

President Barack Obama

A MORE PERFECT UNION ~ JOHN K. WILSON



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JOHN K. WILSON

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Introduction

When Barack Obama took the oath of office in front of more than one million people on the Mall in Washington, D.C., on January 20, 2009, with hundreds of millions more watching online and on TV around the world, it marked the dawn of a new era in American politics.

When his predecessor, George W. Bush, had entered office eight years earlier, Obama was an obscure state senator still struggling to pay off his student loans and facing a debt from his failed campaign for Congress in 2000, wondering if he should give up on politics and pursue a more lucrative legal career. But on this day in 2009, Obama stood as the leader of the most powerful country on earth.

Since his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, people who listened to Obama were wondering, “Why can’t he be the president?” Obama was asking himself the same question. In January 2007, he answered it by defying conventional wisdom and announcing his campaign for president. Obama’s sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, recalled, “There was always a joke between my mom and Barack that he would be the first black president.”¹ Archbishop Desmond Tutu told Obama during his 2006 trip to Africa, “You are going to be a very credible presidential candidate.”²

But few pundits had much faith in Obama’s campaign. Conservative writer William Kristol famously declared, “Barack Obama is not going to beat Hillary Clinton in a single Democratic primary. I’ll predict that right now.”³ Like so much else Kristol has written, this prediction was dead wrong.

Yet despite Obama's celebrity status and best-selling books, despite the long campaign and endless reporting, Obama's beliefs and policies are still a mystery to many people. Obama was called the "Rorschach candidate."⁴ Of course, as with any other admired politician, people tend to see what they want in Obama. I have written this book as an attempt to understand and explain Obama's approach to politics and why so many people on both the left and the right misunderstand him.

Obama also became the world's biggest celebrity, with magazines and newspapers around the world plastering his face on their covers and front pages. Before he began his presidential race, Obama observed: "I am suspicious of hype. The fact that my 15 minutes of fame has extended a little longer than 15 minutes is somewhat surprising to me and completely baffling to my wife."⁵

This book is not a work of so-called objective journalism. There are, I hope, no "objective" journalists who care so little about the fate of the world that they are utterly indifferent about who is chosen to be the planet's most powerful leader.

I am an admirer of Barack Obama, and I want to make my biases clear, as they were clear a decade ago in my book about Newt Gingrich (whom I do not admire). However, this book is not hagiography. I was not part of Obama's campaign.

Too much of what was written about Obama consisted of horse-race stories about the latest poll numbers and his virile fundraising, paeans to his personal background, or cynical "scandal" stories that attempted to undercut his "clean" image with factually dubious attacks. The substance of Obama's ideas was often ignored by journalists and pundits, who then blamed Obama for lacking substance.

This book also is not a biography of Obama. He has already written two widely praised (and widely sold) books that fully describe his life. Instead, I wanted to write a political analysis of Obama, to understand his values and his plans for the country, and to explain why he represents a new kind of progressive political movement.

The first edition of this book, published in 2007 shortly before the first primaries were held, was subtitled "This Improbable Quest." This was a phrase from Obama's speech in Springfield, Illinois, on February 10, 2007, when he stood in front of 17,000 shivering, cold fans to announce his presidential plans and invite them to join "this improbable quest." It


was a highly appropriate description for a campaign that seemed unlikely to win against the powerful Clinton machine and the attacks of the right wing. But what seemed improbable in 2007 has come true.

This paperback edition includes some additional thoughts about the campaign and Obama's presidency, but I have left most of the original book untouched except for some minor corrections. Although Americans know much more about Obama than they did when he first announced his candidacy, the details about his record and his approach to politics still are often little understood or misunderstood. Obama's presidency makes this analysis more important than ever because it provides a guide for how he will act as commander in chief.

I wrote this book not only because I felt it was essential that people understand one of the most important progressive politicians in America but also because I knew Obama long before he was a global celebrity. More than a decade ago, I walked into my class on race, racism, and the law at the University of Chicago Law School and first encountered my teacher. In his early 30s, he looked younger than me. He was thoughtful, soft-spoken, and knowledgeable. He already had a reputation as an up-and-comer, but he was rational and sincere and honest, so I never imagined he could have a successful political career. Like so many other people have done, I underestimated Barack Obama.

Now, facing an economic crisis and the necessity of rebuilding the federal government's competence at home and abroad, Obama must prevail against the partisan and divisive spirit in Washington and bring Americans together to solve some of the worst problems facing a president since the Great Depression.

CHAPTER ONE



Generation Obama

The Youth Movement for Barack

Let's bring a new generation of leadership to America, and let's change this country together.

—Barack Obama

On December 10, 2006, in his first speech in New Hampshire, Obama said, “America is ready to turn the page. America is ready for a new set of challenges. This is our time. A new generation is prepared to lead.”¹

Obama’s announcement of his presidential run on February 10, 2007, in Springfield, Illinois, was filled with appeals to generational change. Obama declared, “Let us be the generation that reshapes our economy to compete in the digital age.... And as our economy changes, let’s be the generation that ensures our nation’s workers are sharing in our prosperity.... Let’s be the generation that ends poverty in America.... Let’s be the generation that finally tackles our health care crisis.... Let’s be the generation that finally frees America from the tyranny of oil.... Let’s be the generation that makes future generations proud of what we did here.”

According to fellow Illinois senator Dick Durbin, “I think he represents a generation change in American politics—much like 1960 with John Kennedy. He appeals to younger people and those who want to see real fundamental change in America.”² Simon Rosenberg, head of the New Democratic Network, said, “Obama has already established himself as the paramount leader of the next generation. There’s no one even close.”³

Obama has said that he looks at “some issues differently as a consequence of being of a slightly different generation.”⁷⁴ But there is no strong generational identity in the wake of the baby boomers, and what Obama calls for is not so much a repudiation of the 1960s generation as a fulfillment of some of its ideals. Obama suggested that he may have “a particular ability to bring the country together around a pragmatic, commonsense agenda for change that probably has a generational element to it as well.”⁷⁵ Obama declared in one speech, “America is ready for a new set of challenges. This is our time. A new generation is prepared to lead.”⁷⁶ He promised a new kind of politics instead of the “24-hour, slash-and-burn, negative-ad bickering, small-minded politics that doesn’t move us forward.”⁷⁷

As the first major politician of the post-baby boomer era, Barack Obama appeals to a group of “generation Xers” who have always lived in the shadow of the baby boomers and who have faced the generational accusation that those like Obama who grew up in the 1970s and early 1980s were self-centered and indifferent to social causes.

Obama has even more appeal to today’s college students, who are the children of baby boomers. For them, Ronald Reagan is a distant memory from the history books. It would be too extreme to suggest that today’s students are rebelling against their parents, seeking a unifying figure who can avoid the political and social schisms that have echoed since the 1960s. But Obama does represent a new kind of politics that seems perfectly tailored for this new generation. The Obama generation will be defined by his presidency, earning financial aid for college by working on community service projects and participating in expanded opportunities to get involved in public service.

Some of Obama’s approaches are about changing the rhetoric of politics, to bring a more inclusive style to political debate. But his aim is not civility for its own sake; Obama believes a more united politics can be more effective at making progress than the political divisions that have become so common today.

Obama and Community Organizing

The time Obama spent as a community organizer had a profound impact on his approach to politics. Obama was the director of the Developing Communities Project in the mid-1980s, spending four years organizing

African American neighborhoods on the segregated South Side of Chicago. In 1988, Obama wrote about his experience. Obama recalled being told, “I just cannot understand why a bright young man like you would go to college, get that degree and become a community organizer.” Obama answered, “It needs to be done, and not enough folks are doing it.”⁸

Obama considers his work in Chicago on political empowerment, economic development, and grassroots community organizing to be the “best education” he ever received.⁹ Obama noted, “Organizing teaches as nothing else does the beauty and strength of everyday people.”¹⁰

From his organizing work, Obama learned that “oftentimes ordinary citizens are taught that decisions are made based on the public interest or grand principles, when, in fact, what really moves things is money and votes and power.”¹¹ This was Obama’s first lesson that fighting against cynicism was a first step in political change.

Obama also learned the concept of “being predisposed to other people’s power.”¹² It is this idea of seeking to empower others, and not simply accumulating political power for himself, that helped Obama develop a new approach to politics.

In 2004, Obama went back to speak at a convention for the project he once worked on. Obama recalled, “I grew up to be a man, right here, in this area. It’s as a consequence of working with this organization and this community that I found my calling. There was something more than making money and getting a fancy degree. The measure of my life would be public service.”¹³

But progress wasn’t easy. Obama remembered, “Sometimes I called a meeting, and nobody showed up. Sometimes preachers said, ‘Why should I listen to you?’ Sometimes we tried to hold politicians accountable, and they didn’t show up. I couldn’t tell whether I got more out of it than this neighborhood.”¹⁴

Loretta Augustine-Herron, a member of the Calumet Community Religious Conference board that hired Obama to run the Developing Communities Project on Chicago’s South Side, recalled his approach: “You’ve got to do it right. Be open with the issues. Include the community instead of going behind the community’s back—and he would include people we didn’t like sometimes. You’ve got to bring people together. If you exclude people, you’re only weakening yourself. If you meet behind doors and make decisions for them, they’ll never take ownership of the issue.”¹⁵

As a candidate and president, Obama still shows his roots—a faith in ordinary citizens, a quest for common ground, and a pragmatic inclination toward defining issues in winnable ways. Reverend Alvin Love, one of the preachers Obama worked with, noted, “Everything I see reflects that community organizing experience. I see the consensus building, his connection to people and listening to their needs and trying to find common ground. I think at his heart Barack is a community organizer. I think what he’s doing now is that. It’s just a larger community to be organized.”¹⁶

Obama was influenced in his approach to community organizing by the theories of Saul Alinsky. In his book *Rules for Radicals* (1971), Alinsky preached the idea of “agitation,” which meant “challenging people to scrape away habit.” But unlike Alinsky, who largely abandoned electoral politics in favor of direct community organizing, Obama realized the potential of politics to change people’s lives on a mass scale. Obama learned from his four years as an organizer in Chicago about the problems faced by the poor and the difficulty of solving them.

Obama’s vision of leadership is a merger between traditional political activism and the community organizing preached by Alinsky, which eschewed electoral politics. One might call it “community politics.” This goal of Obama’s community politics differs greatly from community service, in which the more privileged members of society volunteer to help the poorer ones. As noble as that may be, it doesn’t create the kind of political empowerment sought by Obama. And community politics differs from the older traditions of machine politics because there is no political bribery involved and the goal is certainly not to use voting as a tool to maintain the power of the establishment. Instead, community politics aims to transform politics using the techniques of community organizing. Rather than top-down management where a politician simply presents policies to the public, Obama’s community organizing approach is to communicate with voters, listen to their suggestions, and convince them to buy in to a common set of proposals. In 2004, Michelle Obama observed, “Barack is not a politician first and foremost. He’s a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change.” Her husband responded, “I take that observation as a compliment.”¹⁷

The question is, can Obama’s new approach work? There are reasons for skepticism. No president has ever come from a community-organizing background or tried to bring such activism to an entire nation. The closest anyone has come since the Peace Corps under John F. Kennedy was George H. W.

Bush's lame "thousand points of light" to encourage volunteerism, and Bill Clinton's AmeriCorps program that institutionalized community service within American boundaries. But what Obama is proposing goes far beyond the boundaries of traditional community service volunteers. Obama wants to bring the spirit and tactics of community organizing into the political system, and there is no road map out there for how to do it.

Certainly, Obama has made use of the Internet as a new organizing tool. But the Internet is not a magical electronic solution to our problems. As a community organizer and politician, Obama believes in the hands-on approach to politics. He believes that if you want change to happen, you need to show up. That's why from the start of his campaign, he didn't rely just on traditional campaign appearances or Internet pleas for fundraising. He held a day of neighborhood meetings, organized via his website, to watch one of his town meetings and discuss it. He also held a neighborhood walk day, to encourage people to meet their neighbors to talk about Obama's candidacy. But Obama has also recognized that community politics has to be about more than his campaign. That's one reason why volunteers for Obama went around New Hampshire seeking signatures on a petition for withdrawal from Iraq, rather than making Obama the sole focus of their recruitment efforts.

The first days of the Obama administration provide a glimpse of what community politics will look like under this new president. During the transition, Obama established a website at change.gov where Americans could offer their ideas and personal experiences and apply for jobs in the Obama administration. Press Secretary Robert Gibbs responded to questions from Americans, and Obama's advisors held town meetings on subjects such as health care. The day before his inauguration, Obama led Americans around the country by participating in community service projects to mark Martin Luther King Jr. Day, leading by the example of his paint roller.

The transition included the Citizen's Briefing Book, where thousands of ideas were proposed by citizens and the best suggestions voted upon. Unfortunately, this approach was mocked in the mainstream press because some people proposed ideas such as investigating UFOs, and the Citizen's Briefing Book disappeared from the transition website after it was delivered to Obama. However, Obama can't give up on the idea of public involvement in policy debates even if online voting is not the best way to develop good ideas. He should create a national suggestion box where ideas for government reform and policy innovations can be proposed and receive

high-level follow-through. Obama is transforming his campaign structure into Organizing for America to encourage his supporters to help promote his reforms and build a grassroots political movement.

Obama's campaign (like that of every other candidate) was filled with consultants and advisers familiar with the ins and outs of traditional politics, but there were few community organizers helping him to merge politics with organizing. There are so many jobs already attached to the presidency—commander in chief, head diplomat, administrative chief, even national mourner—that the idea of adding organizer to the list is difficult if not impossible. But fixing a broken political system is one of the most important tasks of this president.

Obama and the Baby Boomers

Jonathan Alter observed in *Newsweek*, "The campaign will likely have an intra-boomer subplot. Born in 1961 at the end of the baby boom, Obama and his cohort were shaped by a more ironic and less ideological sensibility than those who came of age in the tumult of the '60s."¹⁹ Obama is a bridge between the baby boomers and this younger generation, as someone who has seen both the virtues and the flaws of the baby boomers and the 1960s era that (rightly or wrongly) has come to define them.

Obama has written, "I've always felt a curious relationship to the sixties."²⁰ As he noted, "In a sense, I'm a pure product of that era: As the child of a mixed marriage, my life would have been impossible, my opportunities entirely foreclosed, without the social upheavals that were then taking place."²¹ In his youth, Obama tried to follow the 1960s generational values: "In my teens, I became fascinated with the Dionysian, up-for-grabs quality of the era, and through books, film and music, I soaked in a vision of the sixties very different from the one my mother talked about: images of Huey Newton, the '68 Democratic National Convention, the Saigon airlift, and the Stones at Altamont. If I had no immediate reasons to pursue revolution, I decided nevertheless that in style and attitude I, too, could be a rebel, unconstrained by the received wisdom of the over-thirty crowd."²²

Obama realized, "Eventually my rejection of authority spilled into self-indulgence and self-destructiveness, and by the time I enrolled in college, I'd begun to see how any challenge to convention harbored within it the

possibility of its own excesses.”²³ This reflects Obama’s most conservative attitudes, his desire to find a middle ground between conventional thinking and mindless rebellion. Obama’s rejection of the 1960s is a product not merely of growing up as part of a later generation, but of personal maturity. Obama’s call for a new kind of politics is telling baby boomer politicians to grow up and get beyond petty political bickering.

Baby Boom Politics

A feature in the *Washingtonian* magazine noted, “Obama suddenly has found himself the standard-bearer for a generation.”²⁴ Obama’s crusade is not about generational warfare, of the young ganging up to defeat those aging baby boomers who now dominate our society and our politics. Obama is not interested in pitting the young against the old in some kind of “Don’t trust anyone over fifty” approach to politics. After all, the earlier variation of that slogan (“Don’t trust anyone over thirty”) was common in the 1960s when the baby boomers were growing up and generational divisions reached their peak in the climate of antiwar activism and the sexual revolution. As Obama noted, “there are plenty of politically engaged baby boomers who are tired of waiting to see the American Dream realized.”²⁵

Unlike the baby boomers, younger people today are not generational rebels singing songs “talkin’ about my generation.” Generations today are much harder to define because they are so diverse. Today’s younger generation may not exactly have great respect for their elders, but they also don’t have contempt. Perhaps one symbol of cross-generational partnership is the 1960s youth protest group Students for a Democratic Society, which was relaunched in 2006 by a new generation of students working hand in hand with old sixties radicals who have created the associated group Movement for a Democratic Society so that the protest movement doesn’t have an age limit.

What Obama represents is indeed a new generation of generational politics, but also a new generation of politics that transcends these artificial divisions. Eric Liu, a former Clinton speechwriter and policy aide, expressed the younger generation’s approach to the baby boomers: “Thank you, here’s your gold watch, it’s time for the personal style and political framework of the 1960s to get out of the way.”²⁶ Obama is not so dismissive about the baby boomers; nor does he neglect the accomplishments

of their generation: “The victories that the sixties generation brought about—the admission of minorities and women into full citizenship, the strengthening of individual liberties, and the healthy willingness to question authority—have made America a far better place for all its citizens. But what has been lost in the process, and has yet to be replaced, are those shared assumptions—that quality of trust and fellow feeling—that bring us together as Americans.”²⁷

Obama has said: “It feels as if many of the battles of the sixties have been refought, over and over again, and the cast of characters who were involved have taken a lot of the frameworks of the sixties—what it means to be a conservative, what it means to be a liberal—and just gone at it. And the country’s been very polarized and very divided as a consequence. And you do get a sense that there’s this hunger for a different kind of politics, one that I hope, at least, is strongly progressive, and recognizes the need for government to play a role in broadening opportunity for people, but that scrambles some of the old categories, and is less embedded in some of these old battles. And that, I think, is an enormous opportunity. I think that is an enormous opportunity particularly for Democrats.”²⁸

But Obama rejected the idea that age matters. Obama was interviewed by *New Yorker* writer David Remnick, who asked him if “it’s a way of saying that you need somebody younger than a baby boomer.” Obama resisted that idea: “No, because it could be attitudinal as well, but the point, though, is that I think the country wants something different.”²⁹ What makes Obama different from other candidates is not so much his age, but his approach to politics. And what he opposes is not an older generation of politicians, but a particular brand of politics based in ideological warfare.

Chris Lehane, a former Clinton White House official, observed that “2008 will represent a hinge moment in generational politics, not just because of the prominence of a post-boomer candidate but because this will be the first cycle when a whole new range of issues as big, if not bigger, than the big issues that defined the boomers will be front and center: Iraq, the war on terror, global warming, energy, technology and globalization.”³⁰

John Heilemann in *New York Magazine* noted that Obama “promises to deliver us from the tired and tiresome contours—the moralism, narcissism, condescension, and histrionics—of civic discourse as practiced by the baby boom generation. The essence of Obama’s pitch is that it’s time to move past the old politics and that he’s the embodiment of the new. And after

the scorched-earth tactics and wretched polarization of the Clinton-Bush years, anyone who dismisses the potency of that message hasn't been paying attention."³¹

In a world no longer defined by the cold war and instead facing new challenges, Obama offers a new generation's approach to these new problems. There is no guarantee that Obama's approach is a better way of solving problems, but it represents a break from the past that offers hope of a more united politics.

The Clinton/Bush Generation

Obama's generational differences have been highlighted because of the particular baby boomers who have prevailed in recent American political fights, such as Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and George W. Bush. Few baby boomers would call these men the best representatives of their generation.

Obama wrote in *The Audacity of Hope*, "In the back and forth between Clinton and Gingrich, and in the elections of 2000 and 2004, I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the baby boom generation—a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago—played out on the national stage."³²

In many ways, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush represent the worst stereotypes of the baby boomer generation. Both Clinton and Bush were among the elite boomers who used their connections to dodge the draft during the Vietnam War. Bush's family name got him special admission to the Texas Air National Guard, where he was virtually guaranteed not to be sent to war, and he even failed to show up for duty while he was serving.

Clinton and Bush also had notorious habits of lying. Both of them concealed their illicit drug use. Clinton reluctantly admitted to trying marijuana but claimed that he "didn't inhale." Bush concealed his drunk driving arrest and refused to answer questions about his use of cocaine and other illegal drugs in his twenties. By contrast, Obama has been open about using cocaine and marijuana during a troubled time in high school and college, but he is forthright about condemning such drugs.

Clinton's deceit reached its high point during the Monica Lewinsky scandal when he angrily insisted, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" and then attempted to parse the meanings of "what 'is' is" to avoid

taking responsibility. Bush, declaring that he would bring back integrity to the White House, instead brought the art of political lying to new heights by using deceit to start a war in Iraq.

Those of us who were too young to be involved in the 1960s protests can sometimes be astonished when we read the history books about what happened then: the protests, the sit-ins, the campus shutdowns, the violent actions on both sides. To people filled with protest nostalgia, the 1960s were an era that can seem glorious in comparison to today's smaller and less controversial campus protests. One hallmark of today's generation of students, even among political activists, is their extraordinary politeness. Little wonder, then, that Obama has gained so much support among youth. He shares their same sense of being earnest and polite, of recognizing that devotion to political change isn't measured by marches and sit-ins, but by taking control of the political system and using it as a force for good. *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert observed, "When Senator Obama talks about bringing a new kind of politics to the national scene, he's talking about something that would differ radically from the relentlessly vicious, sleazy, mendacious politics that have plagued the country throughout the Bush-Clinton years. Whether he can pull that off is an open question."³³

Some pundits questioned whether a campaign based on principles of unity could succeed in a political climate fundamentally opposed to that approach, where Obama's version of politics was dismissed as naive or simpleminded. As Obama's chief campaign advisor David Axelrod put it, "Do we have a strategy to tear people down? We don't. And maybe that's incredibly naive, and maybe that is not feasible in modern politics. But we believe it is, and we believe it's important to run a campaign like that."³⁴

Obama and the Culture Warriors

Obama also represents a kind of cease-fire in the culture wars. On one hand, he supports traditional liberal (and very popular) positions on abortion rights, freedom from censorship, and equal rights for all. His background includes experience with illegal drugs, like many of those in his generation, but he is unafraid to reveal these personal facts.

On the other hand, Obama evokes religious imagery and ideas in his talks, which is certainly not a traditional liberal stand (beyond purely symbolic invocations). He has expressed personal opposition to gay marriage (although he supports civil unions). There is something affectionately old-fashioned about some of Obama's views, such as when he denounces graduation ceremonies for eighth-graders as a silly attempt at esteem-building or when he worries about the embarrassment of watching TV with his daughters and an erectile dysfunction commercial is shown.

Even conservatives see the power of Obama's generational appeal. John Fund, editor of the *Wall Street Journal's* right-wing editorial page, observed, "Many voters want to get beyond the stale culture-war issues fought over by rival camps of baby boomers."³⁵ Michael Barone, a senior writer at *U.S. News and World Report*, observed, "There is clearly a demand in the political marketplace for candidates who can rise above the bitter partisanship that has dominated our politics since Bill Clinton took office in 1993. That partisanship has been bitter in part because Clinton and George W. Bush—both born in the leadoff baby boom year of 1946—happen to have personal characteristics that Americans on opposite sides of the cultural divide absolutely loathe. . . . Too many people have come to regard the views of the other side as not only wrong, but evil."³⁶ Barone concluded, "Obama, by emphasizing what Americans of differing views have in common, invites us to an era of less bitter partisanship."³⁷

By no means can Obama be called a cultural conservative. But he is someone who understands religious conservatives and often sympathizes with their concerns even while he opposes most of their policies. Obama has learned many lessons from the 1960s, both the social change it inspired and the failures found in some of its excesses. Obama is proposing a paradoxical generational politics that's about transcending generations in the same way that it's about transcending party boundaries.

The New Political Generation

According to PBS commentator Bill Moyers, "Obama represents a generational metaphor. He opens up new gates so that younger people can feel that there's opportunity for them, that they can come in with him and create new possibilities."³⁸

Obama inspired a mass movement of young progressives who were truly excited by a candidate for the first time. A March 2007 Harvard Institute of Politics survey found that Obama led all presidential candidates among 18- to 24-year-olds, who supported him at levels 50 percent above the general population in polls. Obama is especially popular among college students.³⁹ As Reverend Jesse Jackson observed, "This movement with Barack will ensure more people will register to vote and more youth participation."⁴⁰

Obama's vision of politics is reflected in how he decided to run for president. As much as it is possible for any presidential candidate today, Obama was drafted to run. It was the public demand for his books, the public's interest that spurred media profiles, and the various online "Draft Obama" movements that helped persuade Obama to run. Of course, Obama wanted to be president, and the choice was ultimately his. But it was the thirst for a new kind of politics that helped Obama decide that the time was now.

Obama on Drugs

One issue that exposed the disconnect between Obama's appeal and the conventional wisdom of an older generation in Washington is his admitted drug use. A front-page story in the *Washington Post* focused on Obama's use of drugs as a teenager that he reveals in his 1995 book, *Dreams from My Father*: "Pot had helped, and booze; maybe a little blow when you could afford it. Not smack, though."⁴¹ At the time, Obama reflected on the dangers of drug use: "Junkie. Pothead. That's where I'd been headed: the final, fatal role of the young would-be black man."⁴²

But Obama's honesty in addressing the drug issue reflects the generational change in politics. Most voters no longer care about youthful drug use; they're much more worried about having an honest person in the White House. Back in 1992, Bill Clinton answered a question about his past drug use by saying that he had tried marijuana, but he "didn't inhale." It was a typical Clintonesque answer that foreshadowed some of his later evasions about "what the meaning of 'is' is." When Obama appeared on the *Tonight Show*, Jay Leno asked, "Remember, senator, you are under oath. Did you inhale?" Obama replied, "That was the point."⁴³ Some conservatives

worried that Obama was making light of illicit drug use; in reality, he was making fun of the old-style politicians who thought they could fool the voters with dishonesty.

The fear that Obama's use of cocaine might make him unelectable reflects an old style of thinking. According to conservative columnist Robert Novak, "When the American people find a presidential candidate who has used cocaine, this is not a good thing. It is a burden to carry."⁴⁴ Of course, Obama almost certainly isn't the first person to use cocaine and then run for president. Plenty of presidential candidates would have used the drug when it was legal a century ago and a common medicinal ingredient, even found in Coca-Cola for a time. And George W. Bush probably used cocaine, since he refused to deny doing so before 1974. Bush stopped showing up for his National Guard duty shortly after a new order required random drug tests.⁴⁵

But Obama was the first presidential candidate honest enough to talk in detail about some of the troubles of his youth. This accounted for some of his appeal among younger voters, since he shared his experience rather than trying to cover it up for political advantage. Garth Corriveau, a New Hampshire lawyer, told the *Boston Globe* after an Obama event, "I just turned 30, and the only politics I've known have been divisive. I'm ready for a new kind of politics, and I hope he's the one who can deliver it."⁴⁶ One Republican college student drove three hours to hear Obama speak in Iowa, declaring that "Barack's attitude is awesome. . . . Barack's the only Democrat I'd vote for."⁴⁷

The Myth of Generation I

Like Obama's generation X and the baby boomers before them, the new generation of youth has been smeared with accusations that they are self-centered and spoiled. Brian Williams on the *NBC Nightly News* proclaimed about today's college students, "They're just self-centered enough to be called the Me Generation."⁴⁸ His comment was based on a study by Jean Twenge of San Diego State University, who concluded that narcissism among students is a problem proved by increasing scores on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI). In 2006, two-thirds of college freshman scored above average on the NPI, an increase of 30

percent compared to 1982.⁴⁹ Twenge, the author of *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable than Ever Before*, argues that young people suffer from a sense of entitlement and vanity.⁵⁰

However, the NPI is a deeply flawed survey, and many of the statements in the NPI reflect positive values, not narcissism. “I think I am a special person” is a measure of hope and potential, not necessarily self-centeredness. “I can live my life any way I want to” reflects personal freedom, not narcissism. “I have often met people who were supposed to be experts who were no better than I” reveals a healthy skepticism about authorities.⁵¹ Agreement with the phrase, “If I ruled the world, it would be a better place” is caused by the general belief of most Americans that they could do a better job than George W. Bush did. Do we really want college students who think they’re dull and unimportant, who feel compelled to live lives they don’t want, who think they’re not competent to be leaders? Optimism and confidence aren’t dangers to be feared, but goals to be pursued.

The myth of “generation I” is refuted by the skyrocketing levels of community service among young people, despite the growing cost of college that causes many students to work long hours. A study by the Corporation for National and Community Service found that volunteer activities reported by college students increased 20 percent from 2002 to 2005.⁵² The Higher Education Research Institute’s 2005 survey of college freshmen discovered that feelings of social and civic responsibility were at the highest level in 25 years. Political engagement has also reached unprecedented heights. The Higher Education Research Institute’s survey of college students in Fall 2008 found that 35.6 percent of first-year students reported they frequently discuss politics, the highest level ever recorded and more than double the response in 2000.⁵³ And 85.9 percent of students frequently or occasionally discussed politics, another record.

Twenge cites an example of narcissism: “By its very name, MySpace encourages attention-seeking, as does YouTube.”⁵⁴ But social networking sites aren’t narcissistic; they are a way to reach out to the larger world. However, unlike passively watching the nightly news, social networking requires its users to define themselves and create their own profiles.

It is not surprising that Obama’s campaign generated far more interest on social networking sites than has any other politician’s. Obama’s MySpace

page reached 160,000 friends, up until an April 2007 dispute between the Obama campaign and the volunteer who originally started the page.⁵⁵ An Obama Facebook page had over 200,000 supporters (along with 60,000 members of Students for Barack Obama) within two weeks of his announcement for president, while his competitors had only a few thousand members.⁵⁶ Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's Internet campaign manager in 2004, observed about Obama's Internet presence: "It took our campaign six months to get 139,000 people on an e-mail list. It took one Facebook group, what, barely a month to get 200,000? That's astronomical."⁵⁷ Obama drew thousands of people to a George Mason University rally organized online by Students for Barack Obama using Facebook shortly after he announced his plans to run for president.⁵⁸ Obama hadn't even met the student organizers until he arrived at the event.⁵⁹ By March 1, 2007, just a few weeks after Obama began his campaign, his website My.BarackObama.com attracted 3,306 grassroots volunteer groups, 4,416 personal fundraising pages, 6,706 personal blogs, and 38,799 people with individual profiles building networks to support Obama.⁶⁰ Peter Suderman of *National Review* noted, "Obama's social-network campaigning is unmatched."⁶¹

Even a small dispute over Obama's Myspace page didn't halt Obama's unprecedented rise on the web. A volunteer for Obama had started Obama's MySpace page and later worked with the Obama campaign to get 160,000 friends. However, when the volunteer asked for \$50,000 to transfer the webpage and then cut off the Obama campaign's access to it, Obama's workers went to MySpace and took control of the page (as anyone can do when someone else starts up a MySpace page in his or her name).

The Internet helped create the organizing community that Obama envisions. His history as a community organizer in Chicago guided how Obama shaped his campaign. The model for community organizing is to hear from the people affected by the problem and help them to shape a solution. Rather than announcing a detailed health care plan, Obama instead held meetings and webcasts on health care, with an opportunity for people to submit their stories and ideas for changing policy to Obama.

Of course, this new age of decentralized politics takes much of the power out of the hands of political consultants and puts it into the grasp of individuals. One result was the infamous "1984" parody ad, produced by Obama supporter Phil de Vellis, that was viewed by far more than a million people on YouTube. The video took the classic 1984 Apple

commercial and put Hillary Clinton in the place of Big Brother, her face on a gigantic screen uttering political platitudes to an obedient audience, before an Obama supporter shatters it with a sledgehammer. This idea of Obama as some kind of rebel force against the dominant political machine was exaggerated, of course. Hillary Clinton wasn't Big Sister. Obama wasn't the leader of a rebel army. He is comfortable working within the political system and being effective at it. But there was a kernel of truth in this video, and Obama's approach to using the technology of the Internet reflected his new approach to politics.

The Voting Generation

One characteristic of this new generation is a commitment to electoral politics. In 2004, 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-old citizens voted, compared to only 36 percent in 2000. This increase of nearly one-third (11 percentage points) was far higher than the overall increase in voting rates from 60 percent to 64 percent. The number of young voters increased from 8.6 million to 11.6 million in just one election, an unprecedented increase that continued in 2008.⁶² At colleges around the country, students stood for hours in line to vote at precincts overwhelmed by the demand.

And these young voters are not only voting more, they are voting differently. Unlike the generation who grew up under Ronald Reagan's presidency, who tended to vote Republican more than older voters (even though the younger people were more likely to hold liberal social values), this new generation is the most liberal since the 1960s. According to exit polls in 2006, young people (18 to 29) preferred Democrats 58 percent to 38 percent over Republicans, compared to a gap of only 52 percent to 45 percent for voters of all ages. Among young voters, the gap in party identification was 43 percent Democrat and 31 percent Republican, compared to a 38 percent to 35 percent margin for Democrats among all ages.⁶³

Obama had already brought in a new generation of voters. He led a movement in the Chicago area in 1992 that registered 150,000 new voters—mostly African Americans—and helped Carol Moseley Braun narrowly win a primary and general election to become the first black woman elected to the U.S. Senate.⁶⁴ Obama's appeal to voters disenchanted with conventional politics brought many new voters into the political process.

The Cynical Generation

Obama is fond of criticizing cynicism. At a Democratic National Committee meeting, Obama proclaimed: "Our rivals won't be one another, and I would assert it won't even be the other party. It's going to be cynicism that we're fighting against. It's the cynicism that's borne from decades of disappointment, amplified by talk radio and 24-hour news cycles, reinforced by the relentless pounding of negative ads that have become the staple of modern politics. It's a cynicism that asks us to believe that our opponents are never just wrong, but they're bad; that our motives in politics can never be pure, that they're only driven by power and by greed; that the challenges that we face today aren't just daunting, but they're impossible."⁶⁵

Obama's perspective proved puzzling to pundits trained for cynicism. Conservative MSNBC host Tucker Carlson complained about Obama's critique of cynicism, "What the hell does that mean? I mean, is it—is it too sort of high flown to be a political message?"⁶⁶ Obama argued that if the cynics were right, "politics is not a noble calling, it's a game, it's a blood sport with folks keeping score about who's up and who's down. At best, it's a diversion." According to Obama, "With such cynicism, government doesn't become a force of good, a means of giving people the opportunity to lead better lives; it just becomes an obstacle for people to get rid of. Too often, this cynicism makes us afraid to say what we believe. It makes us fearful. We don't trust the truth."⁶⁷

However, Obama's vision of cynicism is a narrow point of view. Cynicism, strictly speaking, refers to an intelligent skepticism about our political system. Cynicism is a very useful thing. It doesn't create apathy. Instead, it creates an unmet desire for better candidates and better politics. Cynicism is dangerous only if it develops into resignation, into an acceptance of the way things are now in politics, of the corruption and pork in Washington, of the partisan bickering and inability to get things done in government. Obama noted about cynicism, "It's caused our politics to become small and timid, calculating and cautious. We spend all our time thinking about tactics and maneuvers, knowing that if we spoke the truth, we address the issues with boldness, that we might be labeled—it might lead to our defeat."⁶⁸ But Obama has it reversed; the truth is that cynicism is created by political corruption, not vice versa. Our politics is small and timid and calculating because it appeases big money interests and political consultants, not because of the cynicism of the public. The

public becomes cynical because it sees the small and timid politics that dominate Washington.

Even if Obama is mistaken about the basic causes of our political problems, he understands the consequences clearly. According to Obama, “We internalize those fears. We edit ourselves. We censor our best instincts. It’s America that suffers most from this can’t-do, won’t-do, won’t-even-try style of politics. At the very moment when Americans are feeling anxious about the future, uncertain as to whether their children are going to have better lives than they do, we’ve been asked to narrow our hopes, diminish our dreams.”⁶⁹

Obama’s way of fighting cynicism is unusual. Most critics of cynicism equate it with political compromise and seek a purer ideological commitment as the solution to cynics. Obama has a very different approach, rejecting the constraints of ideological warfare. For Obama, cynicism is a type of hopelessness, a way of giving up on the political process when it fails to live up to our ideals. To Obama, political compromise is necessary for participation in the democratic system, and so he opposes the cynic who would rather walk away from politics than experience the disappointment of falling short of ideals.⁷⁰

Obama also recognizes the essential difference between having faith in the potential for politics and having blind faith in the current political system. As Obama noted, “We don’t want another election where voters are simply holding their noses and feel like they’re choosing the lesser of two evils. So we’ve got to rise up out of the cynicism that’s become so pervasive and ask the people all across America to start believing again.”⁷¹ Ultimately, Obama is fighting against cynicism because so many people have heard politicians make and break promises about changing politics or leading America in a different direction that few voters believe it anymore.

Cynicism, then, has been a double-edged sword for Obama. As an outsider to conventional politics, he needed to convince the public that something was wrong in Washington. Yet he also needed to persuade people that change was still possible. It’s part of the meaning behind the title of Obama’s book *The Audacity of Hope*, since it is audacious to hope for political change when so many other politicians have disappointed us. But if people give up all hope, the result will be a kind of cynicism that makes change impossible, and that’s what Obama is fighting against.

One of those cynics is Obama’s wife. Michelle Obama has admitted, “I’m one of the skeptics that Barack often talks about. Like most people, my view

about politics—and it’s evolved, but it had been—that politics is for dirty, nasty people who aren’t trying to do much in the world.” Although she voted regularly, she said, “I think that I had become cynical like many people.”⁷²

Cynicism and Political Culture

Cynicism is also a part of our larger culture, but the term is often misunderstood. Based on one study linking the *Daily Show* to cynicism, the *Washington Post* reported that Jon Stewart “may be poisoning democracy.”⁷³

A study by Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan Morris of East Carolina University tested students by showing them 2004 campaign coverage from the *Daily Show* and the CBS *Evening News* and asking them to respond to statements such as “I trust the news media to cover political events fairly and accurately.” Perhaps not surprisingly, the *Daily Show* viewers were less likely to trust the media and more likely to have negative views of John Kerry and George W. Bush. The researchers claimed, “Ultimately, negative perceptions of candidates could have participation implications by keeping more youth from the polls.”⁷⁴

So why did a generation watching the *Daily Show* vote in such astonishing numbers? The answer is that the researchers’ basic premise is wrong. Students had negative perceptions of the candidates, the media, and the political process, but they still voted. The problem is not with the negative perceptions of young people, but with the negative qualities of the candidates. By the reasoning of those academics, Obama’s own criticisms of Washington politics might be thought to enhance cynicism. But the opposite is true: Change can only happen when people perceive a problem with existing political institutions.

A different study found that watching the *Daily Show* made people more knowledgeable about politics. The 2004 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that Americans asked six questions about their political knowledge got an average of 45 percent correct. Viewers of Jay Leno or David Letterman got 49 percent correct, while viewers of the *Daily Show* got 60 percent correct. Young people watching the *Daily Show* were more knowledgeable about basic political questions than those reading a daily newspaper or watching the network news.⁷⁵ This knowledge is part of what drives new voters, since the *Daily Show* and similar programs are more

popular than the mainstream media among youth. One study indicated that 48 percent of young people watch the *Daily Show*, double the number who follow traditional TV news programs.⁷⁶

The students entering college today have never lived in a world where anyone other than a Clinton or a Bush was president. They have grown up in a country where the president has always been the punch line to a disturbing joke, whether it's about blow jobs in the Oval Office or an incompetent guy too stupid to speak English correctly. Oddly enough, this disturbing view of the most powerful person in the world hasn't led young people into the depths of apathy and cynicism. This seems even stranger for a generation that has grown up watching the *Daily Show* or David Letterman's "Great Moments in Presidential Speeches," who saw a president's administration lie about weapons of mass destruction, where the smoking gun wasn't a mushroom cloud, it was a smokescreen.

How does a generation react when their president is a liar? Certainly, cynicism and apathy are two responses. But political failure also can create an opportunity for change. When President Richard Nixon resigned in disgrace because of his lies and cover-ups, many young people reacted not with despair but with optimism, and a new generation of journalists aspired to match Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's work. Of course, blaming the younger generation is a perpetual hobby. Back on March 25, 1971, Nixon met with student body presidents from various colleges and then complained about it afterward to H. R. Haldeman. Nixon was annoyed that "we have to sit and talk to these little jackasses." According to Nixon, "The softness of this younger [generation] is just unbelievable." Nixon and Haldeman agreed that television was to blame and lamented having to do "this therapy meeting with the little assholes."⁷⁷

Unlike Nixon, Barack Obama sees the younger generation as a source of hope rather than annoyance. Obama told thousands of students at George Mason University, "You guys don't have much of a memory of a politics that transcends and brings people together."⁷⁸ Obama observed, "I think there is a great hunger for change in the country—and not just policy change. What I also think they are looking for is change in tone and a return to some notion of the common good and some sense of cooperation, of pragmatism over ideology. I'm a stand-in for that right now."⁷⁹

But Obama is not promoting a Pollyanna vision of the world, where all of the problems can be solved by positive feelings or the mere belief that

we can fix everything. Obama's idealism is always tempered by realism and a recognition that progress comes in small steps rather than grandiose plans for transforming society. This is what distinguishes him from previous candidates who ran against the Washington establishment.

Obama offered an unusual combination of idealism and pragmatism. He strongly believes in fundamental principles, but he is unafraid of compromising in order to move closer to those ideals. This is unique among politicians seeking the presidency. Some candidates (almost always losers) have been idealists firmly espousing their goals. Others have been pragmatic politicians working the system. What Obama represented is the idea that idealism and pragmatism are not opposites of political life, but positions that can reinforce and support each other. Idealism is more pure when it can be effective. Pragmatism is more effective when it has an ideal pushing behind it.

Obama's 2004 DNC Speech

In his 2004 speech to the Democratic National Convention, Obama asked: "Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or a politics of hope?" Obama is not naive; as he observed, "I'm not talking about blind optimism here—the almost willful ignorance that thinks unemployment will go away if we just don't talk about it, or the health care crisis will solve itself if we just ignore it." Instead, Obama was talking about his optimistic belief that "this country will reclaim its promise, and out of this long political darkness a brighter day will come." Obama called it "the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too."

Obama's new approach to politics turns conventional language on its head. He told the DNC in 2007, "We've been told that consensus on any issue is no longer possible, that we should settle for tinkering around the edges, year after year after year. And along the way we've lost our faith in the political process. We don't really think that we can transform this country." This was a lecture to the Democratic Party about its many, many faults. But it was also an example of Obama reminding himself not to listen too closely to the consultants and the pundits. Obama was talking about himself as much as he was talking about anyone else.