

Obama's leadership challenge



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According to our primary text by J. T. Wren, effective leadership is something which the leader will exude. In other words, one with the qualities there associated will not be required to explain to anybody that he or she is in possession of said qualities. Instead, people will be inclined to follow by virtue of expressive effectiveness, body language, evidentiary success and perhaps something indefinable which allows people to identify with the individual. These qualities that Wren describes bring to mind the present democratic nominee for president.

In Illinois Senator Barack Obama, a leader has emerged with the boldness, charisma and, many believe, ability to lead the United States into a positive future. For many Americans, the eight years of Bush rule have represented an absolute nadir in the country's cultural, political and economic history. Such policies as the War in Iraq, tax cuts for the wealthy, destructive environmental deregulation, permissive corporate policy and out of control energy costs have demonstrated to many a clear absence of good or effective leadership.

Instead, the presidency has appeared largely exploited by its current occupants, who have used the mantle of leadership to pursue an agenda of destructive greed and short-sightedness. In many ways, therefore, the emergence of Obama as a response to this set of untenable conditions is indicative of that which helps to define a great leader. Namely, such a leader will in addition to the admirable traits in his possession find himself in the right place or time in history to have a true impact on the course of mankind.

The consensus within the democratic party is increasingly that Obama is such an individual, whose very position today demonstrates him to be a

pioneer of unprecedented success. As an African American in a country where blacks and whites drank from separate water fountains under 50 years ago, Obama had indeed shown no small amount of courage to assume himself entitled to the democratic nomination. As the first non-white candidate ever to win the nomination of a major party, he has already broken a color barrier by speaking with a grace, an accuracy and an honesty that truly does resonate with people of all walks of life.

In a recent article from The New York Times, revered Senator Edward Kennedy spoke in high praise of the nominee, stating that "we, too, want a president who appeals to the hopes of those who still believe in the American dream and those around the world who still believe in the American ideal and who can lift our spirits and make us believe again," Mr. Kennedy said. "I've found that candidate and I think you have, too." (Zeleny, 1) The strong endorsement by Kennedy would demonstrate the ability of Obama to rally support through strong remark and action.

As Wren discusses, leadership is of little meaning if there is nobody to lead. The difficult position of the democratic party as a losing side in myriad electoral positions had made it often difficult to define appropriate leadership representation. Certainly, in the lackluster 2000 campaign of Al Gore and the perhaps even more depressing 2004 effort by John Kerry, the democrats seemed incapable of identifying with the leader in question.

Gore's stiffness and Kerry's patrician posterior would both be offputting to the public, costing the democratic party two elections and the great many indignities of the Bush years. This point of distinction helps us to identify the traits evident in Obama, which we can see stand in direct contradiction to

those of his democratic forebears by a consideration of the passion which Obama has succeeded in channeling through his base of support.

There is an unusual air of enthusiasm and emotional connection in this election which owes in part to that which is historically suggested by Obama's race and which perhaps owes even more significantly to the fact that Obama does appear to represent an explicit reversal of the many systematic failures which have defined the last eight years. That Obama has keyed into an important message for our time and place and has effectively expressed his commitment to this message has increasingly garnered him followers.

If one can offer any critique to the Senator that might help to refine his leadership effectiveness, it might only be that he must be prepared to remain dignified in the face of extraordinary duress. The unique distinction of political leadership is the extent to which it subjects an individual to the criticism of those with opposing viewpoints or ambitions. In Obama's case, the ruthless republican attack machine will require him to stay on issue while simultaneously showing himself to be sturdy in the face of verbal sabotage.

This is a true challenge to leadership, suggesting that one must be in thorough command of his emotions and his word choice as the election comes down to the final line. Ultimately, Obama has already shown himself to be a leader of remarkable appeal and charisma. It is now important that this translates to leadership effectiveness and success. One quality of leadership which Wren remarks upon and which is plainly in evidence in Obama's case is the reality that many people have come to depend upon

one by concession to his leadership. For Obama, this is a heavy burden that we must hope he is up to shouldering.