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'Celebrity' dig reflects US culture, history

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When John McCain decided to cast Barack Obama as a feckless upstart, an empty suit, he reached for the dirtiest word he could use: "celebrity."

"He's the biggest celebrity in the world," a female narrator warns in breathless tones for a McCain ad, "but is he ready to lead?" Chants of "O-bama! O-bama!" form a mischievous backtrack to fleeting images of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton one a troubled singer and the other a socialite who is famous for, well, being famous.

What McCain and his image-makers don't bother to tell us is that all serious presidential candidates are celebrities. In fact, some of our greatest presidents have benefited politically from our celebrity culture and many shape the ubiquity of it all. Presidents and presidential candidates are not merely well-known, which in itself is enough to make them celebrities; their families, their health histories, their habits and hobbies and once-closeted skeletons are as open to the public as the pages of People magazine.

Oh, and there's this other small point McCain left out: Last month, he created his own celebrity.

Ten days ago, few people in the lower 48 could have named Alaska's governor, much less tell you that Sarah Palin is a mother of five a moose-hunting, corruption-busting "hockey mom" with a pregnant teenage daughter, a son headed to Iraq and a raft of Internet rumors about her personal and professional life. The image has overwhelmed the reality of her relatively thin resume she's nearly three years younger than Obama and barely into her first term as governor.

We think we know Palin. After all, that's her face on the covers of People ("Sarah Palin's Family Drama") and Us Weekly ("Babies, Lies & Scandal"), where we read about her affinity for BlackBerry's and breast pumps. Though not all the news is good for celebrities, it rarely is the fact and fiction of Palin's freshly carved image help her, and perhaps McCain, connect with Americans.

Many voters see a bit of themselves in Palin even while she stands above the populace the classic celebrity duality of fame and attainability that has always accounted for the allure of stars in American culture. Why else would celebrity magazines spend millions of dollars for photos of stars acting "just like us" fetching coffee, toting groceries, playing with their kids in the park?

While the culture of celebrity dates to the early 19th century in politics, the Hollywood ethic is everywhere today. It extends to athletic fields, board rooms and even church pulpits, where evangelists like Rick Warren preach to 20,000 people every week and write mega-selling books.

"People want to find candidates appealing and find some qualities where they're like me or they're better than me," says Victoria Ott, a historian at Birmingham-Southern College in Alabama who studies the pre-Civil War era.

She points to Andrew Jackson, the self-styled populist who called himself "Old Hickory" and touted his war record. His allies cast rival John Quincy Adams as an elitist with the slogan, "Vote for Andrew Jackson, who can fight. Not for John Quincy Adams, who can write."

Nearly 180 years later, the celebrity machine is churning out the same pabulum, albeit electronically and instantaneously. Now it's Vietnam POW John McCain who can fight and best-selling author Barack Obama who can write.

Abraham Lincoln edited his speeches before sending them off to newspapers, and his image-makers marched into a convention hall with two fence rails placarded, "Abraham Lincoln, The Rail Candidate for President in 1860." A celebrity was born, later to be deified upon his assassination and now celebrated daily at the Disney-influenced Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum in Springfield, Ill.

In the 19th century, three developments fueled the celebrification of politics: a new form of communications (the telegraph), the proliferation of a largely partisan and affordable medium (newspapers) and the democratization of the electoral process that gave more people the vote. The same dynamics are driving the culture of celebrity today, though with different platforms: the Internet, blogs and Obama's drive to swell voter registration rolls with young voters.

Teddy Roosevelt, the rugged outdoorsman. John F. Kennedy, the dashing war hero. Ronald Reagan, the morning-in-America optimist. No less than Kennedy's "Rat Pack," these presidents were celebrities.

"What we're looking for in any celebrity is the marvel of discovery," says Jim Broussard, a historian at Lebanon Valley College in Annville, Pa. "A movie star is a celebrity because we see them in movies and we think they're great. I want to be him or like him. Obama's celebrity comes from the fact that a lot of people are hungry for something and all of a sudden they find it and say, 'This is terrific.'"

What are people hungry for? Fame, power, money, attention, status those you can experience vicariously through the pages of People. But if the civic side of the American culture is hungry for change, then Obama and Palin though polar opposites in their politics are the equivalent of the Hollywood starlet who's discovered at a diner: an overnight sensation.

"We're thirsty," Broussard says, "and along comes the water."

What Michael Jordan is to sports, Rick Warren is to religion, Steve Jobs is to business and Madonna is to music that's what McCain, Palin, Obama and Democratic running mate Joe Biden are to politics. Created and marketed as brands, sometimes long after they're effective (Michael Jordan is retired) or dead (Elvis has left the building, but he still sells), political figures are worshipped and consumed, even when they don't deserve the adulation or when the celebrification overwhelms real issues like the war in Iraq and the economy.

McCain's chief adviser, Rick Davis, might have been right when he said this election is not about issues. It certainly won't be about issues alone. "This election is about a composite view of what people take away from these candidates," he said.

In fact, Americans pick a president the way they select a car. Sure, some of us know our way around an engine and read the consumer reports but at the end of the day, you don't buy a car without a test drive without knowing how it feels and knowing what how it makes you feel

about yourself. It's the same with politicians. The campaign is a test drive, and we want a gut check.

Presidents and presidential candidates are celebrities, imperfect models of what we are and what we want to become. "A celebrity is known for being known," Broussard says, "and known for being a bit like us and a bit better than us." And only then, if they're both, will we actually buy the car.

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier covers politics for The Associated Press. Comments about Measure of a Nation can be sent to [measure\(at\)ap.org](mailto:measure@ap.org).

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