

# The making and marketing of Barack Obama: Image and identity in US politics

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An article that appeared in the *New York Times* July 30, along with an extended interview in *Rolling Stone* magazine earlier in July, provide insight into the thinking and personality of Sen. Barack Obama, the presumptive Democratic Party candidate for president.

The *Times* piece concerns Obama's stint teaching part-time at the University of Chicago Law School. That lasted from 1992 until 2004, when he won election to the US Senate. During most of those years, he also served as an Illinois state senator and practiced law with a firm specializing in civil rights litigation and neighborhood economic development.

The *Times* article is not intended to be unfriendly, but it paints a picture of a fiercely ambitious, cool and cautious man, primarily committed to his own advancement. Obama "stood apart," the article asserts, "in too many ways to count." The distance he kept from his colleagues might, in part, be attributed to his ethnic background and his generally liberal politics, in a law school considered to be quite conservative.

However, he never came into conflict with his fellow faculty members over political issues. Mostly, in fact, they were kept "guessing about his precise views." The article asserts: "Mr. Obama's years at the law school are also another chapter... in which he seemed as intently focused on his own political rise as on the institution itself."

As the *Times* notes, Obama hardly had time to engage with anyone at the law school, as he was busy "embarking on five political races during his 12 years at the school." He was also, by all accounts, rather involved with himself. The article states: "Mr. Obama, in turn, could play the star. In what even some fans saw as self-absorption, Mr. Obama's hypothetical cases occasionally featured himself. 'Take Barack Obama, there's a good-looking guy,' he would introduce a twisty legal case."

While his views were more to the left than those of most of his colleagues, his dissatisfaction with old-style liberalism comes through: "Mr. Obama's courses chronicled the failure of liberal policies and court-led efforts at social change: the Reconstruction-era amendments that were rendered meaningless by a century of resistance, the way the triumph of Brown gave way to fights over busing, the voting rights laws that crowded blacks into as few districts as possible. He was wary of noble theories, students say; instead, they call Mr. Obama a contextualist, willing to look past legal niceties to get results."

The *Times* notes that Obama, "whether out of professorial

reserve or budding political caution," refused to take a stand on controversial issues. "Nor could his views be gleaned from scholarship; Mr. Obama has never published any," the newspaper notes. He was too busy, a former colleague suggests, but also "he was unwilling to put his name to anything that could haunt him politically... 'He figured out, you lay low.'"

This canniness, now being played out on the national political stage, is something more than a personal caution. Whereas the Clintons bore some connection to the protest movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, albeit representing their most shallow and opportunist element, Obama was largely shaped by the sharp rightward shift in American ruling class policy that began in the late 1970s under Jimmy Carter and fully flowered during the Reagan administration.

He was an impressionable 19, a college student in Los Angeles, at the time of Reagan's first election. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama offers this remarkable tribute: "All of which may explain why, as disturbed as I might have been by Ronald Reagan's election in 1980... I understood his appeal... Reagan spoke to America's longing for order, our need to believe that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces but that we can shape our individual and collective destinies, so long as we rediscover the traditional virtues of hard work, patriotism, personal responsibility, optimism, and faith."

To ask whether this paean to Reagan was merely political calculation begs the question. Obama is largely made up of political calculation. To inquire as to where his weighing up the advantages of this or that position ends and his "core beliefs" begin is a futile undertaking.

Obama is the product of identity politics, which came to prominence in the 1970s. This opportunist trend, promoted by sections of the ruling elite, elevated race or gender above class position and served to undermine any organized struggle of working and poor people against their social oppression. It became a way for a relatively a small section of blacks, Latinos and women to advance themselves at the expense of the mass.

For obvious reasons, certain doors were closed to Obama as the child of a white woman, originally from Kansas, and a black Kenyan, who left his wife and son when the latter was two years old. Other doors, however, would open up.

Significant numbers of the erstwhile radical middle class were moving toward self-absorption and hedonism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, often while retaining the language and trappings of

their ‘free-spirited’ youth. The category of ‘hippie capitalist’ came into being, including, prominently, *Rolling Stone* publisher and Obama interviewer Jann Wenner.

At what point Obama, in the midst of these various changes, recognized that he might possess a marketable identity is impossible to say. It is worth noting that he stopped calling himself “Barry,” his childhood and teenage nickname, and reverted to his given name, Barack, around 1980 or 1981. Had a vision of a possible political future already flashed before his eyes?

According to a lengthy 1995 article in the *Chicago Reader* entitled “What Makes Obama Run?”, his politics “were tinged with nihilism during his undergraduate years [1979-81] at Occidental College outside Los Angeles. There he played it cool and detached, and began to confuse partying and getting high with rebellion.” Ambition swelled within him apparently during the 1980s, at Columbia and later Harvard Law School.

By 1990, he hardly made a secret about the possibilities his ethnicity and academic qualifications offered him. In the summer of that year, a *Chicago Reporter* article gushed, “The last thing that Barack Obama will have to worry about next year when he graduates is job offers. Obama finished his second year at Harvard Law School this spring and has been elected to lead the Harvard Law Review, a prestigious position traditionally reserved for a top student.

“It’s a great time to be a young black law school graduate—if you’re from Harvard and in the top quarter of your class,” said Obama.”

Throughout his adult life, Obama has single-mindedly pursued his personal career, whatever that might be at any given point. The manipulation of his identity, in response to the changing political winds, has been at the center of that.

As we noted last year: “Obama uses his ethnicity as a kind of unspoken metaphor for his political approach. Here is a man, the message is intended to convey, who is white and black, liberal and conservative, foreign and American, a man above party ideology and the petty bickering of partisan politics.”

His intense ambition and his political ‘androgyny,’ the ability to be ‘all over’ an issue, to appear to address it fluidly and flexibly, while saying nothing, both emerge strongly from Wenner’s *Rolling Stone* interview.

Asked when it had occurred to him that being black and bearing the name “Barack Obama” would not prove an obstacle to his political ambitions, the senator from Illinois replies self-assuredly, “I was never lacking in... confidence that my particular background would not be a barrier to me running.”

What had he learned about Americans that he might not have known before? “I’m not sure if this is a new lesson, but it reinforced my belief that we’re not as divided as our politics would indicate... [Americans are] not particularly ideological. Everybody is sort of a mix of what you might consider some liberal ideas, what you might consider some conservative ideas. But there is a set of common values that everybody buys into: Everybody thinks you should have to work hard for what you get, everybody believes that things like equal opportunity should be real, not just a slogan.”

A feint to the right, a thrust to the left ...

Wenner notes that “change” is the byword of Obama’s campaign. “Can you describe what change is? What does it look like?” he asks.

This provides the opportunity for Obama to indulge in his specialty—empty generalities, vague commitments that commit him to nothing, “feel-good” phrase-mongering.

“I want people to feel connected to their government again,” he says, “and I want that government to respond to the voices of the people, and not just insiders and special interests. That’s real change. I want us to think about the long term and not just the short term, whether it’s climate change, energy policy, how we’re educating our kids, what kind of investments we’re making in our infrastructure, how we’re dealing with the federal budget and national debt,” etc., etc.

What and who is Obama? What does he or anyone else have to show for his legal, political and “community organizing” careers? In reality, very little. Take the marketable identity away from him, and there’s nothing there.

He accepted this identity (neither black nor white, liberal nor conservative, entirely American nor foreign) and cultivated it, and it eventually took the place of whatever he was before.

US presidential hopefuls are selected, vetted, molded in a complex and time-consuming process. The ruling elite faces life-and-death questions and is not about to allow just anyone to take up residence in the White House. He, or she, must be prepared to make the most ruthless decisions.

Obama has survived the process to this point largely because powerful forces in the country recognize that the Bush presidency has been a disaster. A different face, a different look, is needed. Bill Clinton came along to “feel” the population’s “pain” during a sharp recession and after the Reagan phenomenon had exhausted itself. The situation today is far more serious.

Bush and Cheney are identified with war, slump and wholesale criminality. Confused and searching for answers, the population is seething with anger. A mass radicalization threatens. That the relatively inexperienced, bi-racial Obama has been plucked out of the ranks and possibly given his moment in the sun is itself an indication of the depth of the crisis.

Politically, Obama is meant to forestall as long as possible the eruption of mass opposition to the existing economic and political setup. He is being marketed to the public as a caring, thoughtful black man, with hints of Lincoln in the background. He has the constructed appearance, the outer form, of opposition. But only the outer form. He’s clever and adroit. He’s not Bush.

But, minus his carefully crafted identity, he’s not terribly different.



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