

Brendon O'Connor: Learning to rumble in the Chicago jungle

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Brendon O'Connor

Barack Obama is an incredibly talented politician. He is a great orator, serenely cool under pressure, and has a strong record of serving America's disadvantaged communities.

Americans have chosen one of their best and brightest to lead their nation in difficult times.

However, the degree to which his political career has been helped by good fortune – and a certain ruthlessness – has been under-reported.

Maybe you need a lucky run to emerge as a prominent African-American politician. The historical record is miserable.

Before the 2008 elections out of a total of 1907 US Senators only three were black and only two black governors have emerged from a total of 2338. How did Obama defy the 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 manoeuvring his campaign succeeded in having all of his opponents disqualified from the ballot. His next and more crucial victory was his election to the US Senate in 2004.

This time, his main rivals ruled themselves out of the contest through retirement, late withdrawal and embarrassment.

Obama's 2004 Senate victory reminds me of Steven Bradbury's speed skating gold medal. The Australian was in the right place at the right time in Salt Lake City when all those around him were involved in a tumble on the final turn.

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 he had abused his ex-wife.

Hull's popularity tumbled and Obama won the primary. In the general election, Obama's Republican opponent was Jack Ryan who 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 dumb 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 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 manoeuvring 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 prosecutorial.

His 1996 campaign forced a 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 behaviour 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 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 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 show all successful politicians need a healthy dose of luck. The question is whether Obama's luck has run dry now he faces a presidency weighed down with a legacy of problems from George W. Bush. Is the presidency a poisoned chalice?

As strange as it may sound politicians often prefer difficult 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 Franklin D. Roosevelt or Abraham Lincoln but in a time of peace and prosperity.

Having a strong economy and unencumbered military as he entered the White House in 2001 did not guarantee success for George W. 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.

But what of the practical and overwhelming issues of the economy, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the 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 environmental and economic success. The model here is the IT revolution of the '90s, of which America was the unrivalled leader.

The problems Obama faces in Iraq and Afghanistan are incredibly unfortunate and mistakes can easily be made. America has become responsible for the security and stability of both nations. Obama's goal should be to reduce violence in both while judiciously disabling al Qaeda.

Sustaining reductions in violence may be difficult as there will be pressure to bring the troops home from Iraq. In the case of Afghanistan, foreign governments are setting withdrawal dates for their troops. Obama will need all his talents, including his ruthlessness, to have any chance of dealing effectively with these challenges.

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President-elect Barack Obama faces some tough decisions. Photo / AP

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