Election '08

Road to the White House

Sept. 4: Sen. John McCain and his running mate, Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin, wave to the crowd after he accepted his party's nomination for president at the Republican National Convention at the Xcel Energy Center in St. Paul, Minn.

Sept. 23: Mrs. Palin meets former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at his Park Avenue offices in New York City.

Sept. 23: Mr. McCain speaks at the National Guard Association Convention in Baltimore.

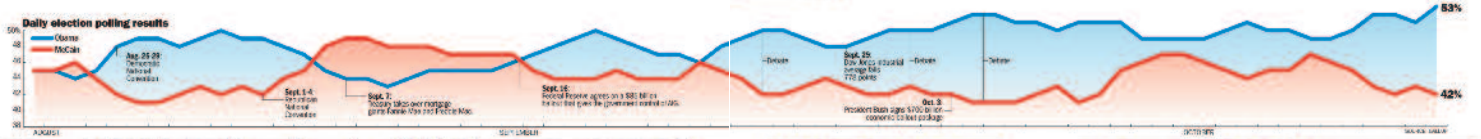
Sept. 25: Mr. McCain, flanked by Mrs. Palin and his wife, Cindy, speaks at a campaign rally in Columbus, Ohio, a battleground state. Mr. McCain returned to full-time campaigning after a brief hiatus to join discussions in Washington on the $7 billion financial bailout package.

Oct. 8: Mr. McCain uses the tried and true political tactic of kissing babies during a rally in Allentown, Pa.

Oct. 15: Mr. McCain and Mr. Obama meet in their third and final presidential debate in the David S. Mack Sports and Exhibition Complex at Hofstra University in Hempstead, N.Y.

Oct. 16: Mr. McCain gets a warm reception from the crowd at a rally in Downingtown, Pa.

Nov. 3: Mr. McCain speaks at a campaign rally at Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla., part of a nationwide cross-country blitz on the day before the presidential election.



Aug. 26: Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton calls for party unity while speaking at the Democratic National Convention in Denver.

Aug. 27: Sen. Barack Obama appears onstage with Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. after Mr. Biden accepted the nomination for vice president at Denver's Pepsi Center during the convention.

Sept. 20: Mr. Obama greets supporters as he is introduced during a campaign rally at Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach, Fla.

Sept. 4: Mr. Obama speaks at a rally at Buchanan Park in Lancaster, Pa.

Sept. 24: Mr. Biden addresses a campaign rally in Jeffersonville, Ind.

Oct. 2: Mr. Biden and Republican vice-presidential candidate Gov. Sarah Palin greet each other before the start of their debate at Washington University in St. Louis.

Oct. 12: Mr. Obama greets Angela Zimmerle as he campaigns in Holland, Ohio.

Oct. 15: Mr. Obama's wife, Michelle, addresses supporters in Fort Wayne, Ind., where she urged them to work to encourage more voter participation.

Oct. 22: Mr. Obama greets supporters at the end of a rally at the Richmond Coliseum.

Nov. 3: Mr. Obama waves at the end of a rally in Jacksonville, Fla. He and his Republican opponent, Sen. John McCain, dashed through critical states in a final blitz on election eve.

Obama breaks barriers for black Americans

"I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on Earth, is my story even possible."

– Barack Obama, Democratic National Convention, July 27, 2004

By Dean R. Souza
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

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Four years after he burst onto the national scene, Barack Obama's improbable story has another precedent-shattering chapter, as the 47-year-old first-term senator from Illinois, the Hawaii-born son of a Kenyan father and a white mother from Kansas, adds another title to an already remarkable resume: president-elect.

Many black voters, patient's waiting at packed polling stations across the country, said they had never thought they would live to see one of their men win the world's most powerful office.

The long lines leading to the voting booths in the morning gave way to exuberant open-air street parties as Mr. Obama's victory became apparent in the evening, topped by a massive open-air bash in the city's Grant Park in the heart of Chicago.

"I believed it would happen one day because my father told me to believe one day it would come to pass, but I just never expected to see it in my lifetime," said Shelley Stokes Hammond, a public affairs officer at Howard University and daughter of former Rep. Louis Stokes, Ohio Democrat. Mrs. Stokes Hammond had just voted at a school in Silver Spring.

Her son, Eric Hammond, added, "Actually, your dad told me he didn't really believe it, either."

Mrs. Stokes Hammond said her family recently recovered records showing her ancestors first appeared on the voting rolls in Jefferson County, Ga., in 1867, two years after the end of the Civil War. By 1870, the county — named for one of 12 U.S. presidents who owned black slaves at some point in their lives — had disqualified all of her relatives from voting under the South's Jim Crow laws.

"It was a critical issue for many of us," said Molefi Kete Asante, a professor of black studies at Temple University and author of more than 40 books. "This is what our parents struggled and fought and voted for. If they could have seen this, I think they would have been able to rest in peace."

Millie Green couldn't vote for Mr. Obama, but that didn't stop her from hosting a victory party for the Democrat. The Trinidad and Tobago native and owner of the Islander Restaurant on the Dupont Circle Street had music blaring, Caribbean food cooking and television showing the returns.

She said aloud to let the election of the country's first black president — one with foreign roots like her own — pass her by.

"How ever it turns out, no matter who wins, it's a historic moment for all," Ms. Green said.

Bars, clubs and restaurants up and down U Street, the city's hub of black night life, hosted election-night parties as the size of Mr. Obama's victory became apparent.

It was a far cry from the image of burned and looted homes and businesses that marked the same street 40 years ago, leveled in the riots that followed the April 1968 assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

From the outset, the 2008 presidential election seemed destined for a thick chapter in the history books. With Mr. Obama, Illinois Sen. John McCain and other hopefuls beginning their quest to succeed President Bush in early 2007, the campaign was easily the longest and most expensive ever.

Mr. Obama scored a stunning upset over Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York in a long, bitter Democratic primary contest, ending the former first lady's bid to become the nation's first female president.

The next generation of candidates, strategists and political scholars will be studying Mr. Obama's record-shattering, Internet-based fundraising machine, which took in more than $600 million for the primary and general elections.

On the Republican side, Gov. Sarah Palin, Mr. McCain's running mate, was the first Alaskan on a major party ticket. She also was only the second woman — after Rep. Geraldine Ferraro, New York Democrat, in 1984 — to run as vice president on a major party ticket. At 72, Mr. McCain was trying to become the oldest man elected to his first term in the White House.

The unique nature of the 2008 election was reflected in the preliminary voter turnout estimates.

A record 31.2 million voters cast absentee and early votes even before Tuesday's polls opened, equal to 25.3 percent of all the votes cast in 2004, said George Mason University researcher Michael McDonald. He projected that the final turnout numbers, which won't be released officially for weeks until after that about 130 million Americans voted, shattering the 2004 record of 122 million.

Officials in Massachusetts, Michigan, Connecticut, Virginia and Indiana were among those reporting heavy state turnouts Tuesday. A video of a polling site in New York City's Greenwich Village showed a line of voters wrapped around three city blocks; a polling line in Greensboro, Va., at one point held more than 1,000 voters.

Among those swelling the vote totals Tuesday were commander Edward Michael Fincke and flight engineer Greg Chamitoff, filing by secure uplink to NASA's Johnson Space Center from the International Space Station.

But Curtis Gans, director of American University's Committee for the Study of the American Electorate, cautioned against relying too heavily on early unofficial reports to measure the turnout figure. He said an "enhanced side" of the figure "probably won't be available until late in the evening," when at least 90 percent of a state's vote has been tabulated.

For political trivia fans, Mr. Obama becomes the first sitting U.S. senator to capture the White House since Democrat John F. Kennedy in 1960. And the 2008 Republican ticket is the first for the party since 1972 that did not include a member of the Bush or Dole family.

But it was the racial issue that seems sure to leave the largest historical imprint, even though Mr. Obama himself often seemed to play down its significance throughout his campaign.

Elise Bynum, a black labor organizer from Silver Spring, recalled hearing the news of President Kennedy's assassination in her segregated seventh-grade classroom up in Detroit.

"I remember my best friend turning to me and saying, 'I never want to grow up to be president,'" she said. "Then we had the news of Martin Luther King, of Bobby Kennedy, of Malcolm X, and we just got the idea this country would not accept a black president or a president of color for the foreseeable."

She said she did not think Mr. Obama had "a snowball's chance in hell" when he started his White House bid, but said it quickly became apparent that his candidacy was about more than race.

"Black voters just won't automatically support an African-American, or we would all have supported New York preacher Al Sharpton," Miss Bynum said. "I am the figure 'probably won't have a shot' in hell in the coming," when at least 90 percent of a state's vote has been tabulated.

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Barbara Smith, a retired D.C. Superior Court employee waiting home after voting at a Northeast Washington elementary school, also cited Dr. King's words to describe Mr. Obama's historic presidential run.

"I'm 70 years old and I'm so glad to see this day come," she said. "I believe it is almost as if God chose him to run. I was sitting in my chair the television just before he died when Dr. King told the crowd he may not get there to the Promised Land, it really doesn't matter because I've been to the mountaintop."

A 70-year-old retired nurse, who gave her name only as Mary O, recalled the days when she and her family could enter only through the basement door to shop at the old Hecht's department store in downtown Washington.

"We had to get a friend who could pass for white to go upstairs and look at the merchandise for us," she said. "It's amazing to me that Obama is now going to go through the front door of the White House."

Like many older black voters, the Silver Spring nurse acknowledged that she did not originally support Mr. Obama because she did not believe he could win. And she conceded to dark fears among her friends that the next president could be assassinated by white racists.

"But sometimes you just have to take a chance, you have to just stop being afraid," she said.

Temple University's Mr. Asante said Mr. Obama's victory has also had him to revise his 1984 book, "Erasing Racism," which argued the United States had yet to confront the lingering legacy of slavery and racial equality despite the gains of the civil rights era.

But he also cautioned against reading too much into the Obama win.

"We have to still remember that a majority of the white voters, according to the polls, are still probably going to vote for John McCain. While Americans by itself would not have elected Barack Obama," he said.

The historic nature of the U.S. race has generated excitement around the world.

By tradition, foreign leaders stay neutral in U.S. presidential races, having to work with whomever the voters choose for the next four years. But Brazil's center-left president, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, told reporters last week that it is his "personal opinion" a win for Mr. Obama would be "an extraordinary thing."

"I think that, in all the world, there is a little bit of happiness," he said. "In the silent minds of each one of us, how good it will be if a black is elected president of the United States."

Shelly Duckett, a school volunteer and single mother of three, recalled being pelted with eggs from a passing car in the mid-1970s while campaigning for civil rights lawyer A. Melvin Miller in his race for a seat on the Alexandria City Council.

"We were teenagers and wanted to run after the car but our parents told us, no, you don't do that," Ms. Duckett said.

She said she still found it "unbelievable" that Mr. Obama was poised to win the presidency.

"I can't wait until January," she said. "My kids will not be going to school on Inauguration Day. We can't afford it, but I've already booked a hotel room downtown in Washington, because we want to be in the thick of it all."

• Jim Calemine and Gabrielle Beeton contributed to this report

President-elect Barack Obama greets supporters in Columbia, S.C. The Democrat's historic election sweep many black voters, who said they thought they would never live to see the day one of their own would claim the presidency.