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Is Iraq Vietnam? Who really won in 2000? Which side are you on in the culture wars? These questions have divided the Baby Boomers and distorted our politics. One candidate could transcend them.

BY ANDREW SULLIVAN

## Goodbye to All That

The logic behind the candidacy of Barack Obama is not, in the end, about Barack Obama. It has little to do with his policy proposals, which are very close to his Democratic rivals' and which, with a few exceptions, exist firmly within the conventions of our politics. It has little to do with Obama's considerable skills as a conciliator, legislator, or even thinker. It has even less to do with his ideological pedigree or legal background or rhetorical skills. Yes, as the many profiles prove, he has considerable intelligence and not a little guile. But so do others, not least his formidably polished and practiced opponent Senator Hillary Clinton.

Obama, moreover, is no saint. He has flaws and tics: Often tired, sometimes crabby, intermittently solipsistic, he's a surprisingly uneven campaigner.

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(November 6, 2007)

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#### **INTERVIEWS: "OBAMA AND AMERICA"**

(November 6, 2007)

Listen to a podcast of Andrew Sullivan's discussion with Tom Ashbrook on NPR's *On Point*.

A soaring rhetorical flourish one day is undercut by a lackluster debate performance the next. He is certainly not without self-regard. He has more experience in public life than his opponents want to acknowledge, but he has not spent much time in Washington and has never run a business. His lean physique, close-cropped hair, and stick-out ears can give the impression of a slightly pushy undergraduate. You can see why many of his friends and admirers have urged him to wait his turn. He could be president in five or nine years' time—why the rush?

But he knows, and privately acknowledges, that the fundamental point of his candidacy is that it is happening now. In politics, timing matters. And the most persuasive case for Obama has less to do with him than with the moment he is meeting. The moment has been a long time coming, and it is the result of a confluence of events, from one traumatizing war in Southeast Asia to another in the most fractious country in the

Middle East. The legacy is a cultural climate that stultifies our politics and corrupts our discourse.

Obama's candidacy in this sense is a potentially transformational one. Unlike any of the other candidates, he could take America—finally—past the debilitating, self-perpetuating family quarrel of the Baby Boom generation that has long engulfed all of us. So much has happened in America in the past seven years, let alone the past 40, that we can be forgiven for focusing on the present and the immediate future. But it is only when you take several large steps back into the long past that the full logic of an Obama presidency stares directly—and uncomfortably—at you.

At its best, the Obama candidacy is about ending a war—not so much the war in Iraq, which now has a momentum that will propel the occupation into the next decade—but the war within America that has prevailed since Vietnam and that shows dangerous signs of intensifying, a nonviolent civil war that has crippled America at the very time the world needs it most. It is a war about war—and about culture and about religion and about race. And in that war, Obama—and Obama alone—offers the

possibility of a truce.

The traces of our long journey to this juncture can be found all around us. Its most obvious manifestation is political rhetoric. The high temperature—Bill O’Reilly’s nightly screeds against anti-Americans on one channel, Keith Olbermann’s “Worst Person in the World” on the other; MoveOn.org’s “General Betray Us” on the one side, Ann Coulter’s *Treason* on the other; Michael Moore’s accusation of treason at the core of the Iraq War, Sean Hannity’s assertion of treason in the opposition to it—is particularly striking when you examine the generally minor policy choices on the table. Something deeper and more powerful than the actual decisions we face is driving the tone of the debate.

Take the biggest foreign-policy question—the war in Iraq. The rhetoric ranges from John McCain’s “No Surrender” banner to the “End the War Now” absolutism of much of the Democratic base. Yet the substantive issue is almost comically removed from this hyperventilation. Every potential president, Republican or Democrat, would likely inherit more than 100,000 occupying troops in January 2009; every one would be attempting to redeploy them as prudently as possible and to build stronger alliances both in the region and in the world. Every major candidate, moreover, will pledge to use targeted military force against al-Qaeda if necessary; every one is committed to ensuring that Iran will not have a nuclear bomb; every one is committed to an open-ended deployment in Afghanistan and an unbending alliance with Israel. We are fighting over something, to be sure. But it is more a fight over how we define ourselves and over long-term goals than over what is practically to be done on the ground.

On domestic policy, the primary issue is health care. Again, the ferocious rhetoric belies the mundane reality. Between the boogeyman of “Big Government” and the alleged threat of the drug companies, the practical differences are more matters of nuance than ideology. Yes, there are policy disagreements, but in the wake of the Bush administration, they are underwhelming. Most Republicans support continuing the Medicare drug benefit for seniors, the largest expansion of the entitlement state since Lyndon Johnson, while Democrats are merely favoring more cost controls on drug and insurance companies. Between Mitt Romney’s Massachusetts plan—individual mandates, private-sector leadership—and Senator Clinton’s triangulated update of her 1994 debacle, the difference is more technical than fundamental. The country has moved ever so slightly leftward. But this again is less a function of ideological transformation than of the current system’s failure to provide affordable health care for the insured or any care at all for growing numbers of the working poor.

FROM THE ARCHIVES:

**"THE DAY AFTER ROE"**

(June 2006)

If the Supreme Court overturns *Roe v. Wade*, it will set off tectonic shifts in the American political landscape not seen since the civil-rights movement—or perhaps even the Civil War. By Jeffrey Rosen

Even on issues that are seen as integral to the polarization, the practical stakes in this election are minor. A large consensus in America favors legal abortions during the first trimester and varying restrictions thereafter. Even in solidly red states, such as South Dakota, the support for total criminalization is weak. If *Roe* were to fall, the primary impact would be the end of a system more liberal than any in Europe in favor of one more in sync with the varied views that exist across this country. On marriage, the battles in the states are subsiding, as a bevy of blue states adopt either civil marriage or

civil unions for gay couples, and the rest stand pat. Most states that want no recognition for same-sex couples have already made that decision, usually through state constitutional amendments that allow change only with extreme difficulty. And the one state where marriage equality exists, Massachusetts, has decided to maintain the reform indefinitely.

Given this quiet, evolving consensus on policy, how do we account for the bitter, brutal tone of American politics? The answer lies mainly with the biggest and most influential generation in America: the Baby Boomers. The divide is still—amazingly—between those who fought in Vietnam and those who didn’t, and between those who fought and dissented and those who fought but never dissented at all. By defining the contours of the Boomer generation, it lasted decades. And with time came a strange intensity.

The professionalization of the battle, and the emergence of an array of well-funded interest groups dedicated to continuing it, can be traced most proximately to the bitter confirmation fights over Robert Bork and Clarence Thomas, in 1987 and 1991

respectively. The presidency of Bill Clinton, who was elected with only 43 percent of the vote in 1992, crystallized the new reality. As soon as the Baby Boomers hit the commanding heights, the Vietnam power struggle rebooted. The facts mattered little in the face of such a divide. While Clinton was substantively a moderate conservative in policy, his countercultural origins led to the drama, ultimately, of religious warfare and even impeachment. Clinton clearly tried to bridge the Boomer split. But he was trapped on one side of it—and his personal foibles only reignited his generation's agonies over sex and love and marriage. Even the failed impeachment didn't bring the two sides to their senses, and the election of 2000 only made matters worse: Gore and Bush were almost designed to reflect the Boomers' and the country's divide, which deepened further.

The trauma of 9/11 has tended to obscure the memory of that unprecedentedly bitter election, and its nail-biting aftermath, which verged on a constitutional crisis. But its legacy is very much still with us, made far worse by President Bush's approach to dealing with it. Despite losing the popular vote, Bush governed as if he had won Reagan's 49 states. Instead of cementing a coalition of the center-right, Bush and Rove set out to ensure that the new evangelical base of the Republicans would turn out more reliably in 2004. Instead of seeing the post-'60s divide as a wound to be healed, they poured acid on it.

With 9/11, Bush had a reset moment—a chance to reunite the country in a way that would marginalize the extreme haters on both sides and forge a national consensus. He chose not to do so. It wasn't entirely his fault. On the left, the truest believers were unprepared to give the president the benefit of any doubt in the wake of the 2000 election, and they even judged the 9/11 attacks to be a legitimate response to decades of U.S. foreign policy. Some could not support the war in Afghanistan, let alone the adventure in Iraq. As the Iraq War faltered, the polarization intensified. In 2004, the Vietnam argument returned with a new energy, with the Swift Boat attacks on John Kerry's Vietnam War record and CBS's misbegotten report on Bush's record in the Texas Air National Guard. These were the stories that touched the collective nerve of the political classes—because they parsed once again along the fault lines of the Boomer divide that had come to define all of us.

The result was an even deeper schism. Kerry was arguably the worst candidate on earth to put to rest the post-1960s culture war—and his decision to embrace his Vietnam identity at the convention made things worse. Bush, for his part, was unable to do nuance. And so the campaign became a matter of symbolism—pitting those who took the terror threat “seriously” against those who didn't. Supporters of the Iraq War became more invested in asserting the morality of their cause than in examining the effectiveness of their tactics. Opponents of the war found themselves dispirited. Some were left to hope privately for American failure; others lashed out, as distrust turned to paranoia. It was and is a toxic cycle, in which the interests of the United States are supplanted by domestic agendas born of pride and ruthlessness on the one hand and bitterness and alienation on the other.

This is the critical context for the election of 2008. It is an election that holds the potential not merely to intensify this cycle of division but to bequeath it to a new generation, one marked by a new war that need not be—that should not be—seen as another Vietnam. A Giuliani-Clinton matchup, favored by the media elite, is a classic intragenerational struggle—with two deeply divisive and ruthless personalities ready to go to the brink. Giuliani represents that Nixonian disgust with anyone asking questions about, let alone actively protesting, a war. Clinton will always be, in the minds of so many, the young woman who gave the commencement address at Wellesley, who sat in on the Nixon implosion and who once disdained baking cookies. For some, her husband will always be the draft dodger who smoked pot and wouldn't admit it. And however hard she tries, there is nothing Hillary Clinton can do about it. She and Giuliani are conscripts in their generation's war. To their respective sides, they are war heroes.

In normal times, such division is not fatal, and can even be healthy. It's great copy for journalists. But we are not talking about routine rancor. And we are not talking about normal times. We are talking about a world in which Islamist terror, combined with increasingly available destructive technology, has already murdered thousands of Americans, and tens of thousands of Muslims, and could pose an existential danger to the West. The terrible failures of the Iraq occupation, the resurgence of al-Qaeda in Pakistan, the progress of Iran toward nuclear capability, and the collapse of America's prestige and moral reputation, especially among those millions of Muslims too young to have known any American president but Bush, heighten the stakes

dramatically.

Perhaps the underlying risk is best illustrated by our asking what the popular response would be to another 9/11-style attack. It is hard to imagine a reprise of the sudden unity and solidarity in the days after 9/11, or an outpouring of support from allies and neighbors. It is far easier to imagine an even more bitter fight over who was responsible (apart from the perpetrators) and a profound suspicion of a government forced to impose more restrictions on travel, communications, and civil liberties. The current president would be unable to command the trust, let alone the support, of half the country in such a time. He could even be blamed for provoking any attack that came.

Of the viable national candidates, only Obama and possibly McCain have the potential to bridge this widening partisan gulf. Polling reveals Obama to be the favored Democrat among Republicans. McCain's bipartisan appeal has receded in recent years, especially with his enthusiastic embrace of the latest phase of the Iraq War. And his personal history can only reinforce the Vietnam divide. But Obama's reach outside his own ranks remains striking. Why? It's a good question: How has a black, urban liberal gained far stronger support among Republicans than the made-over moderate Clinton or the southern charmer Edwards? Perhaps because the Republicans and independents who are open to an Obama candidacy see his primary advantage in prosecuting the war on Islamist terrorism. It isn't about his policies as such; it is about his person. They are prepared to set their own ideological preferences to one side in favor of what Obama offers America in a critical moment in our dealings with the rest of the world. The war today matters enormously. The war of the last generation? Not so much. If you are an American who yearns to finally get beyond the symbolic battles of the Boomer generation and face today's actual problems, Obama may be your man.

What does he offer? First and foremost: his face. Think of it as the most effective potential re-branding of the United States since Reagan. Such a re-branding is not trivial—it's central to an effective war strategy. The war on Islamist terror, after all, is two-pronged: a function of both hard power and soft power. We have seen the potential of hard power in removing the Taliban and Saddam Hussein. We have also seen its inherent weaknesses in Iraq, and its profound limitations in winning a long war against radical Islam. The next president has to create a sophisticated and supple blend of soft and hard power to isolate the enemy, to fight where necessary, but also to create an ideological template that works to the West's advantage over the long haul. There is simply no other candidate with the potential of Obama to do this. Which is where his face comes in.

Consider this hypothetical. It's November 2008. A young Pakistani Muslim is watching television and sees that this man—Barack Hussein Obama—is the new face of America. In one simple image, America's soft power has been ratcheted up not a notch, but a logarithm. A brown-skinned man whose father was an African, who grew up in Indonesia and Hawaii, who attended a majority-Muslim school as a boy, is now the alleged enemy. If you wanted the crudest but most effective weapon against the demonization of America that fuels Islamist ideology, Obama's face gets close. It proves them wrong about what America is in ways no words can.

The other obvious advantage that Obama has in facing the world and our enemies is his record on the Iraq War. He is the only major candidate to have clearly opposed it from the start. Whoever is in office in January 2009 will be tasked with redeploying forces in and out of Iraq, negotiating with neighboring states, engaging America's estranged allies, tamping down regional violence. Obama's interlocutors in Iraq and the Middle East would know that he never had suspicious motives toward Iraq, has no interest in occupying it indefinitely, and foresaw more clearly than most Americans the baleful consequences of long-term occupation.

This latter point is the most salient. The act of picking the next president will be in some ways a statement of America's view of Iraq. Clinton is running as a centrist Democrat—voting for war, accepting the need for an occupation at least through her first term, while attempting to do triage as practically as possible. Obama is running as the clearer antiwar candidate. At the same time, Obama's candidacy cannot fairly be cast as a McGovernite revival in tone or substance. He is not opposed to war as such.

He is not opposed to the use of unilateral force, either—as demonstrated by his willingness to target al-Qaeda in Pakistan over the objections of the Pakistani government. He does not oppose the idea of democratization in the Muslim world as a general principle or the concept of nation building as such. He is not an isolationist, as his support for the campaign in Afghanistan proves. It is worth recalling the key passages of the speech Obama gave in Chicago on October 2, 2002, five months before the war:

I don't oppose all wars. And I know that in this crowd today, there is no shortage of patriots, or of patriotism. What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war ... I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U.S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences. I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale and without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, and encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, and strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaeda. I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars.

The man who opposed the war for the right reasons is for that reason the potential president with the most flexibility in dealing with it. Clinton is hemmed in by her past and her generation. If she pulls out too quickly, she will fall prey to the usual browbeating from the right—the same theme that has played relentlessly since 1968. If she stays in too long, the antiwar base of her own party, already suspicious of her, will pounce. The Boomer legacy imprisons her—and so it may continue to imprison us. The debate about the war in the next four years needs to be about the practical and difficult choices ahead of us—not about the symbolism or whether it's a second Vietnam.

FROM THE ARCHIVES:

**"TAKE TWO"**

(November 2006)

How Hillary Clinton turned herself into the consummate Washington player. By Joshua Green

A generational divide also separates Clinton and Obama with respect to domestic politics. Clinton grew up saturated in the conflict that still defines American politics. As a liberal, she has spent years in a defensive crouch against triumphant post-Reagan conservatism. The mau-mauing that greeted her health-care plan and the endless nightmares of her husband's scandals drove her deeper into her political bunker. Her liberalism is warped by what you might call a Political Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Reagan spooked people on the left, especially those, like Clinton, who were interested primarily in winning power. She has internalized what most Democrats of her generation have internalized: They suspect that the majority is not with them, and so some quotient of discretion, fear, or plain deception is required if they are to advance their objectives. And so the less-adept ones seem deceptive, and the more-practiced ones, like Clinton, exhibit the plastic-ness and inauthenticity that still plague her candidacy. She's hiding her true feelings. We know it, she knows we know it, and there is no way out of it.

Obama, simply by virtue of when he was born, is free of this defensiveness. Strictly speaking, he is at the tail end of the Boomer generation. But he is not of it.

From *Atlantic Unbound*:

**AUDIO: BARACK OBAMA DISCUSSES THE BABY BOOMER GENERATION**

Listen to an excerpt from Obama's interview with Andrew Sullivan

"Partly because my mother, you know, was smack-dab in the middle of the Baby Boom generation," he told me. "She was only 18 when she had me. So when I think of Baby Boomers, I think of my mother's generation. And you know, I was too young for the formative period of the '60s—civil rights, sexual revolution, Vietnam War. Those all sort of passed me by."

Obama's mother was, in fact, born only five years earlier than Hillary Clinton. He did not politically come of age during the Vietnam era, and he is simply less afraid of the right wing than Clinton is, because he has emerged on the national stage during a period of conservative decadence and decline. And so, for example, he felt much freer than Clinton to say he was prepared to meet and hold talks with hostile world leaders in his first year in office. He has proposed sweeping middle-class tax cuts and opposed drastic reforms of Social Security, without being tarred as a fiscally reckless liberal. (Of course, such accusations are hard to make after the fiscal performance of today's "conservatives.") Even his more conservative positions—like his openness

to bombing Pakistan, or his support for merit pay for public-school teachers—do not appear to emerge from a desire or need to credentialize himself with the right. He is among the first Democrats in a generation not to be afraid or ashamed of what they actually believe, which also gives them more freedom to move pragmatically to the right, if necessary. He does not smell, as Clinton does, of political fear.

There are few areas where this Democratic fear is more intense than religion. The crude exploitation of sectarian loyalty and religious zeal by Bush and Rove succeeded in deepening the culture war, to Republican advantage. Again, this played into the divide of the Boomer years—between God-fearing Americans and the peacenik atheist hippies of lore. The Democrats have responded by pretending to a public religiosity that still seems strained. Listening to Hillary Clinton detail her prayer life in public, as she did last spring to a packed house at George Washington University, was at once poignant and repellent. Poignant because her faith may well be genuine; repellent because its Methodist genuineness demands that she not profess it so tackily. But she did. The polls told her to.

Obama, in contrast, opened his soul up in public long before any focus group demanded it. His first book, *Dreams From My Father*, is a candid, haunting, and supple piece of writing. It was not concocted to solve a political problem (his second, hackneyed book, *The Audacity of Hope*, filled that niche). It was a genuine display of internal doubt and conflict and sadness. And it reveals Obama as someone whose “complex fate,” to use Ralph Ellison’s term, is to be both believer and doubter, in a world where such complexity is as beleaguered as it is necessary.

This struggle to embrace modernity without abandoning faith falls on one of the fault lines in the modern world. It is arguably the critical fault line, the tectonic rift that is advancing the bloody borders of Islam and the increasingly sectarian boundaries of American politics. As humankind abandons the secular totalitarianisms of the last century and grapples with breakneck technological and scientific discoveries, the appeal of absolutist faith is powerful in both developing and developed countries. It is the latest in a long line of rebukes to liberal modernity—but this rebuke has the deepest roots, the widest appeal, and the attraction that all total solutions to the human predicament proffer. From the doctrinal absolutism of Pope Benedict’s Vatican to the revival of fundamentalist Protestantism in the U.S. and Asia to the attraction for many Muslims of the most extreme and antimodern forms of Islam, the same phenomenon has spread to every culture and place.

You cannot confront the complex challenges of domestic or foreign policy today unless you understand this gulf and its seriousness. You cannot lead the United States without having a foot in both the religious and secular camps. This, surely, is where Bush has failed most profoundly. By aligning himself with the most extreme and basic of religious orientations, he has lost many moderate believers and alienated the secular and agnostic in the West. If you cannot bring the agnostics along in a campaign against religious terrorism, you have a problem.

Here again, Obama, by virtue of generation and accident, bridges this deepening divide. He was brought up in a nonreligious home and converted to Christianity as an adult. But—critically—he is not born-again. His faith—at once real and measured, hot and cool—lives at the center of the American religious experience. It is a modern, intellectual Christianity. “I didn’t have an epiphany,” he explained to me. “What I really did was to take a set of values and ideals that were first instilled in me from my mother, who was, as I have called her in my book, the last of the secular humanists—you know, belief in kindness and empathy and discipline, responsibility—those kinds of values. And I found in the Church a vessel or a repository for those values and a way to connect those values to a larger community and a belief in God and a belief in redemption and mercy and justice ... I guess the point is, it continues to be both a spiritual, but also intellectual, journey for me, this issue of faith.”

The best speech Obama has ever given was not his famous 2004 convention address, but a June 2007 speech in Connecticut. In it, he described his religious conversion:

One Sunday, I put on one of the few clean jackets I had, and went over to Trinity United Church of Christ on 95th Street on the South Side of Chicago. And I heard Reverend Jeremiah A. Wright deliver a sermon called “The Audacity of Hope.” And during the course of that sermon, he introduced me to

someone named Jesus Christ. I learned that my sins could be redeemed. I learned that those things I was too weak to accomplish myself, he would accomplish with me if I placed my trust in him. And in time, I came to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death, but rather as an active, palpable agent in the world and in my own life.

It was because of these newfound understandings that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity one day and affirm my Christian faith. It came about as a choice and not an epiphany. I didn't fall out in church, as folks sometimes do. The questions I had didn't magically disappear. The skeptical bent of my mind didn't suddenly vanish. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side, I felt I heard God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to his will, and dedicated myself to discovering his truth and carrying out his works.

To be able to express this kind of religious conviction without disturbing or alienating the growing phalanx of secular voters, especially on the left, is quite an achievement. As he said in 2006, "Faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts." To deploy the rhetoric of Evangelicalism while eschewing its occasional anti-intellectualism and hubristic certainty is as rare as it is exhilarating. It is both an intellectual achievement, because Obama has clearly attempted to wrestle a modern Christianity from the encumbrances and anachronisms of its past, and an American achievement, because it was forged in the only American institution where conservative theology and the Democratic Party still communicate: the black church.

And this, of course, is the other element that makes Obama a potentially transformative candidate: race. Here, Obama again finds himself in the center of a complex fate, unwilling to pick sides in a divide that reaches back centuries and appears at times unbridgeable. His appeal to whites is palpable. I have felt it myself. Earlier this fall, I attended an Obama speech in Washington on tax policy that underwhelmed on delivery; his address was wooden, stilted, even tedious. It was only after I left the hotel that it occurred to me that I'd just been bored on tax policy by a national black leader. That I should have been struck by this was born in my own racial stereotypes, of course. But it won me over.

Obama is deeply aware of how he comes across to whites. In a revealing passage in his first book, he recounts how, in adolescence, he defused his white mother's fears that he was drifting into delinquency. She had marched into his room and demanded to know what was going on. He flashed her "a reassuring smile and patted her hand and told her not to worry." This, he tells us, was "usually an effective tactic," because people

were satisfied as long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. They were more than satisfied; they were relieved—such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young black man who didn't seem angry all the time.

And so you have Obama's campaign for white America: courteous and smiling and with no sudden moves. This may, of course, be one reason for his still-lukewarm support among many African Americans, a large number of whom back a white woman for the presidency. It may also be because African Americans (more than many whites) simply don't believe that a black man can win the presidency, and so are leery of wasting their vote. And the persistence of race as a divisive, even explosive factor in American life was unmissable the week of Obama's tax speech. While he was detailing middle-class tax breaks, thousands of activists were preparing to march in Jena, Louisiana, after a series of crude racial incidents had blown up into a polarizing conflict.

Jesse Jackson voiced puzzlement that Obama was not at the forefront of the march. "If I were a candidate, I'd be all over Jena," he remarked. The South Carolina newspaper *The State* reported that Jackson said Obama was "acting like he's white." Obama didn't jump into the fray (no sudden moves), but instead issued measured statements on Jena, waiting till a late-September address at Howard University to find his voice. It was simultaneously an endorsement of black identity politics and a distancing from it:

When I'm president, we will no longer accept the false choice between being tough on crime and vigilant in our pursuit of justice. Dr. King said: "It's not either/or, it's both/and." We can have a crime policy that's both tough and smart. If you're convicted of a crime involving drugs, of course you should be punished. But let's not make the punishment for crack cocaine that much more severe than the punishment for powder cocaine when the real difference between the two is the skin color of the people using them. Judges think that's wrong. Republicans think that's wrong, Democrats think that's wrong, and yet it's been approved by Republican and Democratic presidents because no one has been willing to brave the politics and make it right. That will end when I am president.

Obama's racial journey makes this kind of both/and politics something more than a matter of political compromise. The paradox of his candidacy is that, as potentially the first African American president in a country founded on slavery, he has taken pains to downplay the racial catharsis his candidacy implies. He knows race is important, and yet he knows that it turns destructive if it becomes the only important thing. In this he again subverts a Boomer paradigm, of black victimology or black conservatism. He is neither Al Sharpton nor Clarence Thomas; neither Julian Bond nor Colin Powell. Nor is he a post-racial figure like Tiger Woods, insofar as he has spent his life trying to reconnect with a black identity his childhood never gave him. Equally, he cannot be a Jesse Jackson. His white mother brought him up to be someone else.

In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama tells the story of a man with an almost eerily nonracial childhood, who has to learn what racism is, what his own racial identity is, and even what being black in America is. And so Obama's relationship to the black American experience is as much learned as intuitive. He broke up with a serious early girlfriend in part because she was white. He decided to abandon a post-racial career among the upper-middle classes of the East Coast in order to reengage with the black experience of Chicago's South Side. It was an act of integration—personal as well as communal—that called him to the work of community organizing.

This restlessness with where he was, this attempt at personal integration, represents both an affirmation of identity politics and a commitment to carving a unique personal identity out of the race, geography, and class he inherited. It yields an identity born of displacement, not rootedness. And there are times, I confess, when Obama's account of understanding his own racial experience seemed more like that of a gay teen discovering that he lives in two worlds simultaneously than that of a young African American confronting racism for the first time.

And there are also times when Obama's experience feels more like an immigrant story than a black memoir. His autobiography navigates a new and strange world of an American racial legacy that never quite defined him at his core. He therefore speaks to a complicated and mixed identity—not a simple and alienated one. This may hurt him among some African Americans, who may fail to identify with this fellow with an odd name. Black conservatives, like Shelby Steele, fear he is too deferential to the black establishment. Black leftists worry that he is not beholden at all. But there is no reason why African Americans cannot see the logic of Americanism that Obama also represents, a legacy that is ultimately theirs as well. To be black and white, to have belonged to a nonreligious home and a Christian church, to have attended a majority-Muslim school in Indonesia and a black church in urban Chicago, to be more than one thing and sometimes not fully anything—this is an increasingly common experience for Americans, including many racial minorities. Obama expresses such a conflicted but resilient identity before he even utters a word. And this complexity, with its internal tensions, contradictions, and moods, may increasingly be the main thing all Americans have in common.

None of this, of course, means that Obama will be the president some are dreaming of. His record in high office is sparse; his performances on the campaign trail have been patchy; his chief rival for the nomination, Senator Clinton, has bested him often with her relentless pursuit of the middle ground, her dogged attention to her own failings, and her much-improved speaking skills. At times, she has even managed to appear more inherently likable than the skinny, crabby, and sometimes morose newcomer from Chicago. Clinton's most surprising asset has been the sense of security she instills. Her husband—and the good feelings that nostalgics retain for his presidency—have buttressed her case. In dangerous times, popular majorities often seek

the conservative option, broadly understood.

The paradox is that Hillary makes far more sense if you believe that times are actually pretty good. If you believe that America's current crisis is not a deep one, if you think that pragmatism alone will be enough to navigate a world on the verge of even more religious warfare, if you believe that today's ideological polarization is not dangerous, and that what appears dark today is an illusion fostered by the lingering trauma of the Bush presidency, then the argument for Obama is not that strong. Clinton will do. And a Clinton-Giuliani race could be as invigorating as it is utterly predictable.

But if you sense, as I do, that greater danger lies ahead, and that our divisions and recent history have combined to make the American polity and constitutional order increasingly vulnerable, then the calculus of risk changes. Sometimes, when the world is changing rapidly, the greater risk is caution. Close-up in this election campaign, Obama is unlikely. From a distance, he is necessary. At a time when America's estrangement from the world risks tipping into dangerous imbalance, when a country at war with lethal enemies is also increasingly at war with itself, when humankind's spiritual yearnings veer between an excess of certainty and an inability to believe anything at all, and when sectarian and racial divides seem as intractable as ever, a man who is a bridge between these worlds may be indispensable.

We may in fact have finally found that bridge to the 21st century that Bill Clinton told us about. Its name is Obama.

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