

US ELECTIONS A new voice for Africans everywhere

The African ancestry of the Democratic Party's candidate for the US presidency in November's elections is understandably creating high expectations across the continent

CHARLAYNE HUNTER-GAULT IN WASHINGTON DC

If Senator Barack Obama becomes US president, will the man many Africans see as a native son behave like one when it comes to his Africa policy? Certainly, when he walked into history as the first black man to become the Democratic Party's presumed nominee for the presidency of the US, Africans across the continent seemed to think so.

In leading countries like Nigeria and Kenya – the land of Obama's father who lies buried in his native soil – Africans hailed the Obama victory as a liberating force. Obama had earlier been welcomed to Kenya when he visited

Kogaluc, the tiny village of his father, first as a student in his 20s and again, after graduating from Harvard Law School, with his fiancée, Michelle.

But as he stands perched to become the leader of the free world, after a bruising, but brilliant campaign for the Democratic Party nomination, Obama is being hailed as never before, as “a role model for almost a billion black people in the world today who are used to coming in last in everything important,” as an editorial in *The Nation* newspaper in Nairobi exulted.

“In their secret hearts,” the editorial went on, “Africans see

in Senator Obama's victory a confirmation that a black person can be anything he or she wants to be if they work hard enough and are smart enough and are lucky enough.”

But no doubt also in their secret hearts is the hope that Obama's ascendance might mean Africans would have an advocate as none before, one who would instinctively know their pain and be their champion in helping to eliminate the lingering legacies of colonialism and ongoing poverty and despair, and in challenging the demons of their own design – the blight inflicted on them by their leaders whom power corrupted.

Are they right? Could this man the Kenyans call ‘our lion’ make the whole of Africa the priority it has rarely been for the US?

A CHANGED DYNAMIC

For some, Obama's arrival is in itself a giant leap forward for Africa. “The symbolism thing can't be under-estimated,” says Charles Stith, head of the Boston-based African Presidential Archives and Research Center. “By virtue of the fact that he's in the meeting, the dynamic will change. The conversation is going to be different with the G8, for example, with him in the room.”

It is also going to be different in Africa, says Chris Fomunyoh of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. “The imagery is so strong on a continent where

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African experience in the team



KEVIN SANDERS / AP SIPA

Susan Rice, one of Barack Obama's top foreign policy advisors, would be a strong candidate for National Security Advisor if the Democrats win the Presidency. Rice was the youngest-ever US Assistant Secretary of State for Africa in President Bill Clinton's second administration and worked effectively with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. They had to deal with some cataclysmic events in Africa, such as the start of Al Qaeda's global campaign with the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya, the ousting of Congo's Mobutu

What role for Susan Rice?

Sese Seko and General Sani Abacha's military dictatorship in Nigeria. Prior to the State Department, Rice had worked as Africa director of the National Security Council at the White House. Known for plain-speaking and an aversion to diplo-speak, Rice robustly condemned the human rights abuses and corruption of the Abacha dictatorship and the Islamist regime in Sudan.

After leaving office she found herself in a war of words with some veteran US diplomats who claimed that, had she sought an accommodation with Khartoum, the regime would have handed over Osama bin Laden. Many independent Sudanese analysts backed Rice's stance and dismissed such ideas as patently naïve, given the close ties that continue between Bin Laden and Khartoum's securocrats. ● PATRICK SMITH



image and the spoken word mean so much," he told *The Africa Report*. Fomunyoh argues there is another silent message within the image of the 46-year-old possible president: "Even before he opens his mouth," he says, "his election sends a strong message of the need for generational change on the continent."

Up to now, Obama has opened his mouth about Africa a few times, and not least in

his student days when he demonstrated against apartheid South Africa. And from time to time, Obama has put his money where his mouth is. In Kenya, he donated some

\$14,000 out of his own pocket to a programme (run by the international NGO CARE) in which grandmothers take care of AIDS orphans. And even before he dipped into his own pocket, he had played a role in the provision of \$53m in US assistance to the Democratic Republic of Congo as it emerged from civil war to prepare for its first democratic elections in 46 years. He also worked to get approval of \$20m for the African Union's peacekeeping mission there. In 2006, when Obama was a freshman Senator deepening his credentials as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he took a 15-day tour of Africa, including a well-reported Kenya stop.

ATTACKING CORRUPTION

He was quoted as saying his visit would not be "an episode of biography," but would be informed by the people he met and the stories they would tell. But he felt comfortable enough in his part-African skin to call some of the African family to task, speaking out in South Africa about the slow response to the AIDS crisis.

In Kenya, he and Michelle took an AIDS test in public and he called for more assistance and research into the devastating disease. He also attacked government corruption, calling the fight against it "one of the great struggles of our time." He visited the teeming Kibera slum, drawing attention to the needs of its people, many of whom became victims of the post-election violence earlier this year.

Obama has also weighed in to criticise Robert Mugabe's government in Zimbabwe for the deteriorating crisis there, and spoke to the opposition Movement for Democratic Change leader Morgan Tsvangirai during his ill-fated campaign. He has also supported a no-fly zone over Sudan's



PETE SOUZA / CHICAGO TRIBUNE / MCT / ABACAPRESS.COM

troubled Darfur region, where government helicopters have participated in the slaughter of the country's black Africans in a campaign the US government has called genocide.

Africanists like Charles Stith are hoping this kind of engagement will continue into an Obama administration, when he will have the power to do more than make phone calls and take principled stands. So far, he has pledged to double foreign aid to \$50bn by 2012, although not all of that will go to Africa. He has also said he will establish a \$2bn Global Education Fund to eliminate the worldwide education deficit, and he has pledged to reduce the debt of developing nations, and to coordinate trade and development policies better.

Stith argues that Obama's African roots will help overcome some of what he sees as the "outmoded games" some African leaders continue to play with the West. "It's hard to play the victim card when your guy is The Man," he says. "They're going to have to come to the table with more than an appetite. They've got to come with a menu and a strategy for increasing the level of accountability in their governments."

Insiders on the Obama team have pointed out the fine line

between assurance that Africa will get its fair share of attention without raising expectations too high. Said one: "Barack Obama is going to be president of the United States, not president of Africa."

A hint of the difference between US and African interests came while he was still a member of the Illinois Senate responding to a question about US trade policies that give subsidies to US farmers, which African farmers argue is an unfair advantage. At the time, Obama talked about the soybean farmers in his native state of Illinois, and said: "It's important to me to be sure I'm looking out for their interests. It's part of my job."

"You do have to realise where he comes from," said a backer from Illinois. The Obama team adviser also insisted that it is "unrealistic" to think that Africa will be his sole priority.

"HOPEFUL AND PRAGMATIC"

On the other hand, members of his team insist Obama has a "particular understanding of Africa's complexities and its importance", but seen through a prism of the interrelatedness of African problems to the rest of the world. Just as Africa's health is inseparable from the health and well-being of

Obama visited Kenya in 2006 during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee tour of the continent

IF HE BECOMES PRESIDENT HE COULD BUILD ON GEORGE W. BUSH'S MORE POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENTS

the entire international community, so issues like climate change, food security, counterterrorism, AIDS and other diseases, and energy all involve Africa. The US is expected in the next few years to get 25% of its oil from Africa.

"[Obama] has a sophisticated knowledge and interest in all of those things," one source close to his foreign policy team said, insisting his perspective derives from understanding that doing right by the US requires a much more effective approach to African issues, one that is both "hopeful and pragmatic". The source then defined this as meaning: "He's not gonna be taking any crap."

If he becomes president, Obama will inherit what could be one of the more positive achievements of the Bush administration. Some Africans and Africanists argue that Bush's Africa policy was better than most of his predecessors. President George W. Bush was enthusiastically received by African heads of state, and by those who lined his route in the countries he visited on his farewell tour earlier this year. He was also praised for the contributions his government made through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (Pepfar), and

funds from the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), a programme that provides funds to countries that meet the criteria of what Bush dubbed a “new compact for development” – including ruling justly, investing in people and fostering enterprise and entrepreneurship.

Despite African enthusiasm for the funds, critics have also assailed aspects of both, for example the slowness of disbursing funds from the MCA and Pefpar’s emphasis in its ABC approach on ‘Abstinence’ and ‘Being Faithful’ over the C of ‘Condom Use’, which one Obama insider called “a self-defeating earmark for abstinence”.

FOLLOWING AFRICAN EVENTS

Sources in the campaign argue that Bush had a very narrow set of African priorities and that Obama will build on those foundations but take a far broader, more in-depth and sophisticated approach. “His will be aggressive diplomacy, firing on multiple cylinders simultaneously,” one said.

During the campaign, Obama followed African events, and he was sometimes upfront and sometimes active behind the scenes. He went on Kenyan radio during the post-election violence that led to the deaths of hundreds, appealing for calm. On Zimbabwe, when Tsvangirai pulled out of the elections due to the rampant violence against his supporters, Obama called for African regional powers to take a more aggressive approach to the deteriorating crisis there.

It’s too early to tell who might serve on any Obama administration Africa team. His current foreign policy team already includes Susan Rice (she is no relation to Condoleezza), who served President Bill Clinton as assistant secretary of state for Africa, and Tony Lake,

Clinton’s National Security Adviser.

If Obama ends up as president, whoever serves on his foreign policy team will have to help him confront an Africa of raised expectations and thorny problems. The latter already include issues like free trade; the US Africa Command (Africom), set up to help provide peace and security in Africa, but generating much

CONFRONTING AN AFRICA OF EXPECTATIONS AND PROBLEMS

debate about a US military presence on African soil; and what Africanist Francis Kornegay calls “the no-win anti-terror strategy in the Somali regions of the Horn of Africa”. He will also have to work with those who want to find African solutions to Africa’s problems, even when these efforts aren’t getting the problems solved.

First of all, however, Obama has to win. ●

Firm rock with a warm heart

Michelle Obama gets described in a lot of ways. Words like ‘reserved’ and ‘cool’ are common. ‘Confident’ also frequently comes up, as do ‘fit’, ‘focused’ and ‘kick-ass’.

A reporter following her around recently described a scene during a women’s round table in Manchester, New Hampshire, where the group of mostly white women were talking about their economic difficulties. “Her body language was so physical, so warm,” the reporter recalled. “She would reach out and put an arm around a shoulder that said she was one of them.”

As 44-year-old Michelle Obama, a descendent of slaves, stands poised on the cusp of history to possibly become the first African-American First Lady, the phrase heard most often is “Barack’s rock” – and this description came first from Barack himself.

Michelle Obama was born into a working-class Chicago family and went on to graduate from Princeton University and Harvard Law School. She worked as a corporate lawyer at a prestigious Chicago law firm where she also mentored Obama, then a young lawyer just starting out. In time, she followed her heart – not only into a union with Obama, but also into work more focused on the kind of social change that had interested her since her days at Princeton, rescuing and developing the young people from South Side, Chicago, where she had been raised, and later at the University of Chicago Medical Center, where she worked to expand opportunities and healthcare for people in the mostly black neighbourhoods around the hospital.

While she has undergone adjustments to her public persona in support of her husband’s campaign – with less ‘kick-ass’ and more diplomacy – the tall mother of two young daughters is helping to change the perception of black women in America. Doing a recent stint as co-host of ‘The View’, an all-women show on US television, she said: “I wear my heart on my sleeve and, at some level, when you put your heart out there, there’s a level of passion that you feel, and it’s a risk you take.”

Michelle Obama has refused to be drawn into answering questions about what she would do if she becomes First Lady, but there can be no doubt she believes her husband is set to become the first black President of the United States. ● C. H.-G.



Behind every good man is a good woman, pushing