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In Law School, Obama Found Political Voice

By [JODI KANTOR](#)

Editors' Note Appended

CAMBRIDGE, Mass., Jan. 23 — The peers who elected [Barack Obama](#) as the first black president of the [Harvard](#) Law Review say he was a natural leader, an impressive student, a nice guy. But in the 1990 *Revue* — the graduating editors' gleeful parody of their elite publication — they said quite a bit more.

"I was born in Oslo, Norway, the son of a Volvo factory worker and part-time ice fisherman," a mock self-tribute begins. "My mother was a backup singer for Abba. They were good folks." In Chicago, "I discovered I was black, and I have remained so ever since."

After his election, the Faux-bama says, he united warring students into "a happy, cohesive folk," while "empowering all the folks out there in America who didn't know about me by giving a series of articulate and startlingly mature interviews to all the folks in the media."

In his two memoirs and the biographical video on his Web site, Senator Obama's legal education is barely a blip, one of the least known chapters of his life. But for the Illinois Democrat who is all but certainly running for the presidency, Harvard was the place where he first became a political sensation.

He arrived there as an unknown, Afro-wearing community organizer who had spent years searching for his identity; by the time he left, he had his first national news media exposure, a book contract and a shot of confidence from running the most powerful legal journal in the country.

As the ribbing in the *Revue* suggests, Mr. Obama was realizing the power of his own biography. He proved deft at navigating an institution scorched with ideological battles, many of which revolved around race. He developed a leadership style based more on furthering consensus than on imposing his own ideas. Surrounded by students who enjoyed the sound of their own voices, Mr. Obama cast himself as an eager listener, sometimes giving warring classmates the impression that he agreed with all of them at once.

Friends say he did not want anyone to assume they knew his mind — and because of that, even those close to him did not always know exactly where he stood. It is a tendency that could prove perilous on the campaign trail, as voters, rivals and the news media try to fix the positions of a senator with only two years in office.

"He then and now is very hard to pin down," said Kenneth Mack, a classmate and now a professor at the law school, referring to the senator's on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand style.

Charles J. Ogletree Jr., another Harvard law professor and a mentor of Mr. Obama, said, "He can enter your space and organize your thoughts without necessarily revealing his own concerns and conflicts."

Many of his former professors and classmates say they are cheering on Mr. Obama, 45, in his candidacy. But the skills he displayed in law school may not serve him as well in American presidential politics, which sometimes rewards other qualities — like delivering sound bites instead of deliberateness or fidelity to a base of supporters instead of compromise.

The law review is “fairly disconnected from the breadth and the rough and tumble of real politics,” said Bruce Spiva, a former review editor who now practices civil rights law in Washington. “It’s an election among a closed group. It’s more like electing a pope.”

Mr. Obama declined to comment about his time at Harvard. He arrived at the law school in 1988 with a well-inked passport — he had grown up in Hawaii and Indonesia, son of a black Kenyan father and a white American mother — and years of community organizing experience in Chicago, making him, at 27, an elder statesman among the students who had tested and term-papered their way straight there.

Mr. Obama spent much of his time alone, curtailing his dating life after his first summer, when he met his future wife, a Harvard Law graduate named Michelle Robinson who was working in Chicago. He often played pickup basketball, replacing his deliberative off-court style with sharp elbows and aggressive grabs for the ball.

Along with 40-odd classmates, he won a precious spot on the law review at the end of his first year through grades and a writing competition. But the next year, when other students implored him to run for the presidency, he demurred; he wanted to return to community work in Chicago, he said, and the credential would be no help. Late in the process, he finally agreed, saying he might be uniquely able to heal the review’s partisan divisions.

The election was an all-day affair with the ego-crushing drama of a reality TV show. Inside Pound Hall, the editors picked apart the intellectual and social skills of the 19 contenders, eliminating them in batches. At the last moment, the conservative faction, its initial candidates defeated, threw its support to Mr. Obama. “Whatever his politics, we felt he would give us a fair shake,” said Bradford Berenson, a former associate White House counsel in the Bush administration.

The two finalists were invited back into the room. But before the winner could be announced, Mr. Mack, a black student who had rejoined the editors after being eliminated, lunged toward Mr. Obama, so moved by the barrier that had just fallen that he embraced him tightly, tears streaming down both men’s cheeks.

Newspapers and magazines swarmed around the first black student to win the most coveted spot at the most vaunted club at one of America’s most prestigious institutions. In interviews, Mr. Obama was modest and careful. (In a rare slip, he told The Associated Press: “I’m not interested in the suburbs. The suburbs bore me.”) He signed a contract to write a memoir. A prankster posted a cast list for a movie version of his life, starring Blair Underwood. When Mr. Underwood visited the school, he questioned Mr. Obama for material for “L.A. Law.”

“People were always asking me, do young black attorneys really exist like that?” Mr. Underwood said in a recent interview. “I would refer to Barack.”

Winning the job was simpler than doing it. The president had to reject articles by some of the school’s

famous professors and persuade a divided group of editors to stop arguing and start editing.

“I have worked in the Supreme Court and the White House and I never saw politics as bitter as at Harvard Law Review in the early '90s,” Mr. Berenson said. “The law school was populated by a bunch of would-be Daniel Websters harnessed to extreme political ideologies.” They were so ardent that they would boo and hiss one another in class.

Even trickier, Mr. Obama was the most prominent minority student on a campus shaken by racial politics. A group agitating for greater faculty diversity occupied the dean's office and sued the school for discrimination; Derrick Bell, a black law professor, resigned over the issue.

The law review struggled to decide whether affirmative action should factor into the selection of editors, and how much voice to give to critical race theorists, who argued that the legal system was inherently biased against minorities. That drew the ridicule of conservative students.

And it left the new president with a difficult choice. If he failed to use his office to criticize Harvard, Mr. Obama would anger black and liberal students; by speaking out, he would risk dragging himself and the review into the center of shrill debates.

People had a way of hearing what they wanted in Mr. Obama's words. Earlier, after a long, tortured discussion about whether it was better to be called “black” or “African-American,” Mr. Obama dismissed the question, saying semantics did not matter as much as real-life issues, recalled Cassandra Butts, still a close friend. According to Mr. Ogletree, students on each side of the debate thought he was endorsing their side. “Everyone was nodding, Oh, he agrees with me,” he said.

As the president of the review, Mr. Obama once again walked a delicate line. He served on the board of the Black Law Students Association, often speaking passionately about the tempest of the week, but in a way that white classmates say made them feel reassured rather than defensive. He distanced himself from bombast; he did a mischievous impersonation of the Rev. [Jesse Jackson](#) when he came to speak on campus, recalled Franklin Amanat, now a federal prosecutor in Brooklyn. Mr. Obama's boldest moment came at a rally for faculty diversity, where he compared Professor Bell to [Rosa Parks](#).

But mainly, Mr. Obama stayed away from the extremes of campus debate, often choosing safe topics for his speeches. At the black law students' annual conference, he exhorted students to remember the obligations that came with their privileged education. His speeches, delivered in the oratorical manner of a Baptist minister, were more memorable for style than substance, Mr. Mack said.

“It's the inspiration of the speech rather than the specific content,” he said.

Just as he does now that he is a senator, Mr. Obama spoke then about his own biography — initially, Mr. Ogletree said, to correct anyone who assumed he had acquired his position with ease. His message, Mr. Ogletree said, was, “Don't look at my success and assume that I have had a silver spoon in my mouth and gold coins in my hand.”

During the constant arguments about race and merit, everyone could point to Mr. Obama and find justification for their views. He had acknowledged benefiting from affirmative action in the past, so those

who supported it saw him as the happy product of their beliefs.

But those who opposed it saw his presidency as the triumph of meritocracy. He was a black man who had helped one of Harvard's most celebrated professors, [Laurence H. Tribe](#), with an article on law and physics, and would graduate magna cum laude.

Another of Mr. Obama's techniques relied on his seemingly limitless appetite for hearing the opinions of others, no matter how redundant or extreme. That could lead to endless debates — a mouse infestation at the review office provoked a long exchange about rodent rights — as well as some uncertainty about what Mr. Obama himself thought about the issue at hand.

In dozens of interviews, his friends said they could not remember his specific views from that era, beyond a general emphasis on diversity and social and economic justice.

Instead, they wonder how the style of leadership they observed on campus could translate to another kind of historic presidency.

“The things that make law school politics fractious are different from the things that make American politics fractious,” said Ron Klain, who preceded Mr. Obama at the law review and later served as Vice President [Al Gore](#)'s chief of staff. Mr. Klain has watched the senator's rise.

“The interesting caveat,” he said, “is that is a style of leadership more effective running a law review than running a country.”

Editors' Note: January 30, 2007

A front-page article on Sunday reported on Barack Obama's years at Harvard Law School. It included a quotation from Ron Klain, former chief of staff to Vice President Al Gore, who said that Mr. Obama's inclusive leadership style as president of the Harvard Law Review would not be as effective in running a country.

The Times later learned that Mr. Klain is an informal adviser to Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democrat of Delaware, who is expected to announce on Wednesday that he is running for president. Mr. Klain's affiliation with the Biden campaign should have been disclosed in the article.

Also, a picture caption with the continuation of the article misstated the timing of the photograph, taken in the apartment of one of Mr. Obama's friends. It was taken during the 1990 midterm elections, not during the 1990 election for the Harvard Law Review.

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