

Seduction and Questions: Barack Obama

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Until recently, it seemed that Barack Obama's weak point was his meager experience in foreign and military affairs. Because these issues are important to the United States, he began to be compared to Bill Clinton, Al Gore, and John Kerry because the first two just ignored these areas of key importance in their presidential campaigns. Kerry did use his participation in Viet Nam as a banner or emblem of sorts. So Obama bore a kind of democratic stigma that was worsened by the fact that he had not visited Iraq since 2006 and did not go to Afghanistan till this past summer. He has also not served in the Armed Forces of the United States. When McCain was put twenty points ahead, it seemed that the Republicans would once again comfortably retain their control of the U.S.'s military and diplomatic actions. It seemed that history would be repeated.

Yet, it is a different world now, as well as a different candidate. It seems that all bets are off with Obama, particularly given the tension surrounding the U.S. occupation of

Iraq and worsening Taliban resistance. He jumped into the fray with some serious talk—climate change and the Kyoto Protocol; nuclear disarmament and an Atlantic treaty; Guantanamo and the Geneva Convention; anti-terrorist security; and an understanding with Iran.

The very presidential Obama came to talk to the Europeans with all those hot topics under his belt. He made a brief tour of France, Great Britain, Germany, Jordan and Israel. His first stop, in Germany, took place on July 24th. The people of Old Europe were not simply just waiting for the mulatto man who beat Hillary Clinton, even if his skill in the primaries foretold the success of this tour. It was more than that. Thousands of Berliners came out to the city's Victory Column to applaud a change in political leadership in the U.S.A.—something other than Cheney, Rumsfeld or Bush fare—a less ideological and more flexible version of U.S. politics.

Berlin will be remembered as a key point in Obama's ascent to the White House if he



Barack Obama in Berlin

becomes the 44th president of the United States. This candidate knew how to thoroughly use to his advantage the potential symbolism of Berlin, just as Kennedy and Clinton had done in their campaigns. It was also the city in which Reagan asked Gorbachev to tear down the Iron Curtain separating East from West, in 1987. The image of Obama proposing a new world view that goes beyond the old and mistaken barriers of the Bush administration needs the ‘support’ that the ‘torn curtain’ of the past can offer, too. Obama didn’t shout *Ich bin ein Berliner!* [I am a Berliner!], like Kennedy, but he did something not too different. There were few references to U.S. pride or his position as a presidential hopeful. Instead, he presented himself to Berlin as a citizen of the world. He spoke on behalf of the voters of Zimbabwe, of Burmese dissidents, of Iranian bloggers—on behalf of all of them.

Obama very subtly traced a parallel between his own personal life story and that of his audience. They both figured prominently in his speech, as he explained how in

his view they were both the result of a long series of rewarding sacrifices of which they should be proud. “*People of the world — look at Berlin!*”: that was the phrase. Suddenly, then, his speech began to conjure up ghostly images of pollution-producing factories in Chicago and Beijing; Arctic melting; violence in Somalia and genocide in Darfur; Afghan heroin—the “new walls” that divide ethnic groups, religions, immigrants and natives—all these threats.

For his finale, he stated that he disagreed with certain voices in his country that denied the importance of Europe’s role in the matter of global security: “Yes, there is a difference between Europe and the United States, [but] it is time to come together through constant cooperation, strong institutions, shared sacrifices, a commitment to world progress, and the willingness to face the challenges of the twenty-first century.”

He said all this, and he did so poetically.¹ Supposedly ignorant of security matters and foreign affairs, this candidate conquered [German] opinion by recycling a new version

of antiquated U.S. patriotism—something people in Germany [Europe] consider filthy, narrow and rank. “People of Berlin—people of the world—this is our moment. This is our time.”

Obama also surprised the Berliners by not doing two things that Bush did too much: talk about the European Union as if it were a territory subordinate to France and Germany, or mention the two countries individually, thus avoiding the reality of the Union as a regional entity. This has always been quite troubling, particularly because it comes from the son of the president who did everything in his power so that Europe would not be what it is today. To the contrary, Obama spoke about a strong Europe, close to the United States regarding the defense of their shared historical roots and ideals (not interests) but independent from Washington.

All of this has contributed to a European preference for Obama, who is now “not just the new American Kennedy but the new European Kennedy as well.”² A recent Gallup poll shows that 60% of the English, 64% of the French, and 62% of the Germans hope that the democratic candidate will win the White House. Only 15% of Britons, 4% of the French, and 10% of the Germans support a McCain victory. Europe “è *perdutamente innamorata di Barack Obama*.”³ This is what the polls and press have been saying, and what French President Nicolas Sarkozy has declared.

One can even detect some sort of tension—almost a lovers’ resentment—in the Spanish press because the Spanish government tried in vain to get Obama to Madrid. *ABC*, a conservative Spanish newspaper, did little to hide the discomfiture when Obama refused. The paper read: “Madrid and Rome are unessential and unimportant capitals in [Obama’s] international tour, despite the



Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel



Barack Obama and the Iraqi president

possibly crucial importance of the Hispanic vote, unrest in the Southern cone, or the historical influence of Spanish culture on the American continent.”⁴ The need [for the Spanish press] to protest, to make reference to so many things, is symptomatic of a hidden, underlying malaise.

In any event, it is one thing to know how to infect people, citizens weary of so many grave problems that have for so long been addressed irresponsibly, with a hopeful vision, and quite another to achieve unani-

mous enthusiasm. *Obamania* sprouts many doubts, though, precisely in political circles—and they all concern his place as the next president, which many of the doubters appear to see as inevitable.

Eberhard Sandschneider, of the German Council on Foreign Relations, believes Obama has not yet shown all his cards. According to him, he has on the one hand used the symbolism of Berlin to show Europe he has no intention of telling Europe what to do and how to do it. Yet behind that message is a sense that he wants more from the Europeans with regard to soldiers and economic support in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵

If he is elected, what Obama does with the issue of trans-Atlantic trade is another complicated matter. This is the one topic that raises the most suspicion (in Europe). It is very likely that either of the two possible presidents will raise the bar on U.S. protectionism. The current crisis demands it. The emerging economies of the Far East urge the employment of this measure even more. According to Reginald Dale, an expert at the Center for Strategic International Studies, this is one negative for Obama the Europeans will find it hard to overlook: “Obama presents himself as a global candidate, but not all of his positions are thus.”⁶ Likewise, Karsten Voight, German coordinator for German-U.S. relations, believes that in matters of economic significance “an American president is, above all, a representative of U.S. interests.”⁷

Lastly, there is the European intellectual left, which has opted for a cautious attitude towards Obama. According to a article by Serge Halimi, to expect a new and “different president” to pull off a kind of *perestroika* that will end (U.S.) militarism is asking for a rude awakening.⁸ He sees that in his recent declarations about Iran, Afghanistan, and

Israel, Obama is increasingly aligning himself with traditional U.S. politics. The closer the date of his possible election, the more realistic the democratic candidate becomes: that is the idea.

For the moment, though, Barack Obama has survived this test. His tour of Europe was a political celebration; it has strengthened his race for the White House. Even John McCain, who promised a respectful campaign, has had to break his word and deal with the democratic incursion into traditionally Republican territory.

If we had to choose just one word to sum up the good feeling that this global candidate has left in Europe, it would have to be *charm*. The rest is queries, uncertainty for the future, and a wonder as to just how much he will be willing to risk in becoming the new tenant at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Yet, a man cannot be judged by what he might do in the future.

Notes:

1. Steven Erlanger. “Obama, Vague on Issues, Pleases Crowd in Europe.” *The New York Times*, 25 July 2008.
2. Andrea Bonanni. “L’Europa sedotta da Barak Obama.” *La Repubblica*, July 25 2008.
3. Ibid.
4. *ABC*. July 26 2008.
5. Steven Erlanger. Loc. Cit.
6. “Obama et L’Europe.” [Editorial] *Le Monde*, July 24 2008.
7. EFE, *El Universal*, July 24 2008.
8. *Le Monde Diplomatique* 154, August 2008.