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Obama may reveal nation's true colors in presidential race

By Steven Thomma
McClatchy Newspapers
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Manchester, N.H. - As it often does for a politician with dark skin, the subject turned to race when Barack Obama arrived in one of the whitest states in the union last weekend.

"Race is still a powerful force in this country," the freshman Democratic senator from Illinois told a horde of reporters and television crews. "Any African-American candidate, or any Latino candidate, or Asian candidate, or woman candidate confronts a higher threshold in establishing himself to the voters."

Yet he added that he believes that the country has changed, grown more tolerant, quicker to get past race and onto the business of judging politicians on their characters and visions. Should he decide to run for president, he said, "people will know me pretty well, and whether I'm qualified to serve or not."

As if to underscore the point, Obama received a rock star's welcome when he appeared an hour later before an eager crowd of more than 1,500, the overwhelming majority of them white. They cheered his speech, roared approval at the suggestion that he might run and crowded around him afterward, reaching out to touch him or take a picture.

Obama hasn't decided whether to run. But the intense interest in him suggests that he'd be the first African-American - he's half Kenyan, half Kansan - in history with a real shot at winning not only a major-party nomination but perhaps the presidency as well.

Coincidentally, the person he'd likely have to get past is New York Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, who'd have a real chance of becoming the first woman to win a major-party nomination or the White House.

Obama has cross-racial appeal. He's a politician who happens to be black, not a black politician. One elderly New Hampshire Democrat said Obama's race made him more appealing: "His skin color is a novelty." Another said it would feel good as a Democrat to vote for a minority.

Yet most seemed to ignore his race altogether - at least they didn't mention it.

That's far different from the reaction to other black candidates, such as Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton.

"America is ready to elect a black president," Vanderbilt University political scientist Carol Swain writes for next month's issue of *Ebony* magazine. "But the first successful black president will not be a Jesse Jackson or an Al Sharpton or any veteran activist of the civil rights movement. Such a candidate laden with heavy baggage would evoke too much white guilt, and he or she would be seen more as a 'black' candidate than one who happened to be black."

Rather, she writes, the first black president will be someone who embodies a broader vision of hope, such as Obama or former Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"It will be a person who ascribes to the mainstream political and social values that place heavy emphasis on hard work and individual responsibility."

Democratic pollster Geoff Garin noted that some of the most trusted people in the country today are African-Americans, including Powell, TV host Oprah Winfrey and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

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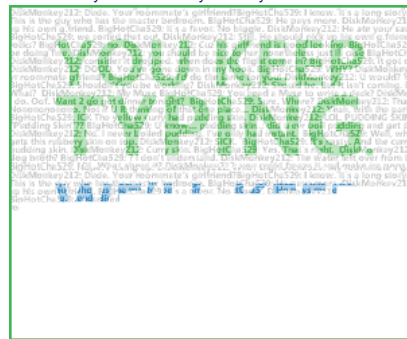
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