

Across the divide

RICHARD WOLFFE and DAREN BRISCOE

CORNEL West was on fire. Bobbing in his chair, his hands sweeping across the stage, the brilliant and bombastic scholar was lambasting Barack Obama's campaign. Before a black audience, at an event outside Atlanta called the State of the Black Union, West was questioning why Obama was 600 miles away, announcing his bid for the White House in Springfield, Illinois. Did he really care about black voters? What did that say about his willingness to stand up for what he believes?

"He's got large numbers of white brothers and sisters who have fears and anxieties and concerns, and he's got to speak to them in such a way that he holds us at arm's length," West said, pushing his hand out for emphasis. "So he's walking this tightrope." West challenged the candidate to answer a stark set of questions: "I want to know how deep is your love for the people, what kind of courage have you manifested in the stances that you have and what are you willing to sacrifice for. That's the fundamental question. I don't care what color you are. You see, you can't take black people for granted just 'cause you're black."

A few days later, West was sitting in his Princeton office after class when the phone rang. It was Barack Obama. "I want to clarify some things," the candidate calmly told the professor of religion and African-American studies. Over the next two hours, Obama explained his Illinois state Senate record on criminal justice and affordable health care. West asked Obama how he understood the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. and interrogated him about a single phrase in Obama's 2004 Democratic-convention speech: that America was "a magical place" for his Kenyan father. "That's a Christopher Columbus experience," West said. "It's hard for someone who came out of slavery and Jim Crow to call it a magical place. You have to be true to yourself, but I have to be true to myself as well." A few weeks later, the two men met in a downtown Washington, D.C., hotel to chat about Obama's campaign staff. Just a month after ripping into him onstage, West endorsed Obama and signed up as an unpaid adviser.

West may have come around, but he raised one of the most potent -- and controversial -- questions facing the candidate: is he black enough? It's one that has long dogged Barack Obama's career, though he says he settled his own struggle with racial identity (as the son of an African father and white, Kansan mother) in his late teens. Questions about black "authenticity" are hardly unique to him; many successful African-Americans face them, too. Obama just happens to be grappling with the issue in full public view as he runs for the highest office in the land.

To the candidate, the debate says more about America's state of mind than it does about him. "I think America is still caught in a little bit of a time warp: the narrative of black politics is still shaped by the '60s and black power," he tells *Newsweek*. "That is not, I think, how most black voters are thinking. I don't think that's how most white voters are thinking. I think that people are thinking about how to find a job, how to fill up the gas tank, how to send their kids to college. I find that when I talk about those issues, both blacks and whites respond well."

He may be right. One eye-

catching measure of Obama's broad support is his extraordinary fund-raising. More than 150,000 donors gave \$31 million for his primary campaign in the second quarter, roughly \$10 million ahead of Hillary Clinton and far ahead of anyone else in either party. In the key, early-primary state of South Carolina, Obama and Clinton are locked in a close fight for Democratic voters, especially African-Americans who are the backbone of the state party; recent polls have shown the lead changing hands each month. Nationwide, the latest *Newsweek* poll suggests that race is no longer the barrier it once was to electing a president. A clear majority -- 59 percent -- says the country is ready to elect an African-American president. That's up from 37 percent at the start of the decade, but it still indicates that a significant percentage of the country is either skeptical or prejudiced.

Obama faces many challenges in what he calls his "improbable candidacy," but few are as complex or emotional as the politics of race. Racial politics are a key source of his campaign's energy, but they could also be his undoing. Obama wants to be the nation's first black president, and he needs to win a clear majority of African-American votes to win his party's nomination. Yet he isn't running purely as a representative of African-Americans, nor can he afford to. He also needs to win the backing of a wide swath of white America. Can he appeal to both black and white, while still being true to himself?

For Obama and his wife, Michelle, navigating the racial riptides can be uncomfortably personal. Michelle likes to tell supporters that her 6-year-old daughter calls the family's new security detail "the secret people." Officially, Obama became the earliest presidential candidate to get Secret Service protection because he's attracting such huge crowds. But *Newsweek* has learned that a key factor in that decision was a string of racist e-mails sent to his Senate office, something his staff is unwilling to discuss publicly for security reasons.

That kind of overt hatred is not visible on the campaign trail. Many of Obama's supporters are enthralled by the content of his character -- by his earnest desire to heal the nation's political divisions and to restore America's reputation in the world. Many also are excited by the color of his skin and the chance to turn the page on more than two centuries of painful racial history. But even that phrase -- "turn the page" -- is fraught. Black voters are wary of whites who think Obama represents a kind of deliverance -- proof that blacks are doing well and that the playing field is leveled.

Obama himself dismisses the idea. At the end of a *Newsweek* interview in his Senate office, Obama offered an unprompted statement about "post-racial" politics: "That term I reject because it implies that somehow my campaign represents an easy shortcut to racial reconciliation. I just want to be very clear on this so there's no confusion. We're going to have a lot of work to do to overcome the long legacy of Jim Crow and slavery. It can't be purchased on the cheap."

Obama was dismayed by the Supreme Court's recent decision against public schools that pursue diversity by taking account of students' race. The latest *Newsweek* poll suggests public opinion is divided on the issue but Obama argues that it all

depends on how the question is framed. "This is a situation where you had local communities voluntarily trying to promote racially diverse schools," he says. "If that had been described to the public, my sense is that they would have said, 'Why is the Supreme Court getting involved in the way that it is?'"

From his earliest days as a politician, Obama has made a career out of reconciling opposing sides. He's been able to assume some conservative whites, who have been surprised by his lack of grievance and encouraged by his pragmatism. And he's accomplished that, for the most part, without alienating African-American supporters. The story of how he has walked that tightrope reveals a lot about what kind of politician Obama is, and how he might perform in the White House. It also says something about how far America has come -- and how far it has to go.

Obama's first campaign was among the mostly white voters at Harvard Law School. At the time, in the early 1990s, the school was torn over racial issues such as affirmative action. On the left, there was anger at the failure to appoint African-American professors; on the right, there was dismay at the influence of liberal scholars who condemned the criminal-justice system as skewed against minorities and the poor. Amid this turmoil, Obama won election to the presidency of the influential law review by seeking consensus -- with the support of a bloc of conservative students.

The conservatives knew he wasn't

one of them, says former classmate Bradford Berenson (who later served in George W. Bush's White House). "What really set him apart from the people who had roughly the same views he did is that he did not demonize the people on the other side of the dispute," says Berenson. "He was not the sort to accuse people of being racist for having different views of affirmative action." Obama rewarded the conservatives by appointing several to the masthead of the law review, which angered some of his more-liberal supporters.

One summer during law school, Obama worked in a Chicago firm where he found a soulmate who would help him navigate his difficult course. Michelle Obama's family comes from the South Side of Chicago, where her father was a city worker and her mother still lives in the humble house where Michelle was born. Like her husband, Michelle is an Ivy Leaguer (in her case, Princeton and Harvard), but she proudly calls herself a product of Chicago's public schools. Some people assume that Obama needed her entree into African-American society to break into Illinois politics. But that's not correct: by the time he met Michelle, Obama had already worked as a community organizer with black churches on the South Side for several years.

When the two first met at the law firm, Michelle was his reluctant mentor for the summer. She remembers rave reports that circulated around the office before she joined him for lunch the first time. "Yeah, he's probably a black guy who can talk straight," she recalls saying to herself. "This is a black guy who's biracial who grew up in Hawaii? He's got to be weird." Afterward, she realized she may have misjudged Obama. But it was only later that summer, when he took her to a church basement on the South Side, that she fell for him. He gave

Back in the Illinois Senate,

Obama made a name for himself as someone who could work both sides of the aisle. He befriended an eclectic group of lawmakers, including Kirk Dillard, a conservative Republican. Dillard specifically recalls Obama's work to reach a compromise on the death penalty.

Michelle had to work through her early misperceptions about him; now, she says, the nation needs to do the same. "Barack poses this interesting dilemma because we are still a country that puts people in boxes," she tells *Newsweek*. "Barack kind of shakes up those notions because his life has crossed so many different paths. He grew up in Hawaii but he was indeed a community organizer. He became very entrenched and rooted in the black community on the South Side. He is very much a black man, but he's very much the son of his mother, who was very much a white woman, and he grew up with white grandparents."

Obama's years in Chicago didn't

help much in his first run for Congress. After four years in the

evoking his childhood in tough neighborhoods of Honolulu and his work as a community organizer in Chicago. But Dillard was struck by Obama's discomfort. "I remember thinking, 'I feel sorry for this guy because he's got to justify himself to blacks and whites alike!'"

On the campaign trail, Obama doesn't seek sympathy; he evokes hope. He's especially fond of a story from his 2004 campaign for the US Senate. Obama is riding on a bus in southern Illinois with Sen. Dick Durbin, his mentor in Congress, when they approach the hardscrabble town of Cairo. Durbin tells him that his first visit to Cairo was in the 1970s, when it was still one of the most segregated towns in Illinois, with a history of lynchings, cross burnings and riots. Durbin, then a young state lawyer on a mission to promote racial harmony, was worried when his driver warned

support from this region," says Farris. "Hopefully he won't forget his trip to this underprivileged ghetto community."

Obama can be idealistic about race, but he can also be blunt in ways that few white politicians could ever pull off. On Father's Day in 2005, before he began his presidential campaign, the freshman senator stepped into a South Side church to talk about what it means to be a responsible black father. "There are a lot of folks, a lot of brothers, who are walking around and they look like men," Obama said. "They've got whiskers, they might even have sired a child, but it's not clear to me that they are full-grown men." The senator urged them not just to get a job, but to start a business; not just to stay at home, but to turn off the TV. Above all, he urged the community to aim high for its kids. "Sometimes," he said, "I go to an eighth-grade graduation and there's all that pomp and circumstance and gowns and flowers. It's just eighth grade, people. Just give them a handshake. Congratulations. Now get your butt in the library."

There wasn't much pre-planning for that talk, which got a lot of attention. His speechwriter had forgotten about the event, so Obama jotted down some notes on the back of a few sheets of paper, based on family conversations around the kitchen table. In his own mind, Obama was trying to walk the middle ground between the need for personal duty and the imperative of social action. "I talk about these things not out of shock value," he tells *Newsweek*. "I also am not at all interested in what some conservative commentators are interested in, which is to use the issue of personal responsibility as an excuse for governmental inaction. It is very much a both-and [approach] as opposed to an either-or approach. When you talk about it in those terms, then the African-American community is responsive." (When Bill Cosby made stronger comments about black responsibility a year earlier, he left out mention of society's duty, and got seared by the reaction of fellow African-Americans.)

Sometimes, the middle ground doesn't hold between black and white, and Obama's innate sense of caution and compromise can look like weakness. Just before his big announcement outside the old state capitol in Springfield -- where Lincoln delivered his "house divided" speech -- Obama abruptly changed plans and asked his pastor not to deliver the invocation prayer. The Rev. Jeremiah Wright is the man who gave Obama not just spiritual direction, but also his signature phrase, which became the title of one of his books, *The Audacity of Hope*. But in the days before Obama officially launched his campaign, Wright was also caricatured as a "radical" for his Afrocentrism and his focus on black issues -- a strange criticism, perhaps, of a preacher on the South Side. (The Reverend Wright is considered mainstream among African-American church leaders; Ebony magazine once named him one of the top 15 black preachers in America.) "Fifteen minutes before Shabbos I get a call from Barack," a clearly perturbed Reverend Wright told The New York Times. "One of his members had talked him into uninviting me."

Yet Obama's drive to find consensus also raised the suspicions of some black colleagues. At the same time as the death-penalty debate, Obama worked to pass legislation on racial profiling; it required police to record information on the race of people pulled over during traffic stops. Obama's seat on the Senate floor was close to the bathroom, a lowly place he'd taken as a freshman. But he learned how to use it to his advantage: he would watch legislators going into the restroom and buttonhole them on their way out. In the heat of the racial-profiling debate, however, the argument spilled into the facilities. Dillard recalls watching as an African-American legislator from Chicago, who wanted even stricter requirements on racial reporting, confronted Obama. "He was questioning Senator Obama's toughness and, frankly, his blackness, as to whether Barack really understood what it was like to be a teenage African-American standing on a street corner in Chicago and being harassed by police officers," recalls Dillard. Obama stood his ground,

him not to use the telephone because the operator was a member of the White Citizens Council; when he checked in to his motel, a visitor knocked on his door demanding to know what the hell he was doing in town. After the story, Obama and Durbin are apprehensive as their bus pulls into Cairo. But as they turn the corner, they see a crowd of 300 supporters wearing blue buttons saying OBAMA FOR U.S. SENATE. Some in the crowd are black; most are white. To Obama, the story of Cairo confirms Martin Luther King Jr.'s observation that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice.

In the real world, the arc of Cairo has not led so clearly toward racial harmony. Until recently, city politics were deadlocked for several years by a mean-spirited dispute between its white, Republican mayor and the majority black Democrats over patronage and the firing of city workers. Paul Farris (whose term as mayor ended in May) blames his opponents for exploiting racial divisions for their own political ends. The story of Cairo is an example, perhaps, of Obama's portraying the glass as half full -- oversimplifying a complicated racial and economic divide to score rhetorical and political points. Still, Farris says he's supporting Obama in the presidential race because he tried to bring biodiesel and liquid-coal plants to the economically depressed town. "Say he gets elected president of the United States, he'll have a lot of

community. "It's conceivable that I might have been overprotective, and probably didn't anticipate that he might feel hurt by it," Obama concedes. "So we had a discussion about it and everything is fine at this point." (Wright declined to talk to *Newsweek*.)

No matter how he positions himself on the campaign trail, when Obama returns home to his wife and two daughters in Chicago, there's no ambiguity about identity. To Michelle, the persistent questions about Obama's roots are not about him. "We as a black community are struggling with our own identity and what it means to be black," she tells *Newsweek*. "We see what is shown of us on TV but we also know that is not the full picture. So what is the picture? We're figuring it out. It's a conversation that needs to take place." There are times when the conversation turns in ways Obama cannot control, especially under the bright lights of the presidential campaign. In March, he traveled to Selma, Ala., to mark the Bloody Sunday march of 1965 -- a turning point in the civil-rights struggle. There, Obama delivered a powerful speech about the need for his generation to overcome its apathy and take action in politics. But he also went too far in suggesting a personal connection to Selma, saying his parents "got together" because of the march, when he was actually born four years earlier, in 1961. A few blocks away, Obama's main Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton, was making her own pitch for the African-American vote, drafting her husband's public help for the first time in the campaign. Obama tells *Newsweek* that his error was simply the result of "testing lines" without forethought; he denied with a wry smile it had anything to do with pressure from the Clintons and a heated competition for black voters.

Four months later, Selma has become the rousing end to Obama's stump speech. Now he makes it clear that he was a young boy at the time of Bloody Sunday, but he says the marchers fought for the rights of children just like him. "They did that for me and now we've got to do it for the next generation," he said last week in front of an ivy-covered barn in southeastern Iowa. "When I went back to Washington [from Selma], some people slapped me on the back and said, 'That was a wonderful celebration of African-American history.' I said, 'You don't understand: that was a celebration of American history.' Because at every juncture in American history, that's how change happens -- by people coming together and deciding we're going to have a better America."

It was the week of July 4, and all across Iowa, presidential candidates were wrapping themselves in the flag. Yet none could have delivered that line quite like Barack Obama. He might have been too young to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, but he sees himself as part of that broad struggle -- and in ways his forebears could hardly imagine, he's still got his eyes on the prize.

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Sen. Ed Petka, a former prosecutor who had put so many men on death row that his friends called him Electric Ed. "Ed Petka was the hardest person for Obama to convince that he was the real deal, but even Petka became an Obama convert with respect to these criminal-law issues," says Dillard. (Petka, now a Will County judge, declined to comment.)

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when my mother goaded me to go to him and get help for my matriculation exams in mathematics. I would go helter-skelter with sums of different types. It did not take him long to establish that I was not good enough for class seven, leave aside matriculation. I was at a tremendous loss, in a sense, that he was now trying his best to take me from class seven to matriculation. I went a few more times to him and then stopped going. Withered with time, he must have set his own rules, never pestered me for not going. Seeing no enthusiasm in me, he possibly just dropped the subject.

Like most of the people when they are young, I had formed opinion about him and other elders. I thought he was too bookish, whiling away time in a silly game of chess, not concerned about the doings of the family, not humorous, didn't have enough love (after all, how much love can one give to thirteen children?), etc.

It was only later on I found out

that he went to her house, brought her home, and got her admitted to pursue education. With that boost in her life she lived a very respectable life and raised four daughters.

I had never seen him engaged in husband-wife talks with my grandmother, so I thought he didn't much care. My grandmother was a shy type but a very progressive-minded woman who believed very strongly in performing duties. She looked after my grandfather very well. When she passed to the other world, the loss overwhelmed him with sorrow which knew no bounds. His love for her shone through

IN MEMORIAM

A singular man

S. M. NASIMUL HAQUE

DR. Qazi Motahar Husain was my maternal grandfather. He was from a very simple Muslim family who respected education and purity of all forms. He was unusually tall for a Bangali, had fair complexion and was a good sportsman. A man larger than life, full of accolades and there aren't very many words to describe him in full. He is an icon for education and quest for knowledge, recognised as a National Professor for statistics. He was well known for mathematics and playing chess, not to forget mentioning that he pic-

neered in opening the statistics department at Dhaka University. He was a dedicated educationist by profession. Though from a simple, not-so-affluent family, he used to play tennis and was good in it. He even became a champion in the university tournament. This I mention for a reason. In those days, this game was well outside the reach of middle to lower-class people. But he proved that where there is will, there is a way.

He always gave due importance to time. I found him doing things by the clock. Very seldom he'd miss out on any program. This was at the age of sixty-plus! He also utilised time in as many

ways as his intelligence permitted. He would demonstrate using time properly in various ways, but seldom impose on others and I found it a good way of teaching others.

It would not be right on my part to write on a person of his caliber. But what I can do is to write the little that I know about him from my own experience and observations. My mother used to talk, amongst other qualities, about his ability to solve any type of mathematical questions and to play chess. He was then a world-class chess player and was also all-India champion. I never fancied anything that demanded

brain work, particularly a game of chess. That alone was the main reason for my scrounging in studies. Today, at this age I have been able to identify why I never liked to tax my brain. Actually, in my mind I was awfully disorganized and my vocabulary pitiful. Dr. Hossain was just the opposite; he was very methodical about all his actions, always planned out things in his mind, never lost track of the process and never compromised with standard.

If he got interested in any subject he would systematically study it without leaving out any bit unscrutinised. This I found out