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## BARACK OBAMA

What could we expect from a Barack Obama presidency? What sort of signal would Americans be sending the world by electing a young black American with the middle name of Hussein? Whose surname rhymes with Osama? Americans are supposed to be wanting a change – but would such an election result be a change too far?

Barack Obama has certainly flashed onto centre stage. He was virtually unknown only four years before the 2008 presidential election.

What put him on the national political map was being asked to be a keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention in July 2004. He was seen as a rising young person (then aged 43) who ought to be encouraged – though no one predicted just how far or how fast he would rise in only four years.

In 2004 he had been involved in Illinois state politics since 1996 and in July 2004 was getting ready to campaign for his first national post – that of federal senator for the state of Illinois. He won election to the Senate and so he was the one of the most junior people in that august body, where seniority is very important.

His 2004 speech electrified the Democratic National Convention. People remember his speech more than the speeches of the really key people (Kerry and Edwards) who were to run – unsuccessfully – in the November 2004 presidential election.

Obama is certainly an unusual politician. He was born in Honolulu, Hawaii to the Kenyan Barack Obama Senior and Ann Dunham of Wichita, Kansas. He had a troubled childhood, with his father leaving his wife and son when he was two years old and returning to Kenya. The father only saw his son once more and he died in 1982.

His mother remarried and they went to live in Indonesia. He returned, aged 10, to live with his maternal grandparents on Hawaii. His mother died in 1995.

Despite all his childhood problems Obama was a gifted student. He obtained a degree in international relations from Columbia University, New York. He later obtained a Harvard doctoral law degree and he was elected as the first black president of the “Harvard Law Review”. He wrote his first book, “Dreams from My Father” in 1995.



Instead of using his Harvard education to land him a high-pressure, high-paying legal job at a big New York law firm, he went to Chicago and got involved in good causes for poor people as well as teaching at the University of Chicago Law School. He developed a reputation for working with disadvantaged people.

An Obama presidency will see great changes. This prediction can be made with great confidence because we are living in a period of great change. There can be no return to the tranquil Eisenhower years of the mid-1950s. There are now so many other actors in international politics who can bring change, such as China, India, European Union, transnational corporations and individual terrorist groups.

The problem for Obama (and any other president) is that increasingly the US has to accept and respond to change - rather than drive it. For example, Bush on 9/11 had to respond to a great shock for which he was unprepared. The US will be confronted with many more shocks as the years roll by, such as a deepening environmental crisis, a shortage of oil and increased economic competition from China and India.

Being such a superb communicator, perhaps Obama's main role as president will be to explain to his fellow Americans just what is happening in the world and suggest how they can best respond to the changes for themselves.

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