

Obama, Charisma, America, Utopia

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A young, telegenic, black junior senator, Barack Hussein Obama, is the undeclared favourite for the Democratic Party's nomination for the 2008 presidential elections in the US. The appeal of Obama tells us a lot more about US society than about the senator's politics.

SANKARAN KRISHNA

*Sitting on a sofa/On a Sunday afternoon.
Going to the candidates' debate/Laugh
about it*

*Shout about it/When you've got to choose,
Ev'ry way you look at it, you lose*

*Where have you gone, Joe Di Maggio?
A nation turns its lonely eyes to you.*

– Paul Simon, *Mrs Robinson*, 1968.

A 45-year old junior senator from the state of Illinois in the US is suddenly emerging as a strong candidate for the Democratic presidential nomination for the elections of 2008. Barack Hussein Obama is young, handsome, articulate and charismatic. He has a wonderful way with words (“the audacity of hope”), is telegenic, has a self-deprecating sense of humour, and obviously smart. He graduated at the top of his class at Harvard Law and made it to the editorial board of its *Law Review*. His speech at the 2004 Democratic national convention electrified a nationwide audience, and his two books are selling by the tens of thousands. He was a consistent opponent of the war in Iraq, and from the very beginning too.

He has drawn crowds in wintry Iowa and New Hampshire like few have. There is a groundswell, both within the Democratic Party and outside it, for a “Draft Obama” campaign, and the man himself has promised that he will make up his mind shortly and announce his decision (on the Oprah Winfrey show).

His mother is a white American and his father a black Kenyan. Like Colin Powell and Tiger Woods, Obama's blackness does not seem to trouble a society which is deeply racist in many ways, and uncomfortable with the ascension of non-white minorities to positions of authority. Like them, his blackness seems enveloped in a persona that is very white: he speaks, dresses, acts and comports himself the way the white elite do, and his mocha complexion does him no disservice in this regard. If there is one theme Obama has stressed so far, it is that he is a unifier of Americans, not a divider, and that he believes bipartisan leadership is something America needs

more than ever at this time. Beyond that, we know little about what he stands for and what he will do if in office.

America's Desire for Utopia

All too often, we focus on the individual in trying to understand charisma: What is it about a political leader or cinema star or saint that makes them so appealing? What sorts of physical attributes (looks), skills (oratory), or metaphysical traits (an aura, perhaps) do they embody that might explain their charisma? In this brief essay, I suggest that a more important aspect to be considered is the society which finds a person to be charismatic. What is it about a particular society at a certain point in time that makes it so hospitable to precisely such a person? What sorts of needs, aspirations, disappointments and hopes does this person fulfil or negate? Why is there a desperate desire to be delivered from the status quo by such a knight in shining armour? In other words, I am suggesting something is to be gained by focusing not so much on Obama and his charisma, but on America and its desire for Utopia.

The disconnect between public policy and public opinion has rarely been as wide as it is now in America. To give just two instances: While public opinion overwhelmingly opposes the war in Iraq, president Bush has just announced a plan (the “Surge” coming five years after “Shock and Awe”) that will significantly increase the number of troops deployed there. Congress (with the new Democratic majority in both chambers) cannot impede him beyond a point as the commitment of troops during a war is an executive decision. By very sizeable margins in opinion polls, Americans support a public healthcare system that is funded out of tax dollars and provides a minimum level of healthcare for everyone. Yet, the privatised system currently embroiled in rising insurance rates, continuous litigation, unhappy doctors and patients, and nearly a quarter of the population with no insurance at all, is solidly entrenched. This disconnect has led Noam Chomsky, among others, to label the US a “failed state” rather than

the self-anointed beacon of democracy.

The inability to impact on public policy through political action is reflected in declining voter turnouts. The influence of moneyed Political Action Committees, deliberate impediments to franchising voters, and gerrymandering, means incumbents are overwhelming favourites in every race for office. Elections rarely put fundamental questions on the agenda. Issues such as the nexus between wealth and political power; the preponderant influence of the military-industrial-corporate complex on domestic and foreign policies; large-scale public funding and help to rescue a healthcare and public education system in crisis; the ballooning gap between a tiny elite and a large majority of middle- and underclass people; the disparity between salaries of CEOs and those at entry-level or mid-career positions – all these are immune from change through the political process.

Elections, especially presidential ones, come down to white voters in a suburb or two in a handful of key states. And here they are determined by a small number of hot-button, ideological issues that intertwine race, sex and class: gay marriage, abortion rights, toughness on crime, immigration and an evanescent “national security”.

Civic-minded American citizens are frustrated by the inability of the political system to address their concerns. They, however, are swamped by a larger majority that has simply tuned out of politics altogether except when it intersects with a celebrity culture. Barack Obama's candidacy has the unique virtue of appealing to both these constituencies, and therein lies the social basis of his charisma at this time. To the political cognoscenti, his obvious intellectual acumen, appeal for bipartisanship, and oratorical skills, are incredibly appealing. To the rest, his candidacy brings an element of sexiness and pizzazz to a domain direly in need of such attributes, i.e., politics. To both groups, he is a site for the displacement of unrealised hopes and desires.

Given the well entrenched structures of political economy that undergird the status quo in the contemporary US, the hopes attached to Obama's candidacy are obviously unrealistic. It remains to be seen whether, after appraising the ground realities, he moves away from the lure of the highest political office in the land, or if he decides that history beckons him and “no” is not an acceptable answer. If he does the former, I suspect he will be truer to himself while disappointing millions; if the latter, we may soon find the limits of charisma when it moves from audacious hope to mundane office. [F]

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