

June 17, 2007 Sunday 9:33 AM GMT

The Unknown: Is Obama Ready?

BYLINE: By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

SECTION: POLITICAL NEWS

LENGTH: 1343 words

DATELINE: SPRINGFIELD III.

Ask those who served with him in the Illinois Senate whether Barack Obama is ready to be president, and they will tell you he is a dogged consensus-builder known for his empathy, intellect and unbounded ambition.

They will call him cautious and calculating, a disciple of shady patrons, a liberal lawmaker and conservative poker player.

But they will not quite say he is ready for the presidency.

"Well, it's a big leap from here to there," said Democratic state Sen. Donne Trotter, standing just outside the Senate chamber where Obama served for eight years. "I couldn't say he wouldn't be up to the task."

Spend some time roaming the stone-slab floors of the Illinois Capitol and you will find many admirers of Obama both Republicans and Democrats as well as a nagging uncertainty about whether a man less than three years removed from this sleepy capital is ready for the White House.

More important, you will find clues to the type of president he might be. Along with the praise, there is reason for pause.

The dynamic in Springfield today is a lot like it was in Little Rock, Ark., 15 years ago, when state Capitol regulars favored visitors with stories about a charismatic young Democrat bursting with potential yet dogged by questions about the depth of his experience and principle.

Nobody knew whether Bill Clinton was ready for the presidency. But his life and record in Arkansas were fair predictors of the kind of president he would become.

A major difference between Obama and Clinton is that the latter had been a long-serving governor who left a major imprint on his state. Obama was not in Springfield long enough to leave much of a mark. But he did make an impression.

"Obama has a great intellect and the leadership characteristics of our great American presidents," said state Sen. Kirk Dillard, a Republican who befriended Obama in Springfield. "But the unknown is the administrative and foreign policy experience."

While Dillard expects to support the GOP presidential nominee, "I would not lose a night's sleep worrying about my young children's future if Senator Obama were my president because I know he would probably surround himself, like Ronald Reagan, with exceptionally experienced people."

One thing evident from his days in Springfield is that Obama knows how to surround himself with powerful mentors. These friendships do not always reflect well on him.

One of his earliest patrons, Chicago businessman Antoin "Tony" Rezko, contributed thousands of dollars and raised thousands more as Obama ran for the Illinois Legislature, the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate. He was even involved in the purchase of land that Obama and his family now live on.

But now Rezko faces federal charges as the central figure in an Illinois corruption scandal.

Another Obama mentor, state Senate President Emil Jones, serves under an ethical cloud. He has several family members on the state payroll and uses his clout to aid their business interests. In an interview, the power broker recalled a conversation with Obama shortly after Jones seized control of the Senate.

Obama: "You have a lot of power."

Jones: "What kind of power do you think I have?"

Obama: "To elect a U.S. senator."

Jones: "Do you know anybody I could make a U.S. senator?"

Obama: "Me."

Trotter laughs at the memory of Obama elbowing his way ever upward. "Very ambitious and confident, that young man," he said. "You could never say he had a self-esteem problem."

Obama never lacked friends, either.

His wide circle of relationships in Springfield reflected a lifelong habit of straddling different worlds. He is the son of a man from Kenya and a woman from Kansas. His childhood was spent in Hawaii and Indonesia, his young adulthood as a Harvard-trained lawyer and street-wise community organizer in Chicago.

Closest to him in Springfield were a trio of white lawmakers from rural and suburban districts whose background and personalities could not have been more different from his. They will tell you Obama had a Clinton-like ability to see things through others' eyes, a natural empathy that helped him reach across party lines and forge hard compromises on the death penalty, racial profiling and ethics legislation.

But there is a fine line between pragmatism and pandering, and Obama walked its jagged edge.

"Sometimes, in order to maintain your position with your constituency you have to vote in a different way than your own mind will tell you," said retired state Sen. Denny Jacobs, one of the close pals. Jacobs was explaining why he believes Obama cast votes that were more liberal than he actually was. It was an unusually frank analysis of how politicians even one such as Obama who claims he is above politics often trim their views to appease constituents.

"You're always a little tainted," Jacobs said, "and I think he comes from a district that is a little different than he actually believed."

Obama could be as calculating as they come. He promoted himself as a defender of abortion rights, but he encouraged fellow Democrats to vote "present" on abortion bills. Friends say the strategy was designed to protect lawmakers, including Obama, with designs on higher offices.

Still, he once voted against requiring medical care for aborted fetuses who survive.

Obama proposed a constitutional amendment to mandate universal health care. It lacked detail and he settled for a task force to study the issue.

Sen. Kimberly Lightford, who entered the state Senate shortly after Obama, recalls walking into Obama's law office and asking for advice after winning her Democratic primary. "I'm, like, very naive and think I can fix the world come here and change things overnight," she said. Obama curbed her enthusiasm.

He urged caution, telling her, "Once you get there you might realize it's a bigger picture and you might want to look at one topic and do what you can." On her way out the door, Obama surprised Lightfoot by pulling out his checkbook and writing a \$500 check to her campaign.

"This guy is cool. He's gorgeous. And he's giving me money!" she recalls with a laugh. "He's my new big brother."

Obama's cautious, close-to-the-vest style is reflected in the way he plays poker, according to those who joined him in a regular game with lawmakers and lobbyists. Obama was fiercely competitive, refusing to admit when he finished a night with less money than he started.

"He wouldn't throw money in the pot just to play out a hand," said Democratic state Sen. Terry Link. "He had to know he had a darn good chance of winning."

While he was never a Senate leader, Obama did lead. He helped pass ethics laws in a scandal-plagued state and won tax credits for the working poor. On racial profiling and the death penalty, he negotiated with Republicans and police chiefs on bills that chipped away at both institutions.

Though these were small steps rather than grand reforms, Obama impressed Republicans and Democrats alike with hard work and a soft touch.

Laimutis Nargelenas, a lobbyist with the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police, said Obama broke a logjam over racial profiling legislation when he volunteered to make his case personally to the chiefs.

Nargelenas is used to Democrats drawing a line in the sand and declaring war. Not Obama. "The thing we noticed about Obama is he's a willing listener," Nargelenas said.

When Democrats took over the Senate, Obama still did not throw his weight around. "While I'm in a position that I can run this bill through, I don't want to do that," he told Nargelenas. They compromised on a bill that, rather than end racial profiling, commissioned a study and required police to record the race of people they stop.

At one point, Obama and Nargelenas were debating how reliable it is to have police determining somebody's race. "So," said a skeptical Obama, "what race am I?"

Nargelenas, a rock-ribbed Republican, can see himself voting for Obama in 2008.

"I think he's ready to move up," Nargelenas said. He paused for a moment, then copped to some doubt. "It is a big leap."

Associated Press writer Sharon Cohen in Chicago contributed to this report.

LOAD-DATE: June 18, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newswire

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