



by marion mckeone ♦ photograph by jason reed/reuters

# american idol



Young, bright and black, Barack Obama is running in 2008's US elections to become the nation's first black president. His story is compelling, but does he stand a fighting chance against the formidable Clinton machine?

**Is it a rock star? Is it the Second Coming?**

Nope, it's the junior senator from Illinois. Barack Obama, the biggest craze to hit America since *American Idol*. Obama is the Tiger Woods of American politics, a black phenomenon that is about as un-black as you can get. And he's a sexy, unapologetic smoker, who, as Rush Limbaugh said on national radio, 'is on fire'. The day he announced he intended to run for president in 2008, the US Senate turned into backstage at the Oscars.

As he strode down the corridor to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee chambers, grown reporters, some of who have been covering Washington since Nixon, were trampling each

other (and a fair few peeved Senators) in the stampede to get to Obama. The camera clicks, the flashes, the jockeying for position, the barking of questions, the frenzied scribbles, the breathless reportage. With less than 700 days to the next US presidential election, this may seem like a case of premature political ejaculation. Obama is everywhere. There's no getting away from that toothy grin, the self-effacing shrug, the lanky bespoke-suited frame, the apparently effortless charisma.

On paper it's inexplicable. Obama has been a senator for all of two years, and like all junior senators has yet to make his mark in any meaningful way. He's a cuddly 'why can't we all just

get along?' liberal who responds to his critics with a little boy smile that would melt even the blackest of Beltway hearts. You can't criticise him, damnit. It's like kicking a puppy. Sure he's got a great back-story – for a Hollywood actor: the Kenyan goatherd-turned-economist father, the Dorothy from Kansas mother. Obama, the fruit of their forbidden love, is an adorable little bundle who goes off to Harvard and becomes the first black editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. He pauses to dabble briefly in a spot of local politics on behalf of Chicago's working-class and below-the-poverty-line underclass. Then it's off to Washington as its only black senator and the rest is hysteria. Hmm, haven't they already made half a dozen films about this sort of thing?

At a Democratic fund-raising party in New York recently, a breathless Upper East Side matriarch said that Obama had hit the American political system like a 'tsunami of hope'. A tsunami of hype would be more accurate. The hype may be due to good timing, better luck, his undoubted political talent or a craving

among Americans for a politician, any politician, who can lift them from the swamp of anomie and self-loathing in which they have become mired. It also stems from the 24-hour news cycles' feverish need to keep feeding the media beast with fresh meat. The reality is that Obama is a blank slate, a chameleon on a sheet of glass. He can be what the Democrats want him to be, a receptor for their wildest fantasies. For now at least, Obama is what they desperately need: a rocketing star in the political firmament.

There is no doubt that Obama is a bright young thing. He's also very lucky, and, to quote Willie Nelson, 'You can give a man shit for brains if you give him two helpings of luck.' Nelson was, of course, referring to George W Bush. But now that Bush's luck has run out, his brain hasn't figured out how to pick up the slack.

Obama has brains and luck – and charisma. He is possibly the only politician in the US, aside from Ted Kennedy, who carries no baggage from the war in Iraq. His 2004 Senate victory came after the vote authorising the President to

go to war, but just as the public support for Iraq was starting to curdle. For his entire political career – all two years of it – Obama has opposed the Iraqi adventure. By its very brevity, his political CV is untainted. But he does have what many politicians have described as the best anti-war speech ever made in US politics to his credit. It was delivered back in 2002 when precious few American politicians were willing to stand up and be counted on Iraq.

What he said, among other things, was, 'I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars.' Invading and occupying Iraq, he said, would be 'a rash war, a war based not on reason but on passion, not on principle but on politics.' Now that's a heck of a lot better than John Kerry's: 'I voted against it before I voted for it' or Hillary Clinton's: 'Whoops, didn't know all the facts' justifications.

Obama also manages to evade any cultural or class stereotype. Sure he's black, but his family tree is a virtual Benetton ad: a white corn-fed Kansas mother, a black Kenyan father, an Indonesian stepfather, a half-sister who is Canadian and Asian. This has ensured his success outside the black community – it differentiates him from what white voters might see as stereotypically African-American. His colliding kaleidoscope of cultures may explain why in Illinois, fat, middle-aged white corn farmers are wearing 'Obama' badges. So are Chicago's soccer moms and its black community organisers. But not everything about Obama is tailor-made for the 2008 White House – like his name. Republicans and right-wing tabloids like to remind Americans that his middle name is Hussein, not exactly bumper-sticker stuff.

His wife Michelle Obama, a lawyer with solid black working-class roots, likes to tell a mischievous little tale about an encounter with President Bush during a visit to the Oval Office. She was wearing an Obama badge. As she was leaving, Bush spotted it. 'He jumped back, literally,' she said, 'and I knew what he was thinking. So I reassured him it was Obama, with a "b", and I explained who he was. The President said, "Well, I don't know him." So I said, "You will."'

She was right. There isn't a Republican in the country that hasn't heard of Barack Obama. Kirk Dillard, a Republican senator and astute observer of politics, admitted that, 'in Republican circles, we've always feared that Barack would become a rock star of American politics'. But the 'where are they now?' files are full of one-time rock stars. And American politics is littered with the political corpses of the next big things whose political dreams were crushed by the juggernaut of the two-party system. Obama isn't just running against Republicans. He's running against the Clinton machine: its might and its financial muscle. In American politics, money talks louder than even the most charismatic of speakers.