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He's proud but is he 'black enough'?

Obama kicks off his 2008 presidential campaign today eager to build U.S. voter support without alienating whites

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TIM HARPER
 WASHINGTON BUREAU

SPRINGFIELD, Ill.—He's a black man running for U.S. president who has never lived the "black experience" in this country.

Barack Obama spent his formative years in Hawaii, at a school known for its diversity, being raised by white grandparents, telling everyone he was preparing to live life as a black man in America.



CHARLES REX ARBOGAS/AP PHOTO
 U.S. Senator Barack Obama, seen this week at a Martin Luther King Day ceremony in Harvey, Ill., announced yesterday he is forming an exploratory committee on a 2008 White House bid. He's expected to formally launch his campaign on Feb. 10.

By his own admission, his peers weren't sure what he was talking about.

Today, as he formally launches his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama must try to bridge a racial divide in America he has been personally straddling all his life.

African Americans are openly asking whether the first-term Illinois senator is "black enough."

But in order to court the black vote he will need to win the Democratic nomination, he must be careful not to raise any flags among a white electorate, which so far feels unthreatened by him.

"When you hear about his background, you hear Hawaii, Kenya (where his father was born), or Kansas (his mother's home state). You don't hear Alabama," says Ronald Walters, president of the African American Leadership Institute at the University of Maryland. "It's not strange at all that blacks would view him with a little suspicion. When somebody presents themselves, you want to look them over and if they don't share your background you might withhold judgment."

But Mike Jacobs, an Illinois state senator and supporter of Obama, says his former colleague is a son of the African American community in this state.

"Barack has always had to prove he is black enough," Jacobs said. "But he is unique. White voters don't feel threatened by him and black voters know he is one of them. He can also win over the white farmers in Iowa in the caucuses there."

On the eve of today's kickoff speech, Obama was trying to tuck the race question in the closet, but no one believes he can run away from it.

"If I'm talking about the issues that matter to people, if we do a good job in letting people know who I am and what I stand for, they'll make their judgment not based on my race, but based on how well they think I can lead this country," he told *USA Today*.

But to run a race-neutral campaign would be to anger and alienate a powerful pool of black voters who so far back Democratic front-runner Senator Hillary Clinton by a three-to-one margin, according to a *Washington Post/ABC News* poll.

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The tightrope act comes in dealing head-on with black issues while not alienating white voters, Walters said.

Already, he says, Obama has broken from mainstream black thinking by dismissing race as the reason the Bush administration proved so inept in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

Blacks overwhelmingly believe the Katrina fiasco had its roots in racism.

Clinton's black support is a holdover from her days in the White House, when her husband Bill Clinton was famously known as the country's "first black president" for his connection to minorities.

Obama lived a life of racial ambivalence as a youth.

"I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere," he wrote in his 1995 book, *Dreams From My Father*.

In his current best-seller, *The Audacity of Hope*, he writes that it not easy for black politicians to find the right tone – "too angry? not angry enough?" – when discussing the hardships of their constituents.

"Even the most fair-minded of whites," he wrote, "those who would genuinely like to see racial inequality ended and poverty relieved, tend to push back against suggestions of racial victimization – or race-specific claims based on the history of race discrimination in this country."

Part of Obama's shortfall among blacks is simple unfamiliarity, says David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, a Washington think tank that studies issues affecting African Americans.

"To build black support, he has to perform well among white voters, in the primaries in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada," Bositis said. "Then blacks would see they are on the verge of a historic event and would move to him."

But to suggest he cannot carry the black vote because he didn't have the inner-city or southern Jim Crow upbringing is ridiculous, he says.

"I don't think blacks are casting about looking for the candidate with the best slave history. There are too many other important factors which determine how they cast ballots."

Carol Swain, an African American high school dropout and teenage mother who rose from jobs in nursing homes and garment factories to become a political science professor at Tennessee's Vanderbilt University, dismisses this all as meaningless chatter by the black elite.

"This has no traction for ordinary blacks anywhere," she said. "I think this is all for the entertainment of white people."

"We never have anyone question whether someone is white enough. Is Obama black enough to represent blacks? Black enough for the Democratic party? Black enough for what?"

"We've never held other candidates to that test and we should get past this comical debate."

Debra J. Dickerson, a black author and essayist, broke the "not black enough" debate into the open in salon.com, last month, arguing Obama would be the great black hope for president, except he isn't black.

She argues that "black" in U.S. culture means those descended from West African slaves.

"Notwithstanding their silence on the subject, blacks at the top are aware (and possibly troubled?) by Obama's lottery winnings: 'black' but not black," she wrote.

"Not descended from West African slaves brought to America, he steps into the benefits of black progress (like Harvard law school) without having borne any of the burden, and he gives the white folks plausible deniability of their unwillingness to embrace blacks in public life."

Dickerson says whites are engaged in "a paroxysm" of self-congratulation because they can swoon over "nice, safe" Obama. Obama allows white Americans to back a black candidate without having to back a black candidate, she says, feeling free of either guilt or fright.

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