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Breaking down Obama

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No matter your politics, there's no denying that U.S. Senate hopeful Barack Obama has become a bona fide worldwide celebrity. * Throngs gather to hear him speak. His Web site receives thousands of hits. He pops up in late-night TV monologues. Orders have surged for his decade-old memoir *Dreams From My Father*, scheduled for reissue Tuesday. Newspapers in Kenya (Dad's homeland) trace his political exploits, and Nairobi watering holes reportedly serve "Senator" beer -- otherwise known as "Obama" (e.g., "Obamas all around, and keep 'em coming"). >>

Not well-known outside Illinois prior to his stirring keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention late last month, the 42-year-old Harvard Law grad and state senator (who already had a healthy contingent of fervent followers in Illinois) is being touted by newly wowed faithful across the country as a beacon of hope and a future presidential candidate, perhaps in 2012. (Sorry, Hillary.)

Republicans, too, have offered praise. Calling Obama "a fantastic speaker" and "a formidable opponent," Pro-Life Action League head Joseph Scheidler recently told the Sun-Times, "I was very impressed by his talk at the convention. ... Here's a man with sincerity, even though I disagree with a lot of his philosophy."

In a May 31 New Yorker article, Illinois Republican state Sen. Kirk Dillard went even further. "I knew from the day he walked into this chamber that he was destined for great things," he said. "In Republican circles, we've always feared that Barack would become a rock star of American politics. Obama is an extraordinary man."

In light of this disparate and widespread gushing, and based largely on the convention performance that so forcefully thrust him into the national spotlight, we've attempted to dissect the Obama Phenomenon, to see what personal qualities were integral to his seemingly overnight stardom.

Charisma

Certified executive/life coach and performance consultant Barry Zweibel, president of Northbrook-based GottaGettaCoach! Inc., uses the acronym A.U.R.A. to help explain this intangible quality.

A=Assured: "People with charisma tend to be very much assured. They're confident but not necessarily arrogant." They also have a vision, Zweibel said, a savvy, and are "larger than the stage they're on. Clearly, in this case, [Obama] was larger than the stage he was on."

U=Unique: "They are something new. ... [Obama] is new, he's young, he looks different. Kind of almost too thin, tall." Part of this is "a magnetism that catches your imagination, forces you to pay attention," and mystery. "Think about Obama and it's like, 'Yeah, where is he coming from? How did he stay hidden for so long?'"

R=Relevant and Resonant: "In a way, he was showing us he's like us, even though he's not like us. And he was saying he's different from us, even though he's similar to us. So I thought it was wonderful how he approached it from both sides."

A=Alive: "And clearly he was. There was a spirit, a joy, an enthusiasm in him. There was an energy and a focus and, I guess, a clarity."

Nonverbal mastery

Heather Harder, a professor at the University of Chicago's Graham School of General Studies, presents a seminar called "The Silent Language of Leadership," about nonverbal communication and its tremendous impact. Obama has it down pat. "He gestures big, and that usually denotes a lot of confidence and a lot of genuineness," she said. "He tends to be very open and relaxed, which is another of those genuineness attributes. Any kind of stress translates to tight muscles ... in your face, your jaw, your hands. ... Tight muscles of any kind read negative or nonsupportive."

In reviewing Obama's DNC speech, Harder pointed out several positive nonverbal qualities, many of them hand-related. For starters, she said, his hands were relaxed and his fingertips often touching or slightly entwined -- the latter being "one of the signs of intelligence." And Obama frequently showed his palms, signalling "incredible vulnerability. When you show your palms, it's about the most vulnerable thing you can do. It's a dating gesture, actually."

Obama's hands were open, his fingers slightly spread. "If you think about how we often picture Jesus [with] his hands open, well, [Obama's] got that same gesture, only slightly in. But it's still very inclusive. It's saying, 'Come in to me, come with me.' "

Eye contact was effective as well. "Most people just look at the audience, or at least give the illusion of looking at the audience. But he's really tuning into the audience." Also, she said, he supported his own weight instead of leaning on the podium, and kept his gesturing within an appropriate (read: non-distracting) field between his mouth and navel.

Oratorical skills

The construction of Obama's speech, said DePaul University associate professor of English Gerald Mulderig, was atypical and thus quite striking. "Certainly no one at this convention had any idea who he was. So there had to be some kind of family background, and I thought one of the brilliant moves of the speech was doing this family history and then using it as an example of the promise of America, the fulfillment of the American dream. 'My father was a goat herder in Kenya, and here I am standing in front of all of you.' And that then takes him into his theme. ... It wasn't a matter of, 'First I'm going to tell you who I am, now I'm going to tell you what my talk is about.' The introduction led seamlessly into the point that he wanted to make."

Mulderig noted Obama's effective use of an ancient rhetorical device called anaphora, starting several sentences with the same element. For example: "I say tonight we have *more work to do* ... *more work to do* for the workers ... *more work to do* for the father ... *more work to do* for the young woman in St. Louis." The satisfaction of listening to such repetition, Mulderig explained, "is that once the speaker does it twice, you know he or she is going to do it a third time and then a fourth time. And so you get the listener anticipating the way your next sentence is going to begin, and that's another way of connecting with your audience."

Fashion sense

"He looked a whole lot better in this convention than he's ever looked before," said Chicago-based custom clothier Haj Gueye, whose stable of well-clad luminaries includes pro athletes, politicians and comedian Bernie Mac. "I think the way he looked was great. That's what he needs to look like at all times. ... He could be a bit more polished, but he needs to keep that same thing."

Obama's DNC ensemble, Gueye thought, "was close to custom." As for the muted blue tie: "He didn't wear a power tie. I don't know why. It was an interesting choice, and I think that by him being the new candidate, by him being the rising star among all of these people who have been in this field so long, maybe he wanted not to overdo it."

Political perspective

"In his speech he really tried to be kind of lyrical, to use his own language," said Brendan Nyhan, co-editor of the nonpartisan political watchdog Web site *Spinsanity.com* and co-author of the new book *All the President's Spin: George W. Bush, the Media and the Truth*. "It's not the standard, off-the-rack, Democratic campaign that you buy from the campaign consultant in D.C., who tells your press secretary what your message is and everything. This is really something that seems like it's coming more directly from him and his experience and his life."

In keeping with the Kerry camp's (sometimes broken) pledge to remain civil and accentuate the positive, instead of baldly attacking Bush and Republicans, Obama couched his criticisms. "I think he was really strongly trying to say, 'Here's my vision,' and be positive, which is really a luxury of being the leading candidate in a race," Nyhan said. "But he's also doing partisan maneuvering in a more subtle way, where he's essentially saying, 'Here's this vague stereotype of my opponents,' and he's shadowboxing with the vague stereotype of Republicans as 'they.' 'They're going to practice the politics of cynicism and we practice the politics of hope.' It's elliptical enough that it doesn't come off as harsh or negative, relative to a real kind of fire-breathing speech that you would have seen, say, Howard Dean give six months ago. This is incredibly elliptical stuff, but everyone knows what it means."

Obama communicates down to his fingertips. His hands are relaxed, and usually inclusive, inviting his listeners in. --AP -->

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