

The Audacity

THE INSIDE STORY
AND LESSONS
OF BARACK OBAMA'S
HISTORIC VICTORY



David Plouffe

CAMPAIGN MANAGER, OBAMA FOR AMERICA

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The Audacity to Win

The Inside Story and Lessons of
Barack Obama's Historic Victory

David Plouffe

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For Olivia, Everett, and Vivian

David Axelrod and I left the Obama campaign headquarters election bunker in Chicago at 10:30 p.m. central time to humbling cheers from the knot of staffers who had been prepared for a long night of data crunching and narrow margins. Instead, they were downing beers and celebrating, having just watched all the networks announce the election of their boss as the forty-fourth president of the United States of America.

It was the end of a long road. Axelrod and I had begun the journey walking together through an airport in November 2006, en route to our first meeting about the far-fetched prospect of Barack Obama's running for president. At the time we figured it was probably the only meeting that such an unlikely endeavor would yield.

Yet here we were, walking down the hallway of the high-rise that had housed our campaign for almost two years, on our way to greet the president-elect. As we departed the elevator and stepped into the lobby, the security guards broke into raucous cheers and tearful thank-yous. Their joy hit me with a jolt of reality that blaring televisions and hours of encouraging results from battleground states had somehow failed to convey.

"I'm having a hard time actually believing this," I said to Axelrod as we made our way into the street.

"I know," nodded Ax. "It's too big to comprehend right now."

We had just elected the president of the United States—an African American man, born to a Kenyan father and a Kansan mother, just four years out of the Illinois state senate. He had defeated the gold standard in both parties, Hillary Clinton and John McCain, to win in one of the biggest upsets in American political history.

The elation of these security guards, all African Americans, struck me powerfully. Later I learned that this same celebratory scene was playing out all across the country, in groups large and small; black, white, and brown; suburban, urban, and rural. Americans were expressing not merely satisfaction at the victory of a political party or candidate, or relief that the lesser of two evils had prevailed, but something deeper and more profound. Their reactions were closer to a kind of primal joy at seeing wrongs righted, at having risen up to achieve something cynics said couldn't be done. For most of us, under a certain age, any prior familiarity with this feeling came secondhand, from history books. Now we owned it.

Ax and I crossed the street to the Hyatt Regency where the next president, his family, and Joe and Jill Biden were watching election results. The advance team directed us up some back stairs, to a blocked-off elevator and eventually down a hall to the Obama suite. Members of the road show—the staff that had spent two years with Obama on the road, living every minute of this amazing and improbable journey—lined the hall. Reggie Love and Marvin Nicholson, both giants, swallowed me in their emotional embrace.

As Ax and I slipped into the suite, Obama was on the phone with President Bush, receiving his congratulations. I shivered, as another jolt of reality shot up my spine. Right before we walked in, Obama had received the historic concession call from Senator John McCain, our vanquished opponent. The next minutes were a blur of hugs and happiness: embracing the Bidens; Michelle's brother, Craig Robinson; and then a wonderful high-five with Michelle. Michelle's mother was radiant, holding hands with her son-in-law, the next president of the United States. Then Obama was done talking to Bush and crossed the room toward me. He and I embraced for a long time. He pulled Ax and Robert Gibbs in for a beaming photograph, a treasured memento.

I suddenly noticed how quiet the room seemed. There were no shrieks or champagne corks popping or screams of delight. Perhaps because of exhaustion, relief, or a sense of elation that was more quiet and private than boisterous, we were a remarkably subdued bunch for a party of victors. An outside observer might not have immediately known if we had won or lost the election.

I could not relax. Though victory was sealed, there were still states to be called, and these states were like my babies—I couldn't rest until they were all put to bed, hopefully tucked under a blanket of Obama blue. I stared intently at the suite's TVs and checked results religiously on my BlackBerry.

The press coverage and reports from our advance staff told us the crowd at nearby Grant Park was enormous and crackling with energy. We piled into a waiting motorcade and screamed down Lakeshore Drive; before it seemed possible, we began to see the crowd. The throngs on the outer edge of the park saw the motorcade approaching, and a roar of cheering supporters followed us all the way down the drive until we reached the security entrance. Axelrod, Gibbs, and I did not want to watch Obama speak from backstage, so we asked the advance staff to get us out with the crowd. We wanted to be swept up in the human wave of energy.

As I watched Barack Obama emerge onto the stage with his beautiful family, I found it difficult to contain my emotions. Was this really possible? Was this our next first family? Obama delivered a phenomenal speech; at one point he thanked me and Ax personally, which was as surreal as it was embarrassing.

Then it was over. The Obamas and the Bidens embraced and joined hands, waved to the crowd, and strode off the stage.

Two years earlier, this historic moment would have seemed little more than a fantasy. It strained credibility—required a certain audaciousness, you might say—to believe that Barack Obama could wrest the Democratic nomination from the Clinton franchise, much less go on to win the presidency with 365 electoral votes, 7 million more popular votes than anyone who had ever run for president, and a higher vote percentage than any Democratic candidate besides FDR in 1936 and LBJ in 1964.

The remarkable Obama for President campaign, led by a once-in-a-generation candidate, had the audacity to win—and not just to win, but to do so with guts, defying conventional wisdom time and again. We talked to voters like adults and organized a grassroots movement of average citizens the likes of which American politics had never seen.

It was not easy. At the beginning it was a stretch just to find office space and fill it with computers and phone lines. Taking the first halting steps of the Obama for President journey, most of us, many included, were more resolute than starry-eyed. We could hardly have realized, in signing up to work for this political long shot from Chicago, that we had gained a unique perch from which to watch American history unfold.

Yes or No

The week before the 2006 congressional elections, my business partner, David Axelrod, and I were sitting in an editing suite in Chicago, putting the final touches on a series of television ads for various Democratic clients. We were seven or eight hours into a sixteen-hour session at the studio.

“I can’t wait for this goddamned election to be over,” I grumbled. “I want it to be over more than I want to win.”

It was a biannual complaint. By October of each election year, everyone in the business has pulled too many all-nighters, been on too many conference calls, and read too many polls. If the whole profession could put the campaign in suspended animation and sleep for a week, it would.

Ax fiddled with some music selections for the spot we were working on. “Well, then you won’t like this,” he said. “Barack wants to meet in Chicago the day after the election to talk about the presidential race. And he wants you there. So don’t get too excited for Election Day.”

“Really?” I said. “Shit.”

Obama’s book tour that fall for *The Audacity of Hope* had unexpectedly turned into a presidential draft. Independent groups calling for him to run had sprung up across the country, generating tens of thousands of rabid potential supporters. There was clearly enthusiasm on the margins. It seemed to me to stem from a hunger for something new and a desire to turn the page not just on the Bush era, but on our own party’s recent history.

The crowds and chatter around the book tour in turn bred a great deal of speculation in the political community and the media about a possible Obama candidacy. Obama would be appearing on *Meet the Press* one Sunday in October, and it was expected that host Tim Russert would press him on whether he was going to run. The question was complicated by the fact that Obama had been on the show in January 2006 and made a Shermanesque statement about not running in 2008.

The Saturday before his October *Meet the Press* appearance, Axelrod and I got on the phone with Obama and his press secretary, Robert Gibbs. Obama and Gibbs were driving down the New Jersey Turnpike toward Pennsylvania, in between rallies he was attending for Democratic U.S. Senate candidates. In 2006 Obama was the most in-demand speaker for Democratic candidates in every part of the country, thanks to the fame resulting from his stirring 2004 Democratic National Convention speech in Boston and the success of his two books.

Ax, Gibbs, and I were trying to find the right turn of phrase to reconcile what Obama had said in January with where he stood in October: while a presidential candidacy was, as he said to us privately, “unlikely,” the response to the book tour, the state of the country, and his profound sense that what we needed a big change in leadership had caused him to give the race some consideration.

We started by throwing out some of the standard nonanswers: “Tim, my focus now is helping Democrats win back the Congress in 2006,” or “We haven’t even had the 2006 election, so let’s settle down a bit; there will be plenty of time to discuss 2008 down the line.”

Obama listened and then offered a novel approach. “Why don’t I just tell the truth?” he suggested

“Say I had no intention of even thinking about running when I was on the show in January but things have changed, and I will give it some thought after the 2006 elections.”

That kind of straightforward answer may sound unremarkable, but politicians always twist themselves into knots denying the obvious on these shows. His instinct to drop the charade and just say what he was thinking was enormously refreshing.

When the strategy session ended I called Ax and said, “That was impressive. It sounds silly but I think if he answers the question that way people will be even more intrigued. Because it will sound nonpolitical.”

“That’s what makes him unique,” Ax replied. “He doesn’t have that political gene so many of them do. He’s still a human being.”

Ax had known Obama since 1992, when Barack was running a voter registration drive in Chicago and Ax was emerging as the city’s preeminent Democratic political consultant. They stayed in touch over the years, and even though Ax never worked for him in a political capacity, they built a strong friendship. He often said Obama was one of the smartest people he had ever known—maybe the smartest.

Ax and I were partners in a political consulting firm. We met in 1994 when I was managing a U.S. Senate race in Delaware and he was hired to serve as our media consultant. His firm produced radio and television ads and served as campaign advisers on strategy and message.

I thought David was unique among political consultants. He was not slick—in fact, whatever the opposite of slick is, Ax was its poster child. He and his partners did not take on too many races, choosing instead to pour themselves into a handful of worthy efforts. Ax took great pride in his work, opting for quality over quantity, and he had a healthy disregard for Washington, which I found appealing. He also had a great sense of humor, was a legendarily poor dresser, and was profoundly disorganized. And he was one of the smartest people I had ever met.

We lost the Delaware race—as did just about every Democrat facing the Republican tsunami of 1994—but I thought Ax did an excellent job for us, and we stayed in touch. In 2001 he asked me if I’d be interested in joining his firm as a partner. The idea appealed to me; I was interested in learning a new discipline—advertisement production—and respected the firm’s focused approach. I agreed to join but would work out of Washington instead of the Chicago headquarters.

The firm—which became AKP Media in 2007—had a meeting in late 2002 to discuss business options for 2003 and 2004. The main topic of conversation was the 2004 Illinois senate race, which would be an open seat.

The two main Democratic contenders were Blair Hull, a very wealthy businessman who had vowed to spend millions on his campaign, and Dan Hynes, the state controller, who would have the endorsement of the state party and many labor unions and was considered a strong favorite. Both candidates had approached us about working for them, and David had sat down with each man to size him up.

But at our meeting he announced that he did not want to work for either. Instead, he thought we should work for a little-known state senator named Barack Hussein Obama, who was given zero chance to win by the political establishment. Just fourteen months after September 11, most believed his name alone would sink his candidacy.

“One of the others will probably win,” Ax told us. “But Barack Obama is the kind of guy who should be in the U.S. Senate. He’s bright, principled, skilled legislatively, and committed to a politics that lifts people up. I think that’s who we should work for.”

“Let me get this straight,” summed up one of our colleagues. “We should work for the candidate with no chance, no money, and the funny name?”

“As I keep telling you guys,” Ax wryly replied, “I am a terrible businessman.”

So that was that. Ax had been the lead political reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* before transitioning into politics and had since elected mayors, senators, and congressmen throughout the state. He was considered the godfather of Illinois Democratic politics, from the operative side of the fence, and had great latitude on any decision the firm made involving Illinois.

I was not heavily involved in the day-to-day of Obama's 2004 Senate race, having other projects that I was primarily responsible for, but I attended some meetings and wrote his initial campaign plans for the primary election and then, when he won the primary in a stunning landslide, for the general.

My first meeting with him came at Ax's request in the spring of 2003. I flew into Chicago from D.C., and the three of us had breakfast at my hotel on Michigan Avenue. My mission at the breakfast was simple: convince Barack that he could not run for U.S. Senate and simultaneously serve as both his own driver and scheduler. The fledgling campaign was struggling with this as well as a host of other remedial issues: he was not spending enough time making fund-raising calls. He was not closing the deal effectively enough with potential political supporters. And he was generally having a hard time allowing his campaign staff to take more responsibility for both the campaign and his life.

"You just have to let go and trust," I told him. "Your staff will inevitably screw up. But the most precious resource in any campaign is time. The candidate's time. Your time. You have to be the candidate. Not the campaign manager, scheduler, or driver."

"I understand that intellectually," he said, "but this is my life and career. And I think I could probably do every job on the campaign better than the people I'll hire to do it. It's hard to give up control when that's all I've known in my political life. But I hear you and will try to do better."

It was my first exposure to Obama's significant self-confidence. We chatted about the race for the rest of breakfast. I was struck by his intelligence and ease, and noticed that he lit up more when talking about policy than politics. I also noted his thoughts on campaign strategy—he was determined to win not with thirty-second ads and clever sound bites, but by building a grassroots campaign throughout Illinois. With rare exceptions, that was not the way politics was done anymore. Maybe A is on to something here, I thought. This is the kind of person we need in politics—and that we desperately need in Washington.

Still, had I been asked to gauge the likelihood that three and a half years later we'd be discussing whether Barack Obama should run for president, I wouldn't have taken the question seriously. At the time, with the country still shaken from 9/11, and the Republicans entrenched in power, it would have seemed insane.

But by 2006 the suggestion had gained a hint of plausibility. The political playing field had shifted dramatically, and one of the reasons was the mood and state of the country. President George Bush was deeply unpopular. Iraq, the economy, divisiveness in Washington, and the erosion of our moral leadership around the world had sent both Bush's and the Republican Party's stock plummeting.

As a result, Democrats scored a resounding victory in the 2006 congressional election, winning the House for the first time in twelve years and winning enough Senate races, coupled with the defection of a moderate Republican senator, to control that chamber for only the second time in twelve years. It was an electoral bloodbath for the GOP.

Historically, the sixth year of a two-term presidency can result in big losses for the incumbent party. In 2006 something deeper was at work, and it was related to the feeling that the core leadership had turned rotten. Voters believed the Democrats' argument that Republican majorities were engaged in a culture of corruption, with lobbyists like the felonious Jack Abramoff calling the shots, showering their political patrons with money, and getting the desired results for themselves and their clients. Meanwhile, the people were getting hosed. Voters wanted a clean break.

The 2006 election swept many Republicans from office, but it did not quench that appetite for

fundamental change. Voters wanted more and the presidential race was their chance to complete the job. Without this hunger for change, driven by a belief that Washington was fundamentally broken, the idea of a Barack Obama candidacy could not have taken flight.

Against this backdrop the nascent Obama organization had its first meeting to discuss the presidential race. Ax and I had spent election night of 2006 at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC), the committee in charge of U.S. House races for the Democrats. We had poured our hearts into the effort for the past two years, partly because it felt personal. Rahm Emanuel, one of Ax's oldest friends, was the DCCC's chairman, and I had run the DCCC in 2000, coming a few thousand votes short in a razor-close national battle for the House. Six years later the job was finally done. We were ecstatic.

It was the kind of night that deserved a few days to soak in. Instead, after a few hours of sleep, we boarded a flight for Chicago to discuss the slimmest possibility, an Obama for President campaign.

My sense was that we would go through the process over the next couple of months and he would decide not to run. Almost every major presidential candidate in recent memory had been doing rigorous planning and laying groundwork for years before jumping in. Even long-shot candidates who eventually don't run still do the legwork. Most of the major Democratic contenders in 2008 spent the previous two years—and sometimes longer—on the hustings in Iowa and New Hampshire, building relationships, acquiring quiet offers of support, and familiarizing themselves with these sometimes quirky states. Biden, Warner, Dodd, Edwards, and Bayh—all had been relentlessly planning and precampaigning. Hillary Clinton was in rarefied air all her own; armed with assets built up over twenty years, she was content to allow lesser candidates to bounce around Iowa. She would take things by storm at the moment of her choosing, when her army would gather and take the field.

I approached this meeting skeptical that a campaign would materialize, doubtful one should, and a little cranky that less than twelve hours after one election had ended the next one was beginning. Unless Obama decided that afternoon not to run, the time that I had planned to spend with my family would instead be spent writing memos and doing analysis that would likely lead nowhere.

Our initial meeting was small and consisted of Barack and Michelle Obama; their close Chicago friends Valerie Jarrett and Marty Nesbitt; Obama's Senate chief of staff Pete Rouse; his spokesman Robert Gibbs; his scheduler and political hand, Alyssa Mastromonaco; Steve Hildebrand, Democratic operative; and Axelrod and me.

We were a motley crew. Gibbs had left John Kerry's presidential campaign in 2003 during a purge and had entered a form of political purgatory. When Obama won the primary for the Senate race in 2004, we set out to enhance his campaign with more seasoned hands and brought Gibbs on board. He was from Alabama, a die-hard Auburn fan who had served as the top communications staffer in a number of campaigns and Democratic organizations. He was known as a tough enforcer who skipped the velvet on his hammer. Signing up with Obama helped rehabilitate his promising career. Despite their different demeanors and upbringings, over the course of the Senate campaign and then two years in the Senate, Gibbs and Obama grew quite close. Obama leaned on him for his political and media judgment, and would clearly want him to play a major role if he decided to run.

From his first days in the Senate, Obama drew top talent. Rouse had been the chief of staff for Tom Daschle when he was the Democratic leader, and Rouse had gained such respect and clout that he became known as the 101st Senator. When Daschle lost his reelection race in 2004, Obama courted Rouse hard to be his own chief of staff. Pete originally demurred but eventually gave in, providing the invaluable assistance of a skilled guide as Obama made his way in the Senate. Alyssa had been the scheduler for John Kerry's presidential campaign; doing a similar job, albeit with additional political responsibilities, for a freshman senator would normally be seen as a backward career move but she was drawn to Obama's potential.

Steve Hildebrand had been running Democratic campaigns for years and was one of the most respected managers and organizers in the party. He knew Iowa well, having run Al Gore's caucus campaign there in 2000. He originally got involved when he accompanied Obama to the Harkin Stearns Fry in Iowa in October at Rouse's invitation, where the excited reaction to Obama added to the intensity of the speculation about his plans; after a few outings with Barack, Hildebrand had become a true believer, and relentlessly pressed him to make a presidential bid.

Valerie and Marty were both close personal friends of the Obamas and had been around Illinois politics for some time. Valerie had served as the finance chair for the 2004 Obama Senate race. I got the sense that after the meeting was over, Valerie, Marty, Barack, and Michelle would have a separate discussion to evaluate how it went. They would be important sounding boards throughout the campaign.

We met in a small room at AKP Media. Crowded around a conference table, we all waited to hear for the first time exactly what Obama was thinking. Within minutes it was clear he had given this a lot more thought than most of us had realized. He laid out why he was considering a run: the country needed deep, fundamental change; Washington wasn't thinking long term; and we had big challenges like energy and health care that had languished for decades; the special interests and lobbyists had too much power, and the American people needed to once again trust and engage in their democracy; the country was too divided; and the middle class and those trying to get into the middle class, especially their children, ran the risk of having less opportunity than generations before. His question for us—before we got to any of the politics—was whether he offered something distinct enough from the other candidates in terms of addressing these challenges that it merited a campaign. I thought his answers were a pretty strong rationale for a candidacy and a strong campaign message. We had done some baseline research on where the race stood, but no message testing, and we hadn't taken any polls to derive the message, which was exhilarating in itself. I was also struck that his initial assessment of the race was all about substance, not about politics. I have been in very few meetings with candidates or potential candidates where this was this case.

Barack did ask questions about the politics, and to a person we all said that Hillary Clinton was an enormously strong front-runner. In fact, at this point, it was tough to see how she could lose. We spent some time on the other candidates, but only briefly, discussing John Edwards's strength in the first contest, Iowa, and how that was a complicating factor; because we could not assume the role of an alternative to Clinton there, we'd have to earn it. She was the eight-hundred-pound gorilla, with organizations in every state, 100 percent name recognition, and a fund-raising machine ready to be switched on at a moment's notice. We had none of this. Nothing, nada, zilch. Any political conversation about the 2008 primaries started and ended with Hillary Clinton.

Michelle Obama had questions about what this would mean to their family. How often would Barack be campaigning out of town? Could they still have many weekends together? Would the family be able to campaign together? How much would she need to do and how would that work with her job and looking after their daughters?

This was the first time I had met Michelle and I was impressed by her directness and the no-nonsense focus of her questioning. She clearly wanted all the facts, and I could tell that running was not going to be solely Barack's decision—they would decide together.

Other than Hildebrand, who was the cheerleader in the room and offered a dubious fairy tale about not campaigning on Sundays and a lot of time at home, no one had good news for Michelle. There could be no shortcuts. It would be grueling and then more grueling. The candidate would only be home for snatches of time and when he was, there would be calls to make and speeches to review. And it would last at least a year if we lost. Two if we won.

I felt satisfied that there was no window dressing. They needed to make their decision with open

eyes and all the facts. But hearing is different than living; we couldn't control how they received the message. I knew they could rationalize that the obstacle course was manageable, only to find themselves stuck midcourse.

The consensus concerning Michelle's involvement was that the campaign, if it existed, would want to use her as much as possible, but that she would tell us when she could travel, and we would utilize that time, with no pressure on her to do more. The Obamas made clear they would not outsource the care of their two young girls, so we would work around the family schedule, not the other way around.

At the end of the meeting we agreed we would reconvene in a couple of weeks and each of us would produce something to move the discussion forward—a sample schedule so the Obamas could see what their lives might look like day to day and month to month; an initial overview of the calendar and of provisional electoral strategy recommendations; fund-raising estimates; and an overview of what the first three months' imperatives and benchmarks would be.

Obama said he would spend time with Michelle discussing whether they could make this work as a family. He made it clear that the campaign's message—the rationale he had laid out at the meeting—was not negotiable. So the Obamas would report on their ruminations about the family and lifestyle issues, and the rest of us would spend the bulk of our time discussing, in his words, “whether we can build not a winning campaign, but a credible one.” That was our bar. It may seem low. But given our starting point, it was alpine.

I still believed the undertaking was largely a theoretical exercise, but Obama was more serious about running than I had anticipated. I called Ax on my way to O'Hare to get his take. “I think he wants to run, but he's drawn more to the idea of running than actually running,” he said. “We'll see how he processes the reality of what this will mean, how hard it is, and how long the odds are. Michelle is the wild card. If she is opposed, there is no way this is going to happen. And I can't really yet where she'll come down.”

I sighed. “Well, all I know is I was supposed to be at Disneyland with my son next week but we have to postpone that to pull together everything he asked for. But I was impressed by him. He clearly has a good sense of why he might want to run, and it's not about power or politics or some long-held ambition. I still think he doesn't do it—how many people have just sort of, last minute, with no planning, rolled the dice and jumped into a presidential race against maybe the strongest front-runner in history? With young kids to boot?”

“It's likely all our work will be for naught,” Ax agreed. “But we owe this a real solid effort so at least he has everything he needs to make the decision.”

In the interim before our next meeting, Obama organized a gathering with some of his key Senate staff, friends, and outside advisers in Washington. It was like a Harvard Law School reunion. Axelrod and I attended, and we listened as Obama explained his current thinking and asked everyone in the room to offer their thoughts, opinions, and concerns.

I was impressed by the thoughtfulness of the responses. Most centered on concern about what this would mean to his family; some flatly said they thought it was too early; others said he should run before he spent too much time in Washington and got senatoritis. Others thought it would be difficult to put together a campaign in such a short amount of time. I found it noteworthy that Obama surrounded himself with a fairly selfless crew, all the more remarkable given the type A ambition often associated with a roomful of Harvard Law grads. I didn't get the sense that any of them were offering their opinions based on what was in it for them—the chance to be close to a new and exciting presidential candidate.

Toward the end of the meeting, Obama turned to me and asked me to outline what would be required to get a presidential campaign up and running and how it might operate. I spent about fifteen minutes ticking through the immediate imperatives were he to commit: launch a cutting-edge website

recruit talented senior staff, develop a plan and budget. I also talked about how strong Clinton was and ~~our need to focus on the early primary states in order to reset the race—when front-runners stumble early, they have generally been visited with great peril, though they almost always win anyway.~~ We had not discussed electoral strategy in depth, but I thought it was important for my friends to understand from the get-go this would not be a sexy pursuit filled with grand white papers and big crowds in major metropolitan areas; we'd likely have to grind it out one voter at a time in Iowa to have any chance of winning. I made the point that to beat Hillary we'd have to run a perfect campaign. And even if we came close to doing that, the odds were still heavily in her favor.

The room was quiet during my spiel and I got the sense the theoretical had become more real—for Obama, too. It also dawned on me that if he ran, he might ask me to manage his campaign. Instantly, I thought I should have kept my mouth shut.

For the past five years I had been a consultant, with Axelrod as my partner. I got paid to give advice, not to be responsible for every facet of a sprawling organization. Before getting into consulting, I had managed two U.S. Senate races, a congressional race, and a national party committee. I knew exactly what managing was—a pain in the ass.

There is a heady side to it, sure, but the job encompasses a lot more than just developing electoral theories, obsessing about metrics, and spending lots of money creatively. It also requires dealing with a myriad personnel issues, mediating internal disputes, and worrying about things like office air conditioning costs and how much to reimburse staff for mileage—stuff I had not had to worry about for a long time but remembered as a grind. The manager has to be on top of every aspect of the campaign—when the candidate calls, he or she can't say, "I haven't been paying much attention" (fill in the blank). Let me talk to the staffer who has." As I had told Obama, there are no shortcuts. The manager's ass is on the line every minute of every day. The campaign has to be all-consuming.

I had not managed since 2000 and aside from knowing I would be rusty, I was not sure my family could handle it. I grew very uneasy at the prospect the more I thought about it. My wife and I had a two-year-old son, we had just moved into a new house, and we had family plans for 2007. My wife had a successful career and was applying to graduate school for the fall. We were also hoping to add another baby to the mix. A campaign would upset the whole apple cart.

Standing on the street outside the gathering, I said to Ax, "I see where this is headed. I am the logical choice of the folks around him to manage this. Well, I don't want to and I'm not even sure I'm a good choice. We better come up with some other options. Fast."

"You go right ahead," Ax said, smiling sweetly. "But I am going to tell him you are the only and best choice. We'll be in this boat together, even if it goes down."



In retrospect, our embryonic team entered this possible race having witnessed in 2004 and 2006, from different perspectives, some of the new techniques and political currents that would emerge forcefully in 2008. Axelrod and I had worked on the tremendously long-shot gubernatorial campaign of Deval Patrick of Massachusetts in 2006, where we worked with a campaign that was doing some fascinating and new stuff using the Internet to organize and communicate message—from scratch, like we would have to do.

Obama's own 2004 race showed us the enormous power of his television presence directly communicating with voters. We realized without even having to discuss it that our most powerful weapon would be the candidate, unfiltered.

The fact that all of the initial inner circle—Gibbs, Ax, and me—had done presidential politics in 2004 (for three different candidates) was incredibly important for how we viewed the conventional wisdom about 2008—and was another huge advantage over the Clinton campaign. Few of her inner circle had been involved in the 2004 Democratic primaries. Ax and I had seen improbable outside win congressional primaries and races in 2006 while we were working closely with Rahm Emanuel and the DCCC on the effort to win back the House while in 2005 Gibbs was traveling with Obama seeing a startling passionate reaction to him in very unlikely places all across the country. Of course most important, Obama was absorbing these lessons as well. All four of us were in the right spots to see a new potential out there to match the changing mood of the electorate and new technological advances that could help us build a campaign to tap into the winds of change. Many of these lessons ran counter to conventional wisdom about how to run for president, so it was a good first test to see if we could ignore the evidence before our eyes, trust our gut, and start with a clean sheet of paper, not try to rerun the campaigns of the past.

When we gathered in Chicago for our next meeting with the smaller initial group, Michelle Obama opened things in very surprising fashion. She declared they had worked through all the family issues and had decided they would run if they thought they could mount a credible effort. They still wanted time to make a final decision on the family side of the ledger, but our conversation that day would focus more on politics than personal life.

We spent a lot of time at this meeting, and during this period, discussing the political calendar. We viewed the race not as national campaign, but as a sequence of states—beginning in Iowa in January and running through Montana and South Dakota on June 3—with the belief that what happened in any one contest had the distinct ability to affect the next. Essentially, this was a momentum theory, and valid or not, we really had no choice but to embrace it. We were thirty points behind Clinton; a head-on race fighting on multiple fronts across the country would be quick and painful. Prior campaign lent some credibility to our approach. Momentum had historically been crucial in these early contests; winners generally kept winning, at least for a time. A loss was hard to turn around, though front-runners could sometimes stumble and recover due to their strength in other states and financial and organizational superiority.

The year 2008 marked the first time the Democratic Party would add two states to the early primary calendar: Nevada and South Carolina. These would follow Iowa and New Hampshire, in that order. February 5, the first date in the so-called window (those states not granted an early primary date), was also beginning to take form, but we did not know then it would become the twenty-two-state monster that was Super Tuesday.

Before we even knew the contours of the final calendar, we pounded Obama with the mantra that the first contests held undue influence. If you stumbled as an insurgent candidate, you were done. “If you run,” we told him, “you are going to spend all your time doing two things: raising money and campaigning in one of these four states, most often Iowa.” Though this strategy would be tested vigorously at times, in hindsight having it pinned down and clear at the outset could not have been more important.

Our strong strategic sense was that Hillary Clinton had to be disrupted early in the primary season for us to have any chance of derailing her. Ax and I gravitated to the same place on this pretty quickly, and the rest of the team concurred. There were no long drawn-out discussions. It just made sense.

It would take discipline to stick to the path, but the necessity of doing so was not really rock science. We were running against such a formidable front-runner that if she won the first few contests the race would be over. We would never be able to erase her big leads in the latter primary states, and at that point, her organizational and financial advantages would really kick in, as she looked to be the all-but-certain nominee and we campaigned in states where we had spent little time or resources.

As Ax told me over a breakfast in Chicago one day during this period, “I really don’t think we have a choice. It’s Iowa or bust.”

I suspected that if you ran a computer simulation of the primary, ninety-five out of one hundred times, Hillary Clinton would win. Edwards would win a couple of the remaining five. That’s how narrow I believed our path to be. And while there was no guarantee that our strategy would lead to victory, backtracking or zigzagging would unquestionably lead to a precipitous fall off the electoral cliff.

Our first cut on these states—before any in-depth survey research was conducted or the final field of candidates was known—was the following (as always, Clinton was the main focus of our analysis).

We thought Iowa could be potential quicksand for Hillary. Bill Clinton never campaigned there in the primaries—in 1992 Senator Tom Harkin ran a favorite-son candidacy (on which I worked), and in 1996 Clinton was unopposed. Unlike in most other states, the Clinton operation, though likely to generate a formidable surge of early endorsements from elected officials and major Democratic activists, was not impregnable. None of her core senior team had any Iowa experience whatsoever. They did not have residual volunteers in every corner of the state from Bill’s 1992 primary campaign as they did elsewhere. And many Iowans were strongly antiwar—including many Republican voters—so we thought her vote and stubborn position on the Iraq War could give her problems. Iowa was also historically friendly to outsider and long-shot candidates if they spent a lot of time in-state, had a resonant message, and organized well.

Of course, we had no assets in Iowa—Obama had close to zero relationships there. But many of us around the table—me, Hildebrand, Axelrod, Alyssa—had extensive experience in Iowa or had dealt with Iowa through the prism of a national campaign. We understood the quirks of caucuses, the nuances of the electorate, and that its voters historically paid little attention to the national media (they would make their own judgments, and take their time doing so). We knew we could count on a fair hearing in Iowa. I did not fully appreciate at the time the advantage such broad Iowa caucus experience gave the Obama headquarters, but looking back I can imagine that at Clinton headquarters it must have seemed somewhat like foreign territory.

New Hampshire was the next state, and the first primary, and home of Bill Clinton’s “Comeback Kid” resurrection in 1992. The state had a special relationship with the Clintons. Despite that, we thought New Hampshire could be fertile ground. Independent voters can make up a huge percentage of the primary electorate, and our sense was that Clinton would be very challenged to earn a healthy share of their support. The Granite State also had a history of tripping up front-runners—Walter Mondale and George W. Bush most famously—so if we could come out of Iowa as the major alternative to Hillary, we thought New Hampshire could be competitive. For Hillary Clinton, losing New Hampshire could be a damaging, if not fatal, blow.

Nevada was one of the new kids on the block; the Silver State would be holding a caucus for the first time. Our first cut at Nevada was the haziest, but our sense was that this would be a hard state for us, as the Democratic establishment would likely have outsized influence in a first-time caucus. Even in the spring training portion of the campaign, it was also clear that Hillary Clinton would have real strength among Latino voters, whom we expected to compose 10 to 12 percent of the Nevada electorate. We thought Nevada would be the least important of the first four contests in terms of the trampoline effect. I figured we would need serious momentum coming out of New Hampshire to have

any chance of winning it.

Conversely, we were thrilled that South Carolina would be the gateway to the rest of the calendar. African Americans made up about 50 percent of the primary electorate, and though Hillary Clinton had a huge lead in the African American community at the moment, we believed that if we could show competitiveness through 2007, and if voters became familiar with Obama (most African American primary voters had no idea who he was or knew only his name, whereas the Clinton name was the gold standard in many of these households), our support levels would increase. If we could topple Clinton in Iowa or New Hampshire, our support in this community would skyrocket. And if we didn't do what we needed to in Iowa and New Hampshire, it was moot anyway; we'd probably be out of the race by South Carolina. We also believed that only one, Obama or Edwards, would be alive by the time South Carolina rolled around; if it was Obama, we would have a terrific opportunity to attract the support of progressive white voters in the Charleston area and rural white men whose support Clinton might have a tough time securing.

But it started and ended with Iowa. If we did not win there, our chances were probably zero. When you got under the hood in Iowa, it was a daunting challenge. Our first poll there had us firmly in third place. Edwards was polling 38, Clinton 25, and Obama 18. Edwards remained very popular in Iowa after his strong second-place finish in 2004 and had a strong core of organizational support. A look beneath the top numbers showed that our task was even harder than we initially realized. To win Iowa we thought we'd probably need 35 percent of caucus attendees. If Edwards really faded, which looked unlikely but possible, the win number could jump up higher as his vote percentage dropped.

From the get-go it was clear we could not win if the caucus universe was the same as it was in 2004. And it had been that way pretty much every year since Jimmy Carter won in 1976, propelling him to the presidency. To win, we would have to attain the holy grail of politics—a fundamentally altered electorate.

Say you are a business trying to expand your percent of market share against an established brand name product. Your competitor's customers have been buying their product for decades and are unlikely to sample something new. How do you outsell that competitor without converting the existing customers? You have to recruit new buyers.

We had to grow the share of the electorate we believed would be most supportive of Obama. The 2008 caucuses would have to be younger, attended by more minorities (though they constituted a small percentage of the population in Iowa, every voter mattered), and have a higher percentage of independents and Republicans participating than had historically done so.

It sounded great in theory. The reality was terrifying. In every recent caucus, twice as many people over sixty-five had turned out as people under thirty. We'd have to narrow that considerably, doing something most political observers thought was impossible—get young people interested and get them to show up. Republicans and independents could attend the caucuses but had to reregister. Democrats to do so—a huge barrier to participation. We'd have to find a way to create a permissive structure to make this easier.

At our second meeting and in subsequent conversations, some other key assumptions we developed and decisions made that would help guide us out of the box if Obama gave the go-ahead:

We would be headquartered in Chicago. There was some dissent about this—he was a senator and would frequently be in Washington; some thought that we would have trouble attracting staff to Chicago for an underdog effort. I felt strongly that our base should be in Chicago. D.C. is a swamp of conventional wisdom and insiders that can suck a campaign down, and we needed to think differently: to care more about volunteers than political endorsements, to focus more on Iowa field numbers than the national Gallup poll, to be strategic more than tactical, and to not traffic in gossip and internecine campaign politics. As far as attracting talent, I thought people who moved to Chicago would be

committing themselves to the campaign, not fitting the campaign around their lives. And most simply, it was hard to sell an outsider candidate who was based in Washington. Obama raised splitting the headquarters—basing some functions in D.C. and some in Chicago—to accommodate those who couldn't move. I quickly shot this down as a potential disaster in the making. Even in the age of technology, it is invaluable to have everyone under one roof. Nothing is a substitute for human, in-person contact for hatching plans and hashing things out.

We would strive to be a grassroots campaign. That meant volunteers. This was a prime motivation for Obama to run, the belief that the American people needed to reengage in their civic life. He laid out a clear dictate that we needed to build a campaign that had this at its core. As a former community organizer, Obama felt in his gut that if properly motivated, a committed grassroots army could be a powerful force. Over time the volunteers became the pillars that held the whole enterprise aloft, but from the outset, we thought the grassroots could play three pivotal roles for our campaign. One, we hoped our volunteers could help fund our campaign with small contributions to a greater degree than any previous presidential candidate had succeeded in doing; two, we wanted them to organize their local communities for the campaign—the best way to get new people to caucuses and polls was to have a family member, friend, or neighbor ask them to go; and three, we needed them to help deliver our message, person to person, which was critical—trust in and attention paid to traditional media sources seemed to be dwindling rapidly.

Obama's desire to mount a grassroots effort answered neatly the looming question of how to run against the strongest establishment front-runner in our party's history; we would build a ragtag militia to compete against her regular army.

Technology, like the grassroots focus, would be at the core of our campaign from the start. In order to build a grassroots movement, it was clear that the only way to get to scale quickly enough was to use the power of the Internet to sign people up and ask them to get involved. I also made the point that many of our early supporters were likely to be fairly technologically savvy, as was more and more of the general population as well.

"So many people are living their lives through technology—how can we expect their interaction with politics to be the one exception?" I asked.

Because of the lead time required, we decided to green-light the building of a website, heavy on video and tools for our supporters to organize and raise money and have discussions and find each other—our own social-networking site. If he didn't run, this work would largely go down the drain, but we knew that the moment he indicated he was running, we would need a website that could absorb the interest and help propel our campaign.

We would follow the Bush model in one area. Obama was running largely to be a national antidote to George Bush, but he had read enough and studied enough about recent presidential elections to know that the Bush people did one thing very well: they had a tight circle involved in key decisions, and none of those people talked out of school. Obama wanted the same along with a clear chain of command.

"I don't want to be involved in a campaign where everyone is leaking on each other and we have to worry that the contents of conference calls and meetings will show up on the Drudge Report or in the *New York Times*," he said. "I want to be inclusive on many matters in the campaign, so people feel listened to, but on big decisions, I want the circle small. So we can trust each other.

"And," he added pointedly, "we'll have fewer suspects to interrogate if there is a leak."

Ken Mehlman, who was Bush's manager and Obama's law school classmate, told him the Bush people had a rule that their campaign inner circle would never expand. If they wanted to add someone new, someone else had to be kicked out. Our tight circle initially consisted of me, Axelrod, and Gibbs talking through key strategic matters with him. Some staff told me having three white guys as the

most inner core in the beginning was the source of some internal tension, and I understood why. The circle would need to get more diverse and grow a bit down the line. But for now, that was the unit.

Fifty million dollars was our initial fund-raising target. That was the number we thought we could raise in 2007 based on initial estimates of fund-raising events, online contributions, and direct-mail contributions. It was a conservative estimate; if we built momentum and looked viable down the line—a big if at that point—we could expect it to grow, but it served for our initial budget. The budget allowed for strong campaigns in the first four states and that was it. We would need to use strong showings in Iowa and New Hampshire to quickly raise the money needed to compete in the February primaries. This underscored how perilous our path to the nomination was—we assumed Clinton would raise at least \$100 million in 2007 on top of the \$10 million she was transferring from her Senate account (we were transferring next to nothing, because his Senate account had next to nothing), that she would outspend us in the early states and also be better prepared in the later states.

The last point may not seem strategic, but it ended up being important. And we would try to have fun. It became clear in these discussions that Obama did not have a pathological desire to be president. He was a grounded, sane, and relatively happy person who would be just fine if he never became president or even a presidential candidate. If he ran in 2008, it would be because at this moment, I thought he had something to offer in terms of leadership and priorities that matched what the country needed. We did not spend much time talking about 2008 versus 2012 or 2016. Obama was not searching for the best time to run. Because of this, we did not have the stifling pressure that came with expectations or unhealthy ambitions. As Obama said at one of our initial meetings in Chicago, “I’m putting all my chips in the middle of the table and letting it ride. If I win, great. If I don’t, I won’t be personally crushed.”

Given all that, when he insisted that we also should have some fun, it did not ring hollow. We’d strap on the armor, battle our way across the countryside, and see what we could accomplish without getting weighed down by overseriousness. This also led to the “no asshole” rule, so popularized in our campaign by Axelrod. We stated from the outset we would try to build a collegial team, where everyone was in it for something bigger than him- or herself. We would not staff positions with merely the best talent available. Of course our people had to know what they were doing—but how they went about doing it was equally important. Presidential campaigns are brutal affairs in the best circumstances; when the internal dynamic is corrosive and not filled with trust, it can be unbearable. We were determined to avoid that from the beginning.

Campaigns are no different than any other organization—they are collections of human beings. The clarity of the mission and the culture of the group may not outweigh strategy and resources determining eventual success, but they’re awfully close. We would strive to build a campaign where people did not scream at each other, where performance was measured objectively, where crises were dealt with calmly, and where the team was there to serve the cause, not personal ambition.

A healthy culture was hard to quantify in terms of its eventual impact on the election. But we thought it would be a big factor. The Clinton inner circle was notorious for infighting, backstabbing, and jockeying for position. Our approach could offer an important competitive advantage.

The formations of a campaign strategy were taking shape, as were some core principles that would define how we would operate and what would be important for us to focus on in creating a start-up organization at warp speed.

I was in Chicago a few days before Obama left for Hawaii on his long-planned family vacation in December. AKP Media was soon to have a meeting to plan out the next two years; most of the conversation would revolve around how we would adjust if Obama ran. The night before the meeting, Obama called and asked me to come to his house. I had a sinking feeling that he was going to ask me to manage his campaign if he jumped in.

I arrived at the Obamas fairly late in the evening, and after saying good-night to Michelle, he and I settled down in the den with a couple of beers to review the current landscape. I was more or less the operational hub in this strange period, so I updated him on various areas: potential staff, machinations of the other candidates, timelines we would need to meet if he were to run. After we chewed on that, he got around to the subject I'd been dreading.

"So, David," he said. "I won't make a final decision until the Hawaii trip. But I think it is all but a certainty that I'll run. And if do, the most important role I need to fill is campaign manager." Here I come, I thought. "I've been impressed by your judgment, temperament, organization, and strategic sense over the last few weeks. There are lots of bigger names out there, and maybe I should have canvassed for other possibilities. But I think you and I would work well together, and it's clear you can work well with Axelrod, Gibbs, and the other likely staff. So I want you to manage the campaign."

I took a big chug of my beer before replying. "There are not many people in our line of work who would not jump at this opportunity, win or lose. But I have two huge stumbling blocks. First, I have a young son. I'd rarely see him. And my wife and I want to have another child, ideally pretty soon. So that will be put off at least another year, and I'm already pushing forty."

"I had my youngest when I was forty," Obama piped in helpfully.

"I understand," I said. "But what if we do the improbable and win the primary? It'll be two years. And it's not just that. My wife's career will be affected too. She'll be marooned here in Chicago with no support network and a husband who is a ghost. It's a personal loser all the way around."

"I'm also not sure I will do a good job. I haven't managed in eight years, since the DCCC. My last stint as campaign manager for a candidate race was the 1996 U.S. Senate race in New Jersey. I will be terribly rusty from a manager's standpoint, and I've gotten used to pontificating and giving advice and counsel, not being responsible for everything from the budget to electoral strategy to personnel headaches. I'm not sure I want to go back to that world and, even if I did, that I would be any good at it."

He nodded. "Well, I understand the hesitation on both fronts. They are valid and you need to wrestle with them. On your last point, I know there will be some rust, but I have faith you'll shake it off quickly. You've never managed a presidential campaign either. But I can see you understand the rhythm and contours of a race like this. I've never been a presidential candidate. Hell, I've never had a negative ad run against me. So I think we'll be a good team, in some ways much more so than people who have been around the track a bunch of times in their current roles. We can look at everything through a fresh set of eyes and be more agile."

"Just making it up as we go along," I added.

Obama laughed. "I prefer the way I put it. It sounds more appealing."

We agreed that I would talk it over with my wife and I would call him in Hawaii to tell him my decision. If it was no, I would have some other candidates lined up for us to consider, and if I didn't manage, I'd work on the race from my firm and spend as much time on it as I could.

On the ride back to my hotel I reported to my wife that the offer was indeed made. She sounded angst-ridden as I felt. I don't think I had ever before agonized over a job in my life, whether it was cleaning chimneys, selling knives door-to-door in college, or my many political jobs. Things made sense immediately or they didn't. I accepted or turned down jobs very quickly. This one would take longer to work through.

The day before Obama left for Hawaii he met with Ax, Gibbs, and me in the same AKP conference room where our initial meeting about running had been held the month before. "I am ninety percent certain I am running," he reported. "Maybe even higher. You guys should proceed quietly as if I am and keep making progress on planning and sizing up potential personnel. I had hoped to have a final decision by now, as you know, but I want to mull it over a bit more while I'm away. When I get back

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