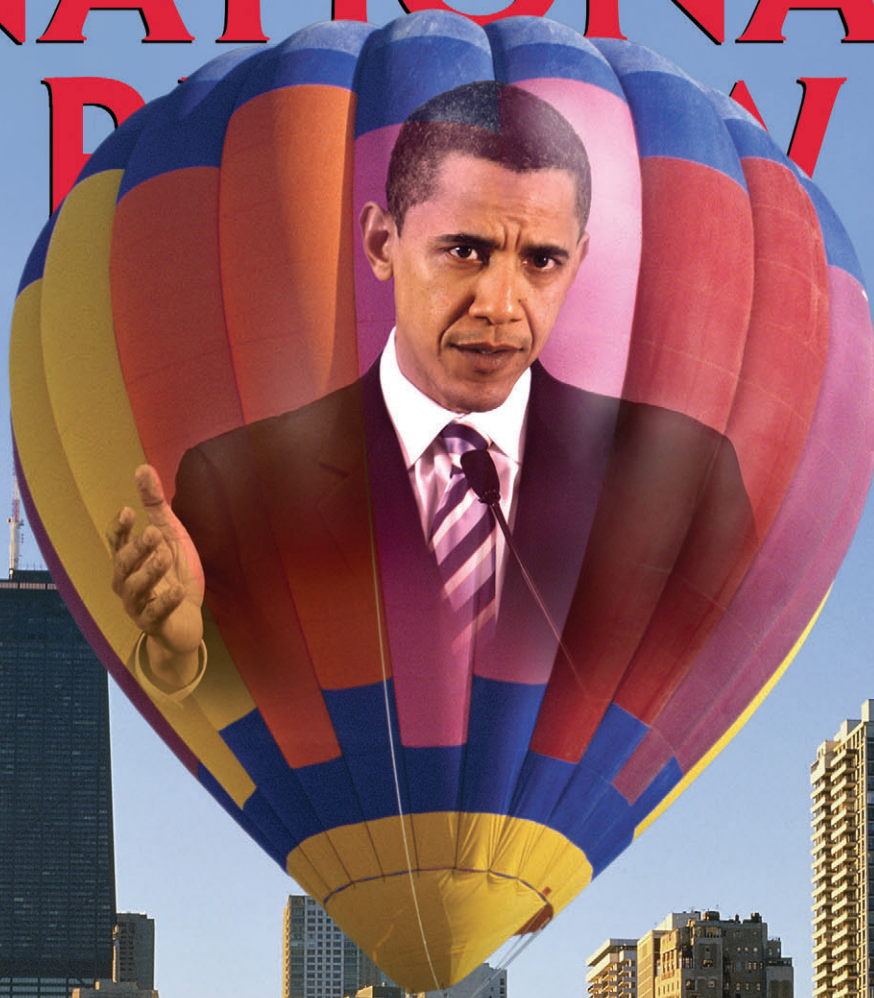


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GOLDBERG: The Problem with 'Unity'

NATIONAL



HOT AIR RISING

**Barack Obama, the phony
reformer out of Chicago**

FRED SIEGEL



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■ COVER STORY

The Obama Way

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Barack Obama exaggerates, embellishes, engages in double-talk, overstates, systematically deceives, and presents lies as metaphorical truths. All of this is unappealing, but also unexceptional. What makes Obama different is that there's not just a gap but a chasm between his actions and his professed principles. *By Fred Siegel*



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The Obama Way

A Chicago pol's special brand of insincerity

FRED SIEGEL

POLITICAL campaigning necessarily produces a wide gap between words and deeds—this is the price of bringing together a broad coalition with disparate interests. All effective politicians are at times authentically insincere or sincerely inauthentic. Exaggeration, embellishment, overstatement, double-talk, systematic deception, and lies presented as metaphorical “truths” are the order of the day.

So of course Barack Obama is no different. He exaggerates the credit he deserves for a very limited piece of ethics-reform legislation. He embellishes when he presents himself as having had a consistent record on the Iraq War, when in fact he's done a fair amount of zigzagging. He engages in double-talk when, on NAFTA and Iraq, he tells the rubes one thing and the policy people another. He overstates when he presents his minimal accomplishments in the Illinois senate as proof of his stature. He engages in systematic deception when he says he doesn't take money from lobbyists. He presents a lie as metaphorical truth when he says it was the 1965 “Bloody Sunday” attacks on peaceful civil-rights protesters in Selma, Ala., that inspired his parents to marry (they had been married for years already).

All of this is unappealing, but also unexceptional. What makes Obama different is that there's not just a gap but a chasm between his actions and his professed principles—this would normally kill a candidacy. And because his deeds are so few, the disparity is all the more salient. Obama, far more than the others, is the “judge me by what I say and not what I do” candidate. He wants to be the conscience of the country without necessarily having one himself.

The disparity between Obama's rhetoric of transcendence and his conventional Chicago racial and patronage politics is a leit-motif of his political career. In New York, politicians (Reverend Al excepted) are usually forced to pay at least passing tribute to universal principles and the ideal of clean government. But

Chicago, until recently a city of Lithuanians, blacks, and Poles governed by Irishmen on the patronage model of the Italian Christian Democrats, is the city of political and cultural tribalism.

Blacks adapted to both the tribalism and the corrupt patronage politics that accompanied it. Historically, one of the ironies of Chicago politics is that the clean-government candidates have been the most racist, while those most open to black aspirations have been the most corrupt. When the young Jesse Jackson received his first audience with Richard Daley the elder, the mayor—impervious to the universalism of the civil-rights movement in its glory—offered him a job as a toll-taker. Jackson thought the offer demeaning but in time adapted. In Chicago, racial reform has meant that today's Mayor Daley has been cutting blacks in on the loot. Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, Jeremiah Wright, and Barack Obama are all, in part, the expression of that politics. It hasn't always worked for Chicago, which, under the pressure of increasing taxes to pay for bloated government, is losing its middle class. But it has served the city's political class admirably.

For all his Camelot-like rhetoric, Obama is a product, in significant measure, of the political culture that *Chicago Tribune* columnist John Kass described thus: “We've had our chief of detectives sent to prison for running the Outfit's (i.e., the mob's) jewelry-heist ring. And we've had white guys with Outfit connections get \$100 million in affirmative action contracts from their drinking buddy, Mayor Richard Daley. . . . That's the Chicago Way.” At no point did Obama, the would-be savior of American politics, challenge this corruption, except for face-saving gestures as a legislator. He was, in his own Harvard Law way, a product of it.

Why, you might ask, did the operators of Chicago's political machine support Obama? Part of the answer was given long ago by the then-boss of Chicago, Jake Arvey. When asked why he made Adlai Stevenson—a man, like Obama, more famous for speeches than for accomplishments—his party's gubernatorial

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candidate in 1948, Arvey is said to have replied that he needed to “perfume the ticket.”

Obama first played a perfuming role as a state senator. His mentor, Emil Jones, the machine-made president of the senate, allowed him to sponsor a minor ethics bill. In return, Obama made sure to send plenty of pork to Jones’s district. When asked about pork-barrel spending, Jones famously replied, “Some call it pork; I call it steak.”

Obama repaid the generosity. When he had a chance to back “clean” Democratic candidates for president of the Cook County board of supervisors and Illinois governor, he stayed with the allies of the Outfit. The gubernatorial candidate he backed, Rod Blagojevich, is now under federal investigation, in part because of his relationship with Tony Rezko, the man who helped Obama buy his current house.

The Chicago Way has delivered politically for Obama even this year. Ninety percent of his popular-vote lead over Hillary Clinton comes from Illinois, and two-thirds of that 90 percent comes just from Cook County. Some of this advantage came from the efforts of Obama’s political ally, the flame-throwing reverend James Meeks, a political force in his own right. Meeks, who mocks black moderates as “niggers,” is an Illinois state senator, the pastor of a mega-church, and a strong supporter of Jesse Jackson’s powerful political operation, which has put its vote-pulling muscle squarely behind the Obama campaign.

It was only with Obama’s remarks about “bitter,” white, working-class, small-town voters that we saw his difficulties appealing beyond the machine’s reach. He won his U.S. Senate race in 2004 not only because his opponents self-destructed, but also because of the machine’s ability to deliver votes (this minimized his need to campaign among working-class whites downstate). In Pennsylvania he has lacked such assistance—and the campaigning has not gone nearly so well. First Obama pretended to be a bowler and scored a 37. Then, appearing before a supposedly closed San Francisco audience, he complained that small-town Pennsylvanians “cling to guns or religion or antipathy toward people who aren’t like them, or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment, as a way to explain their frustrations.”

This is the man who belongs to a church built around bitterness, rancor, and conspiratorial fear. During the Reverend Wright affair, Obama not only repeatedly lied about what he knew and when, but violated the spirit of the civil-rights movement in its mid-1960s glory. When as a young man I was on the periphery of the movement, there was an unwritten rule that if people told racist jokes or speakers engaged in defamatory rhetoric, you needed to register your immediate disapproval by confronting the speaker or ostentatiously walking out.

Wright’s “black theology” is essentially a Christianized version of Malcolm X’s ideology of hate. But for 20 years Obama, who had planned to run for mayor of Chicago, kept silent about the close if at times competitive relationship between Reverend Wright, whose 8,000-member mega-church gave him his political base, and Louis Farrakhan. His ambition overrode his moral integrity.

As part of his “black value system,” Reverend Wright attacked whites for their “middle classism,” “materialism,” and “greed in a world of need.” Obama sounded similar notes in his recent address at the Cooper Union, in which he laid the blame for the sub-prime

mortgage crisis on those who had “embraced an ethic of greed, corner cutting, and inside dealing.” But that’s exactly what Obama did in buying his luxurious house. Given the choice of purchasing a less expensive home or getting into bed with his fundraiser-cum-slumlord-cum-fixer Tony Rezko, Obama chose the latter. Then again, the oppressed of Trinity Church are building Wright a \$1.6 million, 10,340-square-foot home complete with four-car garage, whirlpool, and butler’s pantry. This house, which backs onto a golf course, is to sit in Tinley Park, a gated community that is 93 percent white.

The Obamas’ charitable giving is consistent with Reverend Wright’s talking left while living right. Obama and his wife are quite well-off. They had an estimated income of \$1.2 million from 2000 to 2004. But the man who preaches compassion and mutuality gave all of 1 percent of that income to charity during those years. Most of that went to subvert Wright’s church.

BELOW THE FRAY

There is a similar chasm when it comes to Obama’s claim to post-partisanship. His achievements in reaching out to moderate voters are largely proleptic. But words are not deeds, and while Obama has few concrete achievements to his name, his voting record hardly suggests an ability to rise above Left-versus-Right. In the Illinois state senate he made a specialty of voting “present,” but after his first two years in the U.S. Senate, *National Journal*’s analysis of roll-call votes found that he was more liberal than 86 percent of his colleagues. His voting record has only moved farther left since then. The liberal Americans for Democratic Action now gives him a 97.5 percent rating, while *National Journal* ranks him the most liberal member of the Senate. By comparison, Hillary Clinton, who occasionally votes with the GOP, ranks 16th. Obama is such a down-the-line partisan that, according to *Congressional Quarterly*, in the last two years he has voted with the Democrats more often than did the party’s majority leader, Harry Reid.

Likewise, for all his talk of post-racialism, Obama has, with the contrivance of the press, played traditional South Side racial politics. The day after his surprise loss in New Hampshire, and in



anticipation of the South Carolina primary, with its heavily black electorate, South Side congressman Jesse Jackson Jr.—Obama’s national co-chairman—appeared on MSNBC to argue, in a prepared statement, that Hillary Clinton’s teary moment on the campaign trail reflected her deep-seated racism. “Those tears,” said Jackson, “have to be analyzed. . . . They have to be looked at very, very carefully in light of Katrina, in light of other things that Mrs. Clinton did not cry for, particularly as we head to South Carolina, where 45 percent of African Americans will participate in the Democratic contest. . . . We saw tears in response to her appearance, so that her appearance brought her to tears, but not Hurricane Katrina, not other issues.” In other words, whites who are at odds with, or who haven’t delivered for, Chicago pols can be obliquely accused of racism on the flimsiest basis, but pillars of local black politics such as Reverend Wright, with his exclusivist racial theology, are beyond criticism.

Liberals love Obama’s talk of taking on powerful financial interests. But here too he is rather slippery. In his Cooper Union speech, he denounced in no uncertain terms the “special interests” of people on Wall Street (who are well represented among his campaign donors). He of course had an opportunity to push for repealing the privileged tax treatment of private-equity firms when that question was before Charles Grassley’s Senate subcommittee—but he simply made a pro forma statement in favor of doing so and disappeared into the woodwork. Nationally, as in Chicago, Obama the *soi-disant* “reformer” never crosses swords with any of his putative foes. To pick another example, he has attacked “predatory” sub-prime lenders while taking roughly \$1.3 million in contributions from companies in that line of business.

Obama is the internationalist opposed to free trade. He is the friend of race-baiters who thinks Don Imus deserved to be fired. He is the proponent of courage in the face of powerful interests who lacked the courage to break with Reverend Wright. He is the man who would lead our efforts against terrorism yet was friendly with Bill Ayers, the unrepentant 1960s terrorist. He is the post-racialist supporter of affirmative action. He is the enemy of Big Oil who takes money from executives at Exxon-Mobil, Shell, and British Petroleum.

Obama has, in a sense, represented a new version of the Invisible Man, a candidate whose color obscures his failings. Perhaps his remarks about bitter Pennsylvanians’ clinging to their guns have finally made visible the real man and his Harvard hauteur.

But so far, the wild discrepancy between Obama’s words and his deeds, and between his enormous ambitions and his minimal accomplishments, doesn’t seem to have fazed his core supporters, who apparently suffer from a severe case of cognitive dissonance. Like cultists who rededicate themselves when the cult’s prophecies have been falsified, his fans redouble their delusions in the face of his obvious hypocrisy. That is because Obama, in the imagination of many of his fans in the public and the press, is both a deduction from what was—the failures of the Bush administration and the scandals of the Clintons—and an expression of what should be. The ideal, the aspiration, is so rhetorically appealing that it has been assumed to be true. They remind one of Woodrow Wilson’s answer when asked if his plan for a League of Nations was practicable: “If it won’t work, it must be made to work.”

NR

■ THE LEFT

Unified Theory

The candidate of change forbids you to disagree

JONAH GOLDBERG

‘U NITY is the great need of the hour,” insists Barack Obama. Unity and the hope for unity and the need for unity in the pursuit of hope and the hope that our unified hopefulness will carry us to ever greater heights of hopeful unity until each and every one of us is the person he longs to be: That’s what Barack Obama is all about. And don’t you *dare* say otherwise. These are not “just words.”

One might be forgiven for asking, What the heck do these words *mean*? Specifically, what’s so special about unity? Unity for what? Unity around what? Obama has an answer: We need unity “not because it sounds pleasant or because it makes us feel good, but because it’s the only way we can overcome the essential [empathy] deficit that exists in this country.” His wife, Michelle, dilates on the subject: “We have to compromise and sacrifice for one another in order to get things done. That is why I am here, because Barack Obama is the only person in this who understands that. That before we can work on the problems, we have to fix our souls. Our souls are broken in this nation.”

If you go on to read or listen to more of this stuff, you’ll eventually see what they’re getting at: Americans need to rally around Obama and his platform if they are going to mend their souls and make this a better country. You might buy this or you might think it’s hogwash, and there’s no shortage of arguments out there for both perspectives, but what is it with this obsession with *unity*? American politicians used to have a word to describe their appeals to collective action for the betterment of the whole society. They called it *patriotism*. But that word summons the banshees of the Democratic party. To raise the issue of patriotism, say the Democrats, is to question whether someone is patriotic at all—at least when Republicans do it.

Except that Republicans don’t actually use the word “patriotism” very much. Nevertheless, Democrats hear it in almost everything Republicans say. When Republicans disputed John Kerry’s commitment to national defense, Democrats said they were questioning his patriotism. When John McCain released an ad calling himself the “American president Americans have been waiting for,” one could hear outraged caterwauling from the Democratic jungle: *What’s John McCain trying to say? We’re un-American? Who’s he calling unpatriotic?* Fred Barnes, writing in *The Weekly Standard*, calls this anticipatory offense “patriotism paranoia.” Indeed, there does seem to be psychological insecurity on display. If I say to a male friend, “Those are nice shoes,” and he responds with “How dare you call me gay!” it’s fair to say he’s the guy with the issues.