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An hour and a half with Barack Obama

9-11 minutes

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I've tried very hard to keep politics out of this blog -- despite nearly overpowering impulses to the contrary -- for two reasons: one, there's no reason to alienate people who don't share my political views, as wrong-headed as those people may clearly be; two, there's no reason to expect my opinion on political issues should be any more valid than any other reader of what, these days, passes for the *New York Times*.

That said, in light of the extraordinary events playing out around us right now in the runup to the presidential election, I would like to share with you a personal experience that I was lucky enough to have early last year.

Early in 2007, a friend of mine who is active in both high-tech and politics called me up and said, let's go see this first-term Senator, Barack Obama, who's ramping up to run for President.

And so we did -- my friend, my wife Laura, and me -- and we were able to meet privately with Senator Obama for an hour and a half.

The reason I think you may find this interesting is that our meeting in early 2007 was probably one of the last times Senator Obama was able to spend an hour and a half sitting down and talking with just about *anyone* -- so I think we got a solid look at what he's like up close, right before he entered the "bubble" within which all major presidential candidates, and presidents, must exist.

Let me get disclaimers out of the way: my only involvement with the Democratic presidential campaigns is as an individual donor -- after meeting with the Senator, my wife and I both contributed the maximum amount of "hard money" we could to the Obama campaign, less than \$10,000 total for both the primary and the general election. On the other hand, we also donated to Mitt Romney's Republican primary effort -- conclude from that what you will.

I carried four distinct impressions away from our meeting with Senator Obama.

First, this is a *normal* guy.

I've spent time with a lot of politicians in the last 15 years. Most of them talk *at* you. Listening is not their strong suit -- in fact, many of them aren't even very good at faking it.

Senator Obama, in contrast, comes across as a normal human being, with a normal interaction style, and a normal level of interest in the people he's with and the world around him.

We were able to have an actual, honest-to-God conversation, back and forth, on a number of topics. In particular, the Senator was personally interested in the rise of social networking, Facebook, Youtube, and user-generated content, and casually but persistently grilled us on what we thought the next generation of social media would be and how social networking might affect politics -- with no staff present, no prepared materials, no notes. He already knew a fair amount about the topic but was very curious to actually learn more. We also talked about a pretty wide range of other issues, including Silicon Valley and various political topics.

With most politicians, their curiosity ends once they find out how much money you can raise for them. Not so with Senator Obama -- this is a normal guy.

Second, this is a *smart* guy.

I bring this up for two reasons. One, Senator Obama's political opponents tend to try to paint him as some kind of lightweight, which he most definitely is not. Two, I think he's at or near the top of the scale of intelligence of anyone in political life today.

You can see how smart he is in his background -- for example, lecturer in constitutional law at University of Chicago; before that, president of the Harvard Law Review.

But it's also apparent when you interact with him that you're dealing with one of the intellectually smartest national politicians in recent times, at least since Bill Clinton. He's crisp, lucid, analytical, and clearly assimilates and synthesizes a very large amount of information -- smart.

Third, this is *not* a radical.

This is not some kind of liberal revolutionary who is intent on throwing everything up in the air and starting over.

Put the primary campaign speeches aside; take a look at his policy positions on any number of issues and what strikes you is how reasonable, moderate, and thoughtful they are.

And in person, that's exactly what he's like. There's no fire in the eyes to realize some utopian or revolutionary dream. Instead, what comes across -- in both his questions and his answers -- is calmness, reason, and judgment.

Fourth, this *is* the first credible post-Baby Boomer presidential candidate.

The Baby Boomers are best defined as the generation that came of age during the 1960's -- whose worldview and outlook was shaped by Vietnam plus the widespread social unrest and change that peaked in the late 1960's.

Post-Boomers are those of us, like me, who came of age in the 1970's or 1980's -- after Vietnam, after Nixon, after the "sexual revolution" and the cultural wars of the 1960's.

One of the reasons Senator Obama comes across as so fresh and different is that he's the first serious presidential candidate who isn't either from the World War II era (Reagan, Bush Sr, Dole, and even McCain, who was born in 1936) or from the Baby Boomer generation (Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Al Gore, and George W. Bush).

He's a post-Boomer.

Most of the Boomers I know are still fixated on the 1960's in one way or another -- generally in how they think about social change, politics, and the government.

It's very clear when interacting with Senator Obama that he's totally focused on the world as it has existed since *after* the 1960's -- as am I, and as is practically everyone I know who's younger than 50.

What's the picture that emerges from these four impressions?

Smart, normal, curious, not radical, and post-Boomer.

If you were asking me to write a capsule description of what I would look for in the next President of the United States, that would be it.

Having met him and then having watched him for the last 12 months run one of the best-executed and cleanest major presidential campaigns in recent memory, I have no doubt that Senator Obama has the judgment, bearing, intellect, and high ethical standards to be an outstanding president -- completely aside from the movement that has formed around him, and in complete contradiction to the silly assertions by both the Clinton and McCain campaigns that he's somehow not ready.

Before I close, let me share two specific things he said at the time -- early 2007 -- on the topic of whether he's ready.

We asked him directly, *how concerned should we be that you haven't had meaningful experience as an executive -- as a manager and leader of people?*

He said, watch how I run my campaign -- you'll see my leadership skills in action.

At the time, I wasn't sure what to make of his answer -- political campaigns are often very messy and chaotic, with a lot of turnover and flux; what conclusions could we possibly draw from one of those?

Well, as any political expert will tell you, it turns out that the Obama campaign has been one of the best organized and executed presidential campaigns in memory. Even Obama's opponents concede that his campaign has been disciplined, methodical, and effective across the full spectrum of activities required

to win -- and with a minimum of the negative campaigning and attack ads that normally characterize a race like this, and with almost no staff turnover. By almost any measure, the Obama campaign has simply out-executed both the Clinton and McCain campaigns.

This speaks well to the Senator's ability to run a campaign, but speaks even more to his ability to recruit and manage a top-notch group of campaign professionals and volunteers -- another key leadership characteristic. When you compare this to the awe-inspiring discord, infighting, and staff turnover within both the Clinton and McCain campaigns up to this point -- well, let's just say it's a very interesting data point.

We then asked, *well, what about foreign policy -- should we be concerned that you just don't have much experience there?*

He said, directly, two things.

First, he said, I'm on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where I serve with a number of Senators who are widely regarded as leading experts on foreign policy -- and I can tell you that I know as much about foreign policy at this point as most of them.

Being a fan of blunt answers, I liked that one.

But then he made what I think is the really good point.

He said -- and I'm going to paraphrase a little here: *think about who I am* -- my father was Kenyan; I have close relatives in a small rural village in Kenya to this day; and I spent several years of my childhood living in Jakarta, Indonesia. Think about what it's going to mean in many parts of the world -- parts of the world that we really care about -- when I show up as the President of the United States. I'll be fundamentally changing the world's perception of what the United States is all about.

He's got my vote.