

Barack Obama: The new generation

by the St. Louis Post Dispatch

In the back and forth between Clinton and Gingrich and in the elections of 2000 and 2004, I sometimes felt as if I were watching the psychodrama of the baby boom generation - a tale rooted in old grudges and revenge plots hatched on a handful of college campuses long ago - played out on the national stage.

Thus did Barack Obama, in his campaign book "The Audacity of Hope," touch on a fundamental problem in today's American politics: It's too much about yesterday's American politics. In too many ways, it's still about Vietnam. It's still about har dhats and hippies. It's about Watergate and Iran-contra and Whitewater. It's about the past.

Barack Obama is aware of yesterday, but he is about today and tomorrow and next year. In a strong field of Democratic presidential contenders, he offers the best hope of transforming the debate and moving on to what America can be in the 21st century.

He is unlikely in many ways: He is young, only 46. He is the junior United States senator from Illinois, only a little more than three years out of the Illinois state Senate - as unlikely a forest for presidential timber as ever was. His middle name is Hussein. He spent his boyhood in Indonesia and Hawaii. His mother was a Kansan; his father was a Kenyan.

Did we mention he is black?

If America can get past all that, if America can unload its baggage and get on with the trip, there is no telling far and how fast it can go.

It's true that Obama's legislative portfolio is slim, although he has been strong on ethics reform and the disclosure of lobbyist influences. He's never managed any organization larger than his Senate staff, and he admits a weakness when it comes to paperwork and organization. The nice thing is that a president has people to do those things, and Obama has surrounded himself with a cadre of seasoned professionals. Obama can do things that better managers can't.

The toughest part of any president's job is to inspire and to lead. Think of Franklin Roosevelt and fear itself, of John F. Kennedy challenging America to go to the moon "because it is hard," or Ronald Reagan after the Challenger disaster. Obama, by virtue of his life story and his compelling gift for oratory, has that kind of capacity.

Already he has energized thousands of voters who had written off politics or never bothered to get involved. It's exciting to think of what that might mean.

"I've said only half facetiously that one of my jobs as president would be to make government cool again," Obama told our editorial board in a conference call on Friday. "And the reason is we've got to recruit a whole new generation of the best and the brightest to go into government. We're still living to some degree on the inspiration of the Kennedy era, and now those baby boomers are retiring."

We disagree with the details of some of Obama's legislative proposals, particularly his heavy reliance on insurance companies as part of an overhaul of national health policy. But we are comforted by his legislative career in Springfield and in Washington, where he worked diligently across party lines, seeking common ground and, often, finding it. He offers a welcome return to civility and cooperation.

We're afraid that wouldn't be the case with his principal opponent for the Democratic nomination, Sen. Hillary Clinton of New York. She has been a diligent senator since her election in 2001, but she is a lightning rod. There is a difference, too, between seeking consensus and "triangulating" core principles into positions palatable to campaign donors.

And we confess to a certain "Clinton fatigue." The emergence of the former president as the Luca Brasi of the campaign trail reminds us of the worst of the Clinton years: the divisiveness and the bickering; the too-casual, if artful, blend of truth and half-truth. We're not eager for the replay.

As to John Edwards, the former senator from North Carolina, he is the right man at the wrong time, a star whose light is eclipsed by the tail of a comet.

Comets don't come around that often. In January of 1961, Ann Dunham Obama was six weeks pregnant with Barack Obama Sr.'s child when President Kennedy said at his inauguration that "the torch has been passed to a new generation." It's that time again.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post Dispatch â€“ CNS.

