

Biography of Barack Obama

Born August 4, 1961, Honolulu, Hawaii, The Republic of the United States of America,

Nationality: American

Political party: Democratic

Spouse: Michelle Obama

Daughters: Malia and Natasha (“Sasha”)



Barack Obama was born in Honolulu, Hawaii to Barack Obama, Sr. (born in Nyanza Province, Kenya) & Ann Dunham (born in Wichita, Kansas). His parents met while both were attending the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where his father was enrolled as a foreign student. Obama's parents separated when he was two years old & later divorced. His father went to Harvard University to pursue Ph.D. studies, then returned to Kenya, where he died in a car accident when Obama was 21 years old. His mother married Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian foreign student, with whom she had one daughter, Maya. The family moved to Jakarta in 1967, where Obama

Biography of Barack Obama

attended local schools from ages 6 to 10. He then returned to Honolulu to live with his maternal grandparents while attending Punahou School from 5th grade until his graduation in 1979. Obama's mother died of ovarian cancer a few months after the publication of his 1995 memoir, *Dreams from My Father*.

In the memoir, Obama describes his experiences growing up in his mother's American middle class family. His knowledge about his absent Luo father came mainly through family stories & photographs. Of his early childhood, Obama writes: "That my father looked nothing like the people around me—that he was black as pitch, my mother white as milk—barely registered in my mind." The book describes his struggles as a young adult to reconcile social perceptions of his multiracial heritage.

After graduating from Punahou, Obama studied at Occidental College for two years, then transferred to Columbia University, where he majored in political science with a specialization in international relations. He received his B.A. degree in 1983, then worked for one year at Business International Corporation. In 1985, Obama moved to Chicago to direct a non-profit project assisting local churches to organize job training programs. He entered Harvard Law School in 1988. In 1990, *The New York Times* reported his election as the Harvard Law Review's "first black president in its 104-year history." He completed his J.D. degree magna cum laude in 1991. On returning to Chicago, Obama directed a voter registration drive. As an associate attorney with Miner, Barnhill & Galland from 1993 to 1996, he represented community organizers, discrimination claims, & voting

Biography of Barack Obama

rights cases. He was a lecturer of constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School from 1993 until his election to the U.S. Senate in 2004.

In 1988, while employed as a summer associate at the Chicago law firm of Sidley & Austin, Obama met Michelle Robinson, who also worked there. They were married in 1992 & have two daughters, Malia, born in 1999, & Natasha ("Sasha"), born in 2001. The Obamas moved from their Hyde Park, Chicago condominium to a nearby US\$1.6-million home in 2005, funding the purchase with royalties from his first book & an advance of nearly US\$2 million for future books.

Obama golf's & also plays basketball, a sport he participated in as a member of his high school's team. Before announcing his presidential candidacy, Obama began a well-publicized effort to quit smoking. "I've never been a heavy smoker," he told the Chicago Tribune. "I've quit periodically over the last several years. I've got an ironclad demand from my wife that in the stresses of the campaign I don't succumb. I've been chewing Nicorette strenuously."

Obama was elected to the Illinois State Senate in 1996 from the state's 13th District in the south-side Chicago neighborhood of Hyde Park. In 2000, he made an unsuccessful Democratic primary run for the U.S. House of Representatives seat held by four-term incumbent candidate Bobby Rush. He was overwhelmingly reelected to the Illinois Senate in 1998 & 2002, officially resigning in November 2004, following his election to the U.S. Senate. Among his major accomplishments as a state legislator, Obama's U.S. Senate web site

Biography of Barack Obama

lists: "creating programs like the state Earned Income Tax Credit"; "an expansion of early childhood education"; & "legislation requiring the videotaping of interrogations & confessions in all capital cases." Reviewing Obama's career in the Illinois Senate, a February 2007 article in the Washington Post noted his work with both Democrats & Republicans in drafting bipartisan legislation on ethics & health care reform. During his 2004 U.S. Senate campaign, Obama won the endorsement of the Illinois Fraternal Order of Police, whose officials cited his "longtime support of gun control measures & his willingness to negotiate compromises," despite his support for some bills the police union had opposed. He was also criticized by a rival pro-choice candidate in the Democratic primary & by his Republican pro-life opponent in the general election for having voted either "present" or "no" on anti-abortion legislation.

Obama wrote & delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, Massachusetts, while still serving as a state legislator. After describing his maternal grandfather's experiences as a World War II veteran & a beneficiary of the New Deal's FHA & G.I. Bill programs, Obama said:

No, people don't expect government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that with just a slight change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, & that the doors of opportunity remain open to all. They know we can do better. & they want that choice.

Questioning the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq War, Obama spoke of an enlisted Marine, Corporal Seamus Ahern from

Biography of Barack Obama

East Moline, Illinois, asking, "Are we serving Seamus as well as he is serving us?" He continued:

When we send our young men & women into harm's way, we have a solemn obligation not to fudge the numbers or shade the truth about why they're going, to care for their families while they're gone, to tend to the soldiers upon their return, & to never, ever go to war without enough troops to win the war, secure the peace, & earn the respect of the world.

The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States & Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them too. We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, & we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the Red States. We coach Little League in the Blue States & yes, we got some gay friends in the Red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq & patriots who supported the war in Iraq. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars & stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

The speech was Obama's introduction to most of America. Its enthusiastic reception at the convention & widespread coverage by national media gave him instant celebrity status.

In 2003, Obama began his run for the U.S. Senate open seat vacated by Peter Fitzgerald. In early opinion polls leading up to the Democratic primary, Obama trailed multimillionaire businessman Blair Hull & Illinois Comptroller Dan Hynes. However, Hull's popularity declined following allegations of domestic abuse. Obama's candidacy was boosted by an advertising campaign featuring images of the late

Biography of Barack Obama

Chicago Mayor Harold Washington & the late U.S. Senator Paul Simon; the support of Simon's daughter; & political endorsements by the Chicago Tribune & Chicago Sun-Times. Obama received over 52% of the vote in the March 2004 primary, emerging 29% ahead of his nearest Democratic rival. His opponent in the general election was expected to be Republican primary winner Jack Ryan. However, Ryan withdrew from the race in June 2004, following public disclosure of child custody divorce records containing sexual allegations by Ryan's ex-wife, actress Jeri Ryan. In August 2004, with less than three months to go before election day, Alan Keyes accepted the Illinois Republican Party's nomination to replace Ryan. A long-time resident of Maryland, Keyes established legal residency in Illinois with the nomination. Through three televised debates, Obama & Keyes expressed opposing views on stem cell research, abortion, gun control, school vouchers, & tax cuts. In the November 2004 general election, Obama received 70% of the vote to Keyes's 27%.

Obama was sworn in as a Senator on January 4, 2005. He hired former Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle's ex-chief of staff for the same position, & Karen Kornbluh, an economist who was deputy chief of staff to former Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin, as his policy adviser. In July 2005, Samantha Power, Pulitzer-winning author on human rights & genocide, joined Obama's team. An October 2005 article in the British journal *New Statesman* listed Obama as one of "10 people who could change the world." Three months into his Senate career, & again in 2007, *Time* magazine named Obama one of "the world's most influential people." During his

Biography of Barack Obama

first two years in the Senate, Obama received Honorary Doctorates of Law from Knox College, University of Massachusetts Boston, Northwestern University, & Xavier University of Louisiana. He is a member of the Senate committees on Foreign Relations; Health, Education, Labor & Pensions; Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs; & Veterans' Affairs; & the Congressional Black Caucus.

U.S. Senate bill sponsors Tom Coburn (R-OK) & Barack Obama greet President Bush at the signing ceremony of the Federal Funding Accountability & Transparency Act of 2006. Obama sponsored 152 bills & resolutions brought before the 109th Congress in 2005 & 2006, & cosponsored another 427. His first bill was the "Higher Education Opportunity through Pell Grant Expansion Act." Entered in fulfillment of a campaign promise, the bill proposed increasing the maximum amount of Pell Grant awards to help students from lower income families pay their college tuitions. The bill did not progress beyond committee & was never voted on by the Senate.

Obama took an active role in the Senate's drive for improved border security & immigration reform. Beginning in 2005, he co-sponsored the "Secure America & Orderly Immigration Act" introduced by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ). Obama later added three amendments to S. 2611, the "Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act," sponsored by Sen. Arlen Specter (R-PA). S. 2611 passed the Senate in May 2006, but failed to gain majority support in the U.S. House of Representatives. In September 2006, Obama supported a related bill, the Secure Fence Act, authorizing construction of fencing

Biography of Barack Obama

& other security improvements along the United States–Mexico border. President Bush signed the Secure Fence Act into law in October 2006, calling it "an important step toward immigration reform."

Partnering first with Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN), & then with Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK), Obama successfully introduced two initiatives bearing his name. "Lugar-Obama" expands the Nunn-Lugar cooperative threat reduction concept to conventional weapons, including shoulder-fired missiles & anti-personnel mines. The "Coburn-Obama Transparency Act" provides for a web site, managed by the Office of Management & Budget, listing all organizations receiving Federal funds from 2007 onward, & providing breakdowns by the agency allocating the funds, the dollar amount given, & the purpose of the grant or contract. On December 22, 2006, President Bush signed into law the "Democratic Republic of the Congo Relief, Security, & Democracy Promotion Act," marking the first federal legislation to be enacted with Obama as its primary sponsor.

On the first day of the Democratic-controlled 110th Congress, in a column published in the Washington Post, Obama called for an end to "any & all practices that would lead a reasonable person to believe that a public servant has become indebted to a lobbyist." He joined with Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI) in strengthening restrictions on travel in corporate jets to S.1, the Legislative Transparency & Accountability Act of 2007, which passed the Senate with a 96-2 majority. Obama joined Charles Schumer (D-NY) in sponsoring S. 453, a bill to criminalize deceptive practices in federal elections, including

Biography of Barack Obama

fraudulent flyers & automated phone calls, as witnessed in the 2006 midterm elections. Obama's energy initiatives scored pluses & minuses with environmentalists, who welcomed his sponsorship with Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) of a climate change bill to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by two-thirds by 2050, but were skeptical of Obama's support for a bill promoting liquefied coal production. Also during the first month of the 110th Congress, Obama introduced the "Iraq War De-Escalation Act," a bill that caps troop levels in Iraq at January 10, 2007 levels, begins phased redeployment on May 1, 2007, & removes all combat brigades from Iraq by March 31, 2008.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar (R-IN) & Committee member Barack Obama at a Russian base, where mobile launch missiles are being destroyed by the Nunn-Lugar program. During the August recess of 2005, Obama traveled with Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN), Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to Russia, Ukraine & Azerbaijan. The trip focused on strategies to control the world's supply of conventional weapons, biological weapons, & weapons of mass destruction, as a strategic first defense against the threat of future terrorist attacks. Lugar & Obama inspected a Nunn-Lugar program-supported nuclear warhead destruction facility at Saratov, in southern European Russia. In Ukraine, they toured a disease control & prevention facility & witnessed the signing of a bilateral pact to secure biological pathogens & combat risks of infectious disease outbreaks from natural causes or bioterrorism.

Biography of Barack Obama

In January 2006, Obama joined a Congressional delegation for meetings with U.S. military in Kuwait & Iraq. After the visits, Obama traveled to Jordan, Israel, & the Palestinian territories. While in Israel, Obama met with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom. Obama also met with a group of Palestinian students two weeks before Hamas won the January 2006 Palestinian legislative election. ABC News 7 (Chicago) reported Obama telling the students that "the U.S. will never recognize winning Hamas candidates unless the group renounces its fundamental mission to eliminate Israel," & that he had conveyed the same message in his meeting with Palestinian authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

Obama left for his third official trip in August 2006, traveling to South Africa & Kenya, & making stops in Djibouti, Ethiopia & Chad. He flew his wife & two daughters from Chicago to join him in a visit to his father's birthplace, a village near Kisumu in rural western Kenya. Enthusiastic crowds greeted Obama's public appearances. In a public gesture aimed to encourage more Kenyans to undergo voluntary HIV testing, Obama & his wife took HIV tests at a Kenyan clinic. In a nationally televised speech at the University of Nairobi, he spoke forcefully on the influence of ethnic rivalries & corruption in Kenya. The speech touched off a public debate among rival leaders, some formally challenging Obama's remarks as unfair & improper, others defending his positions.

Obama drew a crowd of over 20,000 attendees at a Austin Texas, appearance. In February 2007, standing before the Old State Capitol building in Springfield, Illinois, Obama announced his

Biography of Barack Obama

candidacy for the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Describing his working life in Illinois, & symbolically linking the event to Abraham Lincoln's 1858 House Divided speech, he said: "That is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a house divided to stand together, where common hopes & common dreams still live, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States of America."

The announcement followed months of speculation on whether Obama would run in 2008. Speculation intensified in October 2006 when Obama first said he had "thought about the possibility" of running for president, departing from earlier statements that he intended to serve out his six-year Senate term through 2010. Following Obama's statement, opinion polling organizations added his name to surveyed lists of Democratic candidates. The first such poll, taken in November 2006, ranked Obama in second place with 17% support among Democrats after Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-NY) who placed first with 28% of the responses.

Through the fall of 2006, Obama had spoken at political events across the country in support of Democratic candidates for the midterm elections. In September 2006, he was the featured speaker at Iowa Senator Tom Harkin's annual steak fry, an event traditionally attended by presidential hopefuls in the lead-up to the Iowa caucus. In December 2006, Obama spoke at a New Hampshire event celebrating Democratic Party midterm election victories in the first-in-the-nation U.S. presidential primary state. Addressing a meeting of the Democratic National Committee one week before announcing his

Biography of Barack Obama

candidacy, Obama called on Democrats to steer clear of negative campaigning, saying: "This can't be about who digs up more skeletons on who, who makes the fewest slip-ups on the campaign trail. We owe it to the American people to do more than that."

Obama's campaign reported raising US\$25.8 million between January 1 & March 31 of 2007. The donations came from 104,000 individual donors, with US\$6.9 million raised through the Internet from 50,000 of the donors. US\$24.8 million of Obama's first quarter funds can be used in the primaries, the highest of any 2008 presidential candidate. In early May 2007, the U.S. Secret Service announced that Obama had been placed under their protection. The protection was not in response to any specific threat, but the campaign had received "hate mail, calls & other 'threatening materials'" in the past, & officials felt that the large crowds & increased campaign activity warranted the order.

On the role of government in economic affairs, Obama has written: "we should be asking ourselves what mix of policies will lead to a dynamic free market & widespread economic security, entrepreneurial innovation & upward mobility [...] we should be guided by what works." Speaking before the National Press Club in April 2005, Obama defended the New Deal social welfare policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt, associating Republican proposals to establish private accounts for Social Security with Social Darwinism. In a May 2006 letter to President Bush, he joined four other Midwest farming state Senators in calling for the preservation of a US\$0.54 per gallon tariff on imported ethanol. Obama spoke out in June 2006 against

Biography of Barack Obama

making recent, temporary estate tax cuts permanent, calling the cuts a "Paris Hilton" tax break for "billionaire heirs & heiresses."

Speaking in November 2006 to members of Wake Up Wal-Mart, a union-backed campaign group, Obama said: "You gotta pay your workers enough that they can actually not only shop at Wal-Mart, but ultimately send their kids to college & save for retirement." In January 2007, Obama spoke at an event organized by Families USA, a health care advocacy group. Obama said, "The time has come for universal health care in America [...] I am absolutely determined that by the end of the first term of the next president, we should have universal health care in this country." Obama went on to say that he believed that it was wrong that forty-six million Americans are uninsured, noting that taxpayers already pay over 15 billion dollars annually to care for the uninsured.

He was an early opponent of Bush administration policies on Iraq. In the fall of 2002, during an anti-war rally at Chicago's Federal Plaza, Obama said:

I know that an invasion of Iraq without a clear rationale & without strong international support will only fan the flames of the Middle East, & encourage the worst, rather than best, impulses of the Arab world, & strengthen the recruitment arm of al-Qaeda. I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars. You want a fight, President Bush? Let's finish the fight with Bin Laden & al-Qaeda, through effective, coordinated intelligence, & a shutting down of the financial networks that support terrorism, & a homeland security program that involves more than color-coded warnings.

Biography of Barack Obama

Speaking before the Chicago Council on Global Affairs in November 2006, he said: "The days of using the war on terror as a political football are over. [...] It is time to give Iraqis their country back, & it is time to refocus America's efforts on the wider struggle yet to be won." In his speech Obama also called for a phased withdrawal of American troops starting in 2007, & an opening of diplomatic dialogue with Iraq's neighbors, Syria & Iran.

Obama spoke about Iran's "uranium enrichment program" on March 2, 2007, stating that Iran's government is "a threat to all of us," & that the US "should take no option, including military action, off the table." However, he stated that the US's "primary means" of relating to Iran should entail "sustained & aggressive diplomacy combined with tough sanctions."

Obama began podcasting from his U.S. Senate web site in late 2005. He has responded to & personally participated in online discussions hosted on politically-oriented blog sites. In a June 2006 podcast, Obama expressed support for telecommunications legislation to protect network neutrality on the Internet, saying: "It is because the Internet is a neutral platform that I can put out this podcast & transmit it over the Internet without having to go through any corporate media middleman. I can say what I want without censorship or without having to pay a special charge. But the big telephone & cable companies want to change the Internet as we know it."

During his first year as a U.S. senator, in a move more typically taken after several years of holding high political office, Obama

Biography of Barack Obama

established a leadership political action committee, Hopefund, for channeling financial support to Democratic candidates. Obama participated in 38 fundraising events in 2005, helping to pull in US\$6.55 million for candidates he supports & his own 2010 re-election fund. The New York Times described Obama as "the prize catch of the midterm campaign" because of his campaigning for fellow Democratic Party members running for election in the 2006 midterm elections. Hopefund gave US\$374,000 to federal candidates in the 2006 election cycle, making it one of the top donors to federal candidates for the year.

Obama has encouraged Democrats to reach out to evangelicals & other religious people, saying, "if we truly hope to speak to people where they're at—to communicate our hopes & values in a way that's relevant to their own—we cannot abandon the field of religious discourse." In December 2006, Obama joined Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS) at the "Global Summit on AIDS & the Church" organized by church leaders Kay & Rick Warren. Together with Warren & Brownback, Obama took an HIV test, as he had done in Kenya less than four months earlier. Obama encouraged "others in public life to do the same" to show "there is no shame in going for an HIV test." Before the conference, 18 pro-life groups published an open letter stating, in reference to Obama's support for legal abortion: "In the strongest possible terms, we oppose Rick Warren's decision to ignore Senator Obama's clear pro-death stance & invite him to Saddleback Church anyway."

Biography of Barack Obama

A theme of Obama's 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address, & the title of his 2006 book, *The Audacity of Hope*, was inspired by a sermon by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the pastor of Obama's church, Trinity United Church of Christ. In the book, Obama writes that his religious convictions formed during his twenties, when, as a community organizer working with local churches, he came to understand "the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change":

It was because of these newfound understandings—that religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic & social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew & loved—that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ one day & be baptized. It came about as a choice & not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, & dedicated myself to discovering His truth.

Obama's 1995 book, *Dreams from My Father*, is a memoir of his youth & early career. The book was reprinted in 2004 with a new preface & an annex containing his 2004 Democratic Convention keynote speech. The audio book edition earned Obama the 2006 Grammy Award for Best Spoken Word Album. In December 2004, Obama signed a US\$1.9 million contract for three books. The first, *The Audacity of Hope*, was published in October 2006. An Italian translation was published in April 2007, & a Spanish translation will

Biography of Barack Obama

be published in June 2007. It has remained on the New York Times Best Seller list for the 29 weeks since publication.

Supporters & critics have likened Obama's popular image to a cultural Rorschach test, a neutral persona on which people can project their personal histories & aspirations. Obama's own self-narrative reinforces what a May 2004 New Yorker magazine article described as his "everyman" image. In *Dreams from My Father*, he ties his maternal family history to possible Native American ancestors & distant relatives of Jefferson Davis, president of the southern Confederacy during the American Civil War. Speaking to an elderly Jewish audience during his 2004 campaign for U.S. Senate, Obama linked the linguistic roots of his East African first name Barack to the Hebrew word *baruch*, meaning "blessed." In an October 2006 interview on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Obama highlighted the diversity of his extended family: "Michelle will tell you that when we get together for Christmas or Thanksgiving, it's like a little mini-United Nations," he said. "I've got relatives who look like Bernie Mac, & I've got relatives who look like Margaret Thatcher. We've got it all."

Obama's rapid rise from Illinois state legislator to U.S. presidential candidate has attracted conflicting analyses among commentators challenged to align him with traditional social categories. In her January 2007 Salon article asserting that Obama "isn't black," columnist Debra Dickerson writes: "lumping us all together [with Obama] erases the significance of slavery & continuing racism while giving the appearance of progress." Expressing a similar view, New York Daily News columnist Stanley Crouch wrote: "When

Biography of Barack Obama

black Americans refer to Obama as 'one of us,' I do not know what they are talking about." But in an October 2006 article titled "Obama: Black Like Me," British columnist Gary Younge describes Obama as "a black man who does not scare white people." Film critic David Ehrenstein, writing in a March 2007 Los Angeles Times article, iffillly compares the cultural sources of candidate Obama's favorable polling among whites to those of "magical negro" roles played by black actors in Hollywood movies.

Writing about Obama's political image in a March 2007 Washington Post opinion column, Eugene Robinson characterized him as "the personification of both-and," a messenger who rejects "either-or" political choices, & could "move the nation beyond the culture wars" of the 1960s. Obama, who defines himself in *The Audacity of Hope* as "a Democrat, after all," has been criticized for his political actions by self-described progressive commentator David Sirota, & complimented for his "Can't we all just get along?" manner by conservative columnist George Will. But in a December 2006 Wall Street Journal editorial headlined "The Man from Nowhere," former Ronald Reagan speech writer Peggy Noonan advised Will & other "establishment" commentators to get "down from your tippy toes" & avoid becoming too quickly excited about Obama's still early political career. Agreeing with Obama's own assessment that "people project their hopes on him," Noonan attributed some of Obama's popularity to "a certain unknowability."

In 2008 November, Barack Obama was elected President of the USA. And the Rest is "History."