



Book Barack Obama

This Improbable Quest

John K. Wilson
Paradigm, 2007

Recommendation

This blatantly positive profile of presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama presents the man, his positions and specific responses to the criticisms against him. Extensive direct quotes from the candidate himself plus 30 pages of footnotes buttress the book's powerful, if partisan, presentation. John K. Wilson, a former student of Obama's, omits some important things, however, it is only fair to note that some hot campaign topics (such as Reverend Wright) emerged after the book's publication. Wilson also makes a few odd comments (for instance, drawing a link between low black unemployment and the high incarceration rate under Bill Clinton). Still, he sets forth a compelling case for Obama and provides observations about the Senator's formative years, accomplishments and policies. He offers some good insights, for example, he discusses the role cynicism plays in politics and the role of white guilt. While Wilson sometimes gets carried away with his support of the candidate, he notes that both the far right and the far left have attacked Obama, so he must be doing something correctly. *BooksInShort* recommends this to voters who want the story (albeit somewhat sunny) behind the candidate and to Obama supporters seeking more information about their presidential hopeful.

Take-Aways

- First-term Senator Barack Obama, 45, announced his U.S. presidential candidacy on February 10, 2007, in Springfield, Illinois.
- Obama is the first post-Baby Boom politician to run for national office.
- He said his work as a community organizer was the "best education" he ever received, even after attending Harvard University and Yale Law School.
- Obama pledged that his presidential campaign will not "tear people down."
- He said he would focus on unity and hope for the future.
- Obama is older than Teddy Roosevelt, Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy were when they declared their presidential candidacies.
- Obama has served 12 years as an elected official, longer than Hillary Clinton, but shorter than John McCain.
- A 2007 poll found Obama was the most popular candidate among 18- to 24-year-olds.
- He earned a groundswell of campaign support, despite critics on the left and the right.
- Political cynicism causes self-censorship; people talk about what cannot be done instead of what can be accomplished.

Summary

Avoiding Slash-and-Burn Politics

Barack Hussein Obama announced his presidential candidacy on February 10, 2007, in Springfield, Illinois. Stressing the need for serious change and his membership in a "different generation," Obama, 45, said the U.S. had suffered "small-minded," "24-hour, slash-and-burn" politics, which prevented progress and hurt the country.

"Obama does represent a new kind of politics that seems perfectly tailored for his new generation."

Born in 1961, Obama is the first post-Baby-Boom politician to run for national office. He has a strong connection with Generation-X voters. Many college students remember only President Bush senior and junior, and Bill Clinton. To them, Ronald Reagan is a figure from the distant past. Obama's fresh ideas and youth appeal to this new generation of American voters. Due to his age, Obama knows the importance and possibilities of the tumultuous '60s, along with their limitations, for example why Baby Boom politicians Bill Clinton and George W. Bush were not forthcoming about their drug use and avoidance of military service in Vietnam.

“Obama is proposing a paradoxical generational politics that’s about transcending generations in the same way that it’s about transcending party boundaries.”

Obama often discusses the power of uniting people, and rejects the divisions caused by polarized disagreements between liberals and conservatives. Hoping to minimize that partisanship and animosity, he advocates full disclosure (and admits having used marijuana and cocaine) as a mechanism for bringing people together. He disavows the classification of “red” and “blue” states and recognizes that individual voters have complex views.

“Obama believes a more united politics can be more effective at making progress than the political divisions that have become so common today.”

His presidential campaign revolves around these ideas. Chief strategist David Axelrod said that was designed to focus on unity and not to “tear people down.” One of Obama’s strong points, he asserts, is that he would steer a straight political course and not cater to the Democratic Party’s fringes. Obama rejects traditional political cynicism that vilifies campaign opponents as evil and says that this attitude results from “decades of disappointment,” negative ads and biting talk radio hosts who dismiss any politician who lacks an ulterior motive as naïve and ineffective. In this environment, Obama stated, “Politics is not a noble calling; it’s a game.”

“It was in Springfield that Obama learned how to negotiate and compromise and bring together bipartisan alliances, which have become his strongest political skills.”

Cynicism also sets a mood that emphasizes what can’t be done instead of what can be accomplished. Americans feel anxious because they don’t see any way to solve the nation’s ills, despite the possibilities of the future. Obama cites the value of compromise to counter cynicism. He believes that achieving something is better than walking away with nothing. For Obama, even old-time cynicism has a positive side. It shines the spotlight on problems. That may help explain how the sarcastic *Daily Show* actually has made young people better informed about the issues. They are also optimistic about the future, despite serious problems concerning the environment, health care and Social Security. Obama hopes to channel their optimism, not just so he can win the election, but also to help transform the nation.

New Issues

During the 2008 presidential election, newer issues – globalization, technology, the war on terrorism, global warming and the Iraq War – will replace many traditional national issues. As a result of his positions and his fresh outlook, Obama has attracted young people, independents and disillusioned older voters. That broad appeal drew GOP voters in his 2004 Illinois Senate race. Younger voters remain excited about him. A 2007 Harvard Institute poll found that Obama was the most popular candidate among 18- to 24-year-olds, an age group which will vote this fall in increasingly greater numbers. A 2006 exit poll found that younger voters are more likely to vote Democratic, one reason Obama views them as the main contributors to his success. He recognizes their optimism, which seems to confirm his belief that change is possible.

Community Organization

Obama’s mid-1980s work as a community organizer in an African-American neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side shaped his political philosophy. He called it the “best education” he ever received, though he attended Harvard University and Yale Law School. Doing this work, Obama discovered that cynicism blocked people from participating in politics. His work as an organizer led to his decision to make public service his career. As he said, “I found my calling.” Obama’s basic community organizing principles are:

- Present all issues and be open.
- People are more involved when they actively participate in the decision-making process on public issues.
- Include the community in all discussions, even people who are against your proposals.
- Exclusion only weakens your position. Find common ground.

“The experience issue has clearly hurt Obama’s chances.”

His principles produced results. In 1992, his efforts helped generate 150,000 new voters – and they contributed to the election of the first African-American woman to serve as a U.S. Senator.

Based on his fund-raising success on the Internet, notably on the networking site MySpace, Obama may use the Web again to complement his community-organizing vision. The Internet is suited for Webcasts and meetings, as well as for soliciting feedback. This innovative use of the Internet would also redistribute power to the public and away from political consultants.

The Experience Question

The media contends that Obama lacks experience. Some reporters said he has more style than substance, but the facts speak for themselves. He served eight years in the Illinois state senate, and has offered (on his Web site) more policy papers on major national issues than any other candidate. In reality, the media did not want to discuss his policies. Other reporters have said he is too young to be president, but he is older than Teddy Roosevelt, Bill Clinton and John F. Kennedy were when they declared their candidacies. Kennedy, Clinton and Jimmy Carter were all elected with less experience than their opponents. Obama has spent more time (12 years) as an elected official than seven of the original 2008 candidates. Only John McCain has served longer.

“Obama should be described as a pragmatic progressive rather than a centrist, even if sometimes his rhetoric and his policies may seem to be moving to the middle.”

While the media clamors for more experienced candidates, voters seem to find less experienced people more interesting and electable. In the 2008 Democratic primary, the frontrunners were all newcomers.

Black Enough?

As the child of a white mother and a black father, Obama has been accused of being too white, too black and not black at all. Because he is an Ivy League graduate, many blacks wonder if he has lost touch with the black community or if he is fully versed in its issues, including civil rights and poverty. Some African-American commentators said his multicultural background and his upbringing in Indonesia, Kenya (his father's homeland) and Hawaii compromise his stated commitment to African-Americans. His problem may be, as one pundit said, that he does not fit the traditional stereotype among blacks since he was not raised in the southern U.S.

“Obama's call for a new kind of politics is telling baby boomer politicians to grow up and get beyond petty political thinking.”

Blacks tend to hold black candidates to a higher standard. Obama has been a civil-rights lawyer and community organizer. He has opposed racial profiling and advocated an earned-income credit. These issues interest African-Americans, but he has not gotten credit for his work. Obama supports affirmative action, but only for those who were deprived of a quality education because they attended inferior schools. Under these criteria, he has said that his daughters should not be eligible for affirmative action since they are “pretty advantaged.” His wife Michelle, a graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School, also has been quizzed about whether she is “black enough.”

Attacks from the Right

Obama has been on the receiving end of unfounded attacks from the political right, including the claim that he attended a Muslim school in Indonesia as a child. Obama has written that he spent five years in Indonesia as a youngster, attended a Catholic school, and then went to a predominantly Muslim school. Both of his parents were atheists. He said that his mother, an anthropologist, just wanted him to get a basic nonreligious education. Obama attended a mosque, but mainly to play with other young boys. A CNN reporter visited the school and found it similar to an ordinary public school, with students learning math and science, and joining the Boy Scouts.

“Obama has already brought in a new generation of voters.”

Critics also have found fault with Obama's name, Barack Hussein Obama Jr. (identical to his father's), which they incorrectly said he refused to use publicly. The motive behind such attacks was to “prove” that Obama is a radical Muslim who will somehow sneak into the White House. He is, in fact, a Christian. While the conservative right has slurred Obama, their primary goal is to complete their vendetta against Hillary Clinton. Given this perspective, they like Obama since he has the potential to prevent her from getting the Democratic Party nomination.

Attacks from the Left

Democratic leftists also fault Obama for not being liberal enough. Some of these criticisms have been more vehement than those from the Right, because Obama is a capitalist and a reformer, not a crusader and not divisive. Leftist critics have faulted him for not being more critical of the Bush administration, and not sufficiently supporting Israel, campaign finance reform and gay marriage. These far left criticisms miss the point. Obama believes that the Bush administration is “irresponsible and often incompetent,” but he thinks the American people do not believe Bush is evil or that the U.S. is imperialist. Americans are nonideological, he believes, but now the nation is too polarized to become unified. Obama feels that reform requires popular support, particularly if it is to address tough issues such as health care, globalization, terrorism and protection of civil liberties. Obama's incremental, pragmatic-progressive approach is distinct from Bill Clinton's triangulation strategy, but he does not blindly follow a utopian progressive line.

The Role of Religion

Obama is pro-choice and acknowledges that religion plays an important part of many Americans' lives. He recognizes the need for a serious discussion about religion's role in a pluralistic democracy. Democrats largely walk away from addressing organized religion. The Republicans have long filled this vacuum and used religious fundamentalists to invigorate their party. Obama believes the U.S. can preserve the separation of church and state, and still have a national religious discussion.

“Americans want someone who's right rather than a politician with a lot of experience at being wrong.”

As a rationalist, Obama believes religion should support a person's values and actions. He differs from biblical literalists, and thinks religion leads to “doubt, and uncertainty and mystery.” If this were not so, then it would not be called “faith,” since the opposite is firm knowledge. Because the existence of heaven is unknowable, he said, people should focus on improving what they do each day. His mother, an anthropologist, taught him that the major religions share a common belief system, based on achieving a common good and examining a person's purpose on earth.

Political Accomplishments

Obama served in the Illinois legislature for eight years and passed a number of bills on a variety of important issues, such as abortion, police brutality, ethics laws, health care, gender discrimination and death-penalty reform. His principled positions earned him the wrath of both extreme conservatives and liberals. Obama entered the Republican-controlled U.S. Senate in 2005 and despite the claims against him produced more legislation than the majority of his colleagues. In 2006, the *National Journal* listed him as the 10th most liberal Senator, a higher rating than Hillary Clinton's because she had moved to a more centrist position.

“Obama alone will not bring a progressive revolution; no single individual can do that, not even a president.”

Obama supporters should not idealize him as someone who can cut through Washington's entrenched system to accomplish far-reaching social change. He wants to “transform a nation,” but he is a pragmatist and a realist about bipartisan politics. Despite the critics, supporters believe that Obama can bring hope and trust back to national politics.

About the Author

John K. Wilson is the author of *Patriotic Correctness*, *How the Left Can Win With Arguments and Influence People*, *A Tactical Manual for Pragmatic Progressives*, *Newt Gingrich*, and *Myth of Political Correctness*.

