

# **The Impact of Personality on Performance: Barack Obama in the Presidency**

**By Stephen J. Wayne  
Professor of Government  
Georgetown University  
Washington DC 20057  
[waynes@georgetown.edu](mailto:waynes@georgetown.edu)**

**Under the Patronage of His Highness Sheikh Dr. Sultan Bin  
Mohammed Al Qassimi, Supreme Council Member, Ruler of Sharjah,**

**President of AUS**

**For a**

**Conference on American Government, Politics, and Policy at**

**The American University at Sharjah, January 25, 2010.**

## **Introduction**

When Obama was 10 years old, his biological father visited him for the first time during the Christmas holidays. In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama describes an incident during that visit in which his father demanded that he stop watching television and do school work. "I tell you Barry, you do not work as hard as you should. Go now, before I get angry at you." (p.68) Obama could not muster a reply. He later wrote, "I felt as if something had cracked open between all of us....I began to count the days until my father would leave and things would return to normal." (pp. 67-68).

The experience was traumatic for the young boy. It punctured the myths he had created about his father. It also contributed to the resentment he felt toward him: His father's self-interested and self-promoting behavior, his refusal to take his marital and parenting responsibilities seriously, and his overly opinionated, non-compromising attitude.

Genes are powerful. Obama displays the intellect of his parents (his father was one of the first young Africans to study in the United States, attending the University of Hawaii and Harvard; his mother received a Ph D in Anthropology from the University of Hawaii), he possesses the ambition, articulateness, and self-confidence of his father and the social consciousness of his mother. However, the behavior he

has displayed in political situations, his style of interacting with others, is very different, particularly when compared with his father's.

- Obama is a listener; his father was a talker who rarely listened;
- Obama is a conciliator; his father was a bossy man who had to have things his own way;
- Obama adapts easily and effortlessly to new environments and situations, much more like his mother than his father. In fact, his adaptive skills have contributed substantially to his political successes.
- Obama seeks common ground and is willing to compromise whereas his father dominated discussions and held strong and for the most part, uncompromising beliefs.

Obama's conciliatory manner, cool temperament, and lay-back style differentiates him from his biological father. It also camouflages his toughness. If pushed to the brink, he resists and fights back, particularly in situations in which his political ambitions are challenged, as they were by Alice Palmer, Jeremiah Wright, and Hillary Clinton. Although he has demonstrated less pugnacity on his specific policy positions, his priorities tend to be set in harder concrete than the details of those priorities.

The reasons for his flexibility on details are threefold: Obama, the generalist, defers to the expertise of others in policy areas in which he is not as knowledgeable; Obama, the delegator, needs time to perform other roles and make other policy judgments; and Obama, the consensus-builder, needs to compromise. He would rather do so on the details than on the goals.

### **Beliefs**

Obama's beliefs are a product of his identity quest. In his search for roots, he encountered diverse cultures (Indonesia, Hawaii, and continental USA), races (black and white), and ethnicities. He interacted with many of them, found roots in some of them, but in only one of them did he find acceptance, opportunity, and ultimately contentment- the United States of America.

What Obama likes about America is its relatively peaceful heterogeneity. How to bridge the diversity gap on the basis of a common historic, philosophic, and political tradition is the lesson Obama took from his American history and personal experience. That lesson informs his beliefs and guides his political activities and social relationships.

Obama points to common values and beliefs as the glue that holds America's diverse social structure together and provides

opportunities for its citizenry to live their American Dream. However, he is painfully aware that those opportunities have not been equal for everyone. We see this in his initial response to the Henry Louis Gates' affair. (He responded in a way that I suspect most African Americans would respond to a situation in which a black man was arrested in his own house by white law enforcement officers who were skeptical of his right to be there, much less own the house in such an upscale community.)

Obama's beliefs are congruent with his personal skills of conciliation and compromise, of finding a middle ground on which people can agree. Conciliation accords with Obama's personal belief in an ordered society governed by the rule of law, his psychological need to overcome his own rooted diversity by finding common values and beliefs in the communities in which he has lived and worked, his political goal of unifying a divided nation, and his political desire to build and maintain majority electoral and governing coalitions. Compromise also enables him to be seen as level-headed, practical, flexible, and rational (unlike his predecessor, George W. Bush who was viewed as ideological, stubborn, and uncompromising). But compromise also has its limitations. It has adversely affected Obama's leadership image and the capital that flows from that image.

For Obama, consensus is the end game; not winning the debate or achieving a particular policy outcome. He sees reasoning together and arriving at a collective judgment as valuable because it bonds participants in a deliberative process and builds support for the policy decision because of the collective manner in which it decision was reached. Leading a public consensus also contributes to public approval.

Obama believes that democracy is “not ... a house to be built...but a conversation to be had.” That conversation is ongoing with public policy decisions continually adjusted as new information becomes available, new conditions emerge, and new ideas begin to take hold.

### **Role of Government**

In contrast to his Republican predecessors, Obama has an expansive view of government. He is not a socialist as some Republicans claim, but he does support a more expansive use of government than they do. He sees three principal roles for government:

- Government is necessary during crises, such as the economic downturn that began in the fall of 2008. he argued that it was the only force with the power to “...jolt the economy back to life”

- Government has an obligation to constrain and hopefully prevent economic, environmental, social, and political abuses and excesses from occurring and undermining a system based on individual initiative, private enterprise, and self interest, hence his support of increased regulatory activity, new climate standards, and expanded stem-cell research.
- Finally, and most controversially, government has a responsibility to reduce the inequality gap in wealth and opportunity through progressive taxes and credits, expanded health insurance coverage, and increased support for veterans reentering civilian society.

His critics see perceive government redistribution as unwise, unfair, and Un-American; Obama sees it as fair play, as an important foundational component of the American dream.

### **Progressive Pragmatism**

Obama is progressive. He desires policy change, campaigned on that theme, and now wants to achieve it. He wants to transform public policy and partisan politics. But he is not a revolutionary, far from it; He values history, traditions, and communities too much. He is into roots. He is more like Edmund Burke than John Locke. He has liberal inclinations but a more conservative manner and operating style.

Obama is a pragmatist and a commonsense decision maker. He keeps his eye on the doable, not necessarily the optimal. Pragmatism conforms to his belief in how and why the American experiment succeeded. It is also consistent with his personal success in adapting to new conditions and environments and with his personal achievements within the political sphere. Thirdly, pragmatism fits into his centrist approach, open mindedness, and rational thought-processes.

Obama has little tolerance for absolutists (like his father), true believers (like Alan Keyes his Illinois Senate opponent in 2004), and ideologues (like George W. Bush and Dick Cheney) because you can't reason with them. They know "truth" and use it to stifle and end debate. In *The Audacity of Hope*, he writes, "... it's precisely the pursuit of ideological purity, the rigid orthodoxy, and the sheer predictability of our current debate that keeps us from finding news ways to meet the challenges we face as a country. It's what keeps us locked in "either/or" thinking..." (p.40)

Obama's is a centrist, more comfortable in the middle than at the policy extremes; more comfortable on Main Street than any other street (except perhaps the road to the White House). His frequent references to Main Street reinforce his down-to-earth, I-understand-what you-are-going-through image, he wishes to convey. His speeches



are filled with examples of real people who encounter real problems and need help. These real stories infuse his political rhetoric and help him counter the perception that he is an elitist and out of touch.

## **Style**

### **Cognition**

Obama's legal training influences how he thinks. Rigor, logic, and rationality structure his thought process. He tries not to let emotions affect his policy judgments or his reactions to people and events. In fact, he usually keeps his emotions well buried and out of public view. Today, he seems a little embarrassed by his own revelations of teen and adult behavior in *Dreams From My Father*, attributing those youthful actions to "his mixed racial background and an excess of youthful hormones."

Obama enjoys and thrives on the challenge of problem solving. He has considerable synthetic and analytic skills. He reads voraciously: books, briefing papers, newspapers, letters, usually until the late hours of the night. He describes himself [with little modesty, I might add] to Steve Kroft on "60 Minutes" as "...a practical person, somebody who, I think can cut through some very complicated problems and figure out the right course of action."

Making good policy judgments on complex matters requires a lot of information from a variety of sources with multiple perspectives and ideas. It also requires considerable time, a flexible mindset, and the ability to cut to the chase. When asked at a presidential news conference why he took several days to react publicly to the bonuses given to top executives by AIG, a company that had to borrow \$173 billion from the federal government, just to survive, Obama snapped: "It took us a couple of days because I like to know what I'm talking about before I speak." And he does.

Although he is not afraid of making difficult decisions, he is afraid of making mistakes. Most of his decisions are risk adverse. He plays it safe. His desire for consensus removes the most controversial items from his wish list and contributes to his penchant for compromise.

### **Decision Making**

Obama adheres to an elaborate and time-consuming decision making process in which he identifies and assembles policy experts, listens as they debate the issues, asks tough questions throughout, requests the opinions and recommendations of everyone in the room—all of which inform his policy judgment. The decision to send 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan illustrates the process and product. It took Obama three months and ten meetings with his national security

and foreign policy advisers before he arrived at a final decision. And when he did, he required unanimity among his senior advisers before he was willing to issue a public statement.

Once Obama makes a decision, however, he usually sticks with it; he is careful not to let peripheral changes in the political environment overturn previously considered political, policy, or even personal judgments, except, of course, when he has no other option (such as with his nomination of former Senate leader, Tom Daschle, to be Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services as well as his chief health reform adviser).

### **Communication**

Obama is his administration's chief spokesman. He enjoys communicating and is good at it. For Obama, words have power and have given him power. They allow him to show off "his smarts" which is part of his mystic. The knowledge he displays reinforces the confidence he projects in his judgments; that knowledge and confidence contributes to the confidence people have in his intellectual abilities.

As a communicator, Obama is extremely disciplined. He is cautious with his words, although a few ad lib remarks and failed jokes have hurt him and taught him to keep to his script. He can talk without

a teleprompter but rarely does so in public. He seems spontaneous, but is usually well scripted and well rehearsed.

Once a professor always a professor, Obama likes to teach and seeks teaching moments for the American people, such as his speech on race or his West Point address on Afghanistan. He believes that presidents have an obligation to explain the reasons for their actions. (George W. Bush did not share that belief. Bush believed that actions speak louder than words.) To Newsweek's John Meacham, Obama stated:

...one of the things I've actually been encouraged by and I learned during the campaign was the American people, I think, not only have a toleration but also a hunger for explanation and complexity, and a willingness to acknowledge hard problems. I think one of the biggest mistakes that is made in Washington is this notion you have to dumb things down for the public.

Information is also a critical component in a deliberative democracy. A proponent of participatory politics, Obama believes that informed debate not only results in better judgments, but it also generates a more civil tone. Civility, in turn, contributes to compromise, which is consistent with Obama's conciliator style, and to gaining greater support for the policy.

Finally, and most importantly, words allow Obama to shine, to demonstrate his intelligence, his thoughtfulness, and occasionally, his wit. Obama loves the adulation he receives from the crowds. The time he spends communicating also helps explain his admiration for the communicative skills of Ronald Reagan and the priority his campaign gave to developing new communication technologies on the Internet. One of Obama's biggest disappointments as president has been his administration's inability to mobilize public support for issues as his campaign had turned out voters for Obama.

### **Temperament**

Although Obama has occasionally shown impatience, he rarely explodes in anger. He does not demonize his opponents (as Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton did) or do anything publically that would run counter to his conciliator approach and his common ground goals. He gets rid of his own excess energy but exercising regularly in the mornings before work, playing basketball and golf, working long hours, and occasionally, burns off anxiety with a cigarette.

Nonetheless, for many, the Obama presidency has been disappointing. As candidate, he created great expectations. He projected the image of a transformational leader with an optimistic, "yes-we-can" message. He promised to bring the American nation together, revitalize U.S. foreign policy and relations with the rest of

the world, and deal with pressing issues, such as the economy, and neglected ones, such as health care, climate change, and renewable energy. Thus far, his list of accomplishments is relatively small given the hopes he raised, promises he made, and money he spent.

Part of the difficulties Obama has encountered stems from a constitutional system that divides power and from a political environment which is highly polarized along partisan and ideological lines. But part is also the result of himself, the clash between the transformational imagery and the 'yes-we-can' optimism he projected and his style of leadership which is careful, cautious, and conciliatory, one that focuses on commonalities, strives for consensus, and seeks common ground. But that clash, my friends, is the subject of another paper.