How Obama won

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Last June, Joel Benenson, who was Barack Obama's top pollster during his Presidential run, reported on the state of the campaign. His conclusions, summed up in a sixty-slide PowerPoint presentation, were revealed to a small group, including David Axelrod, Obama's chief strategist, and several media consultants, and, as it turned out, some of this research helped guide the campaign through the general election. The primaries were over, Hillary Clinton had conceded, and Obama had begun planning for a race against Senator John McCain.

There was good news and bad in Benenson's presentation. Obama led John McCain, forty-nine per cent to forty-four per cent, among the voters most likely to go to the polls in November, but there was also a large group of what Benenson called "up-for-grabs" voters, or U.F.G.s, who favored McCain, forty-eight per cent to thirty-six per cent. The U.F.G.s were the key to the outcome; if the election had been held then, Obama would have probably lost.

Benenson, who is fifty-six, is bearded and volatile. He speaks with a New York accent, and in the movie version of the Obama campaign he might be played by Richard Lewis. He is considered the star pollster in the Democratic Party. Like several of Obama's other top advisers—David Axelrod; Rahm Emanuel, the Illinois congressman who is his new chief of staff; Bill Burton, the campaign's national press secretary—Benenson was deeply involved in helping Democrats win in the 2006 midterm elections, an experience that put the Obama team more in touch with

the mood of the electorate going into 2008. (The top strategists for Clinton and McCain had not been involved in difficult races in 2006.)

The data from Benenson's June presentation contained some reasons to be optimistic. The conventional wisdom was that Obama, as the newest of the candidates, had an image that was malleable and thus highly vulnerable to negative attacks. But that was not what the polling showed. As the presentation explained, "Obama's image is considerably better defined than McCain's, even on attributes at the core of McCain's reputation," such as "stands up to lobbyists and special interests," "puts partisan politics aside to get things done," and "tells people what they need to hear, not what they want to hear."

For Obama aides, who viewed McCain as the one Republican with the potential to steal the anti-Washington bona fides of their candidate, Benenson's polling was revelatory. "Voters actually did not know as much as I think the press corps thought they did about John McCain," Anita Dunn, a senior adviser to Obama, told me. "What they'd heard about McCain most recently, and certainly during the primary process, was that he was like every other Republican—fighting to sound more like George Bush." Benenson said, "What we knew at the start of the campaign was that the notion of John McCain as a change agent and independent voice didn't exist anywhere outside the Beltway."

Another finding from this initial poll had clear strategic implications: the economy concerned the U.F.G.s more than any other issue, and on that question neither candidate showed particular strength. In addition, the U.F.G.s were fed up with Washington and, especially, with George W. Bush. Based on those insights, Benenson came up with some

recommendations, among them “Own the economy” and “Maintain an emphasis on changing Washington.”

As a practical matter, this meant that, after the Democratic National Convention, in Denver, the campaign would do all that it could to focus attention on economic matters. It had no idea, of course, how fully both the economy and John McCain would coöperate with that goal.

There was an almost obsessive singularity in the way that Obama and his chief strategists—Axelrod and David Plouffe, the campaign’s manager—saw the contest. In their tactical view, all that was wrong with the United States could be summarized in one word: Bush. The clear alternative, then, was not so much a Democrat or a liberal as it was anyone who could credibly define himself as “not Bush.” Axelrod had a phrase that he often used to describe this approach: America was looking for “the remedy, not the replica.” The appeal of the strategy was that, with only minor alterations, it could work in the primaries as well as in the general election, and that, in turn, allowed Obama to finesse the perpetual problem of Presidential politics: having one message to win over a party’s most ardent supporters and another when trying to capture independents and U.F.G.s—the voters who decide a general election. Experience? That was George W. Bush. Hillary Clinton? She could be portrayed as polarizing and as a Washington insider—just like Bush. When Obama gave economic speeches during the primaries and caucuses—which continued over five months, in fifty-five states and territories—he lumped together the Clinton and Bush years as one long period of decline. And John McCain? Four more years of Bush, of “the same.”

“We were fortunate,” Anita Dunn said. Both Clinton and McCain were “Washington insiders, people who for different reasons you could argue weren’t going to bring change.”

The incessant repetition of Obama’s change message had its drawbacks, though, and Benenson described to me the ongoing debate inside and outside the campaign about whether the candidate should move away from that theme—for instance, during the summer and fall of 2007, when Obama’s poll numbers in Iowa were stagnant. “We had people in Iowa in the summer of ’07 saying, ‘All we’re getting asked about is experience! We’ve got to have an answer on experience!’ ” Benenson recalled.

Polling in the summer and fall of 2007 led the campaign to a choice between trying to win the debate that the Clinton campaign was eager to have—about Obama’s perceived lack of experience—and sharpening the debate about change in a way that could undermine Clinton. Once again, change trumped experience. “The much shorter path for us,” Benenson said, going into the jargon of political consulting, “was to eliminate Senator Clinton from the decision set as a change agent. We defined change in a way that Barack Obama had to be the answer.” Larry Grisolano, whose job was to oversee all spending on TV ads and mail, the largest part of the campaign’s budget, posed the question this way: “How do we talk about change in a way that makes Hillary Clinton pay a price for her experience?”

On October 10, 2007, less than three months before the Iowa caucuses, Axelrod, Grisolano, Benenson, and other members of Obama’s “message team” distilled several weeks’ worth of polling and internal debate into a

twelve-page memo that laid out Obama's strategy for the weeks leading up to the Iowa caucuses. "The fundamental idea behind this race from the start has been that this is a 'change' election, and that has proven out," the memo said. "Everything in our most recent research has confirmed this premise, as has the fact that other campaigns have adapted to try and catch—or survive—the wave." The plan adopted by Obama was to raise character issues about Clinton that would disqualify her from employing Obama's message. "We cannot let Clinton especially blur the lines on who is the genuine agent of change in this election," the memo said. It argued that, in voters' minds, Clinton "embodies trench warfare vs. Republicans, and is consumed with beating them rather than unifying the country," and that "she prides herself on working the system, not changing it." Obama raised all these issues with some delicacy; he framed the choice as "calculation" versus "conviction," and was careful not to use Clinton's name. But the campaign wanted to be sure that reporters got the message. "We also can't drive the contrasts so subtly or obtusely that the press doesn't write about them and the voters don't understand that we're talking about HRC," the memo advised Obama.

The new strategy was unveiled on November 10th, at the annual Jefferson Jackson Dinner, the biggest event of the Iowa-caucus season. Candidates could not use notes or a teleprompter at the dinner, and, in the weeks leading up to it, Obama stayed up late each night memorizing a new speech based on the strategy memo. "The Iowa Jefferson Jackson Dinner ended up being a tipping point in the election," Dan Pfeiffer, Obama's communications director, said. "That's when we took the lead in our internal polling in Iowa for the first time."

Axelrod believed that the argument about change versus experience would also apply in a race against McCain, and he laid out his argument to Obama in a strategy memo in late 2006, when Obama was still planning his Presidential race. “I was assessing potential opponents,” Axelrod told me. “I got to McCain and said that the McCain of 2000 would be a formidable opponent in a year that was all about change, but that he would almost certainly have to make a series of Faustian bargains in order to be the nominee, and that would make him ultimately a very vulnerable candidate in a year when people were looking for change. And so we started the general election, and by then he had made the Faustian bargains, and he had turned himself into a Bush supporter.” Axelrod continued, “So we had a very simple premise about the general election, which is that these Bush policies had failed, that McCain was essentially carrying the tattered banner of a failed Administration, and that we represented a change from all that. There have been zigs and zags in the road, but that’s essentially the strategy that we have executed from the start.”

The campaign’s faith in the strength of such a simple message was constant. Not only was it the answer for an electorate exhausted with Bush; it turned Obama’s vulnerabilities into assets. “He was at that point a couple of years out of the Illinois Senate, and he was a black guy named Barack Hussein Obama,” Axelrod said. “You don’t have to load up the wagon with too many more bricks than that. But, in a year that was poised for big change, those things were less of an obstacle than you might find in a traditional year. As is often the case, your strength is your weakness, and your weakness is your strength.” Obama almost never delivered a speech from a lectern unless it was festooned with the word “change.” On Election Day, thirty-four per cent of the voters said

that they were looking for change, and nearly ninety per cent of those voters chose Obama.

Like many campaign teams, Obama's was young. The communications department—made up mostly of guys in their twenties and thirties—had a fraternity-house quality. On weekends, they would often drink beer together and play the video game Rock Band at a group house in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood. They had been brought up in Democratic politics in the previous two decades with an understanding that the people who worked for Bill and Hillary Clinton were the best operatives in Washington, especially when it came to dealing with the media. They had watched "The War Room," the documentary about the 1992 Clinton campaign, which featured strategists like James Carville and George Stephano-poulos manically responding to every negative story and trying to win every news cycle.

Several Obama aides believe that a crucial moment came after a debate sponsored by YouTube and CNN in July of 2007. During the debate, Obama was asked, "Would you be willing to meet separately, without preconditions, during the first year of your Administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba, and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that divides our countries?" Obama answered simply, "I would." Hillary Clinton pounced on the remark as hopelessly naïve, and her aides prepared to emphasize what appeared to be a winning argument. Obama's aides had much the same reaction. "We know this is going to be the issue of the day," Dan Pfeiffer, recalling a conference call the following morning, said. "We have the sense they're going to come after us on it. And we're all on the bus trying to figure out how to get out of it, how not to talk about it." Obama, who

was listening to part of the conversation, took the telephone from an aide and instructed his staff not to back down. According to an aide, Obama said something to the effect of “This is ridiculous. We met with Stalin. We met with Mao. The idea that we can’t meet with Ahmadinejad is ridiculous. This is a bunch of Washington-insider conventional wisdom that makes no sense. We should not run from this debate. We should have it.”

The episode gave Obama’s communications aides a boost of confidence. “Instead of writing a memo explaining away our position to reporters, we changed our memo and wrote an aggressive defense of our position and went on the offense,” Pfeiffer said. The aftermath taught them that they could take on the dreaded Clinton machine—“the most impressive, toughest, most ruthless war room in the world,” as Pfeiffer put it. “It was like we had taken our first punch and kept on going,” he said.

The anti-Washington message of their candidate started to influence the way that some staffers saw themselves. “We are, I think, as a group, different from folks in Washington in that we signed up for this campaign and moved to Chicago not knowing a clear path to victory,” Bill Burton, Obama’s press secretary, said. “But, at the same time, we are all still creatures of Washington in the sense that when something happens like that”—the back-and-forth at the YouTube debate—“it lends itself to us thinking, Well, maybe that’s something that we clarify, because the grownups in Washington were all saying you can’t do that. And those are the people that we came up listening to. The Clinton Administration people were saying, ‘O.K., kids, you can’t do that.’ ”

Campaigns are divided in two. On one side are the ad-makers, speechwriters, press secretaries, and assorted spinners, who manage a candidate's image. On the other side are the field operatives, who find voters and deliver them to the polls. While the communications people operate almost exclusively in the world of perceptions, the field people operate in the world of hard data. David Plouffe, the Obama campaign's publicity-shy manager, whom Obama praised as "the unsung hero" of his campaign in his victory speech last Tuesday night, comes out of the field side of campaigns. "Politics is about numbers," Plouffe said to me a few days before the election.

Plouffe, who is forty-one, is thin and discreet, and his low profile in the press sent a message throughout the Obama organization that staffers were to be similarly reticent about attracting publicity. The catchphrase inside the campaign was "No drama with Obama," and Plouffe channelled the low-key temperament of the candidate himself. "Barack went out and sought people who had a certain personality type," Pfeiffer said. "They were people who had intentionally low profiles in Washington." Of Plouffe, Pfeiffer said, "If he had wanted to spend the past five years of his life on 'Crossfire' and CNN, he could do that. He's chosen not to do that." When, in January, 2007, Pfeiffer interviewed for his job, Obama told him, "What I want around me are people who are calm, who don't get too high and don't get too low, because that's how I am."

Jon Favreau, a twenty-seven-year-old speechwriter who had worked for John Kerry in 2004, told me, "People were drawn to him and inspired by him in a way that you knew this was about electing Barack Obama. People had come from places where they were probably disappointed in politics. I was, after 2004. It was painful, and I didn't know if I was going

to do it again." He added, "Even during tough times, everyone sticks together. There are not a lot of Washington assholes on this campaign."

Alyssa Mastromonaco, the director of scheduling and advance, who had also worked for Kerry in 2004, said that she had some trouble getting used to the quieter vibe of the Obama operation. "When I first started on the campaign, at the very beginning of this one, I was one of the only people who had actually done a Presidential before," Mastromonaco, who is thirty-two, told me. "And so we were on some conference call, and I was just completely irritated by something someone was saying. After the call, they came in and were, like, 'Alyssa, this is a campaign where you need to respect other people's opinions and you can't be a bitch.' I was, like, 'Oh, my God, these guys are serious!' "

Obama, who is not without an ego, regarded himself as just as gifted as his top strategists in the art and practice of politics. Patrick Gaspard, the campaign's political director, said that when, in early 2007, he interviewed for a job with Obama and Plouffe, Obama said that he liked being surrounded by people who expressed strong opinions, but he also said, "I think that I'm a better speechwriter than my speechwriters. I know more about policies on any particular issue than my policy directors. And I'll tell you right now that I'm gonna think I'm a better political director than my political director." After Obama's first debate with McCain, on September 26th, Gaspard sent him an e-mail. "You are more clutch than Michael Jordan," he wrote. Obama replied, "Just give me the ball." Obama's confidence filtered down through the campaign and gave comfort to his staff during the bleaker moments of 2008, such as when Obama learned that he had lost the New Hampshire primary. After that, he told his longtime friend and adviser Valerie Jarrett, "This

will turn out to have been a good thing." Jarrett told me, "You would think you would have a lot of other things to say before you might get to that." Favreau said, "His demeanor when he won the Iowa caucuses and his demeanor when he lost New Hampshire were not much different."

David Plouffe's field director was Jon Carson. When we spoke, five days before the election, it was at a cafeteria-style Italian restaurant in the food court of the office building that housed Obama's headquarters. He wore a gray button-down shirt and khakis, and told me that we had exactly forty-five minutes. Carson has a civil-engineering degree and spent time in Honduras working as a water and sanitation engineer. He, like Plouffe, made me think of the focussed men in white shirts and narrow black ties who, in the nineteen-sixties, ran the space program. When Carson hired field organizers for the campaign, he said that he looked for people with unusual backgrounds—"I try to throw out all the political-science majors when I do hiring." During a lull in the primary season, he set up a three-week "data camp" in Oregon for Obama staffers. "We had the best data operation of any campaign," he said. "You can have the most inspirational candidate, you can have the best organizing philosophy in the world, but if you can't organize your data to take advantage of it and get lists in front of the canvassers and take these volunteers and use it in a smart way and figure out who it is we're going to talk to—I mean, the rest of it is all pointless."

Carson was part of the team that made the important decision, during the race against Clinton, to target small caucus states where Clinton had virtually no presence. Carson and Plouffe realized that the cost-per-delegate in caucus states was very low. "I remember the day when we

said, ‘Look at this, we could win more delegates in Idaho than in New Jersey,’ ” he told me. Obama’s original plan was to win the Iowa caucuses and use momentum from that victory to catapult him through the three other early states—New Hampshire, Nevada, and South Carolina—and then on to February 5th, Super Tuesday, when twenty-four states voted. It was clear that the campaign would need a backup plan if Clinton and Obama split the first four states, which is what happened. Obama won Iowa and South Carolina, and Clinton won New Hampshire and Nevada.

As the campaign got ready for Super Tuesday, Carson called upon the volunteers—in particular, those he called the “super-volunteers,” people who had left their jobs or dropped out of school to help. He estimated that there were about fifteen thousand super-volunteers working full time for Obama. Carson recalled the moment when the campaign figured out what it would cost to put a hundred organizers out in the February 5th states. “It was the first time that we took an enormous leap of faith in our grass-roots network that was already out there,” he said.

On October 1st, a field organizer named Joey Bristol, a recent graduate of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School, who had delayed a career at the State Department and was working as an intern at the Chicago campaign headquarters, was sent to Idaho to organize the state for Obama. When he arrived, he learned that much of his work had already been done by a local group, Idaho for Obama. “When Joey gets there, a hundred people are waiting for him,” Carson said. “They’ve got meetings planned for him for the next month, they’ve got little subgroups by county all across the state, they’ve already gone to the state Party, gotten the rules of the caucus, figured out a plan.” On February 5th, Clinton won a net total of

eleven delegates from New Jersey, which had a primary, and Obama won a net total of twelve delegates from the caucus state of Idaho.

In hindsight, it seems that the most important decision that Obama made during the campaign was to remove himself from the restrictions of the public-financing system. The decision held risks. He had, after all, promised to stay in the system, and his reversal had the potential to damage the reform image that Benenson's polling showed was a vital advantage over McCain. But there were collateral benefits; namely, making the campaign more of a person-to-person enterprise, by keeping it tied to the Internet grass roots. Much of the intimacy that the campaign created with its supporters was driven by its need—its ravenous appetite—for money. Plouffe, who rarely spoke to reporters on the record, communicated with donors via amateurish videos in which he explained campaign strategy. "You can't just ask for money," Jim Messina, Obama's chief of staff, said. "You've got to involve them. That's why the famous videos with Plouffe were so important. People felt like insiders. They felt like they knew what we were doing."

Some Obama advisers couldn't quite believe that McCain decided not to follow them in opting out of the system. McCain, during the campaign, criticized Obama for going back on his pledge, but the issue did not seem to hurt Obama. The financial gap between the two campaigns was striking. Budgets that were drawn up in June at Obama headquarters were discarded in September, after the Conventions, when online fund-raising soared. "I spend the money, so everything's gotta go through me to get spent, which is the best job ever," Messina, the keeper of the budget, told me. "It's like getting the keys to a fucking Ferrari." Messina's Ferrari got more turbocharged every week. "On my whiteboard

in front of me, I have the money we added to the media and field budgets by day," he said. "We ended up adding tens of millions to the media budget and twenty-five million to the mail budget over the course of September and the first week of October." By the end of September, Messina said, the money for Obama "was just raining down." Though McCain was aided by outside groups and by the Republican National Committee, his entire budget for the general election was the amount provided by the government—eighty-four million dollars.

One day in September, Plouffe asked Messina if he could find seven million dollars more in the budget—for a thirty-minute advertorial that was to air on the Wednesday before Election Day. He found it. (The Obama commercial attracted an estimated thirty-three million viewers, nearly twice the number for the top-rated "Dancing with the Stars.") There was still money left over, so the campaign bought ads in video games, like Guitar Hero and Madden NFL 09, and scheduled some get-out-the-vote concerts aimed at the youth vote and featuring the rapper Jay-Z and the N.B.A. star LeBron James. "I mean, dude," Messina said, "when you're buying commercials in video games, you truly are being well funded."

But television remained the key advertising medium. And the volume of TV ads that Obama was broadcasting in late October was unprecedented in a Presidential campaign. "In a battleground state like Virginia, we're at thirty-five hundred points," Messina said, by which he meant that an average viewer sees a spot thirty-five times a week. "I've worked on two of the closest U.S. Senate races in the country," he continued. "I helped do Jon Tester last time in Montana," he said, adding that, at the end of the Tester campaign, an average viewer was seeing pro-Tester spots

twenty times a week. For Obama, he said, “we’ve been at two thousand points in Montana since the end of September.” Obama narrowly lost the state, but Republicans were forced to use resources to defend it.

McCain couldn’t keep up. “From the second week in September to the middle of October, we were doing two or three to one against McCain, and at least three to one in some of these battleground states,” Messina said. “Republicans couldn’t play in North Carolina. They couldn’t play in Indiana. They weren’t in Florida for forever, and so we’re up by ourselves just kicking the shit out of them.” Obama won all three states.

The Obama campaign became so flush with cash that one of its trickiest political problems was dealing with other Democrats who wanted Obama to campaign for them and spend money on their races. Pete Rouse, who was Obama’s Senate chief of staff and an architect of his Presidential campaign, spent hours handling such calls. “When we announced that we raised a hundred and fifty-one million in one month”—in October—“every Democratic senator in America called Rouse and had an idea how to spend it on winning the Senate, or whatever race,” one senior Obama aide said. Senator Charles Schumer, who ran the committee in charge of Democratic senatorial campaigns, was particularly aggressive. “The only Senate ad Obama did was in Oregon,” the aide continued. “Schumer rolled Barack. He just got him at an event and made him promise. Barack is really good about not making those promises, but Schumer was begging for money.”

Like being too rich, seeming to be too popular—as exemplified by the enormous crowds that Obama attracted—also vexed the campaign. “We had a rally problem during the primaries,” Anita Dunn said. “It was like he

was on a pedestal." As far back as the earliest primaries, the campaign went back and forth between embracing the crowds to show off Obama's mass appeal and shunning them to emphasize his regular-guy credentials. Hillary Clinton's campaign discovered that it could make Obama's popularity work against him. "Once the Clinton campaign figured out how it wanted to run against Obama, she started doing these town halls," Dunn said. "Her visuals were she was with people, she was working her heart out, and he's floating into these rallies with all these adoring people."

McCain's aides adopted the same strategy in the general election. In July, after Obama toured the Middle East and Europe, and spoke in Berlin at a rally where two hundred thousand people came to cheer him, a McCain ad compared Obama to Paris Hilton. What seemed to outsiders like a trivial, even ridiculous attack had an enormous impact inside Obama's headquarters.

"We've had a 'presumptuous watch' on since then," Dunn said. Alyssa Mastromonaco, who was in charge of putting on all of Obama's events, said, "After that, people started thinking that he's like this celebutante. You have to make it pretty clear through your pictures every day that you aren't, that this is not easy for you."

The campaign kept Obama away from celebrities as much as possible. A Hollywood fund-raiser with Barbra Streisand became a source of deep anxiety and torturous discussions. The campaign was on the phone for days trying to make sure it was going to work, and almost cancelled it. In Denver, celebrities who in past Presidential campaigns would have had major speaking roles were shielded from public view. "We spent hours

trying to celebrity-down the Democratic National Convention," the aide said.

Two days before Obama's acceptance speech, in Denver, Jim Margolis, a top media consultant to the campaign, went to inspect the stage at Invesco Field. McCain's aides had successfully turned the Greek columns ringing the stage at the stadium into a story about how a godlike Obama would be speaking from a "temple." But when Margolis arrived he realized that it was even worse than that. "I walked in and turned to look at the stage, and they had put in purple runway lights all the way around the whole stage, up across all the columns and it looked like a set from 'Deal or No Deal,' " he said. "And in back of them, where he would walk out, there was a colored horseshoe that was lit that would have gone around him. And in back of that was a sixty-five-inch plasma monitor that would change colors. And for a guy who is being torpedoed every day about celebrity and Hollywood this was straight out of a Hollywood set. My mouth just dropped open." Margolis ordered the producer and the set designer, who had worked for months on the design, to remove the screen and the purple lights and generally make the stage look less like a Hollywood production.

Obama's rallies had a strategic purpose beyond their visual impact, and, by putting pressure on Obama to scale down these events, Clinton and then McCain were able to take away one of the campaign's most useful organizational tools—a chance to capture personal information about potential voters and campaign volunteers, and, toward the end, a means of encouraging supporters to vote early. The battle between the communications staff, which was spooked by the Paris Hilton ad, and the field organizers, who needed the rallies to help identify Obama voters,

was decided in favor of the organizers. “Finally, at the end of September we got back to saying, ‘Look, we’re gonna do this again because we need to push early voting,’ and if you’re gonna push early voting and voter registration you’ve gotta do big events,” Messina said.

In the closing weeks of the campaign, crowds of fifty, sixty, and seventy thousand people greeted Obama at every stop—almost as if there were a pent-up demand to see him. At Obama’s final rally, in Manassas, Virginia, the night before Election Day, ninety thousand people came to a dusty fairground. Traffic was snarled for miles on the main highway leading to the site, and people simply abandoned their cars on the side of the road so as not to miss Obama’s speech. Obama’s grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, had died that morning. He seemed subdued, and when he finished his speech he did something unusual. He stood on the stage for what seemed like a long time, a solitary figure in a simple black jacket with his arms at his sides, as if simply absorbing the intensity of a crowd illuminated by high-powered spotlights. A man standing next to me pointed up at Obama. “Look,” he said. “He doesn’t want it to end.”

Much of the Obama campaign was consumed with making the candidate look Presidential. The theory was that the U.F.G.s wanted to be for Obama, but needed some help visualizing him as Commander-in-Chief. His aides had a term for the process of getting voters comfortable with a President Obama: “building a permission structure.” Bill Burton explained it this way: “There were a lot of questions about Senator Obama from the start. Who is he? What’s with the name? Is America ready to vote for a black guy for President?” There were four major moments in the general election—Obama’s trip to the Middle East and Europe, his selection of a running mate, his Convention speech, and the

debates—and each was designed to add another plank to the permission structure. For instance, the foreign trip was designed to show Obama in meetings with world leaders, the strategy that the McCain campaign employed when it sent Sarah Palin to the United Nations to meet people like Henry Kissinger and President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan. “If he looks like a President, and you put him in Presidential settings, then people will get more comfortable with the idea that he could be President,” Anita Dunn said.

To Obama’s aides, the most important moment of the campaign occurred when Obama had to actually be President. It was not totally obvious how he would perform. Many who cheered for Obama from the moment he gave the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention have had reservations. Michelle Obama once talked to me about the doubts that would need to be addressed before people could vote for her husband. “It is a leap of faith,” she said finally. “We talk about it all the time. It is a leap of faith.”

No matter how much confidence one has in Obama, support for him is often based on such intangibles as his temperament and his intelligence, not on a real record of successful decision-making. The campaign helped affirm supporters’ faith in him, but running a successful campaign can’t predict whether someone will be a good President; after all, most Presidents, whether good or bad, have won a Presidential race.

The September financial crisis, which confronted Congress with the task of trying to rescue the economy from collapse, gave Obama’s aides the clearest indication that he might indeed be as good at governing as he has been at campaigning. It forced Obama to do something unusual and

difficult for a candidate: he needed to separate politics and governance in the midst of a political campaign in which there was often no distinction. Obama's aides say that that was the moment they won the election—the moment that any lingering doubts were erased.

The Obama campaign was organized around a series of conference calls, the most important of which was a nightly call involving Obama and some dozen senior advisers. There was always a mixture of the serious and the absurd. For instance, on October 10th the agenda included an update on the message for rallies in Philadelphia, an update on the collapsing economy, and, just as important then, an "Ayers update"—how to respond to attacks on Obama's limited contacts with the former Weatherman William Ayers. On these calls, Obama's advisers had a chance to watch their candidate grapple with complex economic problems. During one, Obama laid out the steps in negotiating the bailout package: he would call the Treasury Secretary, Henry Paulson, and the Federal Reserve chairman, Ben Bernanke, and consult with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. Pfeiffer said, "We all got off the phone and I was, like, 'You know what? That was the first call that felt like that's what it's going to be like if he's President.' That was the moment where he began looking like a President and not a Presidential candidate."

Ever since the Benenson PowerPoint presentation in June, Obama's aides had been looking for ways to show that McCain was just another Washington politician; this was the strategy that had helped defeat Hillary Clinton. At the start of the financial crisis, when McCain announced that he would "suspend" his campaign, Obama's team knew that McCain had stumbled—and that it could highlight his mistake. "We

tested right away as to whether people thought it was a genuine attempt to solve the crisis or more of a political maneuver," Benenson said. "The numbers started out as even, maybe a two-point edge on 'genuine intent,' but, five days later, it swung against him, with a ten-point deficit toward 'political maneuver.' " Obama was surprised by McCain's move. Earlier that day, September 24th, he had spoken with McCain and asked him to release a joint statement about principles that both men wanted to see in a financial rescue package. McCain seemed interested but also told Obama about possibly suspending his campaign; he asked Obama to join him. Obama was noncommittal, but he ended the conversation with the belief that they had agreed about the joint statement and called Jason Furman, a top economic adviser.

"I picked up the phone, and he basically said, 'Jason, I just got off the phone with Senator McCain and we're going to come out with a joint statement to help move the financial rescue package forward, because it looks like it's in a lot of trouble,' " Furman told me. " 'I know you know his economic adviser, and I'd like you to call him up and make it a really substantive statement.' " Furman, glancing at a television, saw McCain walking up to a lectern; a caption at the bottom of the screen said that he was suspending his campaign and might not attend the first debate. When Furman told Obama what McCain was doing, Obama used a salty expression to describe the move and hung up the phone.

As the financial crisis dragged on, Obama and his aides began to realize what it meant for their prospects. Staffers eagerly soaked up the latest polling, which showed a growing lead for Obama, and the conference calls at night only increased their confidence in the candidate. There was some pressure on Obama to come out against the rescue bill, a position

that would have been more consistent with the campaign's themes. "On a purely political calculation, it would have been easy to be against that bill," Anita Dunn said. "If you look at all the polls, right? People were thinking, They made a mess and they're trying to stick you, and they're going to bail out Wall Street. I mean, what would have been easier?"

David Axelrod, who has known Obama longer than most of Obama's other campaign aides, said that he had always wondered how Obama would fare at such a moment. "Barbaric and sometimes ridiculous as is this process of running for President, the thing that I love about it is at the end of the day you can't hide who you are," Axelrod said. "I'd known him for sixteen years, I have huge confidence in him, but you never know how someone's gonna handle the vagaries and vicissitudes of a Presidential race, so you hope that they do well."

A lingering question about Barack Obama's run for the Presidency was whether this inspirational figure—more so even than the candidate John F. Kennedy—would be transformed by consultants and a sophisticated campaign apparatus into someone no longer recognizable. "Most of us do this and then we go away," Dan Pfeiffer said at the end of a conversation at Obama's Chicago headquarters. "The first Wednesday in November, we're off doing something else. We got the horse to the water, and someone else can make him drink. We're about winning elections, not actually governing the country, and because he has not done campaigns—he has not run for reëlection five times; he's actually really only ever had one hard race, this one—he doesn't have all the bad habits of career politicians."

It is already being said by the great army of bloggers and commentators that the Obama campaign was the best-run in modern history. Much the same thing was said about James Carville's work for Bill Clinton in 1992 and Karl Rove's for Bush in 2000. But campaigns can change a candidate, too. Axelrod said to me that, early in the process, Obama told aides, "I'm in this to win, I want to win, and I think we will win. But I'm also going to emerge intact. I'm going to be Barack Obama and not some parody." At another point, in early 2007, Obama returned from a forum about health care knowing that he had not done well against Hillary Clinton. "She was very good, and I need to meet that standard, meet that test," he told Axelrod. "I am not a great candidate now, but I am going to figure out how to be a great candidate." One of Obama's achievements as a politician is that he somehow managed to emerge intact, after navigating two years of a modern and occasionally absurd Presidential race, while also becoming a great candidate. On Election Night, as he once again invoked the words of Lincoln, he seemed to be saying that he was going to figure out how to be a great President. ♦