

# Obama an uncommon candidate

It's not exactly like answering the phone at 3 a.m. to handle a national security crisis, but Sen. Barack Obama's handling of two incendiary political controversies in the last week has shown he is calm and confident under pressure.

On Friday, Obama sat down with the *Tribune* and *Sun-Times* and said, in effect, "ask me anything you want about my dealings with Tony Rezko," the politically connected developer who is now on trial on corruption charges. No shortcuts. No unanswered questions. He answered, patiently and in detail. We can't recall a similar discussion with any political figure.

Obama took a risk. He's now on the record in minute detail about every aspect of his relationship with Rezko. Every possible inconsistency, every shading, can now be picked apart. But by choosing to be utterly transparent, he established a level of trust.

At that same meeting, and again in an astonishing speech on Tuesday, Obama confronted an issue that carries even greater risk for him: the incendiary remarks of his longtime pastor and spiritual mentor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. By now you've heard some of the things Wright has said.

Obama could have done the customary political thing, denounce the utterings of Wright and move on. Obama did say without equivocation that he "vehemently condemns" Wright's diatribes. He disconnected Wright from his campaign, just as Hillary Clinton disconnected former Rep. Geraldine Ferraro from hers after Ferraro said Obama wouldn't be running for president if he were white.

Damage control. If you're not good at it, you don't survive as a politician.

But Obama got beyond damage control and created

the most remarkable moment in this presidential campaign. He delivered one of the most profound speeches in memory on a subject that creates peril in American politics and society: how we deal with race.

If you saw it, if you read it, you won't forget it. He talked about the anger many black Americans have over centuries of discrimination, "the reality in which Rev. Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up." He talked about the anger harbored by many whites: "So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear an African-American is getting an advantage in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time."

And he said, as he has before: everyone, your anger is understandable, now rise above it. He gambled again. It's hard to imagine any other national candidate who could — or would — deliver that speech.

It has been an unusual few days in the presidential campaign. You might have expected a lull. There were no votes to be counted. It seemed a perfect time, after a pounding run of primaries and caucuses, for each candidate to catch a breath. But if anything the pace and pulse has quickened, putting even more pressure on these candidates.

These events may not benefit Obama's campaign. He surely hasn't heard the last about Tony Rezko and Jeremiah Wright. The speech on race had plenty of critics. But these events remind us that Obama is an uncommon politician, an uncommon leader.

## War's toll on Iraqis forgotten

Five years into the Iraq war, much of America's focus has been on the nearly 4,000 U.S. soldiers who have died, the \$600 billion in tax money spent, and the projected tab of \$3 trillion.

Those figures are a staggering reminder of how much the war has cost us in blood and treasure.

But often lost in our debate and fading news coverage is the toll the U.S. invasion has taken on the Iraqi people.

Granted, life under Saddam Hussein was bleak, but the Iraqi people didn't ask for this war. It was thrust upon them. Then they were left to dodge the bullets or flee.

Thanks to the Bush administration's failure to plan for the aftermath of "shock and awe," much of Iraq has been destroyed, and the lives of those Iraqis still breathing turned upside down.

Iraq's Ministry of Health estimates that 180,000 Iraqis have been killed in the fighting, while one controversial study by researchers at Johns Hopkins University placed the number of deaths at more than 600,000.

Either figure is a travesty.

An estimated two million Iraqis have been displaced inside the country and another two million have fled, mainly to Jordan and Syria. In all, about 14 percent of Iraqis have left their homes since the war began.

Most of the uprooted are children. Many went to live in tent cities that lacked power and water. But as the garbage and sewage piled up, many refugees have escaped the fetid camps.

Even as the daily violence has dropped, the United Nations warned refugees last month not to return to Iraq because of continued safety concerns.

As a result, more and more Iraqis are looking for a viable option. The number of Iraqis seeking asylum doubled to 45,200 last year, compared with 2006.

In fact, more Iraqis are seeking asylum than applicants from any other country, including China. That's saying something, given Iraq's population, at about 27 million, is just a few million more than the State of Texas.

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■ Letters must be kept to a maximum of 250 words. Letters longer than that will not be considered.

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## ARTIST'S VIEW



GUEST EDIT | ERIC MASSA

## Responsible budget or spin?

Last week Congress passed the 2009 Federal Budget. This budget is the change that Americans have demanded ever since George Bush declared his war on working families.

Beltway insiders will attack this proposal, but don't be fooled by their outright lies, half truths, and Washington double talk. When you look at the facts, it's obvious that this budget would not only save lower- and middle-income families thousands of dollars each year, it would restore funding to critical programs which have seen continual cutbacks under Bush such as education, health care, infrastructure, and border security and return your tax dollars to you — not failed Wall Street CEOs.

Let's honestly address where we are as a nation today. During the last eight years of George W. Bush's failed presidency, we have gone from record surpluses to record deficits. As a result of his borrow-and-spend practices and the support of a rubber stamp Congress, every man, woman, and child now has \$30,000 of debt hanging over their heads. This out of control borrowing is directly responsible for the financial

crisis we face today.

What do Randy Kuhl and George Bush want to do about it? Pretend it's not a problem and hope you don't notice it either. It is time for us to reject this failed thinking and start talking about solutions.

Hard decisions have to be made as we continue to spiral into a recession, and the new majority in Congress has developed a sound budget to stop George Bush. Rather than continuing record handouts to multi-millionaires and their Wall Street friends, this budget will give lower- and middle-income Americans the tax relief they deserve. My opponent wants to portray this as a tax hike, and he's right — if you're making \$1 million per year. However, the rest of us will save thousands of dollars.

I think it's time to tell the Wall Street millionaires that they need to pay their fair share rather than placing the burden solely on the rest of us. George Bush has already bailed them out, now it's up to new leadership to save our economy.

We can fully fund our education system and once again make America the land of opportunity. To do so we must stop cutting funds for our schools and

instead make a meaningful investment in our future.

We can provide additional funding for children's health insurance and reject the president's cuts to Medicare and Medicaid, and we can do this without borrowing any more foreign capital. If we can afford to save Bear Sterns, we can afford to take care of our families.

We can start a New Deal transportation project to repair and upgrade our aging highways, bridges, and create thousands of living wage jobs in the process. It's time to invest in America, not Iraq or Communist China as George Bush and Randy Kuhl have done.

We can balance the budget and we can fund our critical programs without raising taxes on middle class America. We can move our country forward and make it a better place for the next generation. But, we must be willing to stand up for our values, not the values of Washington insiders whose only hope is a campaign of smear and fear.

■ Corning resident Eric Massa is a Democrat running for New York's 29th Congressional seat.

## As trade grows, jobs leave U.S.

Nearly 700 good jobs will disappear when Western Union closes its St. Louis call center and other operations this summer. Officials of the union that represents Western Union workers say the company plans to move many of those jobs to Costa Rica, the Philippines, Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

It's an all-too-familiar song: Jobs that average \$19 per hour plus benefits will disappear from St. Louis, only to pop up across borders and overseas paying a fraction of American wages.

"It's about globalization," says Earline Jones, president of Communications Workers of America Local 6377. "They (Western Union) said they ran the numbers, and it's cheaper for them to do business elsewhere. They're outsourcing America, and what will be left? There will be nothing left for our kids."

That cry comes from the heart, a broken one at that, and it's echoing in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., wife of the president who negotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement, is busy distancing herself from it. She and her opponent, Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., are pledging to stem the loss of jobs to overseas competition. That pledge will be diffi-

cult to keep. U.S. trade has risen 700 percent in the past quarter century. Foreign trade — exports and imports combined — now accounts for 28 percent of the American economy. If the United States somehow were to wall off imports, other nations would retaliate against our exports, and we would lose more than we would gain.

Exports are booming at the moment. As the dollar drops, American goods are cheaper abroad, so our overseas sales are up 17 percent this year. That creates jobs at home, one of the bright spots in a dismal economy.

An American worker's view of global free trade depends a lot on where that American works and what kinds of skills he or she has. If he works at a Western Union call center, he hates it. If he works at Boeing, building fighter jets for Korea and Singapore, he's grateful for foreign trade. The average wage in the aircraft manufacturing industry is \$30.50 per hour.

A Western Union operator with a high school diploma can't suddenly become a machinist at Boeing or get a specialized job at a technology company with a lot of export business. The biggest winners tend to be the highly skilled workers, along with executives and shareholders of large corporations with

export businesses or operations abroad. Half of the manufacturing of U.S.-owned companies now occurs overseas, according to the Economic Policy Institute in Washington.

The institute argues that low-wage foreign competition helps depress American paychecks, and that's right. Adjusted for inflation, hourly wages for non-supervisory workers rose only 4 percent from 1973 to 2005. Globalized trade is one of the reasons for the growing income gap dividing the wealthy from the poor and middle class.

The flip side is that foreign trade also holds down the price of goods in this country. That \$15 pair of jeans at the discount store was made by low-wage workers overseas. But that effect may be lessening as the weakened dollar prompts foreign companies to raise their prices.

Foreign competition forces U.S. companies to become more efficient and improve quality. That benefits consumers, but it's hard on workers. The typical American factory today can produce the same amount of goods it did in 1990, but with a little more than half the number of workers. Increased efficiency actually has contributed more to the loss of high paying factory jobs in America than foreign trade has.

## BLOG TALK

Excerpts from blogs this week that appeared on [www.the-leader.com](http://www.the-leader.com) focus on C-PP teachers seeking a new contract, high gas prices and bail revoked for an accused sex offender recently charged with assaulting his estranged wife outside of the Coopers Plains BOCES.

## Teachers contract

**O wrote on Sunday:** "I'm sorry, but it is time for teachers to start paying more into their insurance like everyone else. 75%, wow."

**Billskid blogged on Sunday:** "Remember the teacher's won't be getting a 7% bonus in February each year. Those Corning Inc. bonuses are as much a tax on the rest of the community as an increase in teacher salaries. Those bonuses bid up the price of everything sold in the community. Economics 101."

**Please wrote on Sunday:** "We pay one of the highest school taxes in the country. Most all other employees pay their own insurance and don't normally get a 4% raise each year. We need to do something about this."

**Love those teachers!! blogged on Sunday:** "As a teacher in a neighboring District, Good luck to the Teacher's union in their upcoming negotiations. I believe from everything I have read and heard that Mike G. is an intelligent man. Labor Strife is never a good thing in any school district and takes focus away from educational issues."

## Gas Prices

**We have been here before wrote on Sunday:** "The problem we are now in is no ones fault but our own. Looking back at the 1970's and 1980's no one can say we did not see this day coming. But we Americans did not take notice and kept building and buying large vehicles..."

**I LOVE MY SUV blogged Sunday:** "I rather drive a safe larger vehicle than a small car just to save money on gas-hey a funeral cost a lot more than one gallon of gas..."

**Dazed and Confused wrote on Wednesday:** "The reasons stated in comments for our energy problems are mostly accurate opinions, we can't argue that. But I have not heard any of our elected representatives express any concern or solutions to this problem. It is almost like they aren't even aware of the problem. Like most average Joes, my personal budget is nearly busted with all energy cost increases. What do we do Hillary?"

**Math Boy blogged on Wednesday:** "Dazed and Confused, it's easy what to do... just go out and grab one of those well paying (200,000) jobs Hillary promised for New York. That should be real easy!"

## Bail Revoked

**Yeah wrote on Tuesday:** "Someone finally realized this guy needs to stay off our streets. Now lets keep him off!!!"

**As a victim blogged on Tuesday:** "I am a victim of child abuse of over 50 years ago. I say that the judge who gave this trash bail is at fault. 60 charges of child abuse, rape in other words, why on earth let this predator loose. That man should have been in jail not out on bail. Shame on that judge..."

**No Name Here wrote on Wednesday:** "My heart goes out t Ms. Lindsey the trauma that she has gone through. i hope she recovers fast and well. Hats off to the teachers and SRO at Boces for reacting as they did. Without them, Ms. Lindsey may have ended up dead and the situation may have been a whole lot worse than it was..."