights movement. He calls the "spirit that would grip the nation for that fleeting period between Kennedy's election and the passage of the Voting Rights Act: the seeming triumph of universalism over parochialism and narrow-mindedness" a "useful fiction, one that haunts me . . . evoking as it does some lost Eden." When it seems that history has been defeated, that is only an illusion produced by charisma and rhetoric.

It is, then, not surprising that when it was proposed that America should invade Iraq with the goal of establishing democracy there, Obama knew that it would be a terrible mistake. This was American innocence at its most destructive, freedom at its most deceptive, universalism at its most naïve. "There was a dangerous innocence to

thinking that we would be greeted as liberators, or that with a little bit of economic assistance and democratic training you'd have a Jeffersonian democracy blooming in the desert," he says now. "There is a running thread in American history of idealism that can express itself powerfully and appropriately, as it did after World War II with the creation of the United Nations and the Marshall Plan, when we recognized that our security and prosperity depend on the security and prosperity of others. But the same idealism can express itself in a sense that we can remake the world any way we want by flipping a switch, because we're technologically superior or we're wealthier or we're morally superior. And when our idealism spills into that kind of naïveté and an unwillingness to acknowledge history and the weight of other cultures, then we get ourselves into trouble, as we did in Vietnam."

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, Obama is deeply conservative. There are moments when he sounds almost Burkean. He distrusts abstractions, generalizations, extrapolations, projections. It's not just that he thinks revolutions are unlikely: he values continuity and stability for their own sake, sometimes even more than he values change for the good. Take health care, for example. "If you're starting from scratch," he says, "then a single-payer system"—a government-managed system like Canada's, which disconnects health insurance from employment—"would probably make sense. But we've got all these legacy systems in place, and managing the transition, as well as adjusting the culture to a different system, would be difficult to pull off. So we may need a system that's not so disruptive that people feel like suddenly what they've known for most of their lives is thrown by the wayside."

Obama's voting record is one of the most liberal in the Senate, but he has always appealed to Republicans, perhaps because he speaks about liberal goals in conservative language. When he talks about poverty, he tends not to talk about gorging plutocrats and unjust tax breaks; he says that we are our brother's keeper, that caring for the poor is one of our traditions. Asked whether he has changed his mind about anything in the past twenty years, he says, "I'm probably more humble now about the speed with which government programs can solve every problem. For example, I think the impact of parents and communities is at least as significant as the amount of money that's put into education." Obama encourages his crossover appeal. He doesn't often criticize the Bush Administration directly; in New Hampshire recently, he told his audience, "I'm a Democrat. I'm considered a progressive Democrat. But if a Republican or a Conservative or a libertarian or a free-marketer has a better idea, I am happy to steal ideas from anybody and in that sense I'm agnostic." "The number of conservatives who've called me—roommates of mine, relatives who are Republicans—who've said, 'He's the one Democrat I could support, not because he agrees with me, because he doesn't, but because I at least think he'll take my point of view into account,'" Michael Froman, a law-school friend who worked in the Clinton Administration and is now involved in Obama's campaign, says. "That's a big thing, mainstream Americans feeling like Northeast liberals look down on them."

After Obama's Convention speech, Republican bloggers rushed to claim him, under headings such as "Right Speech, Wrong Convention" and "Barack Obama: A Republican Soul Trapped Inside a Democrat's Body." The Convention speech was uncharacteristically Reaganesque for Obama, being almost uniformly sunny about America, which he called a "magical place"; these days, he tends to be more sombre. Even so, Republicans continue to find him congenial, especially those who opposed the war on much the same conservative grounds that he did. Some of Bush's top fund-raisers are contributing to Obama's campaign. In his election to the U.S. Senate, Obama won forty per cent of the Republican vote; now there is a group called Republicans for Obama, founded by John Martin, a law student and Navy reservist shortly to be posted to Afghanistan, which has chapters in six states. (On its Web site, the group highlights aspects of Obama's biography that aren't usually emphasized, referring to his mother's second husband as an "Indonesian oil manager," and mentioning the year after college that Obama spent working at Business International Corporation.) Of course, not all Republicans like Obama—John Martin receives a steady stream of rude e-mails. "Hi John, Just wanted to let you know that there aren't Republicans for Obama Hussein

Barack,” one woman wrote. “Please remove me from your mailing list and get over your white guilt.” “Some Republicans you scum are!” a man from Hobe Sound, Florida, wrote. “This is someone who has a 100% left wing voting record in the Senate, including rejection of Roberts and Alito and wants to repeal our tax cuts. Screw him! And screw you too!”

In the most widely quoted part of his Convention speech, Obama said, “The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I’ve got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, and we don’t like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the Red States.” Seasoned observers of Washington tend to dismiss such talk of national unity and bipartisan cooperation as meaningless political boilerplate. Even Obama’s allies worry that it sounds a little flaccid. “So much of what he’s said he’ll do when he’s President is about being conciliatory and bipartisan and really listening,” a friend says. “All this process-oriented stuff that’s not exactly Churchillian rhetoric.” But, coming from Obama, the talk about unity isn’t boilerplate—he actually means it, and it’s substantive, which is to say that it has consequences that make people angry.

Obama is always disappointing people who feel that he gives too much respect or yields too much ground to the other side, rather than fighting aggressively for his principles. “In law school, we had a seminar together and Charles Fried, who is very conservative, was one of our speakers,” Cassandra Butts says. “The issue of the Second Amendment came up and Fried is pretty much a Second Amendment absolutist. One of our classmates was in favor of gun control—he’d come from an urban environment where guns were a big issue. And, while Barack agreed with our classmate, he was much more willing to hear Fried out—he was very moved by the fact that Fried grew up in the Soviet bloc, where they didn’t have those freedoms. After the class, our classmate was still challenging Fried and Barack was just not as passionate and I didn’t understand that.” Recently, Obama said that if Bush decided to veto a military spending bill on the ground that it included a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq, he, Obama, would support removing the timetable in order to pass the bill. Liberal bloggers were irate at this capitulation, but the writer Samantha Power, who has worked for Obama on foreign policy, says, “Standing on one side of the room with his arms folded is just not his M.O.”

This is, again, partly a matter of temperament. “By nature, I’m not somebody who gets real worked up about things,” Obama writes in his second book. “When I see Ann Coulter or Sean Hannity baying across the television screen, I find it hard to take them seriously.” He tends to think of his opponents as deluded and ridiculous, rather than as demons. “I’ve never been a conspiracy theorist,” he says. “I’ve never believed there are a bunch of people out there who are pulling all the strings and pressing all the buttons. And the reason is that the older I get, the more time I spend meeting people in government or in the corporate arena, the more human everybody becomes. What I do believe is that those with money, those with influence, those with control over how resources are allocated in our society, are very protective of their interests, and they can rationalize infinitely the reasons why they should have more money and power than anyone else, why that’s somehow good for the society as a whole.”

Obama’s drive to compromise goes beyond the call of political expediency—it’s instinctive, almost a tic. “Barack has an incredible ability to synthesize seemingly contradictory realities and make them coherent,” Cassandra Butts says. “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. He had to figure out whether he was going to accept this contradiction and be just one of those things, or find a way to realize that these pieces make up the whole.” In the state senate, this skill served him well—he was unusually dexterous with opponents, and passed bills that at first were judged too liberal to have a chance, such as one that mandated the videotaping of police interviews with suspects arrested for capital crimes. “In our seminar, whether we were arguing about labor or religion or politics, he would sit back like a resource person and then he would say, I hear Jane saying such and such, and Tom seems to

disagree on that, but then Tom and Jane both agree on this,” Robert Putnam says. (For a couple of years, Obama participated in a seminar about rebuilding community, inspired by Putnam’s article “Bowling Alone.”) “I don’t mean he makes all conflicts go away—that would be crazy. But his natural instinct is not dividing the baby in half—it’s looking for areas of convergence. This is part of who he is really deep down, and it’s an amazing skill. It’s not always the right skill: the truth doesn’t always lie somewhere in the middle. But I think at this moment America is in a situation where we agree much more than we think we do. I know this from polling data—we feel divided in racial terms, religious terms, class terms, all kinds of terms, but we exaggerate how much we disagree with each other. And that’s why I think he’s right for this time.” Even when he was very young, Obama was scornful of, as he puts it, “people who preferred the dream to the reality, impotence to compromise.”

Sometimes, of course, there is no possibility of convergence—a question must be answered yes or no. In such a case, Obama may stand up for what he believes in, or he may not. “If there’s a deep moral conviction that gay marriage is wrong, if a majority of Americans believe on principle that marriage is an institution for men and women, I’m not at all sure he shares that view, but he’s not an in-your-face type,” Cass Sunstein, a colleague of Obama’s at the University of Chicago, says. “To go in the face of people with religious convictions—that’s something he’d be very reluctant to do.” This is not, Sunstein believes, due only to pragmatism; it also stems from a sense that there is something worthy of respect in a strong and widespread moral feeling, even if it’s wrong. “Rawls talks about civic toleration as a *modus vivendi*, a way that we can live together, and some liberals think that way,” Sunstein says. “But I think with Obama it’s more like Learned Hand when he said, ‘The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right.’ Obama takes that really seriously. I think the reason that conservatives are O.K. with him is both that he might agree with them on some issues and that even if he comes down on a different side, he knows he might be wrong. I can’t think of an American politician who has thought in that way, ever.”

Obama is, in fact, committed to respecting the opinions or cultures of others even when religious beliefs aren’t involved. “There are universal values that I will fight for,” he says. “I think there may have been a time and a place in which genital mutilation was culturally appropriate, but those times are over. I’m not somebody who believes that our foreign policy has to be driven by moral relativism. What I do believe is that we have to apply judgment and a sense of proportion to how change happens in any society—to promote our ideals and our values with some sense of humility.”

“Lincoln is a hero of his,” Sunstein says—Obama announced his candidacy in front of the Old State Capitol in Springfield in order to draw a connection between himself and that other skinny politician from Illinois—“and in the legal culture Lincoln is famous for believing that there are some principles that you can’t compromise in terms of speaking, but, in terms of what you *do*, there are pragmatic reasons and sometimes reasons of principle not to act on them. Alexander Bickel, in ‘The Least Dangerous Branch,’ made this aspect of Lincoln famous, and I don’t know if Obama has this directly from Bickel, but if he doesn’t he has it from law school.” Lincoln, Bickel wrote, “held ‘that free government was, in principle, incompatible with chattel slavery.’ . . . Yet he was no abolitionist.” Should freed slaves become the equals of white men? “The feelings of ‘the great mass of white people’ would not admit of this,” Bickel described Lincoln as thinking, “and hence here also principle would have to yield to necessity.” Lincoln wrote, “Whether this feeling accords with justice and sound judgment, is not the sole question, if indeed, it is any part of it. A universal feeling, whether well or ill-founded, can not be safely disregarded.”

Obama has staked his candidacy on union—on bringing together two halves of America that are profoundly divided, and by associating himself with Lincoln—and he knows what both of those things mean. He calls America’s founding a “grand compromise”: compromise, for him, is not an eroding of principle for the sake of getting something done but a principle in itself—the certainty of uncertainty, the fundament of union. “I would save the Union,” Lincoln wrote, in a letter to Horace Greeley, the editor of the New York *Tribune*. “If I could save the

Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.” “I like to believe that for Lincoln it was never a matter of abandoning conviction for the sake of expediency,” Obama writes. “Rather . . . that we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side.”

Obama sat leaning back in a chair in his office in Washington. He gave the impression that he would be perfectly comfortable sitting in that chair, without moving, all day. As he spoke, he waved his hand in a vague, regal gesture, like somebody absent-mindedly swatting away a fly. He talked about the aftermath of the Iraq war, how he believes that it is crucial to avoid a Vietnam-syndrome-style retreat into isolation.

“There are no countries now with no security implications,” he said. “If you have ungoverned spaces, they become havens for terrorists and breeding grounds for pandemics and generate refugees that can destabilize areas that are of great interest to us. Security and humanitarian concerns are all part of one project, which is to create a world in which people see enough opportunity that they end up sharing our interest in maintaining order. . . . I would take some of the troops that we redeploy out of Iraq and use them to bolster NATO forces in Afghanistan. I think we still have the opportunity to succeed there.”

Obama has become known for his skepticism about the Iraq war, but he is not a dove, nor is he averse to thinking in international terms. Two of the issues to which he has devoted the most attention since he arrived in the U.S. Senate, avian flu and nuclear nonproliferation, are grand global problems, which, while relatively uncontroversial, are nonetheless risky choices for signature issues, since, in both cases, success is invisible, and failure could mean disaster of world-changing proportions. Still, it seems that this global mode of thinking is comparatively new for him. When the first President Bush invaded Iraq, Obama was in his late twenties and thinking seriously about a career in politics, but friends from that time don’t recall his opinion of the war. “I don’t want to make claims as if I had been in a position to articulate a clear position on it,” he says. “I remember believing that Saddam’s invasion justified international action, and had I been forced to articulate a policy I’d like to think that I would have supported it once the international coalition was put together. You know, I was busy in law school at the time, or studying for the bar.”

Obama had just returned to his office for an hour or so after voting on the floor of the Senate. He had spent the morning shuttling between the Senate and his office, being briefed on his schedule, chewing gum as he walked. It took him about ten minutes to make the trip each time, a delay sufficiently irritating that Obama’s assistant expended considerable effort to avoid it. That day, she had tried to book the Senate’s President’s Room for a meeting, but Hillary Clinton’s assistant had got there ahead of her.

In the office reception area, crowds of people milled about, many of them unscheduled; the office had become something of a tourist attraction. Marian Wright Edelman had marshalled a group of faith leaders, parents, and sample sick children to speak with Obama for a minute or two about children’s health. About twenty rotund, middle-aged firefighters arrived and, too many to fit in the office, stood in the hallway, blocking the door. A couple of reporters from the Chicago *Tribune*—two of several people the paper has assigned to cover the Obama beat full time—waited on the sofa for a delayed interview. (The day had begun with a candidates’ forum sponsored by a builders’ union at which Obama was scheduled to speak after Senator Joseph Biden, and, as a consequence, a winking press aide told the reporters—we all know what happens when you speak after Joe Biden—Obama was going to be late to everything for the rest of the day.) A white father from Winnetka had brought his two sons, the elder of whom, about nine years old, begged to wait as long as it took to spot Obama for even a second. (After an hour, a receptionist suggested that they come back the following morning.) Two teen-age girls—one, from Lake Elmo, Minnesota, carrying a soda, another, wearing pink tights and carrying a frozen yogurt—stopped by, hoping

for a photograph with the Senator. A receptionist gave them a black-and-white portrait from a pile she kept at her desk, and the girls squealed in delight. The girl with the soda snapped a few photographs of the reception area and the empty conference room next to it and signed the guest book. “Where are you? No picture?” she wrote, next to more conventional comments (“Good luck Your Sweet,” “My hero!,” “Thank you, you rock!”).

The moment Obama’s Senate schedule ends for the week, he flies somewhere to campaign over the weekend, usually Iowa. “What an unbelievable crowd, I am so grateful to all of you for taking the time out on a Sunday afternoon to be here today.” Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, mid-February. “Let me thank first of all the person who just introduced me, Tom Miller, who is just an outstanding attorney general.” Small town after small town, street after street of one- and two-story houses with lawns, then the commercial strip, the same everywhere, McDonald’s, Burger King, Holiday Inn, Super 8, Wal-Mart, Kmart, Super Target, and then the smaller regional stores with names that rhyme—Rib Crib, Hobby Lobby, Taco Tico, Prime N’ Wine.

“I am Barack Obama and I’m running for President.” Algona High School, Algona, Iowa. Early April. “A state senate seat in the area where I lived opened up and some people I knew in the community got involved and asked me if I’d be interested,” Obama said. “I did what every black man does when confronted with a major decision like that: I prayed on it, and I asked my wife.” (Laughter.) “And after consulting those two higher powers I did what every first-time candidate does, which is to talk to anyone who will listen to you. I’d go to PTA meetings, I’d go to the barbershop, I’d go to softball games, and everywhere I went I’d get the same two questions. First question: Where’d you get that funny name, Barack Obama? Although people would mispronounce it. They would call me Alabama, they called me Yo’ Mama.” (Laughter.) “But the second question was what led me to run for President. People would ask me, ‘You seem like a nice guy, you have a fancy law degree, you make a lot of money, you’ve got a beautiful, churchgoing family, why would you want to go into something dirty and nasty like politics?’ ”

“He’s always wanted to be President,” Valerie Jarrett, who has been a family friend for years, ever since she hired Michelle Obama to work in Mayor Daley’s office, says. (Michelle Obama is now an executive at the University of Chicago Hospitals.) “He didn’t always admit it, but oh, absolutely. The first time he said it to me, he said, ‘I just think I have some special qualities and wouldn’t it be a shame to waste them.’ I think it was during the early part of his U.S. senatorial campaign. He said, ‘You know, I just think I have something.’ ”

“Some people who knew of my activism in the community asked me would I be interested in running for that office,” Obama said in Ames. “And so I did what every wise man does when confronted with such a decision: I prayed on it, and I asked my wife.” (Laughter.) It remains to be seen how well Obama adapts himself to campaigning. It doesn’t come altogether naturally to him. Late last year, when he was thinking about whether to run, friends asked him if he was ready for a fight, if the thought got his adrenaline going, and he would say, “Yes—but I don’t know if I want the hassle.” That’s not something you imagine somebody embarking on a Presidential campaign saying—not wanting the hassle. “But that’s why he’s so likable,” a friend says. “That’s the quality people are seeing in him, they’re seeing how campaigning could be a grind.” “Bill Clinton was far more into the tactics of politics,” David Axelrod, Obama’s chief campaign adviser, says. “He was a voracious consumer of polls. Of course, he was so indefatigable that he could do that and still read four books a week and be President of the United States. You wouldn’t hire Barack to run your campaign. You might hire Bill Clinton to run your campaign.”

This is not the only difference between Obama and Clinton. To compare them is to see that a political natural, as both of them are called, can mean very different things. “Bill Clinton has preternatural ability as a listener,” Robert Putnam says. “Everybody always walks away from him thinking, For the first time in my life someone has actually listened to me—that man Bill Clinton is the first person in the world to really understand me. It’s almost magical—even Newt Gingrich said something like, Every time I meet him I feel like I have to go rinse my mind out for an hour. Barack is not that good.” Putnam’s is a common reaction; it seems to be a response to Clinton’s

passionate political drive, his hunger, the need he is said to have to make everybody love him. Some of this quality, in a more restrained, sublimated form, is present, too, in Hillary Clinton—in her intense desire to win people over, in her exhaustive preparation, in her willingness to give everything she is capable of for every single vote.

This is not Obama's style at all. He doesn't seem hungry. He seems to like people but not to need them. When most politicians speak to a crowd, they give the impression that that is what they live for; Obama at town-hall meetings appears engaged but not fervently so, as if there were several other things that he would be equally happy doing that day. He still has the speechmaking power that he displayed at the 2004 Convention, but for the most part he keeps it in reserve. Even at large rallies these days he doesn't try to overwhelm—his eyes don't flame, his hands remain unclenched and below his shoulders, he doesn't go for a sudden conversion experience. (Sometimes his wife, Michelle, appears onstage with him, and this further dilutes the evangelical tone: the way Obama depicts Michelle in his books and speeches makes her sound like a sitcom wife, rolling her eyes at his excesses, affectionately taking him down a peg if he becomes pompous, humorously scolding him for not picking up his socks, and so her down-to-earth, TV presence undercuts his movie uplift.)

Obama is, obviously, running for President: it's not that he isn't hungry for converts but that his way of courting them is subtle. When his speechwriter, Jon Favreau, who in 2004 wrote speeches for John Kerry, was interviewed for the job, Obama asked him what his theory of speechwriting was. "I didn't have a grand theory in my pocket," Favreau says, "but I told him, When I saw you at the Convention what really struck me was that you told a story from the beginning to the end of that speech—a story about your life, about how it fit in with the larger American story—and it built to a point where people wanted to applaud, rather than using forced applause lines. Democrats just haven't done that. And Barack said, That's exactly what I try to do." That is Obama's theory of speeches, and it seems, also, to be his theory of campaigning: don't try to score huge points at every moment, don't kill yourself for every vote—a campaign is a long, slow story, and you don't want to exhaust your audience or yourself. "One weekend I was with him they were making a big deal about his school in Indonesia being a madrassa," Valerie Jarrett says. "I said, 'How could they have even run with this story? It's so completely inaccurate!' He said, 'You know, we've contacted the school and the principal's gonna explain what kind of a school it is and we're gonna refute it all. You need to just calm down. This is gonna be fun! Valerie, you're not a guy but let me explain it to you in sport terms. It's like we're in a basketball game, and I'm gonna fumble the ball, and someone's gonna steal the ball, and I'm gonna miss a free throw, but we're gonna win the game. You can't get yourself worked up over every little thing that somebody says about me or you're gonna go crazy.' "

When Christopher Edley first met Obama, in law school, he decided that he would go far, because of his centeredness. Then when, later, he read Obama's first book and saw how Obama had suspected and vivisectioned himself for so many years, he decided that he would go far because of that. "The capacity for self-reflection is in my experience invaluable for a candidate or a President," he says. (Edley worked in the Carter and Clinton Administrations and for Dukakis's campaign.) "It's difficult to describe to someone who hasn't been involved how tough a Presidential campaign is. When you spend day after day flying around the country in an aluminum tube at forty thousand feet, it's the easiest thing in the world to lose yourself. And when every misstep becomes a thirty-six-hour media disaster there's every reason to second-guess your instincts, so being sensitive to your strengths and weaknesses and having the courage to come to terms with them is helpful when you're facing a crisis. I've seen candidates who, like a deer frozen in headlights, can't find their way forward and have to be led around by staff. I've also seen candidates who, faced with adversity, turn into the stubbornest of mules and can't adapt or adjust. Most candidates walk into the room asking everybody 'How'm I doing? How'm I doing?,' with no ability to look at themselves in the mirror. So the ability that Barack shows in the book to be brutally self-reflective—this is deep stuff."

“When he’s exhausted on day forty of the campaign fund-raising drive, in the grind of it, can he keep it up?” a friend says. “I think sometimes he feels phony to himself. He’s going to struggle with being the candidate, being a regular guy who has become a persona named Barack Obama. The persona is going to get larger and larger, and more and more distant from him and the way he used to live his life. We have a real live human being running for President here. He doesn’t have much experience in this kind of campaigning, and this is both his strength and his vulnerability.”

Some people go into politics with an idea; Obama went in with an example. The only politician he discusses at any length in his first book is the black man who was mayor of Chicago when Obama first moved there, in 1985, Harold Washington. Obama doesn’t mention what platform Washington ran on, or what he accomplished in office (though he implies that it wasn’t much); he talks about the effect his election had on the black community. When he first arrived in the city, Obama noticed that, all over the South Side, people had hung Washington’s picture on their walls. “The night Harold won, let me tell you, people just ran the streets,” a barber Obama calls Smitty says. “It was like the day Joe Louis knocked out Schmeling. Same feeling. People weren’t just proud of Harold. They were proud of themselves.” Washington’s victory, Obama saw, had produced in people an almost religious feeling of deliverance. “Like my idea of organizing,” he concluded, Washington “held out an offer of collective redemption.” It is unlikely that Obama would speak of his own candidacy in these terms—that would be embarrassing. But his talk of unity, his avoidance of blame, and his promise to end the war all seem intended to gesture to a similar prospect of redemption: not only for black people but for white people (for voting for a black man), for Republicans (for embracing unity with a Democrat), and for Americans (for saying to the world that the war was a mistake).

But redemption is brittle. After Harold Washington died suddenly, in his second term, his achievement, such as it was, fell to pieces almost at once. “There was no political organization in place, no clearly defined principles to follow,” Obama writes. “The entire of black politics had centered around one man who radiated like a sun.” To a man less conservative, this failure might have been crushing—a demonstration of the impossibility of change—but to Obama it seemed only one more proof that charisma is misleading, that revolutions are illusory, that real change is slow. Now that he is running for office himself, it is likely he knows he can be as much harmed as lifted up by celestial expectations, so he tries, in small ways, to discourage them. Obama stands on the ground. If he thought his winning would take a revolution, he wouldn’t have run. ♦

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