

# Why Barack Obama Is Winning

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General David Petraeus deployed overwhelming force when he briefed Barack Obama and two other Senators in Baghdad last July. He knew Obama favored a 16-month timetable for the withdrawal of most U.S. troops from Iraq, and he wanted to make the strongest possible case against it. And so, after he had presented an array of maps and charts and PowerPoint slides describing the current situation on the ground in great detail, Petraeus closed with a vigorous plea for "maximum flexibility" going forward.

Obama had a choice at that moment. He could thank Petraeus for the briefing and promise to take his views "under advisement." Or he could tell Petraeus what he really thought, a potentially contentious course of action — especially with a general not used to being confronted. Obama chose to speak his mind. "You know, if I were in your shoes, I would be making the exact same argument," he began. "Your job is to succeed in Iraq on as favorable terms as we can get. But my job as a potential Commander in Chief is to view your counsel and interests through the prism of our overall national security." Obama talked about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, the financial costs of the occupation of Iraq, the stress it was putting on the military.

A "spirited" conversation ensued, one person who was in the room told me. "It wasn't a perfunctory recitation of talking points. They were arguing their respective positions, in a respectful way." The other two Senators — Chuck Hagel and Jack Reed — told Petraeus they agreed

with Obama. According to both Obama and Petraeus, the meeting — which lasted twice as long as the usual congressional briefing — ended agreeably. Petraeus said he understood that Obama's perspective was, necessarily, going to be more strategic. Obama said that the timetable obviously would have to be flexible. But the Senator from Illinois had laid down his marker: if elected President, he would be in charge. Unlike George W. Bush, who had given Petraeus complete authority over the war — an unprecedented abdication of presidential responsibility (and unlike John McCain, whose hero worship of Petraeus bordered on the unseemly) — Obama would insist on a rigorous chain of command.

Barack Obama has prospered in this presidential campaign because of the steadiness of his temperament and the judicious quality of his decision-making. They are his best-known qualities. The most important decision he has made — the selection of a running mate — was done carefully, with an exhaustive attention to detail and contemplation of all the possible angles. Two months later, as John McCain's peremptory selection of Governor Sarah Palin has come to seem a liability, it could be argued that Obama's quiet selection of Joe Biden defined the public's choice in the general-election campaign. But not every decision can be made so carefully. There are a thousand instinctive, instantaneous decisions that a presidential candidate has to make in the course of a campaign — like whether to speak his mind to a General Petraeus — and this has been a more difficult journey for Obama, since he's far more comfortable when he's able to think things through. "He has learned to trust his gut," an Obama adviser told me. "He wasn't so confident in his instincts last year. It's been the biggest change I've seen in him."

I asked Obama about gut decisions, in an interview on his plane 17 days before the election. It was late on a Saturday night, and he looked pretty tired, riddled with gray hair and not nearly as young as when I'd first met him four years earlier. He had drawn 175,000 people to two events in Missouri that day, larger crowds than I'd ever seen at a campaign event, and he would be endorsed by Colin Powell the next morning. He seemed as relaxed as ever, though, unfazed by the hoopla or the imminence of the election. Our conversation was informal but intense. He seemed to be thinking in my presence, rather than just reciting talking points, and it took him some time to think through my question about gut decisions. He said the first really big one was how to react when incendiary videos of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's black-nationalist sermons surfaced last spring. "The decision to make it big as opposed to make it small," Obama said of the landmark speech on race relations he delivered in Philadelphia. "My gut was telling me that this was a teachable moment and that if I tried to do the usual political damage control instead of talking to the American people like ... they were adults and could understand the complexities of race, I would be not only doing damage to the campaign but missing an important opportunity for leadership."

The speech was followed by a more traditional form of damage control when Wright showed up in Washington still spewing racial nonsense: Obama cut him loose. And while Obama has followed a fairly traditional political path in this campaign, his strongest — and most telling — moments have been those when he followed his natural no-drama instincts. This has been confusing to many of my colleagues and to me, at times, as well: his utter caution in the debates, his decision not to zing McCain or even to challenge him very much, led me to assume — all three times — that he hadn't done nearly as well as the public ultimately

decided he had. McCain was correct when he argued that Obama's aversion to drama led him to snuggle a bit too close to the Democratic Party's orthodoxy. But one of the more remarkable spectacles of the 2008 election — unprecedented in my time as a journalist — was the unanimity among Democrats on matters of policy once the personality clash between Obama and Hillary Clinton was set aside. There was no squabbling between old and new Dems, progressives and moderates, over race or war or peace. This was a year for no-drama Democrats, which made Obama as comfortable a fit for them as McCain was awkward for the Republican base.

And at the crucial moment of the campaign — the astonishing onset of the financial crisis — it was Obama's gut steadiness that won the public's trust, and quite possibly the election. On the afternoon when McCain suspended his campaign, threatened to scuttle the Sept. 26 debate and hopped a plane back to Washington to try to resolve the crisis, Obama was in Florida doing debate prep with his top advisers. When he was told about McCain's maneuvers, Obama's first reaction — according to an aide — was, "You gotta be kidding. I'm going to debate. A President has to be able to do more than one thing at a time." But there was a storm brewing among Obama's supporters in Congress and the Beltway establishment. "My BlackBerry was exploding," said an Obama aide. "They were saying we had to suspend. McCain was going to look more like a statesman, above the fray."

"I didn't believe it," Obama told me. "I have to tell you, one of the benefits of running this 22-month gauntlet is that ... you start realizing that what seems important or clever or in need of some dramatic moment a lot of times just needs reflection and care. And I think that

was an example of where my style at least worked." Obama realized that he and McCain could be little more than creative bystanders — and one prominent Republican told me that McCain was "the least creative person in the room at the President's White House meeting. He simply had no ideas. He didn't even have any good questions." Obama had questions for the Treasury Secretary and the Fed chairman, but he was under no illusions: he didn't have the power to influence the final outcome, so it was best to stay calm and not oversell his role. It was an easy call, his natural bias. But, Obama acknowledged, "There are going to be some times where ... I won't have the luxury of thinking through all the angles."

Which is why the Petraeus moment is so interesting. Obama's gut reaction was to go against his normal palliative impulse and to challenge the general instead. "I felt it was necessary to make that point ... precisely because I respect Petraeus and [Ambassador Ryan] Crocker," Obama said, after he reluctantly acknowledged that my reporting of the meeting was correct. "Precisely because they've been doing a good job ... And I want them to understand that I'm taking their arguments seriously." Obama endorses Petraeus' new post, as the commanding general at Central Command, with responsibility for overseeing both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. "He's somebody who cares about facts and cares about the reality on the ground. I don't think he comes at this with an ideological predisposition. That's one of the reasons why I think he's been successful in moving the ball forward in Iraq. And I hope that he's applying that same perspective to what's happening in Afghanistan."

Actually, Obama and Petraeus seem to be thinking along similar lines with regard to Afghanistan. I mentioned that Petraeus had recently given

a speech at the conservative Heritage Foundation in which he raised the possibility of negotiating with the Taliban. "You know, I think this is one useful lesson that is applicable from Iraq," Obama said without hesitation. "The Sunni awakening changed the dynamic in Iraq fundamentally," he said, referring to the Petraeus-led effort to turn the Sunni tribes away from the more radical elements of the insurgency. "Whether there are those same opportunities in Afghanistan I think should be explored," he said. In fact, senior U.S. military officials have told me that there is a possibility of splitting Pashtun tribes away from the Taliban in the south of Afghanistan. "But we have to do it through the Karzai government," a senior officer told me, referring to the fact that the Army had acted independently of the Maliki government in creating the Anbar Awakening. "That is one lesson we've learned from Iraq."

Almost exactly two years ago, I had my first formal interview with Barack Obama — and he appeared on this magazine's cover for the first time. It wasn't an easy interview. His book *The Audacity of Hope* had just been published, but his policy proposals didn't seem very audacious. He actually grew a bit testy when I pushed him on the need for universal health insurance and a more aggressive global-warming policy — neither of which he supported. He has stayed with his less-than-universal health-care plan, and I still find it less than convincing. And his cap-and-trade program to control carbon emissions has taken a backseat to the economic crisis — although Obama insisted that he still favored such a plan, so long as consumers are cushioned with rebates when energy prices rise.

But Obama seems a more certain policymaker now, if not exactly a wonk in the Clintonian sense. He has a clearer handle on the big picture, on how various policy components fit together, and a strong sense of what his top priority would be. He wants to launch an "Apollo project" to build a new alternative-energy economy. His rationale for doing so includes some hard truths about the current economic mess: "The engine of economic growth for the past 20 years is not going to be there for the next 20. That was consumer spending. Basically, we turbocharged this economy based on cheap credit." But the days of easy credit are over, Obama said, "because there is too much deleveraging taking place, too much debt." A new economic turbocharger is going to have to be found, and "there is no better potential driver that pervades all aspects of our economy than a new energy economy ... That's going to be my No. 1 priority when I get into office."

That sort of clarity is new. At the beginning of the year, Donna Brazile said of Obama, "We know he can walk on water — now where are the loaves and fishes?" The inability to describe his priorities, the inability to speak directly to voters in ways they could easily comprehend, plagued Obama through much of the primary season. His tendency to use big rhetoric in front of big crowds led to McCain's one good spell, after Obama presumptuously spoke to a huge throng in Berlin after his successful Middle East trip. Only a President should make a major address like that overseas. Obama seemed to learn quickly from that mistake; his language during the general-election campaign has been simple, direct and pragmatic. His best moments in the debates came when he explained what he wanted to do as President. His very best moment came in the town-hall debate when he explained how the government bailout would affect average people who were hurting: if

companies couldn't get credit from the banks, they couldn't make their payrolls and would have to start laying people off. McCain, by contrast, demonstrated why it's so hard for Senators to succeed as presidential candidates: he talked about Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac and the sins of Obama, and never brought the argument home.

But even with his new populist skills, Obama hasn't been as plain as he could be. If an Apollo project to create a new alternative-energy economy is his highest priority, as he told me, why hasn't he given a major speech about it during the fall campaign? Why hasn't he begun to mobilize the nation for this next big mission? In part, I suppose, because campaigns are about firefighting — and this campaign in particular has been about "the fierce urgency of now," to use one of Obama's favorite phrases by Martin Luther King Jr., because of the fears raised by the financial crisis and because of the desperate, ferocious attacks launched by his opponent.

If he wins, however, there will be a different challenge. He will have to return, full force, to the inspiration business. The public will have to be mobilized to face the fearsome new economic realities. He will also have to deliver bad news, to transform crises into "teachable moments." He will have to effect a major change in our political life: to get the public and the media to think about long-term solutions rather than short-term balms. Obama has given some strong indications that he will be able to do this, having remained levelheaded through a season of political insanity. His has been a remarkable campaign, as smoothly run as any I've seen in nine presidential cycles. Even more remarkable, Obama has made race — that perennial, gaping American wound — an afterthought. He has done this by introducing a quality to American politics that we



haven't seen in quite some time: maturity. He is undoubtedly as ego-driven as everyone else seeking the highest office — perhaps more so, given his race, his name and his lack of experience. But he has not been childishly egomaniacal, in contrast to our recent baby-boomer Presidents — or petulant, in contrast to his opponent. He does not seem needy. He seems a grown-up, in a nation that badly needs some adult supervision.