

Tribune endorsement: Barack Obama For President

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However this election turns out, it will dramatically advance America's slow progress toward equality and inclusion. It took Abraham Lincoln's extraordinary courage in the Civil War to get us here. It took an epic battle to secure women the right to vote. It took the perseverance of the civil rights movement. Now we have an election in which we will choose the first African-American president . . . or the first female vice president.

In recent weeks it has been easy to lose sight of this history in the making. Americans are focused on the greatest threat to the world economic system in 80 years. They feel a personal vulnerability the likes of which they haven't experienced since Sept. 11, 2001. It's a different kind of vulnerability. Unlike Sept. 11, the economic threat hasn't forged a common bond in this nation. It has fed anger, fear and mistrust.

On Nov. 4 we're going to elect a president to lead us through a perilous time and restore in us a common sense of national purpose.

The strongest candidate to do that is Sen. Barack Obama. The Tribune is proud to endorse him today for president of the United States.

On Dec. 6, 2006, this page encouraged Obama to join the presidential campaign. We wrote that he would celebrate our common values instead of exaggerate our differences. We said he would raise the tone of the campaign. We said his intellectual depth would sharpen the policy debate. In the ensuing 22 months he has done just that.

Many Americans say they're uneasy about Obama. He's pretty new to them.

We can provide some assurance. We have known Obama since he entered politics a dozen years ago. We have watched him, worked with him, argued with him as he rose from an effective state senator to an inspiring U.S. senator to the Democratic Party's nominee for president.

We have tremendous confidence in his intellectual rigor, his moral compass and his ability to make sound, thoughtful, careful decisions. He is ready.

The change that Obama talks about so much is not simply a change in this policy or that one. It is not fundamentally about lobbyists or Washington insiders. Obama envisions a change in the way we deal with one another in politics and government. His opponents may say this is empty, abstract rhetoric. In fact, it is hard to imagine how we are going to deal with the grave domestic and foreign crises we face without an end to the savagery and a return to civility in politics.

This endorsement makes some history for the Chicago Tribune. This is the first time the newspaper has endorsed the Democratic Party's nominee for president.

The Tribune in its earliest days took up the abolition of slavery and linked itself to a powerful force for that cause--the Republican Party. The Tribune's first great leader, Joseph Medill, was a founder of the GOP. The editorial page has been a proponent of conservative principles. It believes that government has to serve people honestly and efficiently.

With that in mind, in 1872 we endorsed Horace Greeley, who ran as an independent against the corrupt administration of Republican President Ulysses S. Grant. (Greeley was later endorsed by the Democrats.) In 1912 we endorsed Theodore Roosevelt, who ran as the Progressive Party candidate against Republican President William Howard Taft.

The Tribune's decisions then were driven by outrage at inept and corrupt business and political leaders.

We see parallels today.

The Republican Party, the party of limited government, has lost its way. The government ran a \$237 billion surplus in 2000, the year before Bush took office -- and recorded a \$455 billion deficit in 2008. The Republicans lost control of the U.S. House and Senate in 2006 because, as we said at the time, they gave the nation rampant spending and Capitol Hill corruption. They abandoned their principles. They paid the price.

We might have counted on John McCain to correct his party's course. We like McCain. We endorsed him in the Republican primary in Illinois. In part because of his persuasion and resolve, the U.S. stands to win an unconditional victory in Iraq.

It is, though, hard to figure John McCain these days. He argued that President Bush's tax cuts were fiscally irresponsible, but he now supports them. He promises a balanced budget by the end of his first term, but his tax cut plan would add an estimated \$4.2 trillion in debt over 10 years. He has responded to the economic crisis with an angry, populist message and a misguided, \$300 billion proposal to buy up bad mortgages.

McCain failed in his most important executive decision. Give him credit for choosing a female running mate--but he passed up any number of supremely qualified Republican women who could have served. Having called Obama not ready to lead, McCain chose Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin. His campaign has tried to stage-manage Palin's exposure to the public. But it's clear she is not prepared to step in at a moment's notice and serve as president. McCain put his campaign before his country.

Obama chose a more experienced and more thoughtful running mate--he put governing before politicking. Sen. Joe Biden doesn't bring many votes to Obama, but he would help him from day one to lead the country.

McCain calls Obama a typical liberal politician. Granted, it's disappointing that Obama's mix of tax cuts for most people and increases for the wealthy would create an estimated \$2.9 trillion in federal debt. He has made more promises on spending than McCain has. We wish one of these candidates had given good, hard specific information on how he would bring the federal budget into line. Neither one has.

We do, though, think Obama would govern as much more of a pragmatic centrist than many people expect.

We know first-hand that Obama seeks out and listens carefully and respectfully to people who disagree with him. He builds consensus. He was most effective in the Illinois legislature when he worked with Republicans on welfare, ethics and criminal justice reform.

He worked to expand the number of charter schools in Illinois--not popular with some Democratic constituencies.

He took up ethics reform in the U.S. Senate--not popular with Washington politicians.

His economic policy team is peppered with advisers who support free trade. He has been called a "University of Chicago Democrat"--a reference to the famed free-market Chicago school of economics, which puts faith in markets.

Obama is deeply grounded in the best aspirations of this country, and we need to return to those aspirations. He has had the character and the will to achieve great things despite the obstacles that he faced as an unprivileged black man in the U.S.

He has risen with his honor, grace and civility intact. He has the intelligence to understand the grave economic and national security risks that face us, to listen to good advice and make careful decisions.

When Obama said at the 2004 Democratic Convention that we weren't a nation of red states and blue states, he spoke of union the way Abraham Lincoln did.

It may have seemed audacious for Obama to start his campaign in Springfield, invoking Lincoln. We think, given the opportunity to hold this nation's most powerful office, he will prove it wasn't so audacious after all. We are proud to add Barack Obama's name to Lincoln's in the list of people the Tribune has endorsed for president of the United States.

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