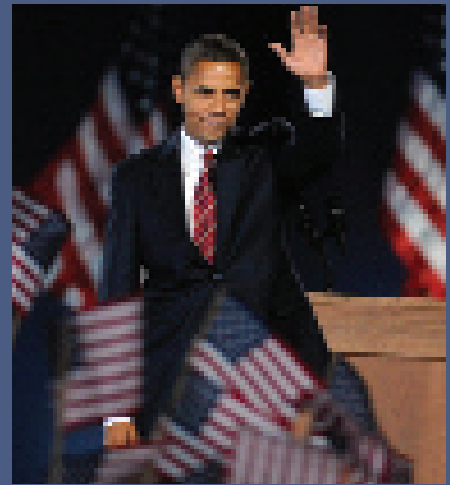


YES, WE CAN, NOW! A FIERCE URGENCY

John Parisella

The Obama campaign really began on the stage of the Democratic convention in Boston in 2004. John Parisella was there doing television commentary. Barack Obama's keynote speech "electrified" the convention, and delegates all thought they were witnessing something special — the arrival of a future presidential candidate. But few would have thought then that his arrival would occur so quickly, in the very next presidential cycle. Here are the personal reflections of a professional political operative who became a volunteer in Obama's movement for change.

La campagne de Barack Obama a véritablement commencé en 2004, lors de la convention démocrate de Boston. John Parisella s'y trouvait en tant que commentateur pour la télévision. Le discours d'Obama avait électrisé l'auditoire, et tous les délégués ont compris qu'ils assistaient à l'avènement d'un futur candidat à la présidence. Mais peu d'entre eux auraient imaginé une ascension aussi fulgurante. Voici les réflexions d'un observateur politique avisé, qui a bénévolement collaboré au projet de changement de Barack Obama.



The fierce urgency of now," a phrase associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, has come to define the nature of the candidacy of the new president-elect of the United States, Barack Obama. On January 20, when he takes the oath of office on the steps of the West Front of the US Capitol, it will be the culminating moment of a journey that began in February 2007, when he announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination on the steps of another capitol, the old legislature building in Springfield, Illinois. This will be the concluding moment of what Obama himself has called his unlikely journey. Along the way, he signed up millions of volunteers, including me, in his movement for change. And he changed forever the way political campaigns will be conducted. If Franklin Roosevelt was the first president to use radio, and John F. Kennedy the first to use television well, Obama is the first candidate to effectively channel the new platforms of the Internet. (I would become one of 10 million people on his e-mail listserv.) This is to say nothing of the compelling nature of his narrative, or the sheer power of his oratorical skills. I have been around politics most of my life, and served as a chief of staff to two premiers of Quebec, Robert Bourassa and Daniel Johnson. But Obama is, quite simply, the best candidate I've ever seen.

Few thought in late 2007 that this was meant to be his moment. After two terms of the controversial Bush presi-

dency, with two wars being conducted in the context of the overall war on terror, an increasingly sliding economy and mid-term election results leading to the Democratic Party's control of Congress, it was obvious that 2008 would be the year of change and the year when a Democrat could once again become president.

Eight years after Bill Clinton left office, it seemed quite possible and even likely that another Clinton would become the 44th president of the United States, thereby joining both the Adams family and the Bush family in providing a second occupant from the same family to the White House. Yes, 2008 was to be the year of the first woman commander-in-chief, Senator Hillary Clinton of New York.

While the journey that has led Barack Obama to the presidency is now the subject of countless articles outlining his personal narrative and providing once again an illustration of the so-called American dream being fulfilled, I must admit that my small part in the journey began in August 2004 at the Democratic National Convention held in Boston, where Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts was chosen the party nominee against George W. Bush for the November presidential showdown of that year.

I was invited by Radio-Canada, to be an analyst at the convention. It was my second US convention and I was scheduled to do the Republicans' event in New York the

following week. The talk was all about the newly formed Kerry-Edwards ticket and whether President Bush would join his father and be a one-term president.

The atmosphere in Boston was electric. An authentic war hero was about to be nominated for the presidency, and despite the fact that Bush

Obama's speech, delivered in a clear and most articulate manner just literally stole the show. It was inspirational, it was electrifying, it was unifying, and it clearly set the tone. As he called upon delegates in the Fleet Center and voters at home to change the way of conducting politics in America, he affirmed that it was time

no incumbent president or vice-president was seeking office. The Republicans, however, seemed out of touch, less prepared and less in tune with voters for the contest. The Democrats, on the other hand, were energized by their mid-term success and soon the new coterie of candidates began to emerge. Eventually, eight candidates remained in the race by the end of 2007. However, only three were considered in the top tier, front-runner Hillary Clinton, former 2004 vice-presidential candidate, John Edwards and yes, the first-term senator from Illinois with the "funny" name, Barack Obama.

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had made gains during the mid-term election of 2002, Democrats were optimistic that their candidate could win the November election. However, on day one of the 2004 convention, the talk was about the keynote speaker set to open the convention. He was not yet a holder of national office but he was an African American running for the Senate from the state of Illinois. He had, as he would often say, a funny name and many among the delegates would often confuse the order of his name, Obama Barack or Barack Obama. Not to mention Barama Barack!

The keynote address is usually left to a promising politician who has the role of setting the tone of the convention and creating the needed enthusiasm to build up to the speech on Thursday by the nominee. Mario Cuomo filled the role brilliantly in 1984, and in 1988, an Arkansas governor named William Jefferson Clinton was asked to deliver the keynote address. While Clinton gave a less than stellar performance that year — the loudest applause in his rambling speech came when he said, "In conclusion" — he did become the nominee four years later. So the eyes and ears were on the promising senatorial candidate from Illinois.

to move from the division of red states (Republicans) and blue states (Democrats) and work for the United States of America. It was obvious that this young man had the promise and potential to be a national leader. All the delegates I talked to told me he could be someday the first African-American president.

The impact was immediate. Obama was the star of the convention. His book *Dreams from My Father* was later reissued and soon became a bestseller. His second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, was published to strong reviews and it also became a bestseller. It became obvious that Barack Obama was going to Washington with more than dreams of hope. He was going for the big prize. The question was when.

Soon after Bush won his second term, the occupation of Iraq deteriorated into a brutal civil war and American casualties mounted. Hurricane Katrina hit in August 2005 and the Bush administration's response was completely ineffectual. It now became clear that the Republicans were on a sliding slope, which culminated in their losing both houses of Congress in the 2006 mid-term elections. The year 2008 was to see the first election since 1952 where

While my fascination with Obama began at the 2004 convention, I actually was surprised that he would decide to run without completing his first term as senator. He decided to announce on February 10, 2007, in Springfield, Illinois. I immediately took notice and became enthusiastic about his candidacy and his chances. His was a candidacy that went beyond the culture wars that had characterized US politics since the sixties.

I had intended to be involved in the 2008 presidential primary process for the Democrats as I had done in 2000 and 2004. My goal was to choose a candidate who responded to my values and hopes as an outsider from Canada. The primary objective was more to learn about the process of choosing a nominee and eventually a president. Being a Canadian, I had no right to vote but I regarded America as an important force in the world in the dealing with issues of war and peace, the environment and, mostly, moral leadership.

Like many, I was struck by the events of 9/11 and believed that the United States of America was correct in its initial response. The year 2008 was about to be historic, with the first woman candidate with a serious chance of winning and the first African-American candidate who

seemed to appeal beyond traditional Democratic Party constituencies.

Never being a Bill Clinton fan, yet respectful of the man's talent and accomplishments, I began researching the potential candidacy of Hillary Clinton. I was impressed and

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felt she was the clear favourite to win the race. It was a rational assessment, devoid of any real emotion on my part. After all, I would find time to volunteer for someone I respected and learn more about the process. I did something similar for Senator Bill Bradley in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004.

On February 10, 2007, I watched Obama's announcement of his candidacy. That was all I needed to sign up as a volunteer. I became a cheerleader for his movement in my own circle of friends and in the Canadian media. Obama represented more than conventional change; he represented a new way of engaging in public life, he appealed to our best inner emotions and made us hope about making it a better world. It was beyond politics as usual; he was potentially a transformational figure, inspiring a new generation of voters. The last figure to have this effect on me was Robert F. Kennedy.

In the course of 2007, I wrote two articles for Montreal dailies, *Le Devoir* and *La Presse*, arguing that Obama's moment was "now or never," that he was not running for the next time or for a vice-presidential slot. I also argued that he had the best potential to change the world view of America and re-establish America's moral lead-

ership among nations. The blog I later published with *Maclean's* from January 2008 to election day on November 4 served as my modest account of the Obama campaign. I volunteered in three states (New Hampshire, Vermont and Virginia)

and was able to send more "out of the box" reactions about the conduct of the campaign to Obama operatives. The Internet operation of the Obama campaign made us all feel that we were part of a movement.

Then came Iowa on January 3. Obama won. An African American won a state that was at least 95 percent white. Hillary Clinton finished third, behind Edwards. It was the beginning of a movement that spread across America, and it became obvious his was a candidacy of a new genera-

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tion. The primary season among the Democrats quickly became the most exciting ever, along with being the most expensive. The aura of inevitability around Senator Clinton dissipated with the results of Iowa caucuses. By the end of January 2008, the Democrats had a horse race and on February 5, Super Tuesday, the race tilted in favour of Obama. Clinton was now short of money and her campaign strategists seemed overwhelmed and were bickering among themselves. A string of 11 victories after Super Tuesday gave Obama a clear

lead and while the race lasted until the final primary on June 3, Obama never lost his lead.

The superior organizational skills of his campaign and the incredible fundraising operation nurtured by small donations and Internet technology, and which raised \$700 million by November, will be the things to study for all future campaigns. Above all, the Obama campaign had a lot to do with timing and especially the quality of the candidate.

The campaign against the Republican ticket of John McCain and Sarah Palin provided the American electorate with fundamental choices. Both Obama and McCain promised change but Obama's contrasted with that of McCain in that his was transformational and inspirational. McCain was more personality driven and transactional. America wanted and expected more.

The election of Barack Obama benefited from the political context where President Bush and his party were highly unpopular. The economy and the financial crisis sealed the fate

of the McCain campaign in late September. What was especially uplifting about this campaign, however, was the return to civility in an election campaign of a major candidate and the power of words. Barack Obama changed and imposed a tone of campaigning for the presidency. The McCain-Palin ticket ran a traditional hardball and negative campaign where personal attacks were part of the strategy. They failed and in so doing may have reversed the cynical brand of politics so typical of the Republican attack machine beginning



CP Photo

Barack Obama strides onto the stage in Denver to deliver his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, one of five exceptional speeches, writes John Parisella, that defined the unique appeal of his campaign of hope and change.

with the likes of Lee Atwater (George H.W. Bush strategist) and Karl Rove (George W. Bush).

The speeches Obama delivered at crucial and defining moments brought back a tradition in US politics where words could still make a difference. The high-road rhetoric of the 1960s had given way to the focus-group-tested platitudes and the segmentation of electoral clienteles for too long. The “Yes we can” speech in New Hampshire, Obama’s speech on race following the controversy surrounding Reverend Jeremiah Wright,

the “This is our moment” speech on June 3 when he won the primary season, the speech at the Denver convention and finally his victory speech on November 4 have delivered powerful messages about the candidate’s values and his vision. Yes, Barack Obama had to win now. While the expectations are high and there will be disappointments in these perilous times, Barack Obama is doing something that was so lacking in our public discourse and public life. He gave us hope and he treated his electorate with respect.

On election day, I was knocking on doors for Obama in Virginia. Obama, an African American, carried Virginia, the heart of the old Confederacy, by more than 10 percentage points. Truly, as Obama said that night, change has come to America.

John Parisella, chief of staff to Quebec Premiers Bourassa and Johnson, and a volunteer adviser to Premier Jean Charest, is chairman of BCP Advertising and a special adviser to the president of Concordia University. He was a volunteer for the Obama campaign in three states.