

Sunday, Oct. 15, 2006

The Fresh Face

By Joe Klein

It is 9 A.M. on a fresh, sunny Saturday in Rockford, Ill., and nearly a thousand people have gathered in the gymnasium at Rock Valley College to participate in a town meeting with their Senator, Barack Obama. It is an astonishingly large crowd for a beautiful Saturday morning, but Obama--whose new book, *The Audacity of Hope*, is excerpted starting on page 52--has become an American political phenomenon in what seems about a nanosecond, and the folks are giddy with anticipation. "We know he's got the charisma," says Bertha McEwing, who has lived in Rockford for more than 50 years. "We want to know if he's got the brains." Just then there is a ripple through the crowd, then gasps, cheers and applause as Obama lopez into the gym with a casual, knees-y stride. "Missed ya," he says, moving to the microphone, and he continues greeting people over raucous applause. "Tired of Washington."

There's a sly hipster syncopation to his cadence, "Been stuck there for a while." But the folksiness pretty much disappears when he starts answering questions. Obama's actual speaking style is quietly conversational, low in rhetoric-saturated fat; there is no harrumph to him. About halfway through the hour-long meeting, a middle-aged man stands up and says what seems to be on everyone's mind, with appropriate passion: "Congress hasn't done a damn thing this year. I'm tired of the politicians blaming each other. We should throw them all out and start over!"

"Including me?" the Senator asks.

A chorus of n-o-o-o-s. "Not you," the man says. "You're brand new." Obama wanders into a casual disquisition about the sluggish nature of democracy. The answer is not even remotely a standard, pre-taped political response. He moves through some fairly arcane turf, talking about how political gerrymandering has led to a generation of politicians who come from safe districts where they don't have to consider the other side of the debate, which has made compromise--and therefore legislative progress--more difficult. "That's why I favored Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposal last year, a nonpartisan commission to draw the congressional-district maps in California. Too bad it lost." The crowd is keeping up with Obama, listening closely as he segues into a detailed discussion of the federal budget. Eventually, he realizes he has been filibustering and apologizes to the crowd for "making a speech." No one seems to care, since Obama is doing something pretty rare in latter-day American politics: he is respecting their intelligence. He's a liberal, but not a screechy partisan. Indeed, he seems obsessively eager to find common ground with conservatives. "It's such a relief after all the screaming you see on TV," says Chuck Sweeny, political editor of the Rockford Register Star. "Obama is reaching out. He's saying the other side isn't evil. You can't imagine how powerful a message that is for an audience like this."

Obama's personal appeal is made manifest when he steps down from the podium and is swarmed by well-wishers of all ages and hues, although the difference in reaction between whites and blacks is subtly striking. The African Americans tend to be fairly reserved--quiet pride, knowing nods and be-careful-now looks. The white people, by contrast, are out of control. A nurse named Greta, just off a 12-hour shift, tentatively reaches out to touch the Senator's sleeve. "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! I just touched a future President! I can't believe it!" She is literally shaking with delight--her voice is quivering--as she asks Obama for an autograph and then a hug.

Indeed, as we traveled that Saturday through downstate Illinois and then across the Mississippi into the mythic presidential-campaign state of Iowa, Obama seemed the political equivalent of a rainbow--a sudden preternatural event inspiring awe and ecstasy. Bill Gluba, a longtime Democratic activist who sells real estate on both sides of the river in the Quad Cities area, reminisced about driving Bobby Kennedy around Davenport, Iowa, on May 14, 1968. "I was just a teenaged kid," he says. "But I'll never forget the way people reacted to Kennedy. Never seen anything like it since--until this guy." The question of when Obama--who has not yet served two years in the U.S. Senate--will run for President is omnipresent. That he will eventually run, and win, is assumed by almost everyone who comes to watch him speak. In Davenport a local reporter asks the question directly: "Are you running for President in 2008?" Obama surprises me by saying he's just thinking about the 2006 election right now, which, in the semiotic dance of presidential politics, is definitely not a no. A few days later, I ask Obama the obvious follow-up question: Will he think about running for President in 2008 when the congressional election is over? "When the election is over and my book tour is done, I will think about how I can be most useful to the country and how I can reconcile that with being a good dad and a good husband," he says carefully, and then adds, "I haven't completely decided or unraveled that puzzle yet."

Which is even closer to a yes--or, perhaps, it's just a clever strategy to gin up some publicity at the launch of his book tour. The current Obama mania is reminiscent of the Colin Powell mania of September 1995, when the general--another political rainbow--leveraged speculation that he might run for President into book sales of 2.6 million copies for his memoir, *My American Journey*. Powell and Obama have another thing in common: they are black people who--like Tiger Woods, Oprah Winfrey and Michael Jordan--seem to have an iconic power over the American imagination because they transcend racial stereotypes. "It's all about gratitude," says essayist Shelby Steele, who frequently writes about the psychology of race. "White people are just thrilled when a prominent black person comes along and doesn't rub their noses in racial guilt. White people just go crazy over people like that."

When I asked Obama about this, he began to answer before I finished the question. "There's a core decency to the American people that doesn't get enough attention," he said, sitting in his downtown Chicago office, casually dressed in jeans and a dark blue shirt. "Figures like Oprah, Tiger, Michael

Jordan give people a shortcut to express their better instincts. You can be cynical about this. You can say, It's easy to love Oprah. It's harder to embrace the idea of putting more resources into opportunities for young black men--some of whom aren't so lovable. But I don't feel that way. I think it's healthy, a good instinct. I just don't want it to stop with Oprah. I'd rather say, If you feel good about me, there's a whole lot of young men out there who could be me if given the chance."

But that's not quite true. There aren't very many people--ebony, ivory or other--who have Obama's distinctive portfolio of talents, or what he calls his "exotic" family history. His parentage was the first thing he chose to tell us about himself when he delivered his knockout keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004: his father was from Kenya and his mother from Kansas. He told the story in brilliant, painful detail in his first book, *Dreams from My Father*, which may be the best-written memoir ever produced by an American politician. His parents met at the University of Hawaii and stayed together only briefly. His father left when Obama was 2 years old, and Barack was raised in Hawaii by his Kansas grandparents, except for a strange and adventurous four-year interlude when he lived in Indonesia with his mother and her second husband. As a teenager at Hawaii's exclusive Punahou prep school and later as a college student, Obama road tested black rage, but it was never a very good fit. There was none of the crippling psychological legacy of slavery in his family's past. He was African and American, as opposed to African American, although he certainly endured the casual cruelties of everyday life--in the new book, he speaks of white people mistaking him for a valet-parking attendant--that are visited upon nonwhites in America. "I had to reconcile a lot of different threads growing up--race, class," he told me. "For example, I was going to a fancy prep school, and my mother was on food stamps while she was getting her Ph.D." Obama believes his inability to fit neatly into any group or category explains his relentless efforts to understand and reconcile opposing views. But the tendency is so pronounced that it almost seems an obsessive-compulsive tic. I counted no fewer than 50 instances of excruciatingly judicious on-the-one-hand-on-the-other-handedness in *The Audacity of Hope*. At one point, he considers the historic influence of ideological extremists--that is, people precisely unlike him. "It has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise, that has created the conditions for liberty," he writes about the antislavery movement of the 19th century. "Knowing this, I can't summarily dismiss those possessed of similar certainty today--the antiabortion activist ... the animal rights activist who raids a laboratory--no matter how deeply I disagree with their views. I am robbed even of the certainty of uncertainty--for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute."

Yikes. But then Obama is nothing if not candid about his uncertainties and imperfections. In *Dreams from My Father*, which was written before he became a politician, he admits to cocaine and marijuana use and also to attending socialist meetings. In *The Audacity of Hope*, I counted 28 impolitic or self-deprecating admissions. Immediately, on page 3, he admits to political "restlessness," which is another way of saying he's ambitious. He flays himself for enjoying private jets, which eliminate the cramped frustrations of commercial flying but--on the other hand!--isolate him from the problems of average

folks. He admits that his 2004 Senate opponent, Alan Keyes, got under his skin. He blames himself for "tensions" in his marriage; he doubts his "capacities" as a husband and father. He admits a nonpopulist affinity for Dijon mustard; he cops to being "grumpy" in the morning. He even offers his media consultant David Axelrod's opinions about the best negative TV ads that could have been used against him in the 2004 Senate campaign. (He once--accidentally, he says--voted against a bill to "protect our children from sex offenders.")

There is a method to this anguish. Self-deprecation and empathy are powerful political tools. Obama's candor is reminiscent of John McCain, who once said of his first marriage, "People wouldn't think so highly of me if they knew more about that." Obama's empathy is reminiscent of Bill Clinton, although the Senator's compassion tends to be less damp than Clinton's: it's more about understanding your argument than feeling your pain. Both those qualities have been integral to Obama's charm from the start. His Harvard Law School classmate Michael Froman told me Obama was elected president of the Law Review, the first African American to hold that prestigious position, because of his ability to win over the conservatives in their class. "It came down to Barack and a guy named David Goldberg," Froman recalls. "Most of the class were liberals, but there was a growing conservative Federalist Society presence, and there were real fights between right and left about almost every issue. Barack won the election because the conservatives thought he would take their arguments into account."

After three years as a civil rights lawyer and law professor in Chicago, Obama was elected to the Illinois state senate and quickly established himself as different from most of the other African-American legislators. "He was passionate in his views," says state senator Dave Syverson, a Republican committee chairman who worked on welfare reform with Obama. "We had some pretty fierce arguments. We went round and round about how much to spend on day care, for example. But he was not your typical party-line politician. A lot of Democrats didn't want to have any work requirement at all for people on welfare. Barack was willing to make that deal."

The raising and dashing of expectations is at the heart of almost every great political drama. In Obama's case, the expectations are ridiculous. He transcends the racial divide so effortlessly that it seems reasonable to expect that he can bridge all the other divisions--and answer all the impossible questions--plaguing American public life. He encourages those expectations by promising great things--at least, in the abstract. "This country is ready for a transformative politics of the sort that John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Franklin Roosevelt represented," he told me. But those were politicians who had big ideas or were willing to take big risks, and so far, Barack Obama hasn't done much of either. With the exception of a bipartisan effort with ultra-conservative Senator Tom Coburn of Oklahoma to publish every government contract--a matter of some embarrassment to their pork-loving colleagues--his record has been predictably liberal. And the annoying truth is, The Audacity of Hope isn't very audacious.

A few weeks ago, I watched Obama give a speech about alternative energy to an audience gathered by MoveOn.org at Georgetown University. It was supposed to be a big deal, one of three speeches MoveOn had scheduled to lay out its 2008 issues agenda, a chance for the best-known group of activist Democrats to play footsie with the party's most charismatic speaker, and vice versa. But it was a disappointment, the closest I had seen Obama come to seeming a standard-issue pol, one who declares a crisis and answers with Band-Aids. In this case, he produced a few scraggly carrots and sticks to encourage Detroit to produce more fuel-efficient cars. The audience of students and activists sensed the Senator's timidity and became palpably less enthusiastic as Obama went on. Just two days before, Al Gore gave a rousing speech in New York City in which he proposed a far more dramatic alternative energy plan: a hefty tax on fossil fuels that would be used, in turn, to reduce Social Security and Medicare taxes. I asked Obama why he didn't support an energy-tax increase married to tax relief for working Americans in the MoveOn speech or in *The Audacity of Hope*. "I didn't think of it," he replied, but sensing the disingenuousness of his response--talk of a gas tax is everywhere these days, especially among high-minded policy sorts--he quickly added, "I think it's a really interesting idea."

I pressed him on this. Surely he had thought about it? "Remember, the premise of this book wasn't to lay out my 10-point plan," Obama danced. "My goal was to figure out the common values that can serve as a basis for discussion." Sensing my skepticism, he tried again: "This book doesn't drill that deep in terms of policy ... There are a slew of good ideas out there. Some things end up on the cutting-room floor."

Universal health insurance also found its way to the cutting-room floor. I asked about the universal plan recently passed in Massachusetts, which was a triumph of Obama-style bipartisanship. The plan requires everyone who earns three times the poverty rate to purchase health insurance and subsidizes those who earn less than that. Shouldn't health insurance be mandatory, like auto insurance, for those who can afford it? Obama wouldn't go there. "If there's a way of doing it voluntarily, that's more consonant with the American character," he said. "If you can't solve the problem without the government stepping in, that's when you make it mandatory."

After we jostled over several other issues, Obama felt the need to step back and defend himself. "Look, when I spoke out against going to war in Iraq in 2002, Bush was at 60-65% in the polls. I was putting my viability as a U.S. Senate candidate at risk. It looks now like an easy thing to do, but it wasn't then." He's right about that: more than a few of his potential rivals for the presidency in 2008 voted, as a matter of political expediency, to give Bush the authority to use military force in Iraq. Then Obama returned to the energy issue. "When I call for increased fuel-economy standards, that doesn't sit very well with the [United Auto Workers], and they're big buddies of mine ... Look, it's just not my style to go out of my way to offend people or be controversial just for the sake of being controversial. That's offensive and counterproductive. It makes people feel defensive and more resistant to changes."

Talk about defensive: this was the first time I had ever seen Obama less than perfectly comfortable. And his discomfort exposed the elaborate intellectual balancing mechanism that he applies to every statement and gesture, to every public moment of his life. "He's working a very dangerous high-wire act," Shelby Steele told me. "He's got to keep on pleasing white folks without offending black folks, and vice versa." Indeed, Obama faces a minefield on issues like the racial gerrymandering of congressional districts and affirmative action. "You're asking him to take policy risks? Just being who he is is taking an enormous risk."

There is a certain amount of political as well as psychological wisdom to what Steele says. The most basic rule of presidential politics is that you run against your predecessor. If Obama, 45, chooses to run in 2008, his consensus seeking would stand in stark contrast not only to the hyperpartisan Bush Administration but also to the histrionic, self-important style of baby-boom-generation politicians. Or it could work against him. An old-time Chicago politician told me Obama's thoughtfulness might be a negative in a presidential campaign. "You have to convey strength," he said, "and it's hard to do that when you're giving on-the-other-hand answers."

Meanwhile, back in our interview, I offer a slightly barbed olive branch: Maybe I'm asking for too much when I expect him to be bold on the issues, I suggest. Maybe my expectations for him are too high? "No, no," he says, and returns for a third time to energy policy--to Gore's tax-swap idea. "It's a neat idea. I'm going to call Gore and have a conversation about it. It might be something I'd want to embrace."

But he's not ready to make that leap just yet. Boldness needs to be planned, not blurted--and there are all sorts of questions to ponder before he takes the next step. Would the arrogance implicit in running now, after less than one term in the Senate, undercut his carefully built reputation for judiciousness? Is the Chicago politician right about the need to be strong and simple in a run for President? Or can Obama overturn all the standard political assumptions simply by being himself? "In setting your expectations for me now, just remember I haven't announced that I'm running in 2008," he concluded. "I would expect that anyone who's running in 2008, you should have very high expectations for them."