



## Barack Obama stands tall in history's shadow

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Stefanie Balogh  
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**FROM slavery to segregation to the struggle for civil rights, America's racially scarred past is now just four days away from the likely drafting of a new chapter, featuring Barack Obama in the lead role.**

The son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, Senator Obama deliberately markets himself as a post-racial candidate who happens to be African-American.

He promises to lead for all. As he so often says - black, white, Latino, straight, gay, disabled or not - and usher in a new era.

Just how the world views the US, and how Americans see themselves, now rests with what Senator Obama would do if he, as polls suggest, maintains his momentum and defeats a late comeback by Republican John McCain to win the White House on Tuesday (Wednesday, Australian time).

Despite a late tightening in the race, most polls are showing Senator Obama and Joe Biden look set to defeat Senator McCain and his colourful vice-presidential nominee, Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin.

America is crippled with an economic crisis, fighting two wars, and during the past eight years has overspent its global goodwill. Should he win, Senator Obama's task would be momentous - he must rebuild a nation.

The symbolism of his journey cannot be missed. He accepted the Democratic Party's presidential nomination on the 45th anniversary of the day civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr delivered his seminal "I have a dream" speech.

He also launched his presidential tilt in February 2007 in Springfield, Illinois, the home town of former US president Abraham Lincoln, who helped end slavery.

In a single lifetime the US could go from more than half of the population saying they would never vote for a black candidate, to an African-American leader.

Stanford University professor of political science Simon Jackman, an Australian, cautions that having an African-American rise to the highest office, as predicted by the polls, would not mean the US "has finally thrown off the stain, the guilt, the shame of its long and terrible history with race".

"I think it will be an important symbolic moment, and if Obama is a two-term president there's going to be African-American kids growing up and seeing an African-American president on TV for eight years, you can't understate that," he says.

"But to say this represents a seachange in American political attitudes on race, I think that's getting way ahead of us."

Prof Jackman says Senator Obama has exceptional political qualities, and the key to his success has been stepping outside the mould of a stereotypical angry black firebrand politician such as the Rev Jesse Jackson.

"He is winning because he has presented himself as a change candidate who happens to be African-American. Not an African-American candidate bringing change.

"His African-American identity has been carefully managed, almost sublimated."

Prof Jackman says that if Senator Obama is inaugurated on January 20 it would be "one of the more emotionally supercharged political events we will witness, but then frankly I think things start to get overshadowed just by the dire challenges the United States faces".

For any potential Obama administration, the most pressing problem is righting the crisis-ridden US economy.

If he wins on polling day, Senator Obama, according to Prof Jackman, may "not be able to do as much as he wants, certainly in the first two years. The real challenge is how much of his reform agenda - health care, the green jobs initiative, investment in education - he will be able to achieve in his first term."

He suggests that perhaps Senator Obama's pledge to decrease the US footprint in Iraq and bring US combat troops home within 16 months of taking office may be "all we can expect in the first two years".

At 47, Senator Obama could be the third-youngest leader after former US presidents Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, if he secures the vote this week.

His daughters, Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7, could be the youngest children at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue since nine-year-old Amy Carter followed her father, former US president Jimmy Carter, to Washington in 1977.

Senator Obama would probably run a disciplined internal administration. As he has shown on the campaign, he demands loyalty from his staff. He will expect them to be tight-lipped, methodical, accountable, and have an eye to detail. They would also be adept at spin.

They will undoubtedly receive the "no drama" speech when they come on board - a mantra that has served Senator Obama and his close-knit team well during his marathon 21-month presidential campaign.

One of Senator Obama's biggest hurdles, if he moves into the Oval Office, could come from the predicted size of the Democratic win on November 4 (US time) and managing the competing interests and ideologies of the swollen Democratic ranks.

Americans are not only deciding their 44th US president, but one-third of the US Senate seats are up for election as well as the entire House of Representatives.

The Democrats already control the US Congress, but some are anticipating that their gains could be so great in the Senate they may reach the holy grail of a 60- vote majority.

This is the number needed to overcome what is termed in US politics as a filibuster. It is a technique where debate continues and continues, and can prevent a final vote ever being taken. If the Democrats have a 60-vote majority, Republicans would have no avenue to stymie legislation.

Some Democrats, expected to ride Senator Obama's long coat tails into the Congress, will come from conservative patches of the nation and may not always agree with his liberal agenda.

On the foreign stage, Senator Obama has promised to restore America's "moral standing" after two terms of the go-it-alone diplomacy of the Bush administration.

The "Coalition of the Willing" is no more, and Australia has handed in its deputy sheriff's badge.

Under any Obama administration, Australia would most likely join the queue of nations competing for the new president's attention, but our geography gives us clout to emerge as a potentially important diplomatic partner in the region.

"The story going forward, over the eight years that Obama could presumably be president, is the rise and rise of China at a time when America is stalled or declining economically," says Prof Jackman.

"I think (Australian Prime Minister) Kevin Rudd and his Government is positioning itself as a go-between, as a broker of sorts. Australia is already positioning itself in that way, I suspect, in terms of how it may be of help and also prominence in the new order of things in Washington."

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