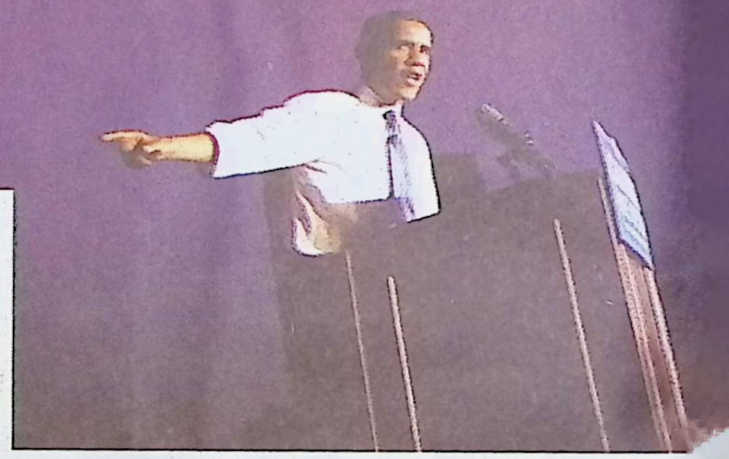
President Obama, I Presume?



SYED ZAIN AL-MAHMOOD

North Carolina, USA. The tall dark immaculately dressed man stepped off the bus and strode into the BBQ and Diner. The elderly and majority white clientele of several dozen were eating lunch after church services. This was potentially hostile territory. There was another restaurant down the street which would have a predominantly African-American crowd, but our man has chosen the more challenging terrain. As he smiles affably and interacts with the gathering, a woman in the corner starts shouting, "Socialist! Get outta here!"

Our man remains calm, and gradually works his way to the table where the heckler is sitting with several other people, all fresh from church. "How are you, Ma'am?" he says but she pointedly refuses to shake his hand. The elderly conservative voters seem surprised by his appearance there. This is a conservative territory that has been off-limits for a democrat since Carter in 1976. The woman in the corner and a few others are openly hostile. But for most it's a pleasant surprise. "After months of TV ads calling him an elite and a celebrity, I was surprised to see how comfortable he was communicating on a down to earth level," said one. The pastor of the church is also eating there. Our man shakes his hand and smiles. "Whether you vote for me or not," he says, "I'm going to need your prayers."

Meet Barack Hussein Obama, US presidential candidate extraordinary. His candidacy is not remarkable merely because he is black indeed, he has never made race an issue. His campaign has stood out because of its inclusive nature, its inspirational qualities, and its "feet on the ground" pragmatism. His grasp of the details, his breadth of knowledge on virtually all present day issues, his commanding presence and aplomb, and his ability to connect with both the common man and the highly educated has made Barack Obama an irresistible force. Obama's run for the presidency has energised young people in America like never before who see in him not only a break from traditional Washington politics but a generational change. The era of the Baby Boomers is over. It is a new generation waiting to take control in Washington. An Obama presidency would be just the antidote the world needs after eight toxic years of George W Bush.

Don't tell anyone, but the indications are that Obama is winning. With a few days to go, most of the surveys have him leading by a margin of 6 to 8 percentage points. After being deadlocked for most of the season, and showing a temporary "surge" for both candidates after the respective conventions, the race seems to be breaking Obama's way. In the key battleground states of Virginia, Colorado, Florida and Ohio, Obama's message seems to be resonating.

In many ways, this has been a classic political campaign. When the race kicked off, the talk was that the Republicans had nominated the only candidate that could win it for them in a climate poisoned by the unpopularity of President George Bush. John McCain, war hero and self proclaimed maverick was just the man to do it for the GOP. The democrats on the other hand had nominated a little-known young black first-term senator from