



Obama will need his ruthless streak

*He has won by playing hard; now he faces an even tougher test, argues **Brendon O'Connor***

BARACK Obama is an incredibly talented politician. However, the degree to which his political career has been helped by good fortune and a certain ruthlessness has been underreported.

First, you need luck to emerge as a prominent African-American politician. The historical record is miserable. Before the 2008 elections out of a total of 1,907 US Senators only three were black and only two black governors have emerged from a total of 2,338 governors. How did Obama defy these odds?

Obama's first political victory was his election to the Illinois state Senate in 1996. As a newcomer to Chicago, he was not a favourite to win. However, through legal maneuvering he succeeded in having all of his opponents disqualified from the ballot.

Obama's 2004 Senate victory evokes Steven Bradbury's speed skating Gold Medal; he was in the right place at the right time and all those around him fell. First the one term incumbent Illinois Senator Peter Fitzgerald decided to retire. Then with Obama trailing in the polls before the Democratic primary, his main rival Blair Hull suddenly faced allegations reported in the *Chicago Tribune* that that he had abused his ex-wife. Hull's popularity tumbled and Obama won the primary. In the general election Obama's Republican opponent Jack Ryan resigned when it was revealed he had not only taken his ex-wife to sex clubs but had also wanted her to have sex on stage with him.

Another case of luck? Not

entirely. Once again the *Chicago Tribune* (the newspaper Obama's chief strategist David Axelrod had once worked for) broke the Ryan story open by very aggressively pursuing Ryan's divorce court records.

Gaining access to such records is controversial and politicians like John Kerry, Ted Kennedy and John McCain have successfully kept their records sealed from public scrutiny.

Such behind-the-scenes maneuvering reminds us that Obama is a graduate not only of the Harvard Law School but also of Chicago politics, long famous for its ruthless nature. His campaign tactics were often tough and

voting system employed in the Democratic primaries and particularly in the caucuses, Hillary Clinton may well have won. He also scored a lucky break in his battle against McCain with the timing of the financial crisis; if that crisis had occurred post-election, victory may have been more elusive.

These incidents go to show that all successful politicians need a healthy dose of luck. The question is whether Obama's luck has run dry now that he faces a presidency weighed down with a legacy of problems from Bush. Is the presidency a poisoned chalice?

As strange as it may sound, politicians often prefer difficult

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prosecutorial; his 1996 campaign forced a long-time fellow Democrat activist off the ballot and in 2004 his team pushed for embarrassing personal details about his opponents to be revealed to the public. With Bill Clinton and George W. Bush the past was often prologue to their behavior as a president. As with Clinton's philandering and Bush's religiosity, Obama's ruthlessness is only one of his key attributes and one he masks effectively; however, following its influence on his presidency should be interesting.

Obama's 2008 victories against Hillary Clinton and McCain relied a lot less on good fortune and showed that Obama is a special political talent. However, luck was still there for him. Without his on-the-record speech opposing the Iraq war in 2002 and the strange

times to prove their greatness. Bill Clinton apparently complained to his advisers that he could not be a truly great president because he led America not in a time of crisis like FDR or Lincoln but in a time of peace and prosperity. Having a strong economy and unencumbered military as he entered the White House in 2001 certainly did not guarantee success for Bush.

Much more so than in ordinary times, Obama's transformative and messianic rhetoric has struck a chord with his fellow Americans in this difficult period in their country's history. In the short term this rhetoric is inspiring particularly with regards to healing America's history of racism and discrimination. However, what of the practical and overwhelming issues of the economy, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,



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and the massive challenge of climate change?

Obama's speeches during the campaign did not put climate change centre stage but he said enough to suggest he sees this problem as dramatic and urgent. His prescription sounds rather like that promoted by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman in his recent book *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*. Namely, that America should embrace a green technology revolution as its path to both environmental and economic success. The model here is the IT revolution of the 1990s, of

which America was the unrivalled leader.

The problems Obama faces in Iraq and Afghanistan are incredibly unfortunate. Mistakes can easily be made with every policy decision. America has become responsible for the security and stability of these two nations. Obama's goal should be to reduce violence in both countries while judiciously disabling al Qaeda. Sustaining reductions in violence may be difficult as there will be pressure from Americans to bring the troops home from Iraq. In the case of Afghanistan foreign gov-

ernments are already setting withdrawal dates for their troops. Obama will need to call on all of his talents, including his ruthlessness, to have any chance of dealing effectively with these challenges.

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