

Covering Barack

CBS 2 Political Editor Mike Flannery talks about his first impressions of Barack Obama, why his campaign's been brilliant and what's possibly the even bigger local story.

You started covering Sen. Barack Obama when he was elected to the Illinois Senate in 1996. What was he like then? I met him in Springfield. He did stand out. He wasn't one of the business guys down there. You know, there are a lot of Democrats and Republicans who are there, sort of, because it's the family business—politics and government. The Columbia bachelor's degree, the Harvard Law degree, it was clear that he was a different kind of guy. And the attitude kind of was, what exactly are you doing here? And then also the fact that he'd written this book, which I unfortunately didn't sit down and read until he was running for the U.S. Senate.

What kind of candidate was he early on?

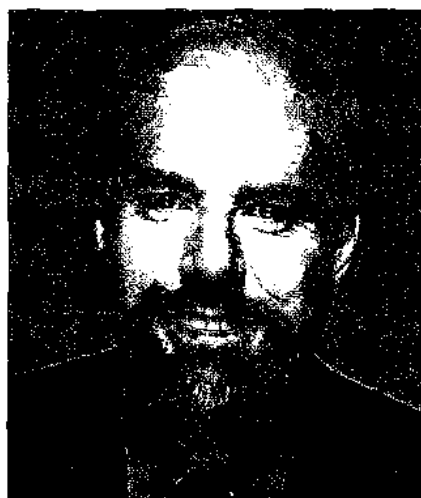
I remember the year before he announced [he was running] for the U.S. Senate, I was in Peoria covering a story. I was interviewing the Peoria County Democratic Party chairman at the Labor Temple, and Obama pulls up, driving his own car, American-made, smartly. I had heard that he was thinking of running for the U.S. Senate, so we chatted for a while. He then revealed that he'd been traveling. He'd been on the road for days, driving himself around, meeting people all over southern and central Illinois. It struck me, this guy is really, really hungry. And also, he sees an opening. This is the Peter Fitzgerald seat, and it's clear that Fitz, being a Republican in an increasingly Democratic state, was going to have trouble getting re-elected, and Obama was one of many who saw the opening. And, of course, the rest is just well-known history.

By Jessica Curry

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How were your conversations with Obama different? He had a different grasp, a bigger picture in mind. There was never a sense you get with a lot of them down there, feathering their own nest. You didn't get that sense with him at all. He stood out. It was refreshing.

Has he changed a lot?

He's become a better speaker. He's also now this world figure. When I went to East Africa with him in 2006, the moment I realized that he was absolutely an international figure, we were in downtown Nairobi, and we went to the scene of the former U.S. embassy, which was the first big al Qaeda bombing that took American lives. We went there with no advance notice, and just spontaneously, 25,000 to 30,000 people gathered, at what's now a memorial park. They started chanting in Swahili, "Come to us Obama, come to us Obama."

Have you seen any other politician rise so quickly? None a one. It's unique in my experience.

What's made Obama so famous so fast?

The unique family story, what he refers to as his DNA, his biracial identity. He says he couldn't be a racist—it's in his DNA. After he became the editor of the *Harvard Law Review*, as I understand it, a publishing house approached him and said, "Why don't you write

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your life story?" So that's when he did the book, *Dreams from My Father*. He has the bio that lets him be different things to different people. He himself says he's the slate onto which people project what they want to see.

How do you think the Obama campaign's been run?

It's been brilliant. It's been disciplined. Whatever bellyaching or unhappiness there's been stays inside the campaign. They had the great benefit of running against candidates who, including the presumably prohibitive frontrunner, grotesquely underestimated Obama. They didn't really see until the voting was done that he was taking off, and even then, they weren't very effective in countering his camp.

What's made the campaign so smart?

[Obama's] campaign studied the rules. They understood that caucuses are driven by a cadre of activists. They saw the opening that all those caucuses gave them, even in states like North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, in places where Hillary wasn't paying any attention. That provided him with the margin of victory. Texas was the classic case. She won by several percentage points the Texas primary, but that same night there was a caucus. After the caucus was done, he ended up getting more delegates from Texas. He also won those overwhelmingly black districts, and the rules of the party give bonuses to congressional districts and to states that have voted Democratic in the past. The Obama campaign understood more than Hillary did that the Democratic caucus system is not one man, one woman, one vote. It has all these wrinkles.

It's been reported that the Obama campaign correctly predicted the outcome of each primary and caucus. What do you make of that?

That was [Obama Campaign Manager] David Plouffe. The guy's a genius. Maybe a few days after Iowa, maybe it was the night of New Hampshire, Plouffe was spotted in Raleigh, North Carolina, meeting with people there, putting an infrastructure in place, preparing to fund an effort in Carolina. And that, of course, is when it was the Indiana/North Carolina night, when Tim Russert famously said, "We now know who the Democratic nominee is going to be."

Why haven't we heard many leaks from the Obama campaign?

It helps that you're a newcomer. Hillary was surrounded by all these people who'd been around 20 to 30 years, who were part of the Washington game and had their own relationships with reporters. A lot of the Obama people didn't have that. And she started to lose. I talked today to Patti Solis Doyle, and I asked her about being scapegoated, and she was telling me how hurtful, how painful, it was. That goof Mark Penn was trying to sell to reporters that it was Patti Solis Doyle who'd run through the 150 million bucks and that Bill and Hillary were just innocent bystanders, out on the road, working their little tails off, as Patti is spending like a drunken campaign worker. The reason they put her in as campaign manager is because the two of them wanted to be campaign manager. Hillary was such a control freak. A lot of serious and severe mistakes.

What made Obama decide to run now?

Once Obama saw that dynamic—he saw a field of a bunch of white guys and a white woman—he saw he could maneuver to be the last man standing. Let's go back to the summer of '06, going to Democratic Senator Tom Harkin's steak fry in Indianola, Iowa, on the county fair grounds, and Obama was the star of the show. Huge crowd, people begging him to run. It was clear that something was happening in Iowa.

Did you believe then that he'd end up running?

Yeah. After he won the primary for U.S. Senate in March of '04, two or three days later, I said, "Barack, all I want is an invitation to the White House Christmas party. And when you give out the Christmas tree ornament, I just want you to sign the box with the ornament and pose for a picture with my kids." He said he would, so I'm going to have to hold him to that.

What were the other big, local stories this year?

The sales tax increase by the Cook County Board, the Tony Rezko melé, the continuing investigation of Governor Blagojevich, the astounding, almost inexplicable, stalemate in Springfield that is blocking progress on everything from road and bridge and school repairs to getting capital funds from the federal government that have been set aside for years. I mean, we may lose those. It's beyond belief. Springfield's become dysfunction junction.

Are we going to see a change in Springfield soon?

I don't know. Maybe after the election.

What ever happened to Dennis Hastert?

He's around town. He also has an office in D.C. He lives in Plano, Illinois. He's still involved in politics, working as a consultant, lobbyist. When the Republicans fell from power in D.C., Hastert's clout went way down.

The Illinois Republican Party seems to be dying.

In Illinois, the Republicans have been reduced to a mere shadow of a political party. I'm almost toying with the idea that it's time for another party. I think the Republicans in Illinois are almost on the verge of some kind of ultimate implosion. The Chicago suburbs are the reason the Republican party has collapsed in Illinois. Chicago has been transformed from being this bugaboo, everything that's bad about cities. There was that period for about 20 to 30 years where Republicans, particularly those in DuPage, could run against Chicago, saying, look at the decline of downtown, look at the mess, the crime. And now, people from out there want to buy condo apartments downtown. One of the key Illinois Republican strategies has disappeared. Rich Daley, at different times, has had a higher job approval rating in the suburbs than in the city. If you look back over the last 20 years, the political transformation of Chicago from object of scorn and hatred to object of envy is arguably a bigger story than Obama. □