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The possibility of Obama lies in the movement more than the man.

Barack Obama, it is true, is a transformational leader. But he needs a transformational movement to become a transformational president.

My wife and I have an adopted 8-year old "biracial" boy whose roots are African-American. My adult son is married to an African-American woman with roots in Jamaica and Costa Rica. Our family is part of the globalized generation Obama represents. What is at stake for our kids' future is real, palpable, not only political. Their future will very much be shaped by the outcome of this election. Millions of people in this country — and around the world — feel similarly affected.

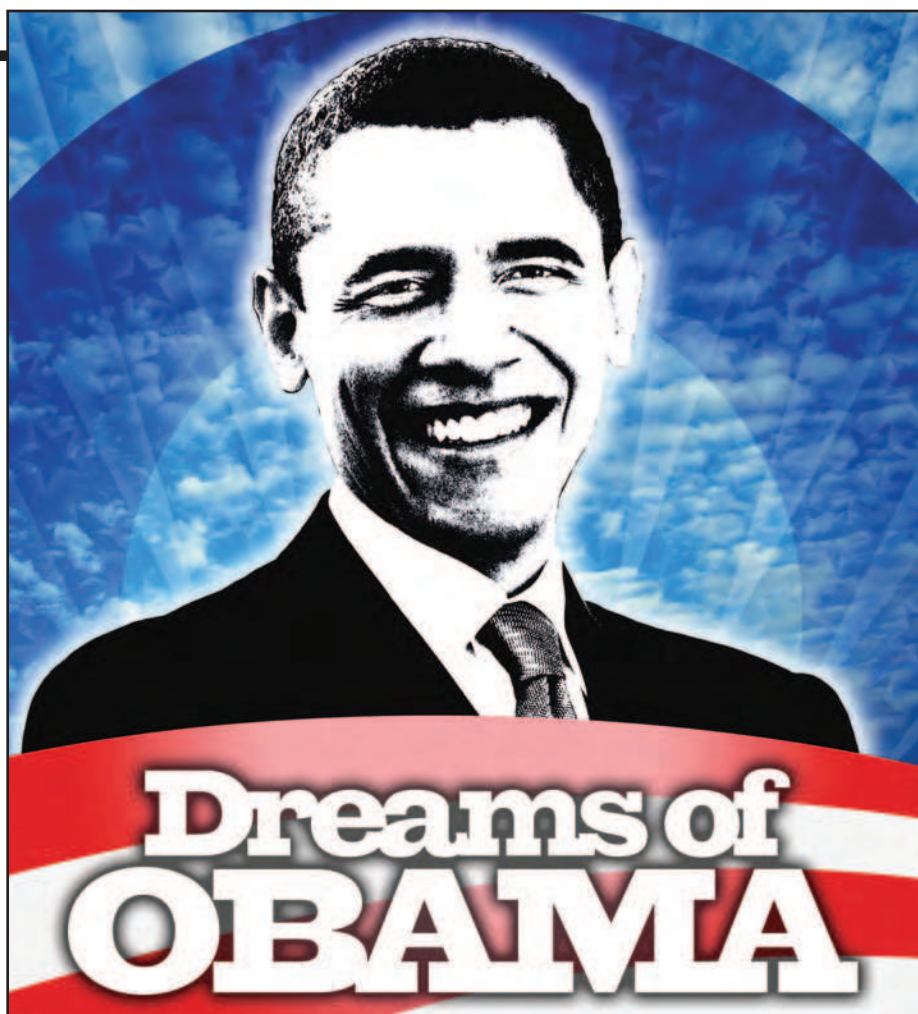
Myths are all-important, as Obama writes in his *Dreams From My Father*. Fifty years ago, the mythic Obama existed only as an aspiration, an ideal, in a country where interracial love was taboo and interracial marriage was largely banned.

The early civil-rights movement, the jazz musicians and the Beat poets dreamed up this mythic Obama before the literal Obama could materialize. His African father and white countercultural mother dared to dream and love him into existence, incarnate him, at the creative moment of the historic march on Washington. Only the overthrow of Jim Crow segregation then opened space for the dream to rise politically.

If this sounds unscientific or, as some would say, cultish, think about it. None of the supposedly expert people in the political, media or intellectual establishments saw this day coming. I didn't expect it myself; the news was carried to me by a new generation, including my own grown-up children. It was dreamed up and built "beyond the radar" or "outside the box" by experienced dreamers with long histories in community organizing, social movements and not a few lost causes.

In one of his best oratorical moments, Obama summons the spirit of social movements that were built from the bottom up, from the Revolutionary War to the abolitionist crusade to the women's suffrage cause to the eight-hour day and the rights of labor, ending with the time of his birth when the walls came down in Selma and Montgomery, Ala., and Delano, Calif. As he repeats this mantra of movements thousands of times to millions of Americans, a new cultural understanding becomes possible. This is the foundation of a new American story that is badly needed, one that attributes whatever is great about this country to the ghosts of those who came before, in social movements from the margins.

John McCain represents a different American story. I am constantly aware that he bombed Vietnam at least 25 times before being shot down in a war that never should have been fought, in a defeat that still cannot say its name. He wants to continue the unwinnable Iraq War, costing \$10 billion per month, until every suspect Iraqi is dead, wounded or detained even though our military tactics keep causing more young Iraqis to hate us than ever before. As if fighting the war on terrorism until the end of terrorism isn't



Transformational president or another disappointment? That's up to us. BY TOM HAYDEN

enough for him, McCain wants to reignite the Cold War until the Russians are forever broken and humiliated. The vanguard for the anti-Russian offensive has been Georgia, a stronghold of the neoconservative lobby and, incidentally, a cash cow for McCain's own foreign-policy adviser Randy Scheunemann, who made hundreds of thousands of dollars working as a lobbyist for the country before joining McCain's campaign team.

This inability to limit the adventurist appetite for war is the most dangerous element of the McCain and Republican worldview. It is paralleled, of course, by their inability to limit the corporate appetite for an unregulated market economy. In combination, the brew is an economy directed to the needs of the country-club rich, the oil companies and military contractors. A form of crony capitalism slouches forward in place of either competitive markets or state regulation.

My prediction: If he continues on course, Obama will win the popular vote by a few percentage points in November but is at serious risk in the Electoral College. The institution rooted in the original slavery compromise may be a barrier too great to overcome.

Unlike the nadir of 2000, when Al Gore and the institutional Democrats seemed unable to mount a resistance, another Electoral College loss should trigger an unrelenting and forceful democracy movement against the Electoral College and other institutional chains on the right to know, vote and participate.

There are many outside the Obama movement who assert that the candidate is "not progressive enough," that Obama will be co-opted as a new face for American interventionism, that in any event real change cannot be achieved from the top down.

These criticisms are correct. But in the end, they miss the larger point.

Most of us want President Obama to withdraw troops from Iraq more rapidly than in 16 months. But it is important that Obama's

position is shared by Iraq's prime minister and the vast majority of both our people. The Iraqi regime, pressured by its own people, has rejected the White House and McCain's refusal to adopt a timetable.

The real problem with Obama's position on Iraq is his adherence to the outmoded Baker-Hamilton proposal to leave thousands of American troops behind for training, advising and ill-defined "counterterrorism" operations. Obama should be pressured to reconsider this recipe for a low-visibility counterinsurgency quagmire.

On Iran, Obama has usefully emphasized diplomacy as the only path to manage the bilateral crisis and assure the possibility of orderly withdrawal from Iraq. He should be pressed to resist any escalation.

On Afghanistan, Obama has proposed transferring 10,000 American combat troops from Iraq, which means out of the frying pan and into the fire. Pakistan could be Obama's Bay of Pigs, a debacle. On Israel-Palestine, he will pursue diplomacy more aggressively, but little more. Altogether, the counterinsurgencies in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan are likely to become a spreading global quagmire and a human rights nightmare, nullifying the funding prospects for health-care reform or other domestic initiatives.

In Latin America, Obama has been out of step and out of touch with the winds of democratic change sweeping Latin America. His commitment to fulfilling the United Nations' anti-poverty goals, or to eradicating sweatshops through a global living wage, is underwhelming and — given his anti-terrorism wars — will be underfinanced.

And so on. The man will disappoint as well as inspire.

Once again, then, why support him by knocking on doors, sending money, monitoring polling places, getting our hopes up? There are three reasons that stand

out in my mind. First, American progressives, radicals and populists need to be part of the vast Obama coalition, not perceived as negative do-nothings in the minds of the young people and African Americans at the center of the organized campaign. It is not a "lesser evil" for anyone of my generation's background to send an African-American Democrat to the White House. Pressure from supporters of Obama is more effective than pressure from critics who don't care much if he wins and won't lift a finger to help him. Second, his court appointments will keep us from a right-wing lock on social, economic and civil liberties issues during our lifetime. Third, we all can chew gum and walk at the same time; that is, it should be no problem to vote for Obama and picket his White House when justified.

Obama himself says he has solid progressive roots but that he intends to campaign and govern from the center. (He has said he is neither a "Scoop" Jackson Democrat nor a Tom Hayden Democrat.) That is a challenge to rise up, organize and reshape the center and build a climate of public opinion so intense that it becomes necessary to redeploy from military quagmires, take on the unregulated corporations and uncontrolled global warming and devote resources to domestic priorities like health care, the green economy and inner-city jobs for youth.

What is missing in the current equation is not a capable and enlightened centrist but a progressive social movement on a scale like those of the past.

The creative tension between large social movements and enlightened Machiavellian leaders is the historical model that has produced the most important reforms in the course of American history.

Mainstream political leaders will not move to the left of their own base. There are no shortcuts to radical change without a powerful and effective constituency organized from the bottom up. The next chapter in Obama's new American story remains to be written, perhaps by the most visionary of his own supporters.

His own movement will have to pull him towards full withdrawal from Iraq, or the regulation of the great financial power centers, instead of waiting for him to lead. Already among his elite caste of fundraisers, there is more interest in his position on the capital-gains tax than holding Halliburton accountable. And his "cast of 300" national security advisers, according to *The New York Times*, "fall well within centrist Democratic foreign policy thinking."

Progressives need to unite for Barack Obama but also unite — organically at least, not in a top-down way — on issues like peace, the environment, the economy, media reform, campaign finance and equality like never before. The growing conflict today is between democracy and empire, and the battlefronts are many and often confusing. Even the Bush years have failed to unite American progressives as effectively as occurred during Vietnam. There is no reason to expect a President McCain to unify anything more than our manic depression.

But there is the improbable hope that the movement set ablaze by the Obama campaign will be enough to elect Obama and a more progressive Congress in November, creating an explosion of rising expectations for social movements — here and around the world — that President Obama will be compelled to meet in 2009.

That is a moment to live and fight for. **EW**