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# Psychological Reflections on Barack Obama and John McCain: Assessing the Contours of a New Presidential Administration

STANLEY A. RENSHON

On 20 January 2009, either Barack Obama or John McCain will place his hand on a bible, swear to uphold and defend the Constitution, and become the forty-fourth president of the United States. The new president will immediately become responsible for the issues on which he campaigned, those that he ignored but for which he will nonetheless be held accountable, and all those unanticipated issues for which he will also be expected to devise solutions.

Naturally, a new president and administration raise many questions. What will the successful candidate really be like as president? What qualities of character, identity, temperament, and leadership will shape the new presidency? How will the new president's worldview shape his domestic and foreign policy choices and his chances for successfully achieving them? And finally, how will these elements play out in the context of the public's psychology—its framing of the issues, views, hopes, and expectations?

The analysis that follows addresses these questions with the intention of developing some preliminary baseline considerations of the psychological contours of the new administration. I spend somewhat more time with the Obama candidacy since his personal and political history presents the most puzzles.

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McCain's personal and political career, while unconventional, is in some ways more transparent.<sup>1</sup>

As befits an anticipatory analysis such as this one, several strong cautions are prudent. First, laying out the contours of a soon to be unfolding administration is meant to establish a plausible set of baselines and parameters within which the above elements are likely to unfold. They are not predictions of specific behaviors. Second, psychological contours, however accurate they prove to be, are only one part of a complex set of elements that shape a presidency. Their importance varies with the particular matter at hand and they are rarely the only decisive causal factor.

Additionally, every administration experiences the routine as well as the unexpected and a president's psychology is important to both. We often miss the psychology involved in the first because it is combined with layers of commonplace strategic and political calculations. It is nonetheless present, hidden in plain sight. The unexpected ordinarily throws the president back on his own operating resources of which his psychology, worldview, and leadership preferences are surely critical and important elements. That said, it is difficult if not impossible to predict how a president will respond to novel circumstances because they contain, by definition, new situational elements that require the application of intelligence and experience, not standard operating procedure. This novelty factor takes on more importance in light of the fact that neither candidate has had any real political executive experience. Those cautions noted, there is much to be gained by looking carefully at the personal development, political careers, and the just completed presidential nomination campaigns to discern what patterns, if any, emerge that might help us to anticipate how the psychologies, worldviews, and approaches to leadership of the two candidates will likely inform and shape their presidencies.

This essay begins with an analysis of public's psychology as the November election approaches. This is the leadership and governing setting in which each candidate's psychology, leadership style, and policy worldview will play out should he gain office. Campaigns try to respond to the public's psychology primarily via the mechanisms of campaign narratives. We examine these narratives before moving on to a more detailed consideration of each of the candidates' leadership and psychology. For both Senators Obama and McCain we focus on the impact of their family and later life experiences on their political identities and ambitions, the leadership skills that they bring to bear,

<sup>1</sup>In my analysis of Obama, I focus on his first book, *Dreams From my Father*, rather than on his second, *The Audacity of Hope*. The latter draws its title and much of its analysis from a speech that Obama gave before the Democratic National Convention in 2004 and was written at a time when he clearly had presidential aspirations in mind. It is therefore much less useful as a relatively early and unvarnished reflection of his psychology and worldview than his first book. Michiko Kakutani, who reviewed the second book for *The New York Times*, said that it is, "much more of a political document. Portions of the volume read like outtakes from a stump speech." See Michiko Kakutani, "Obama's Foursquare Politics, With a Dab of Dijon," *The New York Times*, 17 October 2006.

and the prospects for each should they gain the presidency. The essay highlights the impact of Obama's multicultural identity and upbringing, as well as the absence of his father on the Senator's own arc of ambition and persona as a bridge builder. In addition, the article discusses Obama's ambition and argues that it has thrived as a result of his intellect, organization, and planning skills, as well as his cool, deliberative style. It argues that his rhetorical skills sustain his ambition, but that his cool, deliberative style makes the Senator difficult to read and raises questions about whether his postpartisan building bridges persona constitutes a strategic political construction or the true core of his political identity. We posit that an Obama presidency will be public and symbolic, but unlikely to form a progressive majority and to bridge divides with ease. The article also anticipates difficulties for a McCain presidency, especially if driven by that Senator's quest for honor and his maverick, rebel identity, which have resulted from his own family and personal experiences. It argues that his devotion to honor will place the Senator in the middle of numerous domestic policy debates, while his unique leadership style, dominated by a sense of determination and of reaching common ground on typically decisive issues, might solve some long-standing policy stalemates. Further, the article questions whether the presidency can or should sustain McCain's continuous self-appraisals. The essay concludes with some observations on the key dilemmas of an Obama or McCain presidency.

### THE PUBLIC'S PSYCHOLOGY

Every new president steps into the Oval Office facing a large in-box of public expectations. These are the result of the issues that were on the public's mind during the presidential campaign and the campaign's response to them, the issues that the candidates stressed and their promised solutions, and the public's mood—an emotional barometer of their experience during the years of the administration of the president currently in office.

#### *A Sour Public Mood*

Of the latter, we can say unequivocally that the new president will gain office in November with a public mood that is deeply dour. As of May 2008, an astounding 82 percent of a national sample of respondents said that the country was going in the wrong direction.<sup>2</sup> There are many plausible explanations: unusually high gas prices, the threat of renewed inflation, the housing market meltdown, continuing public regret about having invaded Iraq and uncertainty about the sustainability of progress there, the abysmal standing of America in the world, and the continuing poisonous atmosphere of Washington national politics.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Cohen and Dan Balz, "U.S. Outlook Is Worst Since '92, Poll Finds," 13 May 2008, accessed on the website of the *The Washington Post* at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/postpoll\\_051208.html?sid=ST2008051201102](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/postpoll_051208.html?sid=ST2008051201102), 20 May 2008.

As befits a country that increasingly looks to the president to shape and beneficially order the political universe,<sup>3</sup> George W. Bush is held largely responsible for these maladies. On issue after issue—the situation in Iraq, the economy, energy policy, healthcare, and immigration—the president’s net approval ratings are negative.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, 74 percent of respondents in one national survey said that the next president “should take a different approach than George Bush has.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet, Americans are conflicted about the qualities they want in the next president. In one national survey, the quality most picked by respondents was “strong leadership.”<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, in a survey taken the preceding month those respondents chose “working well with leaders of other countries” as the most important characteristic (32 percent), while “bringing unity to the country” was a close third (25 percent).<sup>7</sup> What comes across in a variety of surveys is that Americans have lost patience with the stark partisan politics of the last few decades, even as they continue to hold strong views about their own specific policy preferences. That paradox aside, Americans are determined to elect someone whom they believe will bring about real change. Change, of course, is an amorphous, some would say, meaningless term that at some point must be translated into actual policy initiatives.

Still, both candidates present themselves as candidates of change. Senator Obama’s campaign theme is: “Change you can believe in.” Not to be outdone in the change sweepstakes, Senator McCain’s campaign theme is: “A leader you can believe in,” both a play on and a criticism of Senator Obama’s theme. McCain’s website warns about the need to distinguish between “the right change and the wrong change.” “Going forward” is the “right kind of change,” “going backward” is the “wrong kind.” This, like Obama’s campaign mantra of change you can believe in, sounds vague and insubstantial, but its purpose for both campaigns is critically important. Both candidates are engaged in an epic struggle to both frame the dominant campaign narratives and each other.

### CAMPAIGN NARRATIVES

Campaigns need a method by which to distill the “essence” of their candidate in a way that conveys his virtues. In the past, many citizens counted on party

<sup>3</sup> For a recent argument that expectations for presidential actions have exceeded both the bounds of reasonableness and constitutional limits, see Gene Healy, *The Cult of the Presidency: America’s Dangerous Devotion to Executive Power* (Washington DC: CATO Institute, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> Lydia Saad, “Disapproval of Bush Spans the Issues,” Gallup Online, 25 February 2008.

<sup>5</sup> NBC/JSJ Poll, November 2007, Question 12. Accessed online at [http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/071107\\_NBC-WSJ\\_Full.pdf](http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/071107_NBC-WSJ_Full.pdf), 2 December 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. NBC/Wall Street Journal Poll, December 2007, Question 17b. Accessed online at <http://online.wsj.com/public/resources/documents/wsjsnbcpoll20071219.pdf>, 3 January 2008.

<sup>7</sup> NBC/JSJ Poll, November 2007, Question 22. Accessed online at [http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/071107\\_NBC-WSJ\\_Full.pdf](http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/msnbc/sections/news/071107_NBC-WSJ_Full.pdf), 3 December 2007.

identification to help manage the wide range of information about candidates and their policies, but a candidate's party identification no longer serves as a highly reliable guide. This metric faltered because presidential candidates, beginning with Richard Nixon, began to blur ideological policy lines as a means of appealing to a wider group of potential voters.<sup>8</sup> That trend finds its latest expression in the candidacies of both Obama and McCain. Senator Obama presents himself as someone who can "move beyond the divisive politics of Washington and bring Democrats, independents, and Republicans together to get things done."<sup>9</sup> He presents himself not as a liberal, a term that is consistent with his voting record,<sup>10</sup> but as a "pragmatist" who presents practical, not ideological solutions. His attempt to escape the liberal label is aided by a persona that comes across as radiating calmness, reasonableness, and fair-mindedness, traits that are viewed as being inconsistent with ideological zealotry.<sup>11</sup> McCain's path to cross-party appeal rests on his reputation as a maverick. As someone who has bucked conservative orthodoxy on immigration, campaign finance, and climate policy, he has earned a reputation as a candidate who is clearly not afraid to take positions at variance with his base. McCain's route to cross-party appeal appears more deeply rooted in his psychology than in his rhetoric or persona, a point that I will develop in a later section, although he has clearly derived political mileage from his maverick image, and knows it.

Campaign narratives are stories about a candidate with a purpose. They ordinarily consolidate a "story line" that links biography, outlook, and leadership in a way that is responsive to the campaign's estimation of the underlying psychology of the public mood. So, for Obama, the biographical fact of his African American and Caucasian background coupled with his exotic geographical upbringing in Indonesia and Hawaii emphasize his stature as both familiar and different, someone whose atypical background gives him standing as an agent of change. Reduced to its essence, the narrative equates atypical experience with fostering the development of a psychological perspective and style that bridges differences.

John McCain's narrative combines equal parts of hero and rebel on the one hand and formidable experience on the other. His narrative begins with his family's tradition of honor and service to the country, progresses in a direct line to his service to the country that led to five and half years of brutal captivity that he survived through sheer grit, and from which he emerged as a

<sup>8</sup> For an extensive discussion of how this trend developed through the presidency of William J. Clinton, see Stanley A. Renshon, *The Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 38–41.

<sup>9</sup> Robin Toner, "Obama's Test: Can a Liberal Be a Unifier?" *The New York Times*, 25 March 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Friel, Richard E. Cohen, and Kirk Victor, "Obama: Most Liberal Senator In 2007," *National Journal*, 31 January 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Powell, "Man in the News: Calm in the Swirl of History," *The New York Times*, 4 June 2008; see also Alec MacGillis, "In Obama's New Message, Some Foes See Old Liberalism," *The Washington Post*, 26 March 2008; A01.

major political figure who has repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to forge bipartisan solutions to tough problems, often at the expense of his party's orthodox positions. Reduced to its essence, McCain's narrative couples a lifelong immersion in the values of honor and service with a determination tested and proven in extreme adversity leading to a leadership stance that values above all pragmatic and independent political solutions, even if they run counter to orthodoxy or conventional wisdom.

McCain stresses two narratives, experience and change, though in different ways, while Obama can really only draw on one. It is not yet clear whether McCain's twin narratives will trump Obama's singular one. A WSJ/NBC poll found that 54 percent agreed with the statement that "this is a time when it is important to look for a person who will bring greater changes to the current policies even if he is less experienced and tested." Forty-two percent agreed that "this is a time when it is important to look for a more experienced and tested person even if he brings fewer changes to the current policies."<sup>12</sup>

Narratives must be consistent with and reinforce candidate authenticity. That characteristic is so highly valued in politics not only because it is in such short supply, but also because it is so crucial. How else can voters tell whether the candidate they see will be the leader in office they expect? When candidates treat their political personas as accessories that can be regularly changed depending on campaign needs, doubts regarding authenticity arise.

It seems clear that both presidential candidates won their respective nominations because of compelling personal narratives, because their psychologies reflected traits that their political bases and the general public found important, and because they fit the needs of the circumstances that their respective political parties faced. For Obama, his path from Jakarta to Harvard and then on to the Senate was a reflection of the promise of the American dream. His soft-spoken eloquence and promise to bridge gaps appealed to the public, while his race, politics, and ambitions appealed to his party.

McCain's road to the Republican nomination appeared at first to be a matter of surviving while his rivals fell by the wayside one by one. But on closer look McCain brought to the nomination battle a formidable story line as war hero and maverick and a reputation for telling the truth as he saw it, political consequences be damned. His courage as both a prisoner of war (POW) and a political straight shooter played well in a public context in which politics as usual are the electoral equivalent of the kiss of death. For his party, whose political brand had been damaged by the many bruising battles involving the George W. Bush administration, a McCain candidacy represented the only plausible chance the GOP had to win the presidency.

<sup>12</sup> Susan David, "WSJ/NBC Poll Shows Change Trumps Experience," *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 June 2008. The complete poll was accessed at [http://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/WSJ\\_NBC\\_SURVEY\\_June2008.pdf](http://s.wsj.net/public/resources/documents/WSJ_NBC_SURVEY_June2008.pdf), 3 July 2008.



These narratives and psychological traits are, of course, in competition. Each candidate had developed a narrative and psychological niche that the other would have trouble duplicating. McCain's narrative and psychological profile fit best with a public worried more about national security, and if he can convince the electorate that he has and will be able to break the political logjam as successfully as president as he did on some tough issues in the Senate, he will stand a good chance of gaining the presidency. Obama's narrative and psychological profile fit best with a public that sees national security as a less compelling consideration than the need to "wipe the slate clean." In choosing this smart, relatively untested, but charismatic leader, they would certainly give new meaning to the title of Obama's second book, *The Audacity of Hope*.<sup>13</sup>

### BARACK OBAMA

To call Barack Obama's political rise meteoric may be the true definition of understatement. Born in 1961 into a racially mixed family, he spent his early life in Indonesia and Hawaii and graduated from Columbia University in 1983. He worked in New York for four years, first for a business consulting firm and then for a public interest research group. He then moved to Chicago to work as a community organizer for three years before entering Harvard Law School in 1988. He was selected as an editor of the Harvard Law Review in his first year, and as its president in his second year at the age of 28. He graduated in 1991 and then returned to Chicago where, in 1993, he joined the firm of Davis, Miner, Barnhill & Galland at the age of 32. In 1994, at the age of 33 his book, *Dreams of My Father*, was published. In 1996, he won election to the Illinois State Senate and served there from 1996 to 2004, ran for a seat in the House of Representatives in 2002 and lost, then ran successfully for a U.S. Senate seat in 2004. He announced his candidacy for the presidency in February 2007 at the age of 41. The Senator has been on a very fast track indeed.

### *Family Themes*

Looking at the arc of Obama's ambition, one cannot fail to notice its clear but complicated history. That story begins as it always does with the family. In Obama's case that story includes his mother Stanley Ann Dunham,<sup>14</sup> a strong willed, unconventional, and politically liberal Caucasian woman who grew up in Iowa, spent her adolescence in Washington State, and moved to Hawaii to attend university. There, she met and married Barack's father, an intellectually gifted student from Kenya who, unbeknownst to her, already had a wife and

<sup>13</sup> Renshon, *The Psychological Assessment*, 186–194.

<sup>14</sup> Her father had fervently wished for a son. Useful profiles of his mother are: Janny Scott, "A Free Spirited Wanderer Who Set Obama's Path," *The New York Times*, 14 March 2008; Tim Jones, "Barack Obama: Mother not just a girl from Kansas," *Chicago Tribune*, 27 March 2007; and Amanda Ripley, "The Story of Barack Obama's Mother," *Time*, 9 April 2008.



child back home. Barack Obama Sr. left his new American wife and child to attend Harvard where he earned an A.M. in economics. He never returned. Instead, in 1965 he went back to Africa with a woman who would become his third wife.<sup>15</sup> He also returned there with large ambitions for an important government position. That dream soured as a result of a disagreement over national economic policy that led to a break with then-President Jomo Kenyatta, a rupture that helped destroy his career. His mentor, Gerald Kellman, recalls Obama telling him that his father had returned to his native Kenya bursting with intellect and ambition, only to devolve into an embittered bureaucrat because he could not find a way to reconcile his ideals with political realities. He began drinking heavily and died a bitter and defeated man. Obama saw his father only once more before he died, an awkward, painful, and brief reunion when Obama was 10. Obama's book, *Dreams of My Father*, is a beautifully written but poignant meditation on his search for an emotional, racial, and communal connection with the father who had abandoned him. His mother would also leave him, but in a different way. Two years after her divorce, she married an Indonesian student at the University of Hawaii. In 1967 the family moved to his country and lived in Jakarta for four years. There, Obama's mother took a strong interest in his education, making him arise at 4 a.m. to study the lessons she had arranged for him to take through a correspondence school because the education he received in Indonesia was not up to her standards.

Obama writes that his mother told him that he needed an American education and that he would go to Hawaii to live with his maternal grandparents. She would join her son, perhaps in a year tops.<sup>16</sup> She did move back and began her graduate work in anthropology. She, Obama, and his younger sister lived together for three years,<sup>17</sup> at which time she returned to Indonesia for fieldwork. Obama writes that when "she suggested that I go back with her...I immediately said no."<sup>18</sup> After a three-year absence, she returned from her fieldwork in 1978 at the start of his senior year in high school.<sup>19</sup> The following fall Obama headed to Los Angeles to start his freshman year at Occidental College. Obama has said of his mother, "I didn't feel [her absence] as a deprivation. But when I think about the fact that I was separated from her, I suspect it had more of an impact than I know."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup> At a conference he attended at Harvard with Gerald Kelman, the man who had brought him to Chicago, he confided the lessons he had learned from his father's life: "the elder Obama had returned to his native Kenya bursting with intellect and ambition, only to devolve into an embittered bureaucrat because he couldn't find a way to reconcile his ideals with political realities." Quoted in Bob Senter and John McCormick, "Portrait of a Pragmatist," *Chicago Tribune*, 30 March 2007; see also Obama, *Dreams*, 217, 344.

<sup>16</sup> Obama, *Dreams*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Ripley, "The Story of Barack Obama's Mother.

His mother died in 1995 at the age of 52 from ovarian cancer while Obama was starting his first campaign for public office. He has said that “his biggest mistake was not being at his mother’s side when she died,”<sup>21</sup> and in the reissue of his *Dreams* book, he wrote, “I think sometimes that had I known she would not survive her illness, I might have written a different book—less meditation on the absent parent and, more a celebration of the one who was the single constant of my life.”<sup>22</sup>

This brief narrative does no more than introduce some of the themes that have played an important role in Obama’s development and will allow us to explore them further in the context of his political aspirations and accomplishments. It is clear that Obama’s search for identity is a key defining element of both his psychology and his developmental experience. The wish to be his father’s son and to answer questions surrounding his father’s absence and his own identity as an American of African descent seem to have been central to him. We can also discern the origins of both his ambition and some of its complications. His father was a person of substantial intellectual abilities who had dreams of great and ultimately unrealized accomplishments. His mother too was a person of substantial intellectual abilities, with less grandiose dreams than her husband, but her dreams led to a separation from her son while she pursued fieldwork, and their fulfillment was cut short by a terminal illness three years after she received her Ph.D.

Thwarted ambitions are also to be found elsewhere in Obama’s early experience. The soft-spoken Indonesian Lolo Soeto, the second husband of Obama’s mother, became “a detached heavy drinker and womanizer,” family members in Indonesia say.<sup>23</sup> Obama’s grandfather, Stanley Dunham (whom he called “Gramps”), with whom he lived while his mother was away doing fieldwork, worked in a series of furniture stores and moved to Hawaii to find better opportunities. His wife, Obama’s grandmother, found her ambitions with the Bank of Hawaii, where she was eventually promoted to vice president. Her husband fared less well, and Obama describes in his book the evenings of quiet desperation as his grandfather tried and failed to sell insurance by phone.<sup>24</sup>

### *The Sharp Arc of Ambition*

The outward manifestations of Obama’s ambitions are easily marked. It reflects an early and ambivalent stance toward achievement, and a later transition to its full embrace. He balked at getting up at 4 a.m. as his mother insisted to study his correspondence course materials, as any child that age would. But

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Obama, *Dreams*, xii.

<sup>23</sup> Kirsten Scharnberg and Kim Barker, “The not-so-simple story of Barack Obama’s youth,” *Chicago Tribune*, 25 March 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Obama, *Dreams*, 53.

in his book, he recalls how in high school his mother confronted him about his lack of ambition. He writes that “I started to tell her how I’d been thinking about maybe not going away for college, how I could stay in Hawaii and take some classes and work part time.”<sup>25</sup> She cut him off by telling him he could get into any college in the country if he just put in a little effort—“remember what that’s like? Effort?”<sup>26</sup> Obama writes that he thought his mother was worried that he would turn out like her father, making unsuccessful calls to sell insurance late in the evening.<sup>27</sup> I think it more likely that Obama was worried about repeating the experience of his own father’s thwarted ambition.<sup>28</sup> When he talks about his father now, Obama frequently summons a quotation that he believes explains how it directed him: “Every man is either trying to *make up for his father’s mistakes* or live up to his expectations.”<sup>29</sup>

We can see the arc of Obama’s ambition begin to rise and his ambivalence toward achievement begin to get resolved in the change from being a student attending Occidental College in Los Angeles to finishing out his college years at Columbia University. But it was a job at the New York Public Interest Research Group that eventually led Obama straight to a political career.<sup>30</sup> From there, Obama went to Chicago to work as a community organizer of the Developing Communities Project. At a Harvard conference he attended two years after moving to Chicago, he raised the question with his first Chicago mentor of whether, “he should go to law school at Harvard and prepare for a life in politics.”<sup>31</sup> This is, of course, precisely what he did. To another colleague, during the same period, he confided an even more ambitious goal—“someday following Harold Washington as mayor of Chicago.”<sup>32</sup> By the time Obama got to law school a classmate remembers him saying that “governor of Illinois would be his dream job.”<sup>33</sup> In 1989, when he first started dating his future wife Michelle, her brother, Craig Robinson, asked him about his plans, to which

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Later in that confrontation over Obama’s lack of ambition, his mother warned him against becoming a “good-time Charlie.” Obama wrote that he replied, “A good-time Charlie, huh? Well, why not? Maybe that’s what I want out of life ... Is that what you’re worried about? That I’ll end up like Gramps?” See Obama, *Dreams*, 95.

<sup>28</sup> Former federal judge Abner Mikva, a longtime Obama mentor, said of Obama, “I think he sees this as a challenge every day, that I want to do better than my father,” Quoted in Kevin Merida, “The Ghost of a Father,” *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2007; See also Bob Sector and John McCormick, “Portrait of a Pragmatist,” *Chicago Tribune*, 30 May 2007; Obama, *Dreams*, 217, 344; and, note 23.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Ibid. (emphasis added); see also Obama, *Dreams*, 227.

<sup>30</sup> Janny Scott, “Obama’s Account of New York Years Often Differs from What Others Say,” *The New York Times*, 30 October 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Sector and McCormick, “Portrait of a Pragmatist.”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in David Jackson and Ray Long, “Obama Knows His Way Around a Ballot” *Chicago Tribune*, 3 April 2007.

Obama replied: "I think I'd like to teach at some point in time, and maybe run for public office." Robinson assumed that Obama meant he would like to run for city alderman, but "he said no—at some point he'd like to run for the U.S. Senate. Possibly even run for president at some point."<sup>34</sup>

At Harvard Law School, "he was also among the most driven in his class. In his first year, he entered the competition for the Law Review."<sup>35</sup> During his second year, he entered into a stiff competition to become president of the Law Review and won, the first American of African descent to reach that position. He emerged from Harvard with a book contract from a major publishing firm and a fair amount of public recognition for a recent law school graduate,<sup>36</sup> even one from Harvard.<sup>37</sup> The law firm that Obama chose, from among the many prestigious offers he received, was one whose principal, Judson Miner, was Chicago's corporation counsel under Harold Washington, the city's first black mayor and introduced the young attorney to a large number of people involved in Chicago politics.<sup>38</sup>

From there the arc of his ambition rises in a steep trajectory—an appointment to teach at the University of Chicago Law School, board of directors positions, elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1996, reelected in 1998 and in 2002, keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention in July 2004, elected to the United States Senate in November 2004, and Democratic presidential nominee in 2008. There is one other aspect of Obama's ambition that is worth noting: once it began to coalesce, he was in a great hurry to realize it. Obama arrived in Springfield, Illinois, in January 1997, and less than two years later described himself as suffering "chronic restlessness."<sup>39</sup> It was at that point that he began his only unsuccessful political campaign, a run for a Congressional seat held by a very popular Democrat, Bobby Rush.

Obama's ambitions for higher office were "an open secret in Springfield."<sup>40</sup> Steven J. Rauschenberger, a longtime Republican Illinois State Senator said of Obama, "He is a very bright but very ambitious person who has always had his

<sup>34</sup> Robinson quoted in Liza Mundy, "A Series of Fortunate Events," *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Jodi Kantor, "In Law School, Obama Found Political Voice," *The New York Times*, 28 January, 2007; see also Michael Levenson and Jonathan Saltzman, "At Harvard Law, a unifying voice," *Boston Globe*, 28 January 2007.

<sup>37</sup> When attorney Judson Miner, who headed a Chicago civil rights-focused firm, called Obama to offer him a job, the woman who answered the phone at the Harvard Law Review told him, "You can leave your name and take a number. You're No. 647." Quoted in Mike Robinson, "Obama got start in civil rights practice," *Boston Globe*, 20 February 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Peter Slevin, "Obama Forged Political Mettle In Illinois Capitol," *The Washington Post*, 9 February 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Rick Pearson and Ray Long, "Careful steps, looking ahead," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 May 2007; see also Janny Scott, "In Illinois, Obama Proved Pragmatic and Shrewd," *The New York Times*, 30 July 2007.

eyes on the prize, and it wasn't Springfield. If he deserves to be president, it is not because he was a great legislator."<sup>41</sup> Long before one of the state's two U.S. Senate seats came up for election in 2004, Obama approached his mentor, Emil Jones, who was preparing to lead a new Democratic majority in the state Senate:

'You're a very powerful guy,' Obama told Jones.

'I've got the power to do what?' Jones responded.

'You could help elect a U.S. senator,' Obama said.

Jones asked his protege if he had anyone in mind.

'Yeah,' Obama replied. 'Me.'<sup>42</sup>

Obama won that race, when two other Democratic candidates for the seat, both Caucasian, split the vote and Obama's expected Republican opponent, Jack Ryan, withdrew because of a divorce-related scandal. According to Al Kindle, an Obama campaign aide at the time, by the end of that senatorial campaign, Obama's aides were sending workers into Iowa, the first presidential caucus state, to begin developing contacts among Democrats there. In a 2005 interview with Obama taken several months after he had won election to the U.S. Senate, the reporter writes, "At interview's end, Obama takes another silly question about whether he'd run for president in 2008 (no)."<sup>43</sup> In reality, as early as February 2005 he and his advisers had begun planning a presidential bid for the year 2012 or 2016, "But eventually he succumbed to the buzz enveloping his political persona and decided to run for the presidency of the most powerful nation in history after only two years in national politics."<sup>44</sup> One hundred and forty-three days after he took his oath of office for the Senate, Obama announced his plans for a formal presidential exploratory committee.

### AMBITION'S SKILLS

Successful ambition requires skills to realize it. Obama's primary skills are clearly his substantial intelligence, his attention to preparation, his ability to convey a calm poised temperament, his ability to get along well with others and to convey the impression that he is open to their viewpoints and perhaps as well to their actual positions, and the ability of his oratory to inspire. He also conveys, "an impression of ease, if not exactly effortless, that obscures a

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Scott, "In Illinois."

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Leibovich, "The Senator's Humble Beginning: Rising Star Barack Obama Is Resolutely Down to Earth," *The Washington Post*, 24 February 2005.

<sup>44</sup> Mike Dorning and Christi Parsons, "Carefully crafting the Barack Obama 'brand': From his first days in the U.S. Senate, the Illinoisan has followed a strategy envisioning a White House bid," *Chicago Tribune*, 12 June 2007.

more complex amalgam of drive, ambition, timing, and the ability to recognize an opportunity and to do what it takes to seize it.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Intellect*

Obama’s level of intellectual capacity certainly seems sufficient for him to have done very well at a top-tier, competitive law school. Lawrence Tribe, a Harvard law school professor who now supports Obama’s candidacy, remembers him as “obviously a serious intellectual as well as a fantastic campaigner who can reach across boundaries.”<sup>46</sup> Testimonials from such partisan supporters make it difficult to separate out the first characterization from the second. More convincing is a testimony from Rauschenberger, who served with Obama in the state senate. He says of him, “Barack was one of the smartest people I ever worked with ...”<sup>47</sup> It does seem fair therefore to say that Obama has given ample evidence of his intelligence and a supple mind, honed by lawyers’ skills in parsing and presenting positions to the best advantage.

### *Organization and Planning*

Obama’s lofty rhetoric might give the impression of someone who is a bit of a dreamer, and both his wife and his legislative chief of staff have called him one.<sup>48</sup> He may be, but not at the expense of careful planning, and not when it comes to his own ambitions. As one longtime observer notes, too much focus on his high-minded mission statements “obscures the real-world organizing skills that proved relevant to Obama’s political skills.”<sup>49</sup> Another reporter covering him noted that “he is no accidental political tourist. He studies his chosen world like a Talmudist, charting trends and noting which rivals are strong and which weak.”<sup>50</sup> One profile noted how well Obama had laid out the circumstances in 2002 of what it would take for a successful Senate run.<sup>51</sup> Another profile reported how Obama had watched others and taught himself a number of things that had helped advance his career, among them how to play poker, golf, and even church pastors’ patterns of speech and how to take people up the rhetorical ladders.<sup>52</sup> His organization skills have impressed those on both sides of the political aisle. *The Wall Street Journal* observed that Obama “No doubt benefited from the desire of even many Democrats to impeach the

<sup>45</sup> Janny Scott, “The Story of Obama, Written by Obama,” *The New York Times*, 18 May 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Marie C. Kodama, “Obama Left Mark on HLS,” *Harvard Crimson*, 19 January 2007.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Kaufman, “For Obama, Chicago Days Honed Tactics,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Garrett M. Gaff, “The Legend of Barack Obama,” *The Washingtonian*, 1 November 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Ryan Lizza, “The Agitator,” *The New Republic*, 19 March 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Powell, “Deliberative in a Manic Game,” *The New York Times*, 4 June 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Ryan Lizza, “Making It: How Chicago Shaped Obama,” *The New Yorker*, 21 July 2008.

<sup>52</sup> Powell, “Deliberative in a Manic Game.”

polarizing era of Bill Clinton. But he also beat Hillary and Bill at their own game. He raised more money, and he outworked them in the small-state caucuses that provided him with his narrow delegate margin. Even now, he is far better organized in swing states than is John McCain's campaign. All of this speaks well of his preparation for November, and perhaps for his potential to govern."<sup>53</sup>

He used those skills to his advantage when his early Chicago political mentor, Alice Palmer, decided to stand for reelection to her old Illinois State legislative seat instead of running for Congress as she had originally planned. Obama, who was then preparing to run for her old seat, filed a series of technical challenges to her nomination petitions that knocked her (and every other potential candidate) out of the race.<sup>54</sup> His decisive and successful effort to terminate her candidacy divided Chicago Democrats for many years. Asked about his choice and tactics, Obama said, "If you can win, you should win, and get to work doing the people's business."<sup>55</sup> That's not exactly a means justify the ends statement, but it does seem to give personal ambition wide scope.

### *A Cool, Deliberative Interpersonal Style*

Calm, tempered, cool, deliberative, detached, laid-back, and serious are all terms that have been used to describe Obama by people who have known him at various periods in his life.<sup>56</sup> These adjectives are so widespread and behaviorally obvious that it seems fair to have confidence in them. It also seems clear that "calm" is a by-product of a physiologically based temperament coupled with an interpersonal style Obama has developed and consolidated. The psychological origins of that style, whether it be from the need to bridge different worlds or the emotional impact of his father's absence, or some other combination of factors is of less immediate interest here than its implications for Obama's leadership and presidential prospects.

Obama's calm external demeanor leads to the question of what he does with the normal passions that animate people.<sup>57</sup> I raise this point not to suggest that buried underneath that calm exterior is a seething cauldron of intense emotions, but to simply ask the question as it has been stated. One hint of an answer is that Obama's seemingly detached equanimity does not mean that

<sup>53</sup> Review and Outlook, "The Obama We Don't Know," *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 June 2008.

<sup>54</sup> David Jackson and Ray Long, "Showing his bare knuckles," *Chicago Tribune*, 4 April 2007; David Jackson and Ray Long, "Obama knows his way around a ballot: Some say his ability to play political hardball goes back to his first campaign," *Chicago Tribune*, 3 April 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Powell, "Deliberative in a Manic Game."

<sup>57</sup> Obama writes in his memoir that his Chicago mentor, Marty Kaufman, while interviewing him for the organizing job, said, "You must be angry about something." Obama asked him what he meant and Kaufman replied, "I don't know what exactly, but something. Don't get me wrong—anger's a requirement for the job. The only reason that anybody decides to become an organizer. Well-adjusted people find more relaxing work." See Obama, *Dreams*, 141.



he is incapable of tough, even harsh attacks on others. Of Hillary Clinton he said that she “says and does whatever it takes to win the next election.”<sup>58</sup>

Toward Republicans, he has been even harsher. In a 1995 interview speaking of the success of Christian conservatives in building communities he said, “It’s always easier to organize around intolerance, narrow-mindedness, and false nostalgia.”<sup>59</sup> Eight years later, in speaking of Republicans more generally, he said, “What I’m certain about is that people are disenchanted with a highly ideological Republican Party that believes tax cuts are the answer to every problem, and lack of regulation and oversight is always going to generate economic growth, and unilateral intervention around the world is the best approach to foreign policy.”<sup>60</sup>

Depending on your political point of view Obama’s characterizations are either truthful essence or partisan hyperbole. However, neither view is the point here. The point is that Obama’s calm exterior does not inhibit his tough-minded defense of his own interests. One observer of his political attack style noted a number of examples and said, “The response was signature Obama: Attack first, sort out the details later, if at all. No apology, no immediate regret, just a sharp counterattack.”<sup>61</sup> The psychological premises of this adversarial stance may be sound politics, but they are inconsistent with building bridges or finding common ground.

As a result of Obama’s cool, analytical, and often ironic stance the public has gained few clues during this campaign of his passions, the convictions that fire him. What policy or leadership issues really move him? What does he feel passionately about? Which, if any, is he willing to go to the mat for? In the debate between the two Democratic candidates while discussing Iran’s nuclear ambitions, Obama was asked about extending a nuclear shield to Israel against an Iranian attack. He never answered that question. However, using minimalist language, he did say he would find a direct attack on Israel or one of its allies “unacceptable.”<sup>62</sup> If an attack on Israel is unacceptable, what about Iranian support of elements in Iraq killing American soldiers? Is that also “unacceptable,” and what will he do about it? Obama did say, “I will take no options off the table” when it comes to Iran’s obtaining or using nuclear weapons. However, he has also promised high-level presidential talks with Iran, without preconditions, to offer “carrots and sticks.” Is Obama ready to accept a nuclear Iran? We don’t know, but there are grounds for asking.

Another question that arises with regard to Obama’s stylistic equanimity is its impact on his decision making and judgment. Obama has repeatedly touted

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Weisman, “Obama’s Gloves Are Off—And May Need to Stay Off,” *The Washington Post*, 23 April 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Hank De Zutter, “What Makes Obama Run?,” *Chicago Reader*, 8 December 1995.

<sup>60</sup> Toner, “Obama’s Test.”

<sup>61</sup> Avi Zenilman and Ben Smith, “Barack Obama’s counterpunching style,” *The Politico*, 14 April 2008.

<sup>62</sup> Transcript, “Democratic Debate in Philadelphia,” *The New York Times*, 16 April 2008.

the high quality of his judgment and rests that case on what he sees as his prescient opposition to the war;<sup>63</sup> “on the most important foreign policy issue of a generation, I got it right and others did not.”<sup>64</sup> It is somewhat unclear, however, just how strategically accurate the basis of his opposition was.<sup>65</sup> He argued that Saddam Hussein posed no imminent threat to the United States or its neighbors, but what about a gathering threat? His opposition was premised on the view that Saddam could be contained; others made strong arguments that containment was failing.<sup>66</sup> That argument rests on plausible analysis that either side could marshal, not on the superior judgment of Obama’s side of the debate.

Obama also framed his criticism of the war with direct personal attacks on members of the administration and their motives. “I am opposed to the attempt by political hacks like Karl Rove to distract us from a rise in the uninsured, a rise in the poverty rate, a drop in the median income—to distract us from corporate scandals and a stock market that has just gone through the worst month since the Great Depression.”<sup>67</sup> So is the basis of his good judgment prescient geo-strategic analysis or a progressive’s animus toward a conservative agenda?

### *Where Does He Stand?*

Among the most basic questions that arise in relation to Obama’s stylistic demeanor is the question of where he really stands. This is related to but separate from the more leadership-oriented question of what he really stands for, a question that we shall take up shortly. One reason that both questions have arisen is because Obama has developed a style that conveys the impression of openness to others’ viewpoints, but how much actual openness exists is not easy to discern. Gerald Kelman, an early Chicago mentor from Obama’s community organizing days, says of him, “One of the remarkable things is how well he listens to people who are opposed to him.”<sup>68</sup> Obama may well be a good listener, but a key question is: How much does he modify his views in response to what he has heard? As one analysis of his style by a member of the law school review noted, “Surrounded by students who enjoyed the sound

<sup>63</sup> Mark Memmott and Jill Lawrence, “Obama launches tour to highlight ‘judgment, experience’ on Iraq,” *USA Today*, 1 October 2007.

<sup>64</sup> Transcript of Obama interview with NPR All Things Considered “Iran Requires Direct Diplomacy,” 13 October 2007, accessed at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15251928>, 3 November 2007.

<sup>65</sup> “Remarks of Illinois State Senator Barack Obama Against Going to War with Iraq,” 2 October 2002, accessed on Barack Obama’s website at [http://www.barackobama.com/2002/10/02/remarks\\_of\\_illinois\\_state\\_sen.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2002/10/02/remarks_of_illinois_state_sen.php), 1 August 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Kenneth Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002).

<sup>67</sup> “Remarks of Illinois State Senator.”

<sup>68</sup> Liza Mundy, “A Series of Fortunate Events,” *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2007.

of their own voices, Mr. Obama cast himself as an eager listener, sometimes giving warring classmates the impression that he agreed with all of them at once.”<sup>69</sup>

Obama has said of himself, “I am like a Rorschach test”<sup>70</sup> and that seems accurate on a personal and political level. Larry Walsh, a former Democratic Illinois state senator, said Obama, “was competitive yet careful—and always hard to read.”<sup>71</sup> Friends of his from that time say that “even those close to him did not always know exactly where he stood.”<sup>72</sup> It seems fair to say that holding his cards close to his vest is a personal and political stance that allows Obama to put ambiguity to a strategic purpose. In that respect he is the creator of his own inkblots.

One of the most contentious issues at Harvard and especially at the Law Review during his term as editor was the legitimacy and appropriateness of affirmative action. During the fervent and often heated debates, “Obama listened to impassioned pleas and pressed conservatives to explain their reasoning and liberals to sharpen their thinking. But he never spoke about his own point of view or mentioned that he believed he had benefited from affirmative action.”<sup>73</sup> Yet, in an interview with the *The New York Times* just after being elected as editor he said of his goals, “I personally am interested in pushing a strong minority perspective. I’m fairly opinionated about this.”<sup>74</sup>

So a puzzle arises here. Here is an issue on which Obama says he was fairly opinionated, yet he did not state his view in this fierce debate. One possible answer to that puzzle is that Obama feels that even if he is “fairly opinionated” about an issue his role as a leader is to encourage others to reach common ground. Yet, this does not seem to have happened with the affirmative action debates at the Law Review. His campaign theme of trying to bridge differences and find common ground could possibly be one reflection of a view that places guiding debates, but not committing oneself, at the center of the leadership stance he might assume as president. However, this is very inconsistent with public expectations of presidential leadership, and also inconsistent with the fact that Obama does have and has expressed specific policy views.

There is, however, another possible answer to the puzzle and that is found in Obama’s observation in that same interview that while he was “fairly opinionated” on this issue it was also true as Obama said that “as president of the Law Review, I have a limited role as only first among equals.”<sup>75</sup> That quote raises the

<sup>69</sup> Jodi Kantor, “In Law School.”

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in Powell, “Deliberative in a Manic Game.”

<sup>71</sup> Slevin, “Obama Forged Political Mettle.”

<sup>72</sup> Kantor, “In Law School.”

<sup>73</sup> Levenson and Saltzman, “At Harvard Law.”

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Fox Butterfield, “First Black Elected to Head Harvard’s Law Review,” *The New York Times*, 6 February 1990.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

issue of what he would do as president occupying a very powerful office equipped with many levers of power and authority to leverage his political ambitions.

That question comes up as well in another way. It is clear that Obama's racial identity plays a central role for him, a fact reflected in his poignant and beautifully portrayed search for his father in his first book. It also seems clear that Senator Obama's racial identity contains a duality whose resolution is not yet clear. On one hand, there is Obama's white mother and his own development of a conciliating stance toward others, an element that can be found in his political style as well.<sup>76</sup> Yet, there is also the fact that as Obama passed from adolescence to young adulthood he experimented with a more racially charged persona.<sup>77</sup> He wrote in his first book that even while doing that he wondered whether it was just a pose.<sup>78</sup> Evidence suggests he has yet to resolve that question.

It was during this period that Obama moved to Chicago and began his brief career as a community organizer. There, he looked for and found his religious home with the pastor who served as his spiritual mentor, advisor, and obvious surrogate father figure. That choice clearly reflects the powerful emotional magnet of racial grievance. Obama writes in his first book of the first Reverend Wright sermon he heard that it contained a ringing denunciation of poverty caused by "white greed."<sup>79</sup> Wright's other views are now widely known, and it is difficult to believe that they were not a recurring staple of the services that Obama attended for 20 years.<sup>80</sup> It is easy to criticize him for doing so, but a more important question is: Why did he simply not leave?

Part of the answer must be that his mentor's views resonated with some part of him. Perhaps it was his missing out on the radical sixties and hearing about them only through the second hand stories that his mother told him. Perhaps it stemmed from personal experience or identification with the anger he thought he was supposed to feel or wanted to feel as an authentic black. Whatever its source, it seems that the conflict between the racial reconciler and the identification with racial grievance was never fully resolved. This obviously has implications for a possible Obama presidency. However, the puzzles of his political identity go beyond the question of which racial road he will choose to follow—the president of racial bridge building or the dispassionate president of policies premised on the muted assumption of grievance.

### *What Does He Stand For?*

The question of what Obama actually thinks regarding the various issues that have arisen when he was in positions of responsibility is directly related to

<sup>76</sup> Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Conciliator," *The New Yorker*, 7 May 2007.

<sup>77</sup> Obama, *Dreams*, 80–81, 100, 105.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>80</sup> Derek Kravitz and Keith B. Richburg, "Obama Quits Longtime Church Over Inflammatory Comments," *The Washington Post*, 1 June 2008.

another very critical question: What does he stand for? The difference between the two is that the first asks where to locate Obama's views on a political continuum. The second asks both a character and an authenticity question: Are his stated principles and ideals the anchor or his ambitions or are they in the service of them? Or, to put the issue in a slightly different way: Is Obama's "post-partisan" building bridges persona more of a strategic political construction or does it represent the true core of his political identity?

Obama calls himself a progressive and a pragmatist combining two categories that have not often been seen as siblings. In his 2004 keynote address before the Democratic Convention he said, "There's not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America."<sup>81</sup> However, the nonpartisan *National Journal* rated Obama as the most liberal member of the Senate in 2007.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, he voted with his party 97 percent of the time in 2007.<sup>83</sup> His campaign platform "is orthodox liberal Democratic fare... [so the question arises] is Mr. Obama a standard liberal clad in the soothing language of inclusiveness?"<sup>84</sup>

Rhetoric aside, just how independent minded is Obama? How far across the aisle is he really willing to reach to find common ground and pragmatic solutions? On what core issues, if any, has he been willing to go his own way and take the consequences of doing so? This latter point is critical. The hallmark of true independence is the willingness to go against those who support you. Obama was not part of the bipartisan "Gang of 14" that tried to avert a showdown on judicial filibusters; he was not among the 68 senators voting for a bipartisan agreement on the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act; and he dissented from the part of the bipartisan immigration deal that displeased unions.<sup>85</sup>

Obama points to a number of areas where he says he has demonstrated his courage and independence. He often mentions his support for better gas mileage in a talk before Detroit automakers.<sup>86</sup> This, however, is a conventional Democratic policy position delivered before a group who are hardly political allies. He has also touted his support of teacher's merit raises, a position that seems at variance with that of a key Democratic support group, the National Education Association.<sup>87</sup> Yet a look at his website on the issue of rewarding teachers shows that he emphasizes giving merit pay for mentoring new teachers serving in underserved places, and only last "if teachers

<sup>81</sup> "Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama," *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2004.

<sup>82</sup> The composite reflected 99 key votes and assigned scores in three areas: economic issues, social issues, and foreign policy. See Friel, Cohen, and Victor, "Obama: Most Liberal Senator."

<sup>83</sup> Toner, "Obama's Test."

<sup>84</sup> Editorial, "The Obama Enigma: Where Would he Lead?," *The Washington Post*, 24 February 2008.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> James Fallows, "Two Rhetorical Missteps by Team Obama," *The Atlantic*, 22 April 2008.

<sup>87</sup> As one editorial put it, "He dared to mention the notion of 'merit pay' in an appearance before the teachers union." See editorial, "The Obama Enigma."

consistently excel in the classroom, that work can be valued and rewarded as well.”<sup>88</sup>

David Brooks looked into Obama’s education rhetoric and plans and found ample evidence of statements meant to please two distinctive education policy positions *within the Democratic Party* (no evidence was reported of him having considered ideas from across the aisle). Brooks writes that Obama has made numerous statements over time that seems to support first one side, then the other. Moreover, as Brooks notes in all of these rhetorical initiatives, he “doesn’t really address the core issues ... What do you do with teachers and administrators who are failing? How rigorously do you enforce accountability? Obama doesn’t engage the thorny, substantive matters that separate the two camps. He proposes dozens of programs to build on top of the current system, but it’s not clear that he would challenge it.”<sup>89</sup> Robert Samuelson writes that “aside from ambition—hardly unique among presidential candidates—I cannot detect powerful convictions in Obama.”<sup>90</sup> The question regarding Obama’s policy ambitions, therefore, is not “where’s the beef?” but more crucially: What does he stand for, really?

### *Obama’s Oratory: Power and Puzzles*

Among the most important and obvious skills that sustain Obama’s success and ambition is his ability to deliver speeches that his adherents view as soaring and inspiring. His speech on race relations, for example, was hailed, even exalted. “One for the history books,” “brilliant,” and “unequivocal and healing” are some of the accolades heaped upon it. This praise reflects the extraordinary rhetorical skill and power that Obama can bring to bear.

There can be no doubt about the power of Obama’s oratory to inspire his followers.<sup>91</sup> His rhetorical skills have been noted and praised by persons from both sides of the political aisle,<sup>92</sup> although there are some dissents. Some have pointed out that his charisma has the trappings of a “cult of personality.”<sup>93</sup> Others, both on the left and the right, have pointed to the gap

<sup>88</sup> Obama: Issues: Education, accessed at <http://www.barackobama.com/issues/education/#teachers>, 2 August 2008.

<sup>89</sup> David Brooks, “Obama, liberalism and the Power of Reform,” *The New York Times*, 13 June 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Robert J. Samuelson, “A Vote for McBama,” *The Washington Post*, 11 June 2008.

<sup>91</sup> Alec MacGillis, “Finding Political Strength in the Power of Words,” *The Washington Post*, 26 February 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Bradford Berenson, a Washington lawyer and former associate counsel in the Bush administration, says of Obama, “This is a very gifted individual who has a way with words and an interest and ability in communication.” Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Kate Zernike, “The Charisma Mandate,” *The New York Times*, 17 February 2008; see also Timothy Noah, “The Obama Messiah Watch,” *Slate*, 29 January 2007.



between “inspiration and substance.”<sup>94</sup> Some have wondered whether eloquence is “overrated.”<sup>95</sup>

Obama has the unique ability to offer doctrinaire liberal positions in a way that avoids the stridency of many recent Democratic candidates.<sup>96</sup> How does he do this? His preferred rhetorical device, evident earlier in his career is that “When he addresses a contentious issue, Mr. Obama almost always begins his answer with a respectful nod in the direction of the view he is rejecting—a line or two that suggests he understands or perhaps even sympathizes with the concerns of a conservative.”<sup>97</sup> The question is how much of this is rhetorical cover and how much of it is genuine.

If elected, Obama will be among the youngest presidents ever to serve in that office. His resume will also be among the thinnest of those who have served. This being the case it is not easy to reconcile the record that does exist, as the most liberal Senator in that chamber in 2007, with the primary rhetorical emphasis of his campaign, which is pragmatic but transformational change. Even those last two terms seem contradictory, but it is in the gap between Obama’s messianic rhetoric and his moderate, pragmatic political persona that some real presidential leadership contradictions come plainly into view.

Obama has made wide use of soaring rhetoric often of apocryphal and biblical dimensions. Building to the rhetorical climax in the speech in which he claimed victory in his quest for the Democratic Party’s nomination, he said,

I am absolutely certain that generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children that this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal...<sup>98</sup>

Close your eyes and you can easily imagine Obama as a new world prophet forecasting a spiritual and political awakening. Indeed that is how many of his adherents view him and herein is an enormous problem for him, should he gain the presidency.

### *The Dilemmas of an Obama Presidency*

The essential tasks of political leadership are mobilization, orchestration, and consolidation.<sup>99</sup> The first reflects the ability to arouse your supporters. The

<sup>94</sup> Joe Klein, “Inspiration vs. Substance,” *Time*, 7 February 2008; See also Sebastian Mallaby, “Obama’s Missing Ideas,” *The Washington Post*, 25 February 2008 and Michael Gerson, “Words Aren’t Cheap,” *The Washington Post*, 29 February 2008.

<sup>95</sup> Peter Applebome, “Is Eloquence Overrated?” *The New York Times*, 13 January 2008.

<sup>96</sup> Stephen F. Hayes, “Obama and the Power of Words,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 February 2008.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Barack Obama, “Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Final Primary Night,” 3 June 2008.

<sup>99</sup> These terms are developed in Renshon, *The Psychological Assessment*, 226–228.



second requires the skill to organize them for common purpose, and the third requires the ability to actually achieve it. Obama has successfully done all three in reaching the Democratic Party nomination and may well succeed again with the same tasks to win office. However, it will be far from easy to repeat these successes when it comes to actually governing the country should he become president.

### *The Question of Leadership Style*

The question that Obama will then face is whether it is possible to deliver on that promise, given that the country remains quite politically divided. Here Obama will confront the dilemma that has faced America's last two presidents. President Clinton fit comfortably within the Democratic Party's left-center views on domestic and foreign policy issues, but had to govern a country in which many had grown skeptical of some of those policies. His answer to this leadership dilemma was triangulation—modest reform of limited aspects of various core Democratic Party policies while adhering to the central premises of those paradigms. That was the essential nature of being a “New Democrat.”<sup>100</sup>

George W. Bush governed openly from the right center, although he tried to leaven his basic approach early in his administration with claims to be a “compassionate conservative.” September 11 ended his attempts to develop and consolidate that leadership persona. Thereafter he governed directly and forcefully as a wartime president.<sup>101</sup> The question then arises: What leadership style will Obama adopt? First, it is clear that his will probably be a very public presidential leadership style. Some years ago, Fred Greenstein pointed to Dwight Eisenhower as an example of a “hidden-hand presidency.”<sup>102</sup> As his correspondence and memo notations made clear, Ike was comfortable, indeed preferred, to operate behind the scenes, presenting a public persona of a kindly grandfather figure who occasionally came up rhetorically short. In fact, he was smart, strategically sophisticated, and possessed generally good policy judgment.

Even if that notion of behind the scenes leadership appealed to Obama, and I do not think it does, that stance would be politically difficult to sustain. Obama is *the* unique and sole embodiment of the movement that has coalesced around him. He will therefore need to play a very public role of reassurance that the hope, idealization, and transformational policy initiatives that followers expect will be part of his presidency. If he becomes president, I expect

<sup>100</sup> For the psychological and strategic considerations behind Clinton's stance for governing in a divided society, see Stanley A. Renshon, *High Hopes: The Clinton Presidency and the Politics of Ambition* (New York: Routledge, 1998), Introduction, chap. 1.

<sup>101</sup> Stanley A. Renshon, *In His Father's Shadow: The Transformations of George W. Bush* (New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2004), chap. 6.

<sup>102</sup> Fred I. Greenstein, *Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1982).

to see a number of symbolic acts to hedge against the inevitable disappointments that will set in once the realities of leading in a divided society take their toll.

We can see some foreshadowing of this in Obama's decision to give his acceptance speech to a crowd of 75,000 at the Denver football stadium rather than the more limited seating venue of the Pepsi Center.<sup>103</sup> However, even some left center commentators have worried about the large-scale adulation that is likely to be on display there and Obama's apparent comfort with being its object.<sup>104</sup> It also seems clear that Obama and his advisors are sensitive to the importance of spectacle, perhaps more so than any president since Ronald Reagan. Reagan, however, combined a strong sense of theatrics with an equally strong reputation for conviction. Obama may well appreciate and even have mastered the first, but the second remains to date elusive.

### *A New Progressive Majority?*

The other, harder leadership gap for Obama to manage will emerge from the difference between his clearly liberal worldview and policies and the more moderate inclinations of the American public. Some Obama supporters say that the country has shifted to the left in recent years as a result of public disenchantment with the war in Iraq and the Bush administration more generally.<sup>105</sup> They are betting that the country will be open to the development of a new "progressive majority" that will allow Obama's liberalism to become the new political center. Obama apparently holds this view as well having commented at one point, "I think there's the possibility of a significant realignment politically in this election."<sup>106</sup>

Aside from the fact that one election is unlikely to constitute realignment but is perhaps better viewed as an audition for one, there is little evidence of this possibility. A 2007 Pew Survey found that there had been a decided shift toward the Democratic Party, though they did not report a shift toward liberalism.<sup>107</sup> And the Democratic Party's overall standing is no better than it was when George W. Bush first came into office.

The same survey found an increase in the number of people who agree that "today it is really true that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer." This would seem to be fertile ground for left-center populist appeals. The only

<sup>103</sup> Shailagh Murray, "Obama to Accept Nomination at Broncos' Stadium," *The Washington Post*, 8 July 2008.

<sup>104</sup> Joan Vennoch, "The audacity of ego," *Boston Globe*, 20 July 2008.

<sup>105</sup> Toner, "Obama's Test."

<sup>106</sup> Jonathan Weisman, "Obama May Consider Slowing Iraq Withdrawal Candidate Says He Remains Committed to Ending War," *The Washington Post*, 4 July 2008.

<sup>107</sup> The figures and characterizations that follow are drawn from: The Pew Center for the People & the Press, "Trends in Political Values and Core Attitudes: 1987–2007," 22 March 2007, accessed at <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/312.pdf>, 1 June 2008.

problem with the populist “us vs. them” rhetoric is that it is inconsistent with a central element of Obama’s political persona as a “uniter.” Perhaps more promising is the finding of a rising number of Americans who believe (54 percent) that “government has a responsibility to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves, even if it means adding to the deficit.” However, 69 percent of the same survey agrees that “poor people have become too dependent on government programs.”

The evidence for a new progressive majority is thin and the question then arises for Obama’s leadership premises: What then? Obama himself provides another answer. Asked about his liberal record in the Senate and how that record can be the basis of bringing Americans together, he argues that Senate voting is polarized because “The only votes that come up are votes that are purposely designed to divide people.” However, he continues, “As president, I would be setting the terms of debate.”<sup>108</sup> That is a bold declarative statement, but the reality is likely to be quite different. It is closer to the truth to say Obama would *try* to set the terms of debate, but even in this more limited framing he would run up against difficulties. First, in a rhetorically minded presidency, as Obama’s is likely to be, his frame will be one frame of several. Second, while his followers may amplify his refrain, there is no guarantee that the general public will accept and act upon that framing, assuming that they even hear it.<sup>109</sup> Third, even knowing how unpopular the Republican Party is in Congress according to various polls, no one has argued that the Democrats are likely to capture a net of 10 seats in the Senate and thus achieve a cloture-imposing majority.

### *If America Remains Divided: What Then?*

So, if Obama cannot count on either the American public coalescing around a new progressive majority or controlling the framing of the public discussion, what are his leadership options? The most likely is a strong emphasis on rhetorical pronouncements and attempts to shape legislative support by the use of bridging euphemisms like “fair,” “reasonable,” or “balanced.” This will be coupled with efforts to make the legislative wording more closely conform to his progressive policy preferences. This is likely to be a difficult finesse because those in opposition will be looking for Obama to adopt precisely this strategy and the specific wording of proposed bills is now widely available for analysis and criticism.

It is at this point that several elements of Obama’s leadership strategy are likely to come into conflict, and the true contours of his presidency will emerge. Obama has gathered a fair amount of political capital by emphasizing

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Toner, “Obama’s Test.”

<sup>109</sup> George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

his political persona as a conciliator and bridge builder although there is not much evidence that he has attempted to perform this role in his time as a Senator. Obama is quoted as saying, “we need a leader who can finally move beyond the divisive politics of Washington and bring Democrats, independents, and Republicans together to get things done.”<sup>110</sup> Yet it is very unlikely that Republicans in general, or conservatives in particular, will be won over to supporting a liberal or progressive Obama agenda. What then?

At this point there are several possible ways for Obama to proceed. He could move to harshly criticize those whom he might say, “stand in the way of progress that a majority of Americans voted for.” However, the problem with this kind of rhetoric is that it is inconsistent with “bringing Americans together.” As noted, there is evidence that Obama can be very tough minded with those who stand in the way of his personal ambitions, but whether he would be equally tough-minded in pursuit of maximizing progressive policies is a wholly separate question.

With a Congress that is likely to remain Democratic at least through 2010, he may well be able to push through many pieces of “progressive” legislation. However, this will be hard to square with the moderation and pragmatism that he has adapted as his leadership narrative, or with his recent migration to the “political center.”<sup>111</sup> In the end an Obama presidency, if it occurs, is likely to be a highly symbolic one, full of political firsts because of Obama’s racial heritage that nonetheless add up to much less than the transformation he promised and his most fervent followers have demanded. This is not to say that it cannot be modestly successful in enacting domestic policy programs; it is certainly likely that he will be able to boast, as most presidents can, of legislation proposed and signed into law. Whether this will at term’s end amount to a progressive realignment remains to be seen.

### JOHN MCCAIN

It is hard to think of two more contrasting presidential candidates than Barack Obama and John McCain. Consider their ages and its implications. One was born in 1961 and is now 47. The other was born in 1936 and is running for the presidency at the age of 71. McCain came of age at the height of the Cold War, saw military action during the Vietnam War, lived through the social and political upheavals of the sixties and seventies, served in the U.S. House and then Senate through several momentous decades, and overlapped with his democratic nominee counterpart in a national political setting only at the start of the second term of the George W. Bush presidency.

Barack Obama worked as a community organizer from 1985 to 1988, served in the Illinois State Senate from 1997 to 2004, and has served in the

<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Toner, “Obama’s Test.”

<sup>111</sup> Kenneth P. Vogel, “Obama: Change agent goes conventional,” *The Politico*, 27 June 2008.

United States Senate since 2004, a total of 11 years of community and political service. McCain spent his adulthood serving first in the military (after his graduation from the United States Naval Academy in 1958) and then in Congress since 1982, a total of 50 years of military and political service. There are other differences as well having to do with worldview, leadership style, temperament, and identity. McCain has demonstrated that he is willing to take substantial personal and political risks, and accept the political consequences, in the service of policies or principles he judges essential. As one neutral assessment noted, "For more than a decade, on tobacco, health care, immigration, judicial nominees, creation of a commission to investigate the Sept[ember] 11, 2001 terror attacks and more, McCain has championed high-profile legislation opposed by President Bush or others in his own party."<sup>112</sup> On immigration reform, campaign finance, and Senate agreement on judicial appointments he has been in the forefront of difficult bipartisan solutions, that are very different in nature than those policies on which most agree, and reflect different leadership qualities. His policy leadership in all these circumstances has earned the continued criticism of political conservatives.<sup>113</sup>

John McCain is a war hero and political maverick as well as the Republican nominee for president. If elected, his presidency too, will be no simple matter to forecast even in areas like foreign policy where his career history is relatively dense and well known. Part of this variability derives from his own idiosyncratic responses, which he takes pride in being able to consider and act upon. On a number of issues his policy decisions can more resemble a "bumpy line" than a direct trajectory from here to there.<sup>114</sup>

Part of this comes from a domestic policy worldview that is truly hard to pigeonhole in traditional left-right categories. He has, for example, recently called for states to be able to allow offshore drilling, a position that has earned him criticism from Democrats.<sup>115</sup> Yet, at the same time, he continues to insist the drilling in the Alaskan reserve should be off limits. That has earned him criticism from conservatives.<sup>116</sup> In fact, his views on energy issues are a complex

<sup>112</sup> David Espo, "Bipartisanship marks McCain's Senate tenure," *Associated Press*, 2 July 2008.

<sup>113</sup> Among the more benign criticisms are claims that "he is too quick to play bipartisan polka with liberals like Sen. Ted Kennedy when he should be holding the line for common sense conservatism." See Melanie Morgan, "The Problem with John McCain," *Human Events*, 4 February 2008; see also Cliff Schecter, *The Real McCain: Why Conservatives Don't Trust Him—and Why Independents Shouldn't* (Sausalito, CA: Polipoint Press, 2008).

<sup>114</sup> Jake Tapper provides a good illustration of this approach in his article focused on background checks for gun buyers at gun shows. In the end McCain brokered an agreement between what some GOP members wanted ("voluntary" checks) and what some opponents wanted (a three-day waiting period when a gun show didn't last that long) that called for instant but mandatory checks on gun buyers. See Jake Tapper, "How Tough is John McCain?," *Salon*, 14 May 1999.

<sup>115</sup> Michael D. Shear, "Democrat Assails McCain on Drilling," *The Washington Post*, 21 June 2008.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "McCain's Oil Epiphany," *The Washington Post*, 20 June 2008; see also Ann Coulter, "McCain: Pump This!," *Townhall.com*, 3 July 2008.

amalgam that takes some effort to work through.<sup>117</sup> He is no simple, or simple-minded, ideologue. McCain's foreign policy worldview most accurately parallels that of international relations "realists" leavened with the view that the United States must be a world leader in modeling and facilitating freedom and democracy. The latter is part of a long tradition in U.S. foreign policy,<sup>118</sup> but there are other elements in McCain's psychology like the role of honor whose decision judgment implications are unclear.

### *McCain's Family Themes*

John McCain was born at Coco Solo Naval Air Station in the Panama Canal Zone where his father John S. McCain, Jr. was stationed. In the McCain family, military service was a tradition that stretched back on both sides of his family to the Revolutionary War.<sup>119</sup> McCain writes of his Revolutionary War ancestor John Young (from the matrilineal side) who was a member of George Washington's general staff, that he was "valorous and exceedingly diligent about safeguarding his family's honor and ... set an example emulated by generations of Youngs and McCains who eagerly reinforced the family's reputations for quick tempers, adventurous spirits, and love for the country's uniform."<sup>120</sup> These elements of the McCain family tradition, an emphasis on honor, tempestuousness, openness to adventure, and the duty and responsibility of military service are all key themes in John McCain's personal psychology and identity, and the somewhat unique national leadership profile he has developed.

As young John McCain grew up, his strong family traditions were an ever-present source of pride and, at the same time, a heavy weight. This ambivalent mixture was certainly one psychological source of his well-earned adolescent reputation as a rebel, and later adulthood reputation as a political maverick. Of the first he writes that as a youth, "in spite of my 'studied indifference'... my family's history was my pride."<sup>121</sup> The weight of that tradition was also quite present:

The relationship between that of a sailor and his children is, in large part metaphysical ... Our fathers are often at sea in peace and war ... Perhaps because of and not in spite of their long absences [our fathers] can be a huge presence in our lives. You are taught to consider their absences not a deprivation but an honor ...

<sup>117</sup> Laura Meckler, "Senator's Broad Range of Energy Policies Defies Categories," *The Wall Street Journal*, 24 June 2008.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Kagan, "Neocon Nation: Neoconservatism, c 1776," *World Affairs* (Spring 2008): 13–35; and the exchange that followed, David Rieff, George Packer, Ronald Steel, and Robert Kagan, "An Exchange: Neocon Nation?" *World Affairs* (Summer 2008): 12–25.

<sup>119</sup> John McCain with Mark Slater, *Faith of My Fathers: A Family Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1999), 17–19.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.



When your father is away, the tradition remains, and embellishes a paternal image that is powerfully attractive to a small boy, even long after the boy becomes a man.<sup>122</sup>

Both his father and his grandfather became four-star admirals, and were admired and much-decorated officers at a time when the United States Navy, and especially its officer corps, constituted a relatively small and exclusive group. His grandfather had, among other assignments, commanded Admiral William “Bull” Halsey’s fast carrier task force that fought the Japanese in a number of decisive naval battles of World War II in the South Pacific and was honored after his death by having a battleship named after him. His father commanded three submarines during World War II at that time the new small select service emphasized leadership initiative in part because they were so often out of (then) radio contact. He rose to become Commander in Chief, Pacific, a position he held when his son was shot down over North Vietnam and became a POW.

McCain writes that his father was a great leader of men, but the item that stands out given his son’s psychology is not that particular trait. Rather it is a profile that appears in his father’s 1931 class yearbook that says, “Sooner could Gibraltar be loosed from its base than could Mac be loosed from the principles which he has adapted to govern his actions.”<sup>123</sup> McCain writes of his father, though it seems as fitting for him, “I truly believe he would have preferred any misfortune to having his honor called into question for an offense he committed.”<sup>124</sup> He was also a man that McCain describes “of strong views who spoke his mind bluntly.”<sup>125</sup> As McCain notes, again speaking as much for himself as for his father, “This is as risky a habit in Navy politics as it is in civilian politics, and it often caused him trouble.”<sup>126</sup>

The weight of living up to icons is a heavy one psychologically. Being human McCain is an imperfect man, and well aware of it. He has said of himself, “I don’t live up to my own expectations in my life in many ways.”<sup>127</sup> In some people such sentiments can act both as a disclaimer of real responsibility and an implied reflection of their virtue in owning up to a general flaw. McCain has been publicly and reflexively self-critical in print and in interviews for many years now. Calling attention to the conflict between the idealized standards that he was taught and his actual psychology and imperfections has become a regularized psychological response and a form of political explanation consistent with his persona as “straight talker,” but is no less real for having become routine.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Tapper, “How Tough.”



Unlike many other political leaders, McCain is quite specific about his failings. In captivity, he repeatedly defied his guards and those who tortured him, and rejected early release to keep the Vietnamese from gaining a propaganda coup because his father was U.S. Commander of the Pacific Fleet. But after continuing torture, and severely weakened by dysentery, he did sign a document that said he had performed the deeds of an “air pirate.”<sup>128</sup> Soon after, he attempted suicide.

Some time after his return home from captivity he and his first wife, Carol Shepp, separated, a break that he attributed to his own “selfishness and immaturity.”<sup>129</sup> Looking back on his waffle in the 2000 campaign regarding the appropriateness of flying the Confederate flag from the capital dome in South Carolina, he said of himself, “I have been a coward.”<sup>130</sup> In writing of his amendment to do away with the perk of a special Congressional parking space at the Reagan National Airport for commuting Congressmen, he says “Honesty obliges me to confess that there is something in my nature that enjoys throwing bricks at customs that smack of pretension, and sometimes my behavior reveals more vanity on my part than was evident in the practice I denounced.”<sup>131</sup> That dust up took place in 1994<sup>132</sup> and McCain’s quoted comment on it appeared in his 2002 memoir.

McCain’s candid, even harsh, self-appraisals clearly reflect a continuing effort to narrow the gap between idealized standards of honor and comportment he was taught and real life, as it must really be lived with imperfections he acknowledges. One question that arises here is whether in the very high stakes position of president McCain has learned enough from his mistakes to preclude the need for yet another mea culpa.

### *Ambition and Identity*

The trajectory of John McCain’s ambitions was fused with his ambivalence toward his family traditions and the psychology he developed as a result. For McCain, ambition’s normal arc was delayed by a prior psychological puzzle: how to reconcile family traditions with his own search for an identity to carry into the world. It seems fair to say that until the first was more fully resolved, the second would not have a clear field in which to develop. One result of this

<sup>128</sup> Calvin Woodward, “McCain’s WMD is a mouth that won’t quit,” *Associated Press*, 11 March 2007; for more details of his years as a prisoner of war, see also Steve Huntley, “Bad time to question McCain’s qualifications,” *Chicago Tribune*, 4 July 2008. McCain’s recollection of this period is found in McCain, *Faith*, 288–349.

<sup>129</sup> McCain, *Worth Fighting For*, 13–14.; see also Nicholas D. Kristoff, “P.O.W to Power Broker, A Chapter Most Telling,” *The New York Times*, 27 February 2007.

<sup>130</sup> McCain, *Worth Fighting For*, 386, 388–389.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>132</sup> Dan Nowicki and Bill Muller, “McCain becomes the ‘maverick,’” *Arizona Republic*, 1 March 2007.

dynamic is that McCain is clearly a “late bloomer;” someone who found the right fit between his ambitions, skills, and a publicly validated identity later rather than early in his life.

McCain’s experience with family expectations began early and with an important area, how he was expected to handle his father’s long absences from home. Of this he wrote, “Your father’s life is marked by a brave and uncomplaining sacrifice. You are asked only to bear the inconveniences caused by his absence with a little of the same stoic acceptance.”<sup>133</sup> The emotional reality was, of course, quite different. Of his father McCain writes, “I am certain that he wanted to share with me the warm affection that he and his father had shared. But he wanted me to know also that a man’s life should be big enough to encompass both family and duty to country. That can be a hard lesson for a boy to learn. It was a hard lesson for me.”<sup>134</sup>

The next heavy experience of the weight of family tradition was evident as McCain reached adolescence and college came into view on his horizon. McCain writes, “I was sent to Episcopal to prepare for my unavoidable appointment to the United States Naval Academy three years later.”<sup>135</sup> Two things stand out about this sentence; McCain’s begrudging acceptance of his long anticipated fate and his sense that he was “sent,” a verb that reflects some resentment and little mutuality.

While attending prep school, he visited Princeton University on an athletic trip, fell in love with its lovely campus, and imagined himself studying the things he liked there— history, literature, current affairs.<sup>136</sup> But that fantasy had little chance against the weight of family expectations. McCain recalls that his father never ordered him to attend the Academy, nor does he even recall conversations about alternatives, “I remember simply recognizing my eventual enrollment at the Academy was an immutable fact of life, and accepting it without comment.”<sup>137</sup>

Mute acceptance of an ambivalent choice over which you feel you were allowed no control might appear to be a recipe for resentment, and it was. McCain’s adolescent rebellion began in earnest at age 12, precisely the year in which he was enrolled at Episcopal Boarding School in Alexandria, Virginia, to begin his high school preparation for the Academy.<sup>138</sup> McCain himself has drawn the obvious implication, noting in one interview that being basically told he was going to the Naval Academy, “caused resentment in me—and obviously affected some of my wild behavior. Or *caused* some of my wild behavior.”<sup>139</sup>

<sup>133</sup> McCain, *Faith*, 31.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>135</sup> Elsewhere he called it “a place I belonged but dreaded.” See McCain, *Faith*, 108, 117.

<sup>136</sup> Robert Timberg, *John McCain: An American Odyssey* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 23.

<sup>137</sup> McCain, *Faith*, 111.

<sup>138</sup> Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 27.

<sup>139</sup> Quoted in Paul Alexander, *Man of the People: The Maverick Life and Career of John McCain* (New York: John Wiley, 2008), 17 (emphasis in original).

One other foundation of McCain's rebel stance can be traced to his being strong, but of slight build and having attended 20 different schools as a result of his father's changing assignments. McCain was always "the new kid" and often did not stay long in one place. Such students are natural targets for more established cliques, and McCain writes that "My first purpose during my brief stay in these schools was to impress upon my classmates that I was not a person to suffer slights slightly ... when I was disciplined by my teachers, which happened regularly, it was often for fighting."<sup>140</sup> McCain also used his athletic ability to make a place for himself, which he did at both his high school boarding school and at the Academy.

It is in the transition from preadolescence to adolescence that his "rebel" persona took root. Later, of course, it developed and became consolidated in his identity as a maverick. Its basic elements then are discernable now in McCain's leadership style. They included an assertive not a passive stance toward circumstances, being quick to stand his ground, and establishing a reputation for never backing off. It also entailed willingness and a satisfaction in challenging conventional authority, especially if that authority was deemed arbitrary or ill advised. And finally, it included openness to new experience and adventure that was additionally attractive if it involved flouting some arbitrary rules like never leaving campus in search of the opposite sex.

Like his grandfather who attended the Naval Academy, McCain graduated near the bottom of his class.<sup>141</sup> Of his father who also attended the Academy McCain wrote, "His grades were poor, his discipline worse."<sup>142</sup> His father had written that the plebe year hazing by upperclassman that was part of the Academy experience, "only incited rebellion and mutiny in me."<sup>143</sup> Like grandfather, like father, like son. For all of McCain's ambivalence about the Naval Academy, what is interesting about his rebelliousness is that it only went up to a point of no return, and never over it. He accumulated demerits, but never enough to seriously jeopardize continuing. He was not an outstanding student but he did well enough to graduate and did particularly well in English and history, subjects that he liked. And when it came time to take the tough entrance exam for the Naval Academy, McCain wrote, "I had applied myself ... and did surprisingly well, even on the math exam."<sup>144</sup> For all of the commentary about McCain's "misspent youth" and rebelliousness, some of it from McCain himself,<sup>145</sup> it all

<sup>140</sup> McCain, *Faith*, 100, 107.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 1116; see also Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 37–38.

<sup>145</sup> Laura Meckler, "McCain Gives Unvarnished View of His Past," *Wall Street Journal*, 5 April 2008; see also Michael Cooper, "A McCain Confessional, in Multiple Installments," *The New York Times*, 6 April 2008; Michael D. Sheer, "McCain Recalls his Wild Youth," *The Washington Post*, 2 April 2008; McCain, *Faith*, 100–152; Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 37–38, 39–60.

took place within a set of boundaries that did not seriously jeopardize his ability to follow in his family's footsteps.

McCain looks back on himself in that period as a rebel without a cause, a James Dean type.<sup>146</sup> However, the causes seem clear enough; an adolescent search for identity and belonging complicated by an admired but emotionally distant father who had a peripatetic career that made establishing connections between them and establishing peer connections difficult, and the real attraction to but ambivalence toward the family tradition that seemed to be his fate.

### *The Arc of Ambition*

The onset of the development of McCain's ambition had to await the resolution of his identity dilemma, and then it was further slowed down, and irrevocably changed, by his time as a POW. The cradle of his ambition was his family's tradition of military service and the fact that both his father and grandfather had reached the four-star pinnacle of their chosen profession. Moreover, while doing so, they had both had courageous and successful commands during a major war, and his father had gone to a second distinguished phase of his Navy career as the Navy's first chief of information and later as the Navy senior liaison officer to the United States Congress, a position that his son also occupied before he retired from military service and began his political career in earnest.

McCain's father kept a house on Capitol Hill during this period and a number of prominent congressional leaders were regular guests.<sup>147</sup> But it is not there that McCain's political ambitions took shape. His ambitions took form around the family narrative of duty, honor, and service, as well as the iconic examples of his father and grandfather. McCain writes that "when I heard my father or one of my uncles refer to an honored ancestor or notable event from our family past, my boy's imagination would conjure up some future day of glory when I would add my own paragraph to the family legend."<sup>148</sup> Moreover, his father's pride in the family's history gave McCain the idea that "it would fall to me to represent the family when the history of my generation was recorded."<sup>149</sup> Childhood fantasies? Certainly. But out of such dreams ambition is formed.

The most obvious developmental path of his childhood ambition lay in a military career. But this path, as noted, was partially obstructed by ambivalence. McCain did graduate and chose naval aviation. Of that decision he has said, "I wanted to live the life of a daring, brash, fun-loving flier, indifferent to the hazards of his profession, calm and stoic when the adrenaline flowed, fatalistic about life-and-death situations, and determined to live every nondangerous

<sup>146</sup> Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 36.

<sup>147</sup> McCain, *Faith*, 71.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

moment of his life to the fullest.”<sup>150</sup> He did live that life, of adventure, beautiful women, good friends, and off-base escapades, until he went off to war, got shot down, and endured the transforming experience of five and half years in brutal confinement, a good portion of it in solitary confinement. McCain says of that experience that “It changed my life forever”<sup>151</sup> and there is no reason to doubt him.<sup>152</sup> He says that “Surviving my imprisonment strengthened my self-confidence, and my refusal of early release taught me to trust my own judgment. I gained a seriousness of purpose that observers of my early life had found difficult to detect.”<sup>153</sup> One of the ways in which captivity changed him was its abrupt rescinding of the freedom that went with his maverick persona and the quintessential young adult dream of freedom as involving fast cars, pretty women, and long evenings. Having had the experience of freedom and losing it made their mark.

The experience threw McCain back on his inner resources. In that POW camp, he and his fellow prisoners supported each other as best they could, but they were also, in many respects, alone in the hell of their brutal captivity. McCain survived this searing ordeal by drawing on inner resources that few of us are ever called upon to summon. Gritty determination was clearly part of that mix, and echoes of that trait were evident in one of the most remarkable political comeback stories of this or any recent presidential campaign. Having endured in his POW experience the essential aloneness of being truly dependent on his own inner resources, it is not surprising that McCain has less trouble than most charting his own path politically.

That determination was also quite evident when he returned from the war with a badly injured knee and was told that he would never fly again. That was his only path to flag rank and without it his career as a naval aviator was over and with it his chosen path to advancement. In what one reporter calls, “a ferocious determination to fly again and a tough physical therapy regimen, he got his wings back.”<sup>154</sup>

In 1997, McCain was assigned to the Navy’s Senate liaison office on Capitol Hill in Washington, a position similar to the one his father had held many years earlier.<sup>155</sup> Working in that office McCain both prospered and chaffed. He loved working in the Senate, and became friendly with many of the senior senators including Texas Senator John Tower, who treated him like

<sup>150</sup> Quoted in Cooper, “A McCain Confessional.”

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> The details of his experience can be found in McCain, *Faith*, chap. 16–28; Timberg, *American Odyssey*, chap. 6–8; and Alexander, *Man of the People*, chap. 3.

<sup>153</sup> McCain, *Faith*, 347.

<sup>154</sup> Ralph Vartabedian, “John McCain returned from Vietnam determined to lead,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 April 2008. Others called the physical rehabilitation therapy “brutal,” a description that seems apt. See Kristoff, “P.O.W. to Power Broker.”

<sup>155</sup> Dan Nowicki and Bill Muller, “Back in the USA,” *Arizona Republic*, 1 March 2007.

the son that he never had. But McCain “was not content to be a bit player.”<sup>156</sup> He had thought about running for office in 1976 when he had been stationed in Jacksonville, had tested the waters, but found his chances too steep.<sup>157</sup> His first wife is quoted as saying that when they started dating in 1964 when McCain was a 28-year-old young pilot training in Naval Air Basic Training Command in Pensacola, Florida, a friend asked her, “What does John want to do with his life? Does he want to be an admiral like his dad?” and she answered, “He wants to do something important, so he’ll be in the history books.”<sup>158</sup> Here we can see the echo of his childhood dreams, but they seem to have taken a more specific turn in captivity, at least in his daydreams. Richard A. Stratton, one of his cellmates, recalled that during one of their group discussions, “We asked John what he wanted to be—chief of naval operations? He said, ‘no, the best job in the Navy is commander in chief of Pacific forces, because then you’re chief warrior.’ But he said that what he really wanted to be was president.”<sup>159</sup>

However serious McCain’s POW musings were, he had to contend with the reality of his circumstances when he returned home. Though his family background and highly publicized time as a prisoner of war had opened doors for him,<sup>160</sup> he was just a junior captain in his new Washington post with no major sea commands in sight for him. They were the usual stepping-stones to the higher career echelons that his father and grandfather had achieved. He “knew his navy career was about over.”<sup>161</sup> He had reached a dead end, punctuated by a blocked career path and his separation and divorce from his first wife.

But he was also buoyed by a new-found sense of himself as a survivor, having survived not only his ordeal as a POW but also a number of airplane crashes and a flight deck fire in which 134 men were killed or severely injured.<sup>162</sup> It was also the period that his romance with Cindy Hensley, daughter of wealthy Arizona businessman James Hensley was consummated in marriage. McCain’s post-return narrative has all the elements of that overused term midlife crisis—a turn in his ambitions toward politics, a new wife and the start of a new family, leaving older relationships and failing ambitions behind for a “new start,” and watching his father’s slow but persistent physical and mental decline after his retirement.<sup>163</sup> His former wife, with whom he

<sup>156</sup> Timberg, *An American Odyssey*, 138.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 139; see also Kristoff, “P.O.W to Power Broker.”

<sup>158</sup> Kristoff, “P.O.W to Power Broker.”

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> McCain returned to the United States as something of a celebrity. His return was pictured on the front page of the *The New York Times*, there was a White House reception with President Nixon and a first-person account of his experiences published in *U.S. News and World Report*. See Nowiki and Muller, “Back in the USA”; See also Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 117–129.

<sup>161</sup> Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 139.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 76–79.

<sup>163</sup> McCain, *Worth Fighting For*, 3–5.

has remained on good terms, said of their breakup, “I attribute it to John turning 40 and wanting to be 25 again ...”<sup>164</sup> That is accurate to some degree, but is also misleading.

Daniel Levinson’s work on adult development makes clear that when the life structures that a person has developed in their early or even later adulthood no longer satisfy their essential needs for connection and achievement, the alternatives are either change or resignation.<sup>165</sup> It is not likely that having survived a brutal captivity by fighting and winning the battle against despair, he would embrace it as a solution to his feelings of restlessness and the understanding that he had reached one of life’s forks in the road in the form of a career cul-de-sac.

The tabloid view of midlife crisis is that a man reaches 40 and reaches back for his long-gone youth. The reality is that 40 is about midway through life and the pressures of adjusting dreams to reality can be sobering. McCain’s midlife transition had elements of thwarted dreams in his realization that he had reached the ceiling of his naval aspirations well short of matching either his father or grandfather, which he had hoped to do.<sup>166</sup> His father’s health decline must have also made clear to him that life’s clock was ticking. And he had lost five and one half years of his life in prison camp.

Given these facts, it is not surprising that when McCain made the transition to the next stage he took his own ambitions seriously enough to work very hard for them. When he moved to Arizona and sounded out local political leaders they suggested that he, “start slowly by running for the state Legislature, but McCain was not interested. Legislature residency requirements that would take McCain some time to meet and he was eager to make up for time lost as a POW. McCain wanted Arizona’s new congressional seat.”<sup>167</sup> He got it.

No sooner had he won his first-term seat in Congress than he began talking about running for the Senate.<sup>168</sup> In fact, in his role as congressional liaison he had been dazzled by the power, importance, and downright fun of being involved in major events as they unfolded.<sup>169</sup> Here was the embodiment of his childhood dreams to do something important. In 1986, four years after he had won first election, he became Arizona’s Junior Senator. There remained the future question of whether instead of just being part of history he could, as president, make it.

<sup>164</sup> Quoted in Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 128.

<sup>165</sup> Daniel J. Levinson, *The Seasons of a Man’s Life* (New York: Knopf, 1978).

<sup>166</sup> McCain, *Worth Fighting For*, 10.

<sup>167</sup> Dan Nowicki and Bill Muller “Arizona, the early years,” *Arizona Republic*, 1 March 2007.

<sup>168</sup> Timberg, *An American Odyssey*, 149.

<sup>169</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, “Power and Allure Attracted McCain to the Senate,” *The New York Times*, 29 May 2008.



### *A Unique Leader*

One profile of McCain said he, "... isn't easy to figure out. And rarely predictable."<sup>170</sup> He has been both a "hawk" (Iraq, Iran) and a "dove" (Lebanon). He is a conservative Republican who nonetheless has been approached to consider serving at the highest level of a possible Democratic administration. He has been accused of being a "glory hound," but he has over the years been deeply reluctant to share aspects of experiences as a POW<sup>171</sup> or discuss his son's military service.<sup>172</sup>

He is a leader whose prescient judgment on the need to add more troops in Iraq, the dangers of becoming involved in Lebanon and the need to consider ground troops in Kosovo must be considered along with his lapse in seeming to be too close to those, like campaign contributor Charles Keating, who asked favors of him. And he is a person who inspires both deep attachment and antagonism. If you are searching for the elements that help explain McCain's leadership and appeal and why he occupies such a distinctive position in national life, there are a number that you can immediately cross off your list. He, unlike his opponent this election, is not an eloquent speaker or even necessarily a good one in large public venues.<sup>173</sup> He is not very technologically savvy and prefers town hall meetings where he can respond to questions without a script.<sup>174</sup> Against eloquence, he is at a decided disadvantage.

You can also cross intelligence off your list. Not that McCain is not smart, he is. McCain's low standing at the Academy reflected his attitude not his intelligence.<sup>175</sup> One biographer described McCain as "smart, quick, and thoughtful, if not intellectual."<sup>176</sup> McCain has been called an "indifferent student," but he recalls himself being more selective than indifferent, "I liked English and history and did well in those classes ... I was less interested and less successful in math and science."<sup>177</sup> That selective preference continued in flight school training. Instead of reading the dry training manuals, McCain spent hours reading Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Dan Nowicki and Bill Muller, "Who is John McCain?" *Arizona Republic*, 1 March 2007.

<sup>171</sup> Tony Allen, "John McCain urged to play up his personal life and war heroics," *The Sunday Times* (London), 4 May 2008; see Juliet Eilperin, "McCain reflects on His POW Experience," *The Washington Post*, 1 July 2008; see also Karl Rove, "Getting to Know John McCain," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 April 2008.

<sup>172</sup> Jodi Kantor, "McCain Is Vocal on War, but Silent on Son's Service," *The New York Times*, 6 April 2008.

<sup>173</sup> Mark Leibovich, "McCain Battles a Nemesis, the Teleprompter," *The New York Times*, 6 July 2008.

<sup>174</sup> Debra Saunders, "McCain straight talk need sizzle," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 June 2008.

<sup>175</sup> Class standing was determined not only by grades, but also scores on conduct and leadership, two areas in which he did not excel.

<sup>176</sup> Timberberg, *An American Odyssey*, 54.

<sup>177</sup> McCain, *Faith*, 116.

<sup>178</sup> Timberberg, *An American Odyssey*, 71–72.

Nor is a calm, soothing temperament coupled with a vast store of patience a fair description of McCain. His temper is well known and he has had trouble containing it over the years.<sup>179</sup> McCain says of his temper that “I have used it for effect, as often as I have lost it involuntarily.”<sup>180</sup> And he correctly notes there are some things in life and politics that should make you angry. He has said that “voters occasionally want him to vent: ‘When I see corruption, ... when I see people misbehaving badly, they expect me to be angry.’”<sup>181</sup>

His critics make the point that such volatility is a danger in the White House, and it could be. However, a number of presidents who are counted as among the most successful like Truman, Eisenhower, and Clinton also had strong tempers. Moreover, having a temper and acting rashly are not necessarily synonymous. John F. Kennedy’s first response to the placement of missiles in Cuba was anger and at first he considered a military strike.<sup>182</sup> However, by the next morning, he had recovered his perspective and proceeded to oversee what many consider a textbook case of good judgment and decision making.

For all the discussion about McCain’s temper, it is well to keep in mind that he has also evinced throughout his life a natural magnetism.<sup>183</sup> At the naval fighter wing that he commanded and the congressional liaison office that he headed, he infused both with new purpose, vitality, and accomplishment. The men who served under him when he was in command, liked and respected him, and the senators and staffers he worked with in Washington sought out his company. He has many good friends both in private and public life and he is a devoted family man with very close connections to all his children.<sup>184</sup>

McCain’s supporters point out that he does not hold grudges long and there is some evidence of this not only on a personal but also on a policy level. He teamed up with fellow Senator John Kerry to help end America’s embargo against Vietnam, although Kerry had said some harsh things about fellow soldiers when he returned from Vietnam. For all the brutality that McCain suffered as a POW after his 1985 visit, he committed himself to ending a stalemate over American soldiers missing in action, pursuing steps that led to the eventual restoration of American diplomatic ties with Vietnam. Coming to grip with the legacies of the Vietnam War became one of the signature causes of McCain’s first decade in politics and helped to build his reputation as a conciliator unfazed by past antagonisms.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>179</sup> Michael Leahy, “McCain: A Question of Temperament,” *The Washington Post*, 20 April 2008.

<sup>180</sup> McCain, *Worth Fighting For*, 62.

<sup>181</sup> Leahy, “McCain: A Question of Temperament.”

<sup>182</sup> Ernest May and Phillip P. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).

<sup>183</sup> Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 161.

<sup>184</sup> Jennifer Steinhaur, “Bridging 2 Marriages and 4 Decades, a Large Close-Knit Brood,” *The New York Times*, 27 December 2007.

<sup>185</sup> Sasha Issenberg, “Shaped after Saigon’s fall: Return visits to Vietnam helped mold McCain as a conciliator,” *Boston Globe*, 23 June 2008.

His congressional career has “long included a singular brand of combative bipartisanship.”<sup>186</sup> The list of tough issues that he has championed is a long one: tobacco, health care, immigration, campaign finance reform, judicial nominees, the creation of a commission to investigate the 11 September 2001 terror attacks, banning the use of torture against detainees in the war on terror, and many more. He has not always been successful, but he has spoken up loudly and clearly, worked with Democrats numerous times on tough issues, and been a major player in the Senate.

The importance of his Senate leadership is not only that he has worked across the aisle. It is that he has championed issues like campaign finance reform that have few natural constituents either in Congress or among the public because he thought it was the right thing to do for the country. The importance of his unique brand of leadership is not only that he has taken on large issues like judicial conformations and immigration. His leadership efforts do not rest on an underlying consensus or split the difference mentality. It relies on the hard work of reaching common ground in circumstances where there is not much of it.

In doing so, he has had to repeatedly contend with the displeasure, often anger, of his own party. But this does not dissuade him and therein lays a critical source of his public stature. In an age where even gifted leaders use polls to see where they might best take a vacation, McCain is willing to take positions on his principles and bear the political consequences of his choices. In an age where many worry that our leaders have neither courage nor conviction he has demonstrated both. McCain can be quirky and unpredictable in a range of policy matters, but this reflects a tendency to approach issues on what he sees as their merits rather than a prepackaged outlook. You can generally count on him to say what he thinks in part because he is neither practiced nor comfortable with keeping his real views to himself. When he says in supporting the surge in Iraq, “I would much rather lose an election than lose a war,” it rings true.<sup>187</sup>

There is no doubt that McCain can be querulous and combative. And were he to elected president, American politics would not become any less contentious. On the other hand, McCain’s enormous stores of energy that have been evident since his days pounding the sidewalks in the searing heat for his first congressional run that earned him the nickname “white tornado,” coupled with his determination and public standing may just result in the breaking up of some difficult policy logjams.

### McCain as President: Rebel or Leader

In spite of the ambivalent relationship that Republicans have with McCain, he is in many ways an excellent choice as their presidential nominee. His

<sup>186</sup> Espo, “Bipartisanship marks McCain’s Senate tenure.”

<sup>187</sup> Dan Balz and Shailagh Murray, “The War Within Sen. McCain: Vocal Supporter of Bush Is Increasingly Critical, Isolated,” *The Washington Post*, 13 January 2007.

established identity as a genuine war hero and maverick fits well in a period in which the public is disenchanted with politics as they have been practiced but also concerned about national security. His independence and principled leadership would be a valuable and important trait were he to serve as president. The ability to stand apart from the pressure to conform to conventional wisdom while seriously considering your options is generally a decision-making virtue. And the ability to forge cross aisle alliances on difficult problems is a decided asset in a country that is still sharply divided and at the same time dour about its circumstances. Yet in psychology, as in politics, things are rarely that neat and simple.

McCain has now arrived, by sheer grit and determination, at a crossroads that clearly mirrors a fork in the road that he faced almost five decades ago. Then he was a lackluster Academy student intent on demonstrating his rebelliousness, but he went on to distinguish himself as a pilot and squadron leader. In his political career, he has been in, but not always of, the Republican Party. Now he is its voice and standard-bearer.

Over the years, McCain has generally prospered in his maverick status. It has set him apart in the Senate, given him a way to serve politically on his own terms and allowed his service to reflect a larger cause of political honor and integrity that is so central to his identity while gaining the recognition and admiration that have accompanied it.

Now, he, the consummate rebel, has arrived at the moment when he may well be in charge. If that comes to pass, he will have an important new psychological and political fact to consider: the Oval Office is not a place in which a routinely rebellious stance can sustain effective presidential leadership. George Will, a McCain critic, points out that Senator McCain, “practices the politics of honor: He thinks that whatever his instincts tell him is honorable must be so...” He goes on to say, “This makes him difficult to deal with but does no other harm, as long as it is kept separate from governing.”<sup>188</sup> But of course psychologically this is not possible. One cannot read either McCain’s autobiographical accounts, his speeches, or listen to his explanation of his policies without appreciating just how central this concept is to his identity. The mystery of honor is what it means for his presidency.

On the domestic policy side, it seems clear that the honor involved in doing the right rather than the easy thing will embroil McCain in a number of policy disputes. We can certainly expect renewed battles on immigration, energy, and judicial appointments, to name three. The irony of a McCain presidency is that the fights will be just as likely with Democrats on the left as they will be with Republicans on the right. In order to be successful, however, McCain will have to educate the public to a reality it has not yet considered: this is how a centrist president, trying to get needed policy enacted while governing a deeply divided and partisan country must lead.

<sup>188</sup> George F. Will, “McCain’s Housing Restraint,” *The Washington Post*, 6 April 2008.

The more likely venue of honor's role will be in the area of foreign policy. It is clear, for example, that it is honor, both in the sense of building on and not negating grievous sacrifices made by others to the cause of American policy and interests that partially animates his defense of achieving our goals in Iraq. It also seems clear that McCain sees it as America's duty, as a matter of national honor, to not turn a blind eye toward genocide and mass murder. Many would agree, but does this mean he would reserve the right to intervene in sovereign states as well as failed ones?

We cannot look to McCain's ideology or even his worldview to definitively answer these questions. McCain's strategic worldview is in some ways easy to discern. He calls himself a "realist idealist," conveying both a sense of looking the world squarely in the eye as it is, and remaining hopeful that he can improve it. This contrasts with those who are merely hopeful.

His view, of course, fits squarely in the long tradition of American internationalism. McCain has said repeatedly that America is a special country with a historic leadership mission to both defend and extend freedom. That word, as noted, has a special personal resonance for him that goes beyond rhetorical patriotism. McCain says he eschews the lock-step thinking that would result in a "McCain Doctrine." His reason is that "this is such a complex world we live in, with such varying situations, with varying threats, that I'm not sure you could ever develop an overall doctrine into one size fits all."<sup>189</sup> Yet, his support of sending troops into Kosovo or more troops into Iraq was based on the stated premise that once the United States commits itself, it must honor that commitment not only as a matter of principle, but as a matter of strategic necessity.<sup>190</sup>

Finally, there is as well the very large question mark of McCain's lifelong desire to leave his singular mark. In any trade off between honor and history we will surely witness the clash of iconic virtues. At this point, I would bet on honor. In the commitments reflected in McCain's strategic worldview we see the dilemmas of a tough-minded realist, suffused with the ideals of commitment and honor facing a world in which self-interest, sometime brutal self-interest, is paramount. It is a long-standing American dilemma that Senator McCain for all his deep foundation of experience and earnest intentions will be unlikely to resolve.

## CONCLUSION

After winning the Democratic nomination, Barack Obama moved divisively to the political center.<sup>191</sup> Among the many positions he modified were those

<sup>189</sup> Quoted in Tapper, "How Tough."

<sup>190</sup> Regarding Kosovo, McCain said, "We're in it, we must win it." Quoted in Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 205.

<sup>191</sup> Michael Powell, "For Obama a Pragmatist's Shift to the Center," *The New York Times*, 27 June 2008.

dealing with his support for restrictive gun laws,<sup>192</sup> national security-related wiretapping laws (the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act),<sup>193</sup> North American Free Trade Agreement,<sup>194</sup> debating his opponent in a series of town hall meetings,<sup>195</sup> his policy on Iraq<sup>196</sup> and on Iran,<sup>197</sup> his policy about talking to dictators without preconditions,<sup>198</sup> Social Security tax hikes,<sup>199</sup> and refusing public financing for his campaign when he vowed to use it.<sup>200</sup> The number and importance of these shifts have led to debates and charges of “flip-flopping.”<sup>201</sup> But they also have raised a deeper and important issue: Just what, if anything, does Obama truly believe in outside of the best strategy to gain office? That question is already being raised by Republicans<sup>202</sup> and would be severely damaging to his candidacy were it to become a question raised by independents. Obama’s change of position on so many issues runs the danger of stepping on and damaging the narrative of change that has propelled him to this point. If he is just another ambitious politician who will trade principles for tactical advantage, he has in essence created his own counternarrative. Even beyond these November calculations, lie the problems and prospects of governing a country either from a set of positions you first took then modified, or from a newly articulated set of positions at variance with everything you said you stood for.

There is as well more than a hint of self-absorption in both the candidate and his campaign, although he disclaims “the narcissism that is already a congenital defect for a politician.”<sup>203</sup> As one observer pointed out, “‘It’s not about me, it’s about you,’ he likes to tell his crowds. But according to those who know him, he has been talking about the presidency for more than a decade.”<sup>204</sup> The clues to this self-referential prism are found in a number of items that by themselves might easily pass notice: his volunteered comment about wearing a flag pin that seemed to reflect a disdain for those who differed,<sup>205</sup>

<sup>192</sup> Howard Kurtz, “Pretzel Logic,” *The Washington Post*, 27 June 2008; see also Liz Sidoti, “McCain backs gun decision, Obama straddles issue,” *Associated Press*, 26 June 2008.

<sup>193</sup> Jose Antonio Vargas, “Obama Defends Compromise on New FISA Bill,” *The Washington Post*, 4 July 2008.

<sup>194</sup> Nina Easton, “Obama: NAFTA not so bad after all,” *Fortune*, 18 June 2008.

<sup>195</sup> David S. Broder, “Getting to Know Obama,” *The Washington Post*, 22 June 2000.

<sup>196</sup> Weisman, “Obama May Consider.”

<sup>197</sup> Daniel Dombey and Edward Luce, “Obama camp signals robust approach on Iran,” *Financial Times*, 1 July 2008.

<sup>198</sup> Jonathan Karl, “Obama’s Evolving Position on Iran,” *ABC News*, 4 June 2008.

<sup>199</sup> Teddy Davis, Sunlen Miller, and Gregory Wallace, “Obama Kisses Millions Goodbye,” *ABC News*, 18 June 2008.

<sup>200</sup> Ruth Marcus, “Patriot Games,” *The Washington Post*, 25 June 2008.

<sup>201</sup> Jonathan Weisman, “In Campaign, One Man’s Pragmatism Is Another’s Flip-Flopping,” *The Washington Post*, 28 June 2008.

<sup>202</sup> Karl Rove, “It’s All About Obama,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2008.

<sup>203</sup> Powell, “Deliberative in a Manic Game.”

<sup>204</sup> Liza Mundy, “A Series of Fortunate Events,” *The Washington Post*, 12 August 2007.

<sup>205</sup> Stanley A. Renshon, “The Political Mind: Obama denounces flag-pin patriotism,” *The Politico*, 10 October 2007.



his comment about “bitter” working class Americans clinging to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren’t like them,” another somewhat off-putting remark;<sup>206</sup> an insensitivity in speaking about his family’s favorable economic circumstances while eliciting from a group stories of their own more difficult circumstances;<sup>207</sup> his assertion that in picking a vice presidential nominee he does not have to worry about foreign policy experience because “ironically, this is an area—foreign policy is the area where I am probably *most* confident that I know more and understand the world better than Senator Clinton or Senator McCain”;<sup>208</sup> the decidedly premature “Great Seal of Obamaland,”<sup>209</sup> his trip to Europe whose presidential style some found premature,<sup>210</sup> and his assertion in a recent closed-door meeting with House Democrats that “I have become a symbol of the possibility of America returning to our best traditions.”<sup>211</sup> For a candidate who recently claimed, “We don’t buy our own hype,”<sup>212</sup> the accumulating facts seem equivocal.

John McCain is a genuine American hero, a man who endured a great deal in the service of his country. He is a man of enormous personal courage, resilience, and conviction, and his political leadership has reflected that. His bipartisanship has been in the service of tough issues at a time when political divisions have widened and rhetoric has become shriller.

But his is also a history with more than a hint of self-absorption. Of his plebe days McCain characterizes himself as an “arrogant nonconformist.”<sup>213</sup> Later he writes, “I was an arrogant, undisciplined, insolent midshipman who felt it necessary to prove my mettle by challenging his authority. In short, I acted like a jerk.”<sup>214</sup> McCain’s political career and writings contain many expressions of his failings and he even took a political tour to reprise them.<sup>215</sup> Whether it is a volatile temper, a crude and unnecessary joke,<sup>216</sup> the failure of his first marriage, or the failure to be perfectly truthful about his complex feelings about the confederate flag, McCain embraces his critics, among which he often seems to be the most vocal. Many find this combination of contrition and candor an attractive quality,<sup>217</sup> and it is, to a point.

<sup>206</sup> Jonathan Alter, “Obama’s Vulnerability,” *Newsweek*, 16 April 2008.

<sup>207</sup> Carrie Budoff Brown, “Barack Obama’s flip side revealed,” *The Politico*, 14 April 2008.

<sup>208</sup> Mayhill Fower, “Obama: No Need for Foreign Policy Help from V.P.,” *Huffington Post*, 7 April 2008 (emphasis in original).

<sup>209</sup> John M. Broder, “The Great Seal of Obamaland?” *The New York Times*, 20 June 2008.

<sup>210</sup> Dan Balz, “Embraced Overseas, But to What Effect?” *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2008.

<sup>211</sup> Jonathan Weisman, “Obama’s Symbolic Importance,” *The Washington Post*, 30 July 2008.

<sup>212</sup> Jeff Zeleny, “Going for That Presidential Look, but Trying Not to Overdo It,” *The New York Times*, 27 July 2008.

<sup>213</sup> McCain, *Faith*, 120.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>215</sup> Cooper, “A McCain Confessional.”

<sup>216</sup> Timberg, *American Odyssey*, 197–198.

<sup>217</sup> The most recent set of such soliloquies can be found in McCain, *Worth Fighting For*, xiii–xix.



When McCain looks back as he did most recently in April 2008 and says, “You know, there are compensations to growing older, my friends, but the late discovery that you were probably not quite the charming, irresistible young man you once believed you were, but rather callow, conceited, and often stupid, is not among them.”<sup>218</sup> We can admire his candor, but also hope that he has truly learned its lessons. The presidency is not the place in which to play out this reoccurring cycle contrition and expiation for a last time. The country faces enormous domestic and national security issues. It would certainly benefit from the wealth of experience that he has should he gain office.

However, it also requires a person with a steady sense of what the important issues are and the ability to keep them in sight. Asked about the single most important threat that faces the United States, McCain replied, “The struggle that we’re in against radical Islamic extremism, which can affect, if they prevail, our very existence. Another successful attack on the United States of America could have devastating consequences.”<sup>219</sup> Without assuming that he is correct, it still follows that a president who holds such views will have to be able to set priorities and stick to them, while addressing the myriad other issues to which he must attend. It will not help if the president is blown off course by idiosyncratic personal crusades, however honorable they may be, or by trivial personal annoyances that he sees as an affront to his freedom.<sup>220</sup> In a paradoxical way, McCain’s personal honor and integrity may bring him to the point where his lifelong struggle against imperfections large or small is beside the point.

Nor can the president waste his time and ours by acting on the need to respond, “to every accusation of insensitivity by launching into a litany of my steadfast support for any and all interests of concern...” as McCain did when he made a harmless bad joke about seniors during one of his early campaigns.<sup>221</sup> The presidency is not the place to act out echoes of youthful rebellion or even the cranky contrariness of an adult political maverick. It seems like a strange observation to make discussing such a distinguished and accomplished presidential candidate who would be 72 at the time he took the oath of office, but the presidency functions best when it has a true adult at the helm. And that often entails acting in spite of doubts and not being inhibited by the anticipation of regret because you have fallen short of idealized standards. This in turn entails accepting the reality that sometimes in the presidency giving your very best has to suffice.

<sup>218</sup> Quoted in Cooper, “A McCain Confessional.”

<sup>219</sup> Quoted in David Whitford, “The evolution of John McCain,” *Fortune*, 23 June 2008.

<sup>220</sup> See McCain, *Worth Fighting For*, xv, for his annoyance at roll call votes.

<sup>221</sup> Dan Nowicki and Bill Muller, “The Senate calls,” *Arizona Republic*, 1 March 2007.