



# heroes, presidents, and politics

by jeffrey c. alexander

In 2008, we needed a hero. We still do.

Political narratives are all about heroes, and never was it more plainly evident than in the 2008 presidential contest between Barack Obama and John McCain. Like all candidates, Obama and McCain worked to craft their own heroic narratives, from despair to redemption to, each hoped, glory. And sociologists watched as the American public joined in on this process, seeing their hopes, dreams, and concerns filtered through opinion polls that were used to form the politicians into just the heroes these times called for. Candidates and voters colluded in myth-making in that block-buster election, but how has the victor's heroic reputation served him as he holds office?

For the past two years, as I've been writing a cultural sociology of the 2008 power struggle, I've been watching the hero we elected back then—Barack Obama—as he carried his superhero cape into the White House. That cape's been a heavy burden: sometimes an albatross, sometimes a mantle of greatness. And it's clear that the expectations of a nation change not only the candidates, but the office-holders they become. With the luxury of hindsight and the pressures of a new set of crises, I want to take a look back at the symbolic heroes created in the 2008 election and how the hero we elected to call President has put that personality into action.

### crisis and salvation

According to those who would be president, Americans face a unique moment in our history. Empirically, it doesn't matter all that much which election and when it takes place. A cultural framework is always constructed that declares unprecedented dangers and opportunities, domestic and international troubles that threaten to derail the nation's triumphant mythical history. As "The Dream" lies in tatters, the present moment is precarious and burdened with terrible significance. Desecrated and polluted—not least by the outgoing administration—the nation must be purified. For this, we need a hero; only one man can save the day.

The threatening crisis is not just a matter of survival but

transcendence. A hero will resolve the crisis of the times, refound the nation, and purify our ideals. In 2008, after hard-fought primaries and no lack of commentary, two capes flapped in the wind, and the country had to choose who could save us.

One man, Barack Obama, pointed out that we were in a terrible state, both at home and abroad, and we'd only make everything worse if we continued in the direction we'd been moving under the leadership of George W. Bush. His competitor, John McCain, held that the fundamentals of our economy were good, it was the faltering war against Islamic terrorism that marked the real crisis—and it'd only become worse if we placed

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our trust (indeed, our hope) in some untested Johnny-come-lately. By electing *him*, McCain argued, we'd have a tried-and-true maverick and military hero at the helm.

It's important to realize that, in the course of campaigns, narratives don't just exist, they're *created*. This process involves a lot of give and take, with candidates framing the story in terms of the problems they see as most pressing; getting feedback from the public, polls, commentators, and trusted advisors; and

adjusting their personae to fit. To win an election, candidates need to know about more than the big problems of the day, they must discern what the public's looking for in a savior and how to step into that role as if it's a natural fit.

Max Weber's theory of charisma was prescient about such political challenge. Positioned against the traditional authority

## If McCain was a military hero, Obama was the thinking man's hero.

of kings and aristocrats and the rational authority of judges, charismatic authority draws its legitimacy from the "devotion to exceptional sanctity, heroism, and the exemplary character of an individual person, and the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him." A charismatic leader "seizes the task for which he is destined and demands that others obey and follow him by virtue of his mission." This form of authority, however, is dangerously unstable, for "if those to whom he feels sent do not recognize him, his claim collapses."



Image courtesy Angel A. Acevedo via DeviantArt.com

In a piece described as a tribute to both the artist (Shepard Fairey) who created the iconic Obama "Hope" posters and to John McCain, artist Angel A. Acevedo created his own "Hero" poster.

### mccain's arc of heroic faith

John McCain's heroism had been consecrated well before he put himself forward as a candidate for President (his first run was in 2000). For many Americans, he embodied a story of sacrifice and redemption. In 1966 and 1967, he'd been a Navy fighter pilot, flying dangerous missions over Hanoi. At that time, Hanoi was much more than the capital of North Vietnam; for patriots on the home front, it was the symbolic heart of anti-democratic darkness. So, when McCain's plane was shot down and he was taken hostage in 1967, it wasn't just the dashing pilot that was endangered but democracy itself.

McCain would spend five and a half years imprisoned in North Vietnam. Though he still hobbled on crutches, McCain returned home, resplendent in a gleaming white naval uniform. He was greeted by triumphant headlines, a weary but grateful nation, and a celebration at the White House.

Maybe it was the warm welcome in Washington or just a renewed sense of a duty to his country, but McCain stayed on in D.C., learning politics from the inside as a naval liaison to Congress. From there, he moved to Arizona, where he parlayed his national reputation as a war hero into a series of successful political campaigns. With his eyes on the ultimate honor, McCain prepared for his 1999 run for the Republican presidential nomination by recounting his life in an autobiography titled *Faith of My Fathers*. The book made it clear: from birth, McCain had been destined for great things. His time in Hanoi had only reinforced and made plain his heroism.

### obama's arc of heroic dreams

If John McCain was a military hero, through and through, Barack Obama was the thinking man's hero whose own life story traced the proverbial American Dream. He spoke to the need to harness opportunity and to the hard work of chasing dreams; perhaps, then, it's no surprise that, rather than McCain's *Faith*, Obama's memoir would be titled *Dreams from My Father*.

In 1967, when John McCain was taken prisoner, Barack Obama was only six years old. His life would trace an arc that many Americans would come to recognize (and even revere): here was a keenly intelligent, multiracial young man with an impressive resumé from elite institutions, the "real people" street cred that could only come from hard work in hard neighborhoods, and a beautiful and accomplished family, to boot.

Standing before voters in 2008, Obama could claim only eleven years of political experience, but he'd had a lifetime of public service and direct knowledge of global issues and local crises. He spoke with a sureness and intellectual fervor, and, though they shared an Ivy League background, he seemed to be everything that the outgoing president was not. In what may be an apocryphal story, George W. Bush had once said that he knew he had to run for president when he saw Al Gore speak-

ing—he could not, he said, stand to see pointy-headed nerds like Gore take over the White House, the *people's* house. One can only imagine what he thought of Obama's lofty rhetoric.

Not incidentally, Obama's very face showed the radical break his election would be with the past. He's black. In a country not quite 150 years past slavery and just 40 years past the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., hope wasn't just the message, it was the visage. If voters wondered (and some surely hoped it might) whether electing John McCain would just be giving Bush four more years, they *knew* that electing Barack Obama would not.

Of course, we all know the end of this story. Barack Obama wins, Chicago's Grant Park erupts, millions celebrate. Obama tells the country, "This is our moment, this is our time... to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that... while we breathe, we hope. And where we are met with cynicism and doubt and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: yes, we can." Our anointed hero is an optimist in a dark time; he's smart as a whip and undaunted by the daunting world that awaits him.

### apotheosis—yes, we can!

The foundational myth at the center of American democracy is that "the best man won." After a campaign filled with conflict and division, voting restores to the civil sphere a respite of solidarity, and the inauguration—an apotheosis, of sorts—seems more like a ritual cleansing than a legal ceremony. Henceforth and forever more, Barack Hussein Obama isn't a kid from Hawaii or a law professor or a community organizer (that once denigrated term!) or even an Illinois politician, he's the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

For some weeks after this peaceful, and often joyful, transfer of power, Obama's heroic mug is consecrated everywhere, and everyone eagerly awaits just what it is he'll do to show us how you "put your hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day." But it doesn't take long for any president to see that he has taken a loan, and he must pay it back with speech, action, and, most of all, works. His legislation can be blocked, his government paralyzed. The newly elected president must



Photo by J.L. McVey via Creative Commons

demonstrate not only integrity and competence, but heroic might. Now we see: the president is a tightrope walker, and there's no safety net.

### a year later

Weber warned not only that charisma could fail to ignite, but that even after ignition it would eventually become profane. In November 2009, a *New York Times* headline reads, "A Year Later, A Daily Grind: The Glow of Obama's Election Has Long Faded." It seems that the once-sacred has become mundane, and as his presidential anniversary rolls around, Obama's spoken about in tones more elegiac than exalted. It's been a big year of bank bailouts, a war of attrition on healthcare, and, oh yeah, ongoing wars and casualties. The Tea Party's first rumblings are coming to the fore, and shouts of "Yes, we can!" are being drowned out by cries of "Socialism!" Right-wing extremism is mushrooming at the grassroots.

Even a debilitating setback can become the middle of the hero's story—a new mountain for the gutsy and determined protagonist to climb.

"In the White House, the wistfulness for the simpler days is palpable," writes the *Times*. Barack Obama's hero status is gravely threatened. Candidate Obama had promised to transform the economy, but President Obama seems unable to do so. Candidate Obama promised to transform the international climate, to ease tensions, and to reduce military involvement,



but President Obama has been rebuffed by Iran and stepped up the war in Afghanistan, even as he works to draw down troops in Iraq. Candidate Obama promised to transform the climate of domestic life, reduce partisanship, renew trust and solidarity, and create a more civil political sphere. But President Obama is navigating a labyrinth of ever-hardening partisan walls, and he can't find a Republican vote to save his life.

At the center of this perfect political storm is Obama's 2009 effort to reform healthcare. For the progressives who fought so hard to elect Obama, America's failure to provide healthcare to tens of millions of its citizens glaringly contradicts the idea of social solidarity, the promise that every person should be treated justly. While presidents since Teddy Roosevelt have sought universal healthcare (and even troubled countries like Rwanda provide it), they've all failed. In opposition, conservatives raise the specter of the redistribution of wealth, of

socialism, and of the "death panels" that some say "Obamacare" will appoint to decide, well, who will live and who will die. A project of social rights, which aims to deepen collective solidarity, runs into a project of civil rights, which aims to protect individual liberty.

After 2009's very hot August recess, punctuated by raucous Town Hall meetings, protests, and no end of talk show debates, Congress reconvenes. House Democrats pass a healthcare bill in early November, but the White House wants bipartisanship and asks the Senate's leaders to reach out to moderate Republicans. One presidential deadline after another slips by. Finally, in a Christmas Eve vote that falls on straight party lines, legislation gets through the Senate. It's now time for the protracted struggle to reconcile the House and Senate's bills.

The chance that this would happen anytime soon, or perhaps ever, is put into question just three weeks later when,

seemingly without warning, Massachusetts elects Republican Scott Brown to fill Ted Kennedy's vacant Senate seat. The narrative arc of Obama's presidency is gravely threatened. "Understand what's at stake here," Obama declared to a local audience the night before Brown's election: "It's whether we're going forward or backward." The *Times* announces the White House has been "humiliated" and the Democratic agenda "derailed."

While the Obama character faces a deep crisis, defeat by itself cannot unmake a hero. Even a debilitating setback can become the middle of the hero's story, rather than the end—a new mountain for the gutsy and determined protagonist to climb. Of course, that requires not only that new temporal markers be established but that the hero climb his way back. Obama now launches a heart-stopping run for all-or-nothing success. The *Times* reports that he has begun the "process of trying to turn around his presidency in a drastically altered political environment" and "it will test his leadership, his instincts, and his political dexterity as never before."

The President quickly points out that he has nothing against Republicans, he's sure they're good Americans like everyone else. But they're willing, he says, to let insurance companies

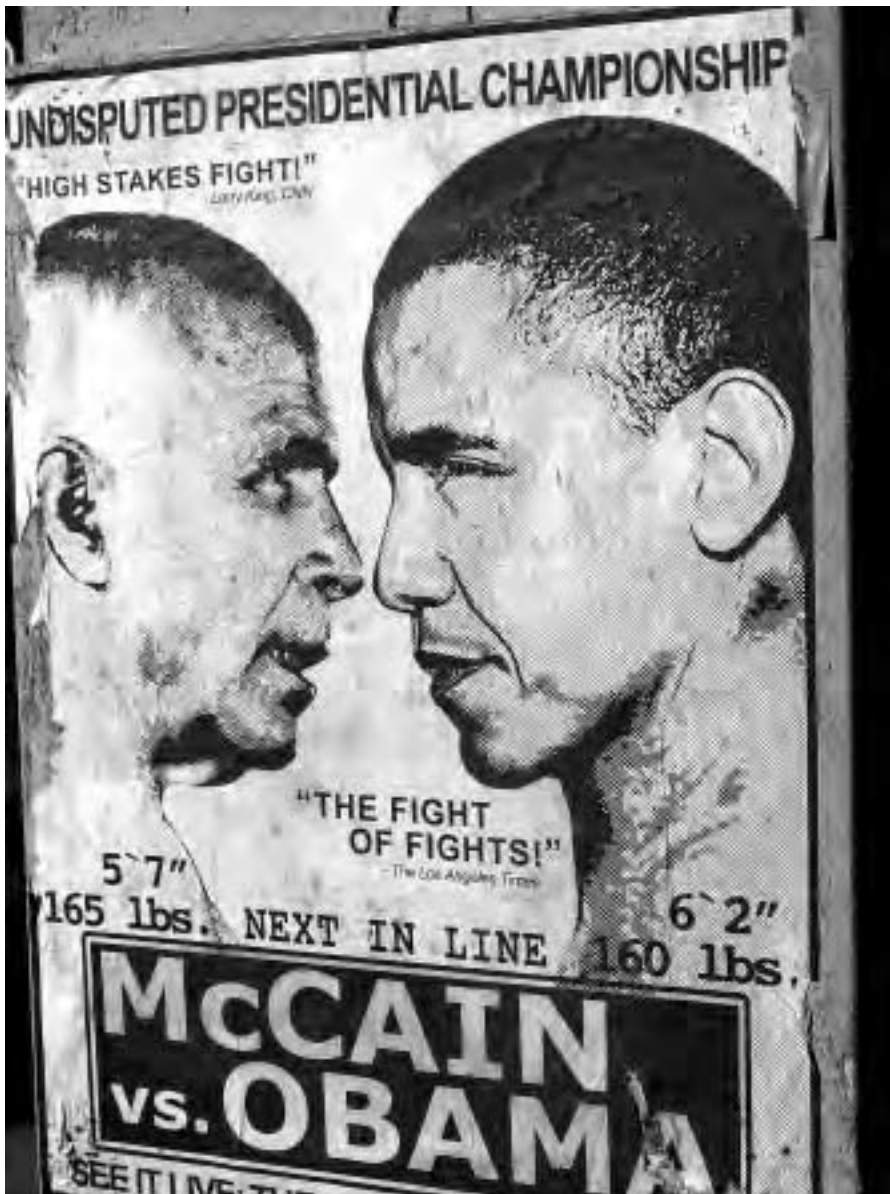


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run roughshod over the people. It's for reasons of justice, not party politics, that he struggles against the other party; he'll fight if he must. In this new and more combative script, our hero draws lines, makes enemies, wages war. Republican Senator Olympia Snowe writes wistfully that many "may wonder, 'What happened to the post-partisan era?'" But if Republicans are wistful, Obama seems sure-footed. Polls show that Americans are increasingly identifying as "intense" reform supporters, with Democratic "strong supporters" of healthcare reform rising from 30 to 52 percent.

On March 21, 2010, Congress passes landmark healthcare reform. *Time* magazine trumpets "an epic victory" and liberal columnist Paul Krugman calls it "a victory for America's soul." Now a *New York Times* headline asks, "Could Obama Be Invincible?"

Politics, as it turns out, is alchemy. It can transform the sacred into the profane, then make it sacred all over again.

### and then...

And that might have been where this story ended: streamers and confetti and the revival of hope. Sure, there were more struggles to come—we hadn't solved education or childhood obesity, closed down Gitmo, saved the environment, or brought about peace in the Middle East—but that sense of hope, that can-do spirit was on the rise again. And if we fixed it all, what would the next election be about?

But politics is not fiction, it's real, social life. On April 20, 2010, with only a few weeks for Obama to have rested on his healthcare laurels, a drilling rig called the Deepwater Horizon explodes in the Gulf of Mexico. Whatever the White House's version of the Bat Signal might be goes off, and the President springs into action. Or does he? From the first, our hero seems challenged. Republicans proclaim the Gulf crisis "Obama's Katrina." The left fumes that, like Achilles, Obama is hanging back, sulking in his tent. Why doesn't he punch a BP exec in the face? "The man who walked on water," columnist Maureen Dowd observes, "is now ensnared by a crisis under water."

Has our hero finally fallen? On day 55 of the worst oil spill in American history, as he teeters on the edge of a symbolic precipice, Obama speaks to the American people in prime time from the Oval Office. Critical but not blistering, the address is filled with professions of faith in God and the future of the American people. It sensibly calls the nation to a new mission of post-oil prosperity and clean energy, but its rhetoric has no bite. The next day, in a follow-up drama the *Times* characterizes, in a decidedly ambiguous manner, as "raw arm-twisting," the president faces down BP's board chairman, forcing him to hand over \$20 billion for a compensation fund to be independently administered on behalf of the nation.

As I write, looking forward to the mid-term elections, the oil spill has gone from crisis to cleanup, but the damage to the

cultural construction of Obama's presidency will take longer to repair. "Barack Obama performed the role of president badly," observes the liberal British *Guardian*: "He failed to reflect back to the American people the frustration they felt. Here was no Reagan or Clinton—past masters of the performance arts—but a somewhat too stoical or deliberative figure who needed prompting in how to articulate the national mood of frustration and rage." And we're not even talking about unemployment yet.

## Politics is alchemy. It can transform the sacred into the profane, then make it sacred all over again.

Every presidential term seems to be an action movie unto itself, with one cliffhanger after another. Obama plays a Gary Cooper kind of character. He's calm and cool under pressure, he likes to lay back and wait. According to the White House story, he rides to the rescue (at the last minute). But for other story tellers, Obama's efforts are often too little and too late. Only history will decide his heroic fate.

### recommended readings

Jeffrey C. Alexander, *The Civil Sphere* (Oxford University Press, 2006). A sociological theory of democracy that makes the performance of moral values and public symbols central.

Bernhard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma* (Paradigm Publishers, 2004). Discusses the role of heroic narratives in the cultural construction of progress and tragedy.

Barry Schwartz. *George Washington: The Making of an American Symbol* (Free Press, 1987). A sociological analysis of military and civil heroism centered on symbolizations of the first "great" American.

Edward A. Shils. "Charisma, Order, and Status," *American Sociological Review* (1965) 30:199-213. Rethinks Weber's charisma theory in terms of the "late" Durkheimian model of sacralization.

Philip Smith. "Culture and Charisma: Outline of a Theory," *Acta Sociologica* (2000) 43(2):101-111. A contemporary reconstruction of charisma theory in terms of cultural sociology.

Max Weber. "The Sociology of Charismatic Authority," in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber* (Oxford University Press, 1946). The classical writing on charismatic authority.

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