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Is (His) Biography (Our) Destiny?

By JAMES TRAUB

“If I am the face of American foreign policy and American power,” [Barack Obama](#) mused not long ago aboard his campaign plane, “as long as we are also making prudent strategic decisions, handling emergencies, crises and opportunities in the world in an intelligent and sober way. . . .” He stopped. He wanted to make sure he got this just right, and he had got a little caught up in rebutting the claim, which [Hillary Clinton](#) has artfully advanced, that he is not prepared to handle emergencies. Obama stopped picking at his grilled salmon in order to stare out at the sky for a few moments. “I think,” he said, in that deep and measured voice of his, “that if you can tell people, ‘We have a president in the White House who still has a grandmother living in a hut on the shores of Lake Victoria and has a sister who’s half-Indonesian, married to a Chinese-Canadian,’ then they’re going to think that he may have a better sense of what’s going on in our lives and in our country. And they’d be right.”

Perhaps they would. Obama’s supporters believe that his life story and the angle of vision it affords him hold out the possibility of curing the harm they would say we have done to ourselves through our indifference to the views of others and through the insularity of a president who seems so incurious about the world. There is thus an emblematic force to Obama’s candidacy. A President Obama, says Joseph Nye, the Harvard professor who popularized the term “soft power” to describe the capacity to gain support through attraction rather than force, “would do more for America’s soft power around the world than anything else we could do.”

But Nye wasn’t quite finished. At a meeting of national-security experts in August, he played out a harrowing crisis situation involving [Iran](#) and concluded afterward that “much though I’m attracted to the freshness of Obama’s life story, I would come out on the experience side of it” — that is, on Clinton’s side. This is Obama’s problem in a nutshell. Democratic voters seem to be torn between the hope of reshaping a frightening world and the fear of being terribly vulnerable to that world. Perhaps Obama’s inability so far to make a dent in Clinton’s 20-point (or more) lead in the polls proves that many believe he’s on the wrong side of that balance.

The United States has had only one foreign policy and one national-security strategy since the transforming events of 9/11 — and this set of doctrines has been shaped by the very distinctive worldview of [George W. Bush](#) and [Dick Cheney](#) and the men and women around them. The great project of the foreign-policy world in the last few years has been to think through a “post-post-9/11

strategy,” in the words of the Princeton Project on National Security, a study that brought together many of the foreign-policy thinkers of both parties. Such a strategy, the experts concluded, must, like “a Swiss Army knife,” offer different tools for different situations, rather than only the sharp edge of a blade; must pay close attention to “how others may perceive us differently than we perceive ourselves, no matter how good our intentions”; must recognize that other nations may legitimately care more about their neighbors or their access to resources than about terrorism; and must be “grounded in hope, not fear.” A post-post-9/11 strategy must harness the forces of globalization while honestly addressing the growing “perception of unfairness” around the world; must actively promote, not just democracy, but “a world of liberty under law”; and must renew multilateral instruments like the [United Nations](#).

In mainstream foreign-policy circles, Barack Obama is seen as the true bearer of this vision. “There are maybe 200 people on the Democratic side who think about foreign policy for a living,” as one such figure, himself unaffiliated with a campaign, estimates. “The vast majority have thrown in their lot with Obama.” Hillary Clinton’s inner circle consists of the senior-most figures from her husband’s second term in office — the former secretary of state [Madeleine Albright](#), the former national security adviser Sandy Berger and the former United Nations ambassador [Richard Holbrooke](#). But drill down into one of [Washington](#)’s foreign-policy hives, whether the Carnegie Endowment or the [Brookings Institution](#) or [Georgetown University](#), and you’re bound to hit Obama supporters. Most of them served in the Clinton administration, too, and thus might be expected to support Hillary Clinton. But many of these younger and generally more liberal figures have decamped to Obama. And they are ardent. As Ivo Daalder, a former [National Security Council](#) official under President Clinton who now heads up a team advising Obama on nonproliferation issues, puts it, “There’s a feeling that this is a guy who’s going to help us transform the way America deals with the world.” Ex-Clintonites in Obama’s inner circle also include the president’s former lawyer, Greg Craig, and Richard Danzig, his Navy secretary.

The first of the Clinton people to notice this rising political star was [Anthony Lake](#), national-security adviser in [Bill Clinton](#)’s first term. Lake says that he was introduced to Obama in 2002 when the latter had just begun considering a run for a Senate seat. Impressed, he began contributing ideas. When Obama came to Washington as a senator and joined the Foreign Relations Committee, Lake continued to work with him on occasion. Like others, Lake was impressed not so much by Obama’s policy prescriptions as by his temperament and intellectual habits. “He has,” Lake says, “the kind of mind that works its way through complexities by listening and giving some edge of legitimacy to various points of view before he comes down on his, and that point of view embraces complexity.”

This awareness of complexity felt like a kind of politics itself and a repudiation of the Bush administration's categorical thinking.

Obama spoke out against the impending war in [Iraq](#) in the fall of 2002; and those members of the Democratic establishment who, like Lake, also opposed the war came to view him as a kindred spirit. Susan Rice, a former assistant secretary of state in the Clinton administration who, along with Lake, heads up Obama's foreign-policy team, says, "You were considered naïve, wrong, weak, stupid to oppose that war." Hillary Clinton (and [John Edwards](#)) voted for the war. Obama's opposition to it showed Rice "a willingness not to be bound by conventional wisdom and the well-trod path."

The deep sense of hopefulness that Obama inspires in his supporters has much to do with a life trajectory unique in the history of major presidential candidates. Obama has always been acutely conscious about the relationship between his personal arc and that of his country. In "Dreams From My Father," published in 1995, before he ran for anything, Obama offered a vivid and strikingly introspective account of his knockabout childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia, as well as of a journey he made as an adult to Kenya, the homeland of his absent father. He presents himself in all his cultural hybridity — African and American and Asian, black and white, infused with all-American hopefulness and with the reserve that comes of living on the receiving end of power.

One recurrent theme of the book is how very little the world, at least the world in which most people live, responds to our wishes or our ideals. Obama's Indonesian stepfather, Lolo, explains the rule of the jungle to the young boy: "Men take advantage of weakness in other men." Obama's mother, an innocent abroad, is shocked to learn that Lolo was conscripted into that country's brutal repression of an insurgency and sent to the jungles of New Guinea, where he saw and did unspeakable things. In America, Obama writes, power was muted; in a place like Indonesia, it was "undisguised, indiscriminate, naked, always fresh in the memory. Power had taken Lolo and yanked him back into line just when he thought he'd escaped. . . . That's how things were; you couldn't change it, you could just live by the rules, so simple once you learned them."

In 1981, Obama arrived at [Columbia University](#), where he majored in international relations. He wrote his senior thesis on the North-South debate on trade then raging as part of the demand for a "new international economic order." But he says that he was never much of a lefty. Obama offers himself as the representative of a new generation, free of the dogmas that still burden the [Democratic Party](#). "The Democrats have been stuck in the arguments of Vietnam," he said to me on the campaign plane, "which means that either you're a Scoop Jackson Democrat or you're a [Tom Hayden](#) Democrat and you're suspicious of any military action. And that's just not my framework."

Indeed, for all his soaring idealism, Obama seems to have absorbed Lolo's teachings about the world's refractoriness. The foreign-policy figures whom he finds "most compelling," he says, are the archrealists who shaped policy during the cold war, including the secretaries of state George C. Marshall and Dean Acheson and the diplomat-scholar [George F. Kennan](#). "What impresses me is not just the specifics of what they did," he said, "but the approach they took to solve the problem, which is, if we have assets or tools to deal with foreign policy, we know that the most costly is the military tool, particularly in a nuclear era, so we want to apply all the other tools that are less costly." Obama said that he also admired the worldly pragmatists who served the first George Bush, including [Brent Scowcroft](#), the national-security adviser: "The whole Bush team, I think, was not entirely aware of the opportunities of this new world, but they had a very clear-eyed assessment." He has sought out the former secretary of state [Colin Powell](#) for counsel, and spoken with Scowcroft as well.

Obama was sitting across from me in one of the leather bucket seats of the walnut-trimmed corporate jet the campaign had just leased. He has a look as cool and unruffled as his velvety tenor. He was tieless, as always, and his white shirt billowed around his trim frame; not even the tiniest crease marred his pale khaki linen pants. Because Obama has a loose and jokey manner — fist-bumps, male hugs — you do not immediately notice the inner gyroscope that keeps everything at a level. Even in public, he rarely changes the volume, speed or pitch of his voice. He does not hurry; he lopes. He seems to have a gift for husbanding his energy. He had woken early that morning in Manchester to play a game of pickup basketball against kids from Southern New Hampshire University. (The Obamas lost, 11-10.) The plane was heading to Des Moines; Obama had four campaign events scheduled for later that day. He was yawning, and he had pushed his salmon aside, half-eaten; but he spoke for about an hour before taking a nap.

You feel, with Obama, that life experience, temperament and opinion are all of a piece. He is, on the one hand, an idealist and optimist who recoils from the zero-sum formula. If a single sentiment stands at the heart of his worldview, it's that, as he said in a speech earlier this year, "the security of the American people is inextricably linked to the security of all people." What's good for others is good for us; there's no contradiction between idealism and realism. This may strike some as naïve; and yet Obama shies away from the exclamatory rhetoric and grandiose formulations that have become George Bush's stock in trade. Bush's post-9/11 recognition that our own security depends on the well-being of people on the other side of the globe led him to propound the so-called Freedom Agenda and to promote democracy in the Middle East. Obama, though a more eager democracy promoter than his realist heroes were, is also far more tempered than Bush. He accuses the Bush administration of an ethnocentric fixation on elections and classic political rights. Instead,

he argues: “We have to be focused on what are the aspirations of the people in those countries. Once those aspirations are met, it opens up space for the kind of democratic regimes that we want.”

Obama speaks with special passion about the need to change America’s image in the world — and not only by proving that it can elect a 46-year-old black man with roots in the Muslim world. He returns again and again to the question of what America means to the rest of the world. In one of his speeches, he observed that United States senators typically see “the desperate faces” of Darfur or Baghdad from the height of a helicopter. “And it makes you stop and wonder,” he added, “when those faces look up at an American helicopter, do they feel hope, or do they feel hate?” Obama would like to restore the era when people in capitals all over the world could go to the local American cultural center to read books and magazines, the way he could in Jakarta — though now he would add English lessons and vocational training, and “stories of America’s Muslims and the strength they add to our country.” He argues that we must give emerging powers like India, Brazil, Nigeria and South Africa “a stake in upholding the international order.” Obama is an unabashed fan of multilateral institutions. At an event in New Hampshire this summer, I heard him say, “I want to go before the United Nations and say, ‘America’s back!’ ” This is a bit too multilateral even for some of his advisers, who take a more skeptical view of the U.N. than he does. But for Obama, our willingness to be constrained by rules that govern others may take precedence over the rules themselves.

By the time he announced his candidacy earlier this year, Obama was already a media phenomenon thanks to his star turn at the 2004 Democratic convention and the publication of his second book, “The Audacity of Hope.” He moved in a bright nimbus of expectation; but he had arrived so recently on the national stage that the idea of a President Obama seemed almost impertinent. And Americans were all too familiar with the dangers of callow presidents. This spring, Obama tried to prove his readiness for office by laying out his foreign-policy views in a series of speeches and the obligatory essay in *Foreign Affairs*. He was obviously far more knowledgeable about the world, and far more nuanced in his understanding, than George Bush was in 2000. But was this junior senator with the boyish mien seasoned enough for the Oval Office? This was the threshold he had to cross. And Hillary Clinton wasted no time in planting the seeds of doubt.

In the CNN/YouTube debate in early July, Obama was asked, “Would you be willing to meet, separately, without preconditions, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that divides our countries?” Obama replied, “I would,” and added that it was a “disgrace” that the Bush administration had refused on principle to do so. This was pretty standard Democratic

rhetoric; but Clinton shot back, “Well, I will not promise to meet with the leaders of these countries during my first year.” She would “pursue a very vigorous diplomacy” but would never allow herself to be “used for propaganda purposes” by rogue leaders. The next day, sensing an opening, Clinton lashed into Obama’s offer as “irresponsible and frankly naïve.” Obama, in turn, accused his opponent of advocating a “Bush-Cheney Lite” brand of diplomacy and insisted that our standing had fallen “because people think that the United States wants to dictate across the world instead of cooperate across the world.”

Here was a false debate that was nevertheless extremely telling. When criticizing Bush rather than Obama, Clinton mocked the administration’s unwillingness to engage with enemies. “Direct negotiations are not a sign of weakness,” she said in a 2006 speech to the [Council on Foreign Relations](#). “They’re a sign of leadership.” She advocated direct talks with both North Korea and Iran, observing in the latter case that our willingness to talk tells the Iranian people that “our quarrel is with their leaders, not with them” and shows the international community that “we are pursuing every available peaceful avenue.” And only a few days before the debate Obama said that he would set conditions before meeting with President [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela. In short, you would need a very fine instrument to calculate the difference between Clinton’s and Obama’s willingness to talk to bad guys. The dispute looked like classic political posturing, with Clinton trying to box her opponent into a frame reading, “Not Ready for Leadership in This Grave Era,” and Obama fighting back with “A Prisoner of Old Thinking.”

The post-debate spin was that Clinton won the battle of the narrative frames; but a CNN focus group concluded that the dust-up was Obama’s best moment. And Obama found that he was as comfortable with his side of the debate as Clinton was with hers. “It accentuated a difference between the two of them that I’m not sure either of them fully appreciated beforehand,” said Samantha Power, the author and Harvard professor, who is another one of Obama’s chief advisers. “It was orienting and galvanizing.” But the difference between them wasn’t really a matter of preconditions and propaganda points. The debate was “orienting” because it exposed the very different orientations of the two — one toward tough-mindedness and resolve, the other toward transparency and dialogue; the one toward the peril that we face, the other toward opportunities we must explore. How you felt about the debate had to do with how you felt about the world.

Obama may have found the debate galvanizing, but only one of them could win the battle of the frames. And Clinton was, at the very least, not losing — which seemed very much to be her strategy. In early August, Obama gave a speech in Washington titled “The War We Need to Win.” Obama proposed to “increase both the numbers and capabilities of our diplomats, development experts and

other civilians who can work alongside our military” in places threatened by extremism; to help weak states build “independent judicial systems, honest police forces” and transparent financial systems; to double foreign assistance by 2012; to close Guantánamo and end torture.

But this was also the speech in which Obama vowed to go after “high-value terrorist targets” in Pakistan if President [Pervez Musharraf](#) failed to act. And the headlines the next day were all about Obama’s strategic embrace of saber rattling. [Mitt Romney](#) cracked that Obama had “gone from [Jane Fonda](#) to Dr. Strangelove in one week.” Clinton noted primly that “you shouldn’t always say everything you think if you’re running for president, because it has consequences across the world.” And the Obama campaign winced. “The fact that Pakistan came so soon after ‘talking to dictators’ was just unfortunate,” as one adviser told me. Another fumes that “it’s just so frustrating that he gives these substantive speeches and it’s like a tree falling in the forest.” The story line was supposed to be that Obama, unlike Clinton, had a comprehensive and nuanced counterterrorism policy. But it wasn’t getting through.

The battle of the competing narratives grew even more one-sided the next day, when Obama answered an out-of-left-field question by flatly ruling out the use of nuclear weapons against terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Pakistan and then awkwardly trying to footnote his categorical answer. Even though such an act is all but unthinkable, presidents typically keep their options open by refusing to take even the unthinkable ones off the table. Clinton, as always, had the Right Answer at the ready: “Presidents should be careful at all times in discussing the use and nonuse of nuclear weapons.” She didn’t have to add that taking options off the table was naïve and frankly irresponsible. This time, no one in the Obama campaign thought they had won. Samantha Power offered to draw up a set of talking points. Each of the three episodes, Power argued, pitted “conventional wisdom” against “new ideas.” Do we really want a president who will sustain the pretense that we will obliterate a chunk of Pakistan in order to take out a training camp? “We should judge presidential candidates on their judgment and their plans,” the spine-stiffening memo noted, “not on their ability to recite platitudes.”

The foreign-policy establishment, whose members actually read speeches, was sympathetic to Obama’s side. [Dennis Ross](#), the former Middle East negotiator and author of a recent book on diplomacy, says of the willingness to negotiate, “You don’t want to make yourself the issue so that it becomes harder to get others to join you,” though he adds that it’s sometimes prudent to first “prepare the ground” with third parties who can explore the usefulness of discussion. Ross, who has spoken to many of the candidates and endorsed none, is unequivocal on Pakistan, saying, “If Pakistan won’t act, then you have to, and you need to condition them to understand that by saying so

publicly.” Obama also gained support from some unexpected quarters. In late August, [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#), the hawkish national-security adviser to President [Jimmy Carter](#), was asked to score the contest between Obama and Clinton. Brzezinski, who opposed the Iraq war and has become a fierce critic of the Bush administration, said: “I think Obama is clearly more effective and has the upper hand. He has a sense of what is historically relevant and what is needed from the United States in relationship to the world. . . . The senator from New York talks in very conventional terms, and I don’t think the country needs to go back to what we had eight years ago.”

Obama was doing everything except winning. Tony Lake, whose career goes back to Vietnam, says he has worked on campaigns, like Ed Muskie’s in 1972, in which the candidate was cautious to a fault. Obama, he says, never shies away from stating his convictions; and unlike Muskie’s opponent, [George McGovern](#), Obama has much of the establishment on his side. So what do you do? You show that tough-minded folks, and above all ones with stripes on their shoulders, support Obama, who began campaigning in Iowa with Brzezinski, Gen. Merrill McPeak, the former Air Force chief of staff, and Maj. Gen. Scott Gration, who recently retired after serving in Iraq. And? “You keep working on this and hope it gets through after a while,” Lake says.

And you start hammering your opponent. Obama long planned to mark the fifth anniversary of his speech opposing the war, which fell on Oct. 2. He would take on Clinton about as frontally as he could without mentioning her name, a piece of campaign etiquette that he consistently observed. He planned to address a rally, as he had five years earlier, but in a conference call a week or so beforehand, Obama said he wanted to give another policy speech instead. “There are those,” he said in the speech in Chicago, “who offer up easy answers” — for instance, that the president and his gang botched the war. In fact, he went on, the American people were being failed by “a foreign-policy elite that largely boarded the bandwagon for war” — an odd comment for someone so deeply admired by the foreign-policy elite. That same conventional thinking, he declared in a rhetorical hop-skip-and-jump, “measures experience only by the years you’ve been in Washington, not by your time spent serving in the wider world.” Then, taking a leaf from the Samantha Power memo, Obama reprised the Three Squabbles as if they defined the difference between himself and Clinton — between conviction and cynicism, the future and the past, hope and fear. His chief protagonist was no longer George Bush, but rather some supposed entity of which Bush and Hillary Clinton are equally a part.

It was a hard-hitting speech; but about an hour before Obama delivered it, the Clinton campaign released figures showing that it had outraised Obama in the previous quarter — a juicy plum for political reporters. And so yet another tree fell silently in the forest. When I asked one of the ex-

Clintonites on the Obama team how he felt about this brilliant act of gamesmanship, he couldn't even get out a complete sentence. He said, "It was, ah . . . it was, ah . . . to type."

Obama's advisers argue that he has plenty of time left to show that he is the candidate of substance and of new thinking, and Clinton of political calculation and Bush-Cheney Lite. In the meantime, though, they blame their failure to break through on what they see as a combination of Clinton's inspired cynicism and the myopia of a press corps addled by tactics and poll numbers. They are, of course, less inclined to think that the public has heard both sides and decided it prefers the other one. But that banal explanation may actually be true. A CBS News poll in August found that while far more Democrats believed that Obama would find "new ways of solving the country's problems" than would Clinton, she received a roughly equal score on trust in her ability to handle foreign crises and a commanding advantage — 59 percent approval versus Obama's 29 percent — on the question of having the "right experience to be president." Three-quarters of Democrats said they believed Clinton could win the presidency. Obama languished at 54 percent; and 37 percent mentioned his inexperience as the chief problem.

Those are startling numbers, considering that the overwhelming majority of Democrats now think that Clinton was wrong and Obama right on Iraq, the great foreign crisis of our generation. Obama has ridden this distinction as hard as he can. But perhaps anger over Iraq is less salient politically than fear about terrorism. And if that's so, voters may be more inclined to take refuge in Clinton's tough-mindedness than in Obama's multipronged Swiss Army knife. Six years have passed since the terrorist attacks, but it seems that, psychologically, we remain inside their fearful penumbra.

And on this visceral question of fear and threat, the candidates differ greatly. Republicans like [Rudolph W. Giuliani](#) promise to assuage our worries by taking the offensive; John Edwards has described the "war on terror" as a slogan rather than a strategy and characterized the supreme goal as reclaiming "the moral high ground that defined our foreign policy for much of the last century." These are the twin poles of the terrorism debate — bellicosity and benevolence. Democrats are not of one mind on the question. Obama continues to use the expression "war on terror" but shares Edwards's substantive views. He says he believes that while a small core of jihadists must be confronted with superior force, the Islamic world generally is in the position of the faces looking wonderingly at the American helicopter, susceptible to the instruments of soft power. He has pledged to convene a forum in the Middle East with regional heads of state soon after he is elected. On the other hand, centrists like Will Marshall, president of the Progressive Policy Institute, are skeptical about the efficacy of soft power in this case. Obama, says Marshall, appears to believe that "the threat we face is an [Al Qaeda](#) threat — a tiny minority of malignant criminals who have

absolutely no public support.” In fact, says Marshall, “Al Qaeda has broad support in the Islamic world,” and Salafism, the extremist branch of Sunni Islam, “is in the ascendant.” And Hillary Clinton, who has expressed qualified support for the Bush administration’s confrontational policies on Iran, has positioned herself carefully to Obama’s right on the subject.

Is Obama, then, too soft for this hard moment — too young, too nice, too worried about what others think of us? Is the whole issue of “experience” really a proxy for tough-mindedness? When I told Obama that Joseph Nye thought he was soft-power incarnate but nevertheless leaned toward Clinton, he nodded, and then coolly shot back: “It is interesting to me that this conversation does not come up with any of the other candidates. It does not come up with respect to John Edwards. On the Republican side, the degree to which Rudy Giuliani was validated almost as a wartime president was fascinating to me.” And what about Mitt Romney? And [Fred Thompson](#)?

“ ‘The Hunt for Red October,’ ” Obama’s communications director, Robert Gibbs, helpfully suggested.

Obama wasn’t done. “Hillary gets a unique pass on this issue,” he went on, “not by virtue of her service in the Senate but by virtue of the idea that through osmosis she gets it from Bill. And they’ve been actively pushing that story.” This was obviously a very sore point.

Obama finally leaned back to nap, and I went across the aisle. I was telling Gibbs my theory that Americans might be looking for a president whose protection they can huddle under when Obama opened an eye. And as he resumed the conversation, the frustration of months of pedaling hard and getting nowhere began to show. He wanted to know what kind of experience Clinton supposedly had that he didn’t, and what kind of crisis she was supposedly better suited to than he, and why “toughness” had become a stand-in for experience, and how Clinton could get credit for it when she failed to stand up to Bush on the Iraq vote. We batted all this around. Finally he said, “Ask Nye why Hillary’s paint-by-the-numbers foreign policy makes her more qualified to handle a crisis when for most of our history our crises have come from using force when we shouldn’t, not by failing to use force.” I promised that I would.

And I did. Nye is writing a book about leadership, and he said he had learned that at moments of crisis a leader’s key attribute was the “tacit knowledge,” usually acquired from prior experience, that allows him (or her) to “shape the crisis by asking the right questions.” I said that Obama wanted to know how Clinton had acquired this experience. “By osmosis of going through this,” Nye said, though he conceded that he wasn’t sure tacit knowledge could in fact be acquired osmotically. And he added that he had great respect for Obama. “It is,” he said, “a 51-49 type of distinction.”

Obama concedes that he has a problem. “We have not fully made our case yet,” he admits. “I think the American people know in their gut that we need significant change, and I think they’d like to believe what I’m saying is possible.” But they need, says this former law-school professor, “a permission structure.” They need to know that they’ll be safe with Barack Obama. Or unsafe with Hillary Clinton.

Two months before the presidential primaries begin, it still looks like a hard sell.

James Traub, a contributing writer, is working on a book about democracy promotion. His last feature for the magazine was a profile of Al Gore.