

Barack Obama

44th President of the United States



In His Own Words

In this excerpt from one of his speeches, Barack Obama talks about a time in his life when he “began to notice a world beyond myself” and about his desire to be an agent of change. These remarks were made in a commencement address at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut, May 25, 2008.

I became active in the movement to oppose the apartheid regime of South Africa. I began following the debates in this country about poverty and health care. So that by the time I graduated from college, I was possessed with a crazy idea — that I would work at a grassroots level to bring about change.

I wrote letters to every organization in the country I could think of. And one day, a small group of churches on the South Side of Chicago offered me a job to come work as a community organizer in neighborhoods that had been devastated by steel plant closings. My mother and grandparents wanted me to go to law school. My friends were applying to jobs on Wall Street. Meanwhile, this organization offered me \$12,000 a year plus \$2,000 for an old, beat-up car. And I said yes.

Now, I didn’t know a soul in Chicago, and I wasn’t sure what this community organizing business was all about. I had always been in-

spired by stories of the Civil Rights Movement and JFK’s [President John F. Kennedy’s] call to service, but when I got to the South Side, there were no marches, and no soaring speeches. In the shadow of an empty steel plant, there were just a lot of folks who were struggling. And we didn’t get very far at first.

I still remember one of the very first meetings we put together to discuss gang violence with a group of community leaders. We waited and waited for people to show up, and finally, a group of older people walked into the hall. And they sat down. And a little old lady raised her hand and asked, “Is this where the bingo game is?”

It wasn’t easy, but eventually, we made progress. Day by day, block by block, we brought the community together, and registered new voters, and set up after-school programs, and fought for new jobs, and helped people live lives with some measure of dignity.

But I also began to realize that I wasn’t just helping other people. Through service, I found a community that embraced me; citizenship that was meaningful; the direction I’d been seeking. Through service, I discovered how my own improbable story fit into the larger story of America.



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Barack Obama ~ An American Life

Barack Obama's unique biography and successful campaign for the U.S. presidency have opened a new chapter in U.S. politics.

President Obama, the first African-American president of the United States, brings a life story unlike that of any previous U.S. leader. The biracial son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from the American heartland, Obama shot to national prominence with a well-received keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, the same year he was elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of Illinois. Just four years later, he rose to the top of a field crowded with Democratic heavyweights to clinch his party's nomination for the White House and win the

presidential election against Republican candidate Senator John McCain.

With a polished speaking style, a command of eloquent and uplifting rhetoric, the ability to inspire the enthusiasm of young voters, and the sophisticated use of the Internet as a campaign tool, Obama was very much a 21st-century candidate. In his campaign, Obama stressed two overarching themes: changing Washington's traditional way of conducting the nation's business and invoking Americans of diverse ideological, social, and racial backgrounds to unite for the common good.

"There's not a liberal America and a conservative America — there's the United States of

America," Obama said in his address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention. "There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America. ... We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the Stars and Stripes, all of us defending the United States of America."

The Early Years

Obama's parents came from vastly different backgrounds. His mother, Ann Dunham, was born and raised in small-town Kansas. After her family moved to the Hawaiian Islands, she met Barack Obama Sr., a Kenyan scholarship student enrolled at the University of Hawaii. The two married in 1959, and on August 4, 1961,

Barack Obama Jr. was born in Honolulu. Two years later the senior Obama left his new family, first for graduate study at Harvard and then for a job as a government economist back in Kenya. The young Obama met his father again only once, at age 10.

When Obama was six, his mother remarried, this time to an Indonesian oil executive. The family moved to Indonesia, and Obama spent four years attending school in the capital city of Jakarta. He eventually returned to Hawaii and went to high school there while living with his maternal grandparents.

In his first book, *Dreams from My Father*, Obama describes this period of his life as having more



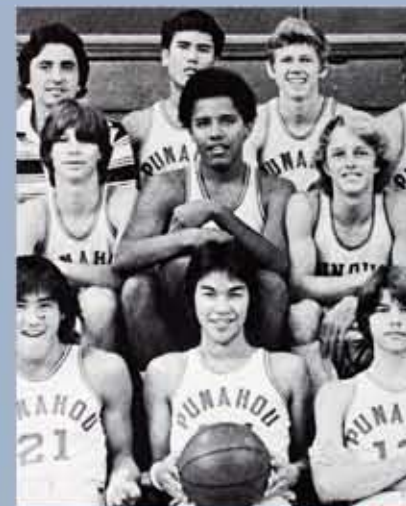
Young Barack with his mother, Ann Dunham, circa 1963.



Nine-year-old Barack in Indonesia with his mother; stepfather Lolo Soetoro; and half-sister Maya.



Barack, age 10, and his Kenyan father, Barack Obama Sr.



Barack Obama, center, on his school's junior varsity basketball team in Hawaii, 1977.



Celebrating his high school graduation with grandparents Madelyn Payne and Stanley Armour Dunham in Hawaii, 1979.



As a college student at Columbia University in New York, circa 1983.

than the usual share of adolescent turmoil, as he struggled to make sense of a biracial heritage then still relatively uncommon in the United States. Being rooted in both black culture and white culture may have helped give Obama the expansive vision he brought to politics years later, one that understands many points of view.

“Barack has an incredible ability to synthesize seemingly contradictory realities and make them coherent,” his law school classmate Cassandra Butts told *New Yorker* magazine writer Larissa MacFarquhar. “It comes from going from a home where white people are nurturing you, and then you go out into the world and you’re seen as a black person.”

Obama left Hawaii to attend Occidental College in Los Angeles for two years. He later moved to New York City and earned a bachelor of arts degree from Columbia University in 1983. In a speech given in 2008, Obama described his thinking at the time: “... by the time I gradu-

ated from college, I was possessed with a crazy idea — that I would work at a grassroots level to bring about change.”

Called to Public Service

In search of his identity and a purposeful direction in life, Obama subsequently left his job as a financial writer with an international consulting firm in New York and headed to Chicago in 1985. There, he worked as a community organizer for a coalition of local churches on the city’s South Side, a poor African-American area hard hit by the transition from a manufacturing center to a service-based economy.

“It was in these neighborhoods that I received the best education I ever had, and where I learned the true meaning of my Christian faith,” Obama recounted years later in the speech announcing his presidential candidacy.

Obama enjoyed some tangible successes in

this work, giving South Side residents a voice in such issues as economic redevelopment, job training, and environmental clean-up efforts. He viewed his primary role as a community organizer, however, as that of a catalyst mobilizing ordinary citizens in a bottom-up effort to forge indigenous strategies for political and economic empowerment.

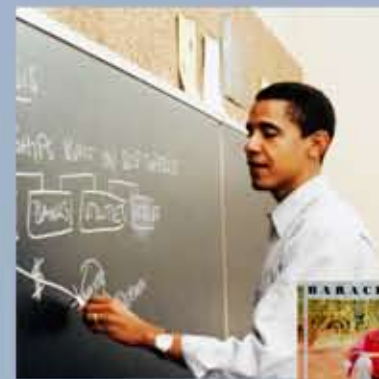
After three years of such work, Obama concluded that to bring about true improvement in such distressed communities required involvement at a higher level, in the realm of law and politics. Accordingly, he attended Harvard Law School, where he distinguished himself by being elected the first black president of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review* and graduating *magna cum laude* in 1991.

With these credentials, “Obama could have done anything he wanted,” noted David Axelrod, who served as his presidential campaign strategist. Obama returned to his adopted hometown of

Chicago, where he practiced civil rights law and taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago. In 1992 he married Michelle Robinson, another Harvard Law graduate, and worked on voter registration in Chicago to help Democratic candidates such as Bill Clinton.

With a continuing strong commitment to public service, Obama decided to make his first run at elective office in 1996, winning a seat from Chicago in the Illinois state senate. In many ways the race was a logical progression of his earlier work as a community organizer, and Obama brought much of that same expansive outlook — the politician as an enabler of citizen-directed grassroots efforts and a builder of broad-based coalitions — to his vision of politics.

“Any African Americans who are only talking about racism as a barrier to our success are seriously misled if they don’t also come to grips with the larger economic forces that are creating economic insecurity for all workers —



At Harvard Law School in Boston, Massachusetts, circa 1991.

Registering voters in Chicago, circa 1992.

Barack and Michelle Obama on their wedding day, October 18, 1992.

Teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School, circa 1993.

Dreams from My Father, published 1995.

Elected to the Illinois state senate as representative from Chicago in 1996, Obama is reelected three times.

State Senator Obama, with his family at his side, concedes defeat in his bid to be elected to the United States Congress, 2000.

— whites, Latinos, and Asians,” he said at the time. Among his legislative accomplishments over the next eight years in the state senate were campaign finance reform, tax cuts for the working poor, and improvements to the state’s criminal justice system.

The National Stage

In 2000 Obama made his first run for the U.S. Congress, unsuccessfully challenging Bobby Rush, an incumbent Democrat from Chicago, for Rush’s seat in the House of Representatives. Dispirited by his lopsided primary loss to Rush and searching for influence beyond the Illinois state legislature, he sold Michelle on the idea of his running for the U.S. Senate in a last-shot “up or out strategy” to advance his political career.

The 2004 U.S. Senate race in Illinois had turned into a free-for-all the year before, when the Republican incumbent, Peter Fitzgerald, announced he would not seek reelection. Seven Democrats and eight Republicans contested their respective

party’s primary for the senatorial nomination. Obama easily captured the Democratic nomination, winning a greater share of the vote — 53 percent — than his six opponents combined.

With the Republicans then holding the 100-member U.S. Senate by a razor-thin majority of 51 seats, Democrats saw the senatorial contest in Illinois as critical to their chances of retaking the Senate that November (in fact, they only regained control in 2006). The desire to give Obama’s campaign a boost through a prominent convention role, the well-known oratory skills Obama possessed, and the very favorable impression he already had made on Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry clinched the decision to select Obama as the convention’s keynote speaker.

Obama’s speech, with its soaring, polished language on the need to transcend partisan divisions and its call for a “politics of hope” rather than a politics of cynicism, did more than rouse convention-goers; it catapulted Obama into the

national media spotlight as a rising star of the Democratic Party. He went on to win handily in the Senate race that autumn, capturing an overwhelming 70 percent of the popular vote. Although the near-total disarray that year among Republicans in Illinois undoubtedly contributed to the landslide margin, Obama’s victory was impressive in its own right, as he won in 93 of the state’s 102 counties and captured white voters by better than a two-to-one margin.

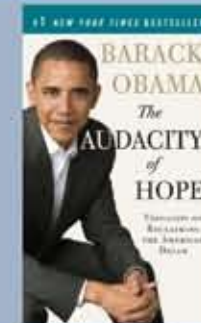
Obama’s reputation as a new breed of politician, one able to overcome traditional racial divides, grew steadily. In a *New Yorker* profile of Obama, writer William Finnegan, noting Obama’s talent at “slipping subtly into the idiom of his interlocutor,” said Obama “speaks a full range of American vernaculars.” Obama offered his own explanation why he could connect with white voters.

“I know these people,” he said. “Those are my grandparents. ... Their manners, their sensibilities, their sense of right and wrong — it’s all totally familiar to me.”

In the Senate, Obama amassed a voting record in line with that of the Democratic Party’s liberal wing. His criticism of the war in Iraq has been one of his trademarks, dating back to a speech in 2002, even before the war started, when he warned that any such military action would be based “not on principle but on politics.” He also has worked to strengthen ethical standards in Congress, improve care for military veterans, and increase use of renewable fuels.

Running for President

The long Democratic primary election campaign of 2008, with elections or caucuses in all 50 states, was historic in several ways. African-American and women candidates had run for the presidency before, but this time the two front-runners were a woman and an African American. As Barack Obama and seven other contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination began to organize in 2007, opinion polls consistently put Obama in second place behind the presumed favorite, New York



State Senator Obama runs for United States senator from Illinois, July 2004.

Still a candidate for U.S. senator, Obama is invited to deliver the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004.

The candidate for U.S. senator from Illinois with wife Michelle and daughters Sasha, front, and Malia on Election Day 2004.

U.S. Senator Obama with then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator Joe Biden.

Obama with his Kenyan grandmother, Sarah Hussein Obama, in Kogelo village, Kenya, August 2006.

The Obama family lays wreaths at the memorial to the victims of the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Nairobi, Kenya, August 2006.

Barack Obama, with his family by his side, announces his candidacy for president, February 2007.

The Audacity of Hope, published 2006.

Senator Hillary Clinton. Obama, however, was highly successful in this early stage of the race at enlisting an enthusiastic cadre of supporters, especially among youth, creating a nationwide grassroots campaign organization, and fundraising through the Internet.

With Clinton enjoying greater name recognition, a well-oiled campaign machine, and support at the state level from leading Democrats, the Obama camp devised an innovative strategy to negate these advantages: targeting states that used caucuses rather than primaries to select delegates and focusing on smaller states that traditionally voted Republican in the general election. This approach capitalized on the Democratic Party's system of proportional representation — awarding convention delegates in each state in rough proportion to a candidate's share of the vote — as opposed to the Republicans' system of awarding most or all convention delegates to the winner in each state.

The strategy paid off with the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008, when Obama scored an upset victory over Clinton. The Iowa win was a game-changer; as the *Washington Post* put it, “Beating Clinton ... altered the course of the race by establishing Obama as her chief rival — the only candidate with the message, organizational muscle, and financial resources to challenge her front-runner status.”

It paid off once more on “Super Tuesday” — the elections held simultaneously in 22 states on February 5 — when Obama dueled Clinton to a tie and swept rural states in the West and South. And it paid off yet again when Obama went on to win 10 more consecutive contests in February, cementing a lead in delegates Clinton never again could catch.

An Obama Presidency

Barack Obama is the among the youngest U.S. presidents. Born at the tail end of the 1946-1964 baby boom generation, he is also the first presi-

dent to have come of age in the 1980s, which of itself might portend change. The atmosphere in which he grew up was markedly different from the socially tumultuous 1960s that shaped earlier baby boomers' outlook. As Obama once said about the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, contested by candidates from a much earlier cohort of that postwar generation, “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.”

The *New Yorker's* Larissa MacFarquhar offered one theory on Obama's noticeable appeal across traditional political lines. “Obama's voting record is one of the most liberal in the Senate,” she observed, “but he has always appealed to Republicans, perhaps because he speaks about liberal goals in conservative language.”

“In his view of history, in his respect for tradition, in his skepticism that the world can

be changed any way but very, very slowly,” she wrote, “Obama is deeply conservative.”

President Obama has broken new ground in U.S. politics. His candidacy came at precisely the time when many Americans believed their country needed a fundamental transformation in its direction. *Washington Post* political columnist E.J. Dionne may have summed up perfectly the serendipitous confluence between Obama's candidacy and the American zeitgeist when he wrote:

Change, not experience, was the order of the day. Sweep, not a mastery of detail, was the virtue most valued in campaign oratory. A clean break with the past, not merely a return to better days, was the promise most prized.



Obama, third from right, at a televised debate with six other candidates for the Democratic nomination for president, November 2007.

Obama campaigns in the small town of Peosta, Iowa. Obama won the Iowa caucus, held on January 3, 2008.

Celebrating his Super Tuesday victories with supporters, February 5, 2008.

Debating with chief rival, Senator Hillary Clinton.

Barack and Michelle Obama at a rally on June 3, 2008. Primary victories that day assured enough convention delegates to win the Democratic nomination.

Talking with reporters on his campaign plane.

Presidential nominee Barack Obama, far right, with running mate Joe Biden, far left, and their wives at the Democratic National Convention, August 28, 2008.

Barack Obama's Vision for the Future

Excerpts from "The American Moment," Remarks to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 23, 2007

I believe that the single most important job of any President is to protect the American people. And I am equally convinced that doing that job effectively in the 21st century will require a new vision of American leadership and a new conception of our national security — a vision that draws from the lessons of the past, but is not bound by outdated thinking.

In today's globalized world, the security of the American people is inextricably linked to the security of all people. When narco-trafficking and corruption threaten democracy in Latin America, it's America's problem too. When poor villagers in Indonesia have no choice but to send chickens to market infected with avian flu, it cannot be seen as a distant concern. When religious schools in Pakistan teach hatred to young children, our children are threatened as well.

Whether it's global terrorism or pandemic disease, dramatic climate change or the proliferation of weapons of mass annihilation, the threats we face at the dawn of the 21st century can no longer be contained by borders and boundaries.

* * * * *

Many Americans may find it tempting to turn inward, and cede our claim of leadership in world affairs.

I insist, however, that such an abandonment of our leadership is a mistake we must not make. America cannot meet the threats of this century alone, but the world cannot meet them without America. We must neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission — we must lead the world, by deed and example.

We must lead by building a 21st century military to ensure the security of our people and advance the security of all people. We must lead by marshalling a global effort to stop the spread of the world's most dangerous weapons. We must lead by building and strengthening the partnerships and alliances necessary to meet our common challenges and defeat our common threats.

And America must lead by reaching out to all those living disconnected lives of despair in the world's forgotten corners — because while there will always be those who succumb to hate and strap bombs to their bodies, there are millions more who want to take another path — who want our beacon of hope to shine its light their way.



America is the country that helped liberate a continent from the march of a madman. We are the country that told the brave people of a divided city that we were Berliners too. We sent generations of young people to serve as ambassadors for peace in countries all over the world. And we're the country that rushed aid throughout Asia for the victims of a devastating tsunami.

Now it's our moment to lead — our generation's time to tell another great American story. So someday we can tell our children that this was the time when we helped forge peace in the Middle East. That this was the time when we confronted climate change and secured the weapons that could destroy the human race. This was the time when we brought opportunity to those forgotten corners of the world. And this was the time when we renewed the America that has led generations of weary travelers from all over the world to find opportunity, and liberty, and hope on our doorstep.

Above, Barack Obama addresses the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, April 23, 2007.

Meet the Obama Family



The Obamas enjoy an Independence Day parade in Butte, Montana, July 4, 2008. From left are Michelle, Sasha, Barack, and Malia.

The Obamas are the first African-American family to move into the White House.

President Barack Obama and his wife, Michelle, are well aware of the historic significance of his election and what it means to many Americans. In her campaign stump speech, Mrs. Obama often mentioned a 10-year-old girl she met in a South Carolina beauty shop who told her that if Barack Obama were elected president, “it means that I can imagine anything for myself.”

“She could have been me,” Mrs. Obama told *Newsweek* magazine. “Because the truth is, I’m

not supposed to be here, standing here. I’m a statistical oddity. Black girl, brought up on the South Side of Chicago. Was I supposed to go to Princeton? No. ... They said maybe Harvard Law was too much for me to reach for. But I went, I did fine. And I’m certainly not supposed to be standing here.”

The first lady was born Michelle Robinson and raised in a working-class family in Chicago, Illinois. Her father worked at the municipal water department and was a Democratic precinct captain, while her mother was a stay-at-home mom who took care of her and her older brother, Craig.

Michelle Robinson worked hard in school and landed a spot in the Princeton University class of 1985. After earning an undergraduate degree in sociology with a minor in African-American studies, she attended Harvard Law School.

Barack Obama and Michelle Robinson met in 1989 when she, then an associate at the Chicago, Illinois, law firm Sidley & Austin, was assigned to mentor Obama, who was a summer intern.

The future president asked her to attend one of his community organizing sessions in Chicago. She accepted and attended a meeting, where she told *Newsweek* that he spoke to participants about closing the gap between “the world as it is, and the world as it should be.”

Michelle Robinson and Barack Obama continued to date, and the couple married in 1992. The Obamas share a passion for public service and have devoted much of their adult lives to careers in the public sector.

After leaving the corporate law practice where they met, Mrs. Obama held several positions in Chicago government, and she was founding executive director of Public Allies — Chicago, an organization that encourages young people to pursue public service jobs. Most recently, she served as vice president of community and external affairs at the University of Chicago Medical Center.

“She certainly seems to be someone who would take advantage of the podium the White House affords her,” said Dr. Myra Gutin, histo-

rian and professor of communications at Rider University in New Jersey. “She is bright, she is articulate, and she has professional experiences in management.”

The Obamas hope that their enthusiasm for public service and their extensive professional experience and achievements will help them



Above, Michelle Obama speaks at the Democratic National Convention, August 25, 2008. Below, The Obamas traveled together during much of the presidential campaign.

deal with the challenges ahead. Behind Barack Obama’s desire to be president and have a positive impact on the world are his young daughters, Malia, born in 1998, and Sasha (short for Natasha), born in 2001. The girls are the youngest inhabitants of the White House since Amy Carter, who was nine years old when her father, Jimmy Carter, was elected president in 1976.



“My life revolves around my two girls,” then Senator Obama said in a Father’s Day speech at a Chicago church. “And what I think about is what kind of world I’m leaving them. What I’ve realized is that life doesn’t count for much unless you’re willing to do your small part to leave our children — all of our children — a better world. That is our ultimate responsibility as fathers and parents.”

Vice President Joseph Biden



Vice presidential candidate Joe Biden, left, with presidential nominee Barack Obama at the Democratic National Convention, August 28, 2008.

“I count my role in helping to end genocide in the Balkans and in securing passage of the Violence Against Women Act as my proudest moments in public life.” So wrote then Senator Joseph R. Biden, the vice president of the United States, in his 2007 autobiography *Promises to Keep: On Life and Politics*.

Key to understanding this self-appraisal is Biden’s background. He is an Irish Catholic, born under modest circumstances in 1942 in Scranton, a mostly working-class city in northeastern Pennsylvania. His mother was a homemaker; his father, a car salesman. The family moved to the state of Delaware when Biden was 10. He was the first in his family to obtain a college degree

and is a graduate of Syracuse University Law School in New York.

The turning point of Biden’s political career came when he was first elected to the U.S. Senate, representing Delaware, in 1972, when he was 29 years old. A few weeks before he was sworn into office, his wife and daughter were killed in an automobile accident. His two young sons survived the accident but were seriously injured. (Biden remarried in 1977, a union that produced a daughter.) Another calamity occurred in 1988 when he was diagnosed with two potentially fatal brain aneurysms. His recovery was long and painful. He was absent from the Senate for seven months, bedridden much of that time.

Joseph Biden

During his Senate career, Biden compiled a mostly liberal record. Although he is well liked by Republicans and has worked across party lines, he mostly has supported his own party. For example, according to the *Washington Post*, in his last two years in the Senate, Biden voted with Democrats 96.6 percent of the time. He “is widely seen as a liberal-minded internationalist,” wrote Michael Gordon in the *New York Times*. “He has emphasized the need for diplomacy but has been prepared at times to back it with the threat of force.”

In his early years in the Senate, Biden concentrated on domestic issues, particularly civil liberties, law enforcement, and civil rights. He became a member of the Judiciary Committee in 1975 and was its chair from 1987 to 1995. Biden’s most significant legislative accomplishment during this time was the landmark Violence Against Women Act (1994), which he authored. It provides billions of dollars in federal funds to address gender-based crimes. But Biden sometimes departed from the conventional liberal view. He was a strong advocate, for example, of tougher drug sentencing laws. He also opposed busing to achieve racial integration of schools while underlining his commitment to civil rights.

A Foreign Affairs Perspective

Biden distinguished himself in the Senate in foreign affairs. He was a member of the influential Senate Foreign Relations Committee since 1975 and its chair from 2001 to 2003 and from 2007 until 2009. Barack Obama was assigned to this committee after he was elected to the Senate in 2004 and got to know Biden well as they worked together. Obama headed the Europe subcommittee, formerly chaired by Biden. On a key foreign policy issue, however, Obama and Biden dis-

agreed. Biden voted for the final Senate resolution authorizing a U.S. invasion of Iraq, whereas Obama (not yet in the Senate at the time) spoke out against it.

Prior to voting for the final resolution, however, Biden worked with Republican Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana to pass a resolution authoriz-



Senator Biden, seated at right, with fellow members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, August 1986.

ing military action only after the exhaustion of diplomatic efforts. Biden voted to authorize the war after that resolution was rejected. But he also voted against an amendment that would have required the Bush administration to seek further authorization before invading Iraq. By 2005, Biden called his vote on Iraq “a mistake.” In a joint appearance in Springfield, Illinois, after Obama selected Biden as his running mate, Obama said Biden is “an expert on foreign policy whose heart and values are rooted firmly in the middle class.” Obama also called Biden “a powerful critic of the Bush-McCain foreign policy and a voice for a new direction that takes the fight to the terrorists and ends the war in Iraq responsibly.”



U.S. Senators, from left, John Kerry, Joseph Biden, and Charles Hagel in Islamabad, Pakistan, February 2008.

During his time on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Biden traveled widely overseas and is on first-name terms not only with many foreign leaders, but also with their deputies and top aides — as well as opposition leaders. He has dealt with such significant issues as arms control, nuclear proliferation, NATO enlargement, superpower rivalry, and U.S. relations with the Third World. He also has been a strong advocate of the Global AIDS Initiative and an early supporter of international efforts to rein in carbon emissions and greenhouse gases. (Biden first drafted climate control legislation two decades ago.) He also has generally backed free trade treaties. The long-term senator has taken a particular interest in Africa. He was an early critic of the apartheid regime in South Africa. In Darfur, he has advocated stronger action to stem the bloodshed there.

Biden's most significant foreign policy accomplishment, according to most observers, was his effort to combat hostilities in the Balkans during the 1990s. Biden was said to be an influential voice urging the Clinton administration to take action against Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic. In their Springfield appearance, Obama said that Biden "helped shape policies that would end the killing in the Balkans." Specifically, Biden urged intervention to stop ethnic cleansing of Muslims in Bosnia. He later supported the NATO bombing campaign to force Serbia to leave Kosovo.

Biden has twice run for the presidency — in 1988 and again in 2008. Both times he was unsuccessful. The Obama campaign said that Biden was selected as a running mate for many reasons but prominently cited the Delaware senator's expertise and record on foreign policy. Biden is the first Catholic vice president and the first vice president from Delaware.

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