



Obama: reach out and touch Middle America

The Democratic candidate needs to be seen as a regular guy, **GEOFFREY GARRET** writes

Barack Obama's celebrity has fuelled cult worship in Berlin and provided fodder for John McCain's negative ad blitz. But it conceals the fact that Americans remain unconvinced they should put Obama, a once in a generation politician but a neophyte they still don't know, in the real West Wing. Obama's rock star status is beginning to hurt more than help him as Americans tire of the incessant hype. The already close race to the White House is tightening further. November's election is taking on a unique shape. It is not an up or down on the past eight years. Nor is it a contest between Obama and McCain. The US presidential election is increasingly a referendum on Obama, someone who has no record to defend, only a persona to project.

This is why McCain has gone negative, and personal, on Obama. But why attack Obama for his celebrity, only fanning the flames of Obamamania? There is real method to McCain's malice. The US elects a person, not a party, as president. At a time when Americans are deeply anxious about the future at home and abroad, star power alone is not enough.

Obama must convince voters he has the right presidential stuff, rather than the superficiality celebrity signals. Like Australians and people the world over, Americans love obsessing over Hollywood's cardboard cut-out stars, even more so when they betray human foibles from the charming to the titillating. But the US wants something very different from its presidents.

Americans want to feel they really understand the person they are putting in the Oval Office, how he will act when the nation's interests are on the line. They need to embrace a simple and seamless narrative of who the president is, where he comes

from, and what he stands for. Real celebrities don't have to pass anything like this test.

Despite the media deluge, Americans still can't put their finger on who Obama is when the cameras aren't rolling. He is undeniably young and black – an unprecedented combination so far into the presidential campaign, and one that no doubt causes voters some unease.

The potential liabilities of Obama's age and race could be turned into positives if there was a clear theme to his public service beyond his miraculous and meteoric rise from down-state Illinois obscurity to presidential favourite in four short years. But there just isn't much to go on. The highlight is less than one full term in the US Senate with no major legislative accomplishments. Obama spent his first two years in Washington preparing to run for president and the next two running all around America and now all over the world trying to win the office. Biography is all Obama has to back up his on-screen appeal. With no obvious story of dedicated and heroic public service like McCain's, journalists have gone looking for the essence of Obama. On the left, the *New Yorker* went to his adopted home of Chicago only to find that the city's powerful black political machine has never considered Obama one of them.

On the right, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks delved into Obama's odyssey from Indonesia to Harvard. His conclusion is that Obama is a "sojourner", someone who visits but does not stay, an astute observer but a reluctant joiner – someone Americans are finding hard to place in any box they understand.

So how should Obama respond to McCain's celebrity taunt? The Obama team's immediate answer has been to issue their own attack ad focusing on McCain's version of

celebrity, his "fame" among Washington's K Street lobbyists as a soft touch for their open wallets. This gambit is unlikely to work if for no other reason than Americans think they know all they need to know about McCain, the man.

What Obama needs is to transform himself from arm's length sojourner into a new version of the beloved American dream, adding a global multicultural frame to Bill Clinton's "a man from a place called Hope".

Clinton was a Rhodes Scholar with mighty and evident ambition. But Americans never branded him as elitist because his Bubba persona played well in Middle America. Regular folks could understand where he was coming from, even if they didn't agree with or even much care about the specifics of his policy platform.

Obama's problem is that he is innately far more "birth of the cool" Miles Davis mixed with Harvard ivory tower than pick-up trucks and gun racks. His challenge is to rework what plays so well with café intellectuals and students the world over into a narrative regular Americans can relate to.

Running headlong to the policy centre, as Obama has been doing for weeks, may help. But creating a winning story about embodying the 21st century evolution of the American dream is more important. His autobiographies – two of them – were lauded by the critics, but they haven't won over Middle America.

Unless Obama can remedy this disconnect with the general public, his celebrity will only increasingly irritate and alienate the voters on whom his fate in November will depend.

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