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ANALYSIS: OBAMA'S PICK HIGHLIGHTS HIS WEAKNESSES

BYLINE: By RON FOURNIER, Associated Press Writer

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The candidate of change went with the status quo.

In picking Sen. Joe Biden to be his running mate, Barack Obama sought to shore up his weakness inexperience in office and on foreign policy rather than underscore his strength as a new-generation candidate defying political conventions.

"I searched for a leader who is ready to step in and be president," said Obama, a transformational political figure who nonetheless faces criticism about whether he has enough experience to be president.

He picked a 35-year veteran of the Senate the ultimate insider rather than a candidate from outside Washington, such as Govs. Tim Kaine of Virginia or Kathleen Sebelius of Kansas; or from outside his party, such as Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska; or from outside the mostly white male club of vice presidential candidates. Hillary Rodham Clinton didn't even make his short list.

The picks say something profound about Obama: For all his self-confidence, the 47-year-old Illinois senator worried that he couldn't beat Republican John McCain without help from a seasoned politician willing to attack. The Biden selection is the next logistical step in an Obama campaign that has become more negative a strategic decision that may be necessary but threatens to run counter to his image.

Democratic strategists, fretting over polls that showed McCain erasing Obama's lead this summer, welcomed the move. They, too, worried that Obama needed a more conventional read: tougher approach to McCain.

"You've got to hand it to the candidate and the campaign. They have a great sense of timing and tone and appropriateness. Six months ago, people said he wasn't tough enough on Hillary Clinton he was being too passive but he got it right at the right time," said Democratic strategist Jim Jordan. "He'll get it right again."

Indeed, Obama has begun to aggressively counter McCain's criticism with negative television ads and retorts from the campaign trail. And Biden didn't waste a moment to point out that McCain is wealthy enough to forget how many houses he owns, a reminder of comments McCain made recently when asked about the property he and his wife own.

"He'll have to figure out which of the seven kitchen tables to sit at," Biden said Saturday, adding that he and Obama better understand the worrisome issues that Americans discuss around their kitchen tables.

A senior Obama adviser, speaking on condition of anonymity, said his boss has expressed impatience with what he calls a "reverence" inside his campaign for his message of change and new politics. In other words, Obama is willing even eager to risk what got him this far if it gets him to the White House.

Biden brings a lot to the table. An expert on national security, the Delaware senator voted in 2002 to authorize military intervention in Iraq but has since become a vocal critic of the conflict. He won praise for a plan for peace in Iraq that would divide the country along ethnic lines.

Chief sponsor of a sweeping anti-crime bill that passed in 1994, Biden could help inoculate Obama from Republican criticism that he's soft on crime a charge his campaign fears will drive a wedge between white voters and the first black candidate with a serious shot at the White House.

Introducing his running mate in Springfield, Illinois, Obama said his new partner is "what many others pretend to be a statesman with sound judgment who doesn't have to hide behind bluster to keep America strong."

Biden is indeed a serious, smart politician who will keep McCain and his soon-to-be running mate on their toes. More importantly, he has the credentials to help Obama lead the nation should the Democrats win in November.

"He has brought change to Washington," Obama said, "but Washington hasn't changed him."

So the question is whether Biden's depth counters Obama's inexperience or highlights it?

After all, Biden is anything but a change agent, having been in office longer than half of all Americans have been alive. Longer than McCain.

And he talks too much.

On the same day he announced his second bid for the presidency, Biden found himself explaining why he had described Obama as "clean."

And there's the 2007 ABC interview in which Biden said he would stand by an earlier statement that Obama was not ready to serve as president.

It seems Obama is worried that some voters are starting to agree.

EDITOR'S NOTE Ron Fournier has covered national politics for The Associated Press for nearly 20 years.

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