Obama Accepts Nomination, Draws Sharp Contrast With McCain

By Jonathan Weisman and Shailagh Murray, Washington Post Staff Writers

Sen. Barack Obama, the first African American to lead a major-party ticket, accepted the Democratic nomination for president Thursday night, sharply criticizing Republican John McCain and casting the election as "our chance to keep, in the 21st century, the American promise alive."

"America, we cannot turn back, not with so much work to be done, not with so many children to educate and so many veterans to care for, not with an economy to fix and cities to rebuild and farms to save, not with so many families to protect and so many lives to mend," Obama told a roaring throng of more than 84,000 packed in the Invesco Field at Mile High football stadium on a temperate summer evening. "America, we cannot turn back."

In a speech filled with policy specifics and some of the toughest swipes he has taken at his opponent in the campaign, Obama took on the sharp criticisms the GOP has leveled against him in recent months and at the same time exhorted the nation to look beyond politics as usual.

"If you don't have a record to run on, then you paint your opponent as someone people should run from," he said of his rival. "You make big elections about small things."

He acknowledged that a vote for a mixed-race candidate named Barack Obama might be a leap for many.

"I realize that I am not the likeliest candidate for this office. I don't fit the typical pedigree, and I haven't spent my career in the halls of Washington," he said. "But I stand before you tonight because all across America something is stirring. What the naysayers don't understand is that this election has never been about me. It's about you."

Obama's speech, nearly 45 minutes long, was the culmination of a four-day Democratic convention designed to unite his party, put more detail behind the slogan of "hope" and regain the momentum of a campaign slowed by sustained fire from his foes.

He accepted the nomination on the 45th anniversary of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, and his campaign played to the historic moment. The promise of America, that hard work, equality and freedom can lead to boundless opportunities, "brought Americans from every corner of this land to stand together on a Mall in Washington, before Lincoln's memorial, and hear a young preacher from Georgia speak of his dream," Obama intoned.

He also emphasized the more traditional aspects of his biography: his Kansas-born grandfather who fought in World War II, his grandmother who lifted herself up from the secretarial pool to become a midlevel bank manager, and his mother, who pushed him hard, instilled her values in him and then died young.

The mood in the stadium bordered on ecstatic. The line to get in stretched over two miles, under a cloudless sky, while inside the stadium, volunteers registered voters, telephoned supporters and organized the faithful. After Obama's speech, fireworks pierced the Denver night sky and confetti rained down on the field.

Even McCain acknowledged what he called "truly a good day for America" with an advertisement before and after the Democrat's address, saying: "Too often the achievements of our opponents go unnoticed. So I wanted to stop and say congratulations. . . . Tomorrow, we'll be back at it. But tonight, Senator, job well done."

But when the event was over, the battle resumed in an instant.

"Tonight, Americans witnessed a misleading speech that was so fundamentally at odds with the meager record of Barack Obama," McCain spokesman Tucker Bounds said, even mocking the set Obama spoke in front of. "When the temple comes down, the fireworks end and the words are over, the facts remain: Senator Obama still has no record of bipartisanship, still opposes offshore drilling, still voted to raise taxes on those making just $42,000 per year and still voted against funds for American troops in harm's way. The fact remains: Barack Obama is still not ready to be president."

For all the historic significance, Obama's speech was less lofty than his earlier rhetorical forays, more specific on the policies he would pursue as president and more scathing toward McCain. He pledged a $150 billion investment to wean the nation from imported oil in 10 years, with wind and solar power, biofuels, nuclear energy, clean coal technology and domestic natural gas, ratifying the goals of the man who preceded him on the podium, Nobel laureate and former vice president Al Gore.

Obama spoke of eliminating capital gains taxes for small businesses and high-tech start-ups and cutting taxes for working families, a point he repeated twice to get it across. He promised to go through the federal budget "line by line" to eliminate programs that don't work.

He renewed his pledge to "end this war in Iraq responsibly, and finish the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan." He warned Republicans eager to portray him as weak: "We are the party of Roosevelt. We are the party of Kennedy. So don't tell me that Democrats won't defend this country. Don't tell me that Democrats won't keep us safe. The Bush-McCain foreign policy has squandered the legacy that generations of Americans -- Democrats and Republicans -- have built, and we are to restore that legacy."

And he portrayed McCain again and again as the personification of a third term of President Bush.

"Senator McCain likes to talk about judgment, but really, what does it say about your judgment when you think George Bush was right more than 90 percent of the time?" Obama asked. "I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to take a 10 percent chance on change."

The McCain campaign has been able to seize at least some attention with its vice presidential deliberations and ongoing GOP attacks on Obama's experience. McCain will announce his running mate Friday in Dayton, Ohio, as the Republicans prepare to open their own nominating convention Monday in St. Paul, Minn.

Still, Thursday's festivities were extraordinary. Not since John F. Kennedy accepted his party's nomination at Los Angeles's Memorial Coliseum in 1960 has a presidential contender thrown such a party. Invesco Field was packed with celebrities and politicians but also college students and ordinary voters who got their tickets with pledges to volunteer for the campaign. Entertainment was provided by Sheryl Crow, Stevie Wonder, Michael McDonald, will.i.am and John Legend.

Scoreboard contests asked the crowd to guess how much money Obama would seek to save each American for college, and to send answers by text message. In lights around the stadium, the campaign posted its Web address. And ticketholders were asked for their e-mail addresses when they signed up to attend. Obama's speech was preceded by a biographical documentary by Davis Guggenheim, the Academy Award-winning director of Gore's "An Inconvenient Truth."

Gore whipped up the crowd, declaring: "We can tell Republicans and independents, as well as Democrats, why our nation needs a change from the approach of Bush, Cheney and McCain. After they wrecked our economy, it is time for a change. After they abandoned the search for the terrorists who attacked us and redeployed the troops to invade a nation that did not attack us, it's time for a change. After they abandoned the American principle first laid down by General George Washington, when he prohibited the torture of captives because it would bring, in his words, 'shame, disgrace and ruin' to our nation, it's time for a change."

But it was Obama who took some of the toughest shots at his opponent, after hearing allies urge him for weeks to hit back harder. He confronted McCain directly on the attacks that have rained on him for a month. Countering his rival's charge that he is a vacuous, pampered celebrity, he spoke of his grandmother in the secretarial pool, his mother, who once turned to food stamps to support her children, and his own work organizing unemployed steelworkers. "I don't know what kind of lives John McCain thinks that celebrities lead, but this has been mine," Obama said.

He questioned McCain's "temperament and judgment to serve as commander in chief," lashing out at Republican questioning of his patriotism. "I've got news for you, John McCain: We all put our country first," he said.

And he painted his opponent as the candidate who is out of touch with the lives of most Americans.

"I don't believe that Senator McCain doesn't care what's going on in the lives of Americans; I just think he doesn't know," Obama said. "Why else would he define middle class as someone making under $5 million a year? How else could he propose hundreds of billions in tax breaks for big corporations and oil companies but not one penny of tax relief to more than 100 million Americans? How else could he offer a health-care plan that would actually tax people's benefits, or an education plan that would do nothing to help families pay for college, or a plan that would privatize Social Security and gamble your retirement? It's not because John McCain doesn't care. It's because John McCain doesn't get it."

A week marked at the outset by lingering divisions between Obama's backers and those of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (N.Y.) concluded with the picture-perfect imagery of Obama's family and the family of his running mate, Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. (Del.), embracing on a stage bathed in floodlight, under a starry sky clouded only with the smoke of the fireworks. With Obama's formal nomination resoundingly requested by Clinton herself Wednesday, then seconded that night by former president Bill Clinton, the party was firmly in Obama's hands.

The nominee's wife, Michelle, and their daughters, Malia and Sasha, rushed out to join him onstage, followed by the Bidens. After the initial embrace, the girls played with the red, white and blue confetti, trying to catch the star shapes as they fell, tossing them in each other's hair. Malia playfully picked up a long blue strand of paper as her father walked toward her. He gave her a knowing look, with a slight, winking smile.

Earlier in the evening, a video tribute to King was introduced by the sole surviving speaker of the March on Washington, Rep. John Lewis (Ga.), and was followed by speeches from King's children.

"For those of us who stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, or who in the years that followed may have lost hope, this moment is a testament to the power and vision of Martin Luther King Jr.," Lewis said. "It is a testament to the ability of a committed and determined people to make a difference in our society. It is a testament to the promise of America."

Obama and Biden are to embark on a bus tour of the Midwestern battleground states Thursday, starting in Pennsylvania and winding through Ohio and Michigan.

For the Obama campaign, the acceptance speech was the final hurdle in a two-month pivot to general-election mode, a lull that had been dreaded after the breakneck pace of the primary season. Complicating the transition was the unfinished business of reconciling with the Clintons. Heading into convention week, the rift had become the dominant narrative, and unity became one of the main goals in Denver. Early in the week, it threatened to overshadow the other key tasks of introducing Obama to a national audience and drawing contrasts with McCain.

Obama campaign manager David Plouffe said the bar was higher for the convention because Obama remains a somewhat mysterious figure to many voters, including millions of lunch-pail Democrats who backed Hillary Clinton. One breakthrough was her rousing speech on Tuesday night.

Clinton's forceful advocacy of Obama, Plouffe predicted, would be "really meaningful in the days and weeks to come."

He dismissed the tightening national polls that suggest Obama is underperforming, given Bush's abysmal approval ratings and the overall low standing of the GOP. "Democrats coalesce a little later historically," Plouffe said. "I think we have more room to grow than McCain."

Plouffe and other Obama officials have adjusted their strategies to answer Democratic criticism, becoming sharper in their attacks on McCain, getting more specific on policy and moving the candidate to more intimate settings. But they have also focused on an intricate, state-by-state plan that lays out, as Plouffe put it, "as many paths to 270" electoral votes as possible.

The campaign is so confident about Iowa and New Mexico, states that voted for Bush in 2004, that Plouffe predicted McCain would soon pull out of those battlegrounds. In Pennsylvania, he said, Democrats could show a net gain of more than 400,000 voters since the last election. Plouffe said he also was "very bullish" on Florida, where the campaign has deployed massive resources.