



OBAMA'S MARGIN OF VICTORY: THE MEDIA



HOW BARACK OBAMA COULD NOT HAVE WON
THE DEMOCRATIC NOMINATION WITHOUT
ABC, CBS AND NBC



A Special Report from the Media Research Center

Obama's Margin of Victory: The Media

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It was the closest nomination contest in a generation, with just one-tenth of a percentage point — 41,622 votes out of more than 35 million cast — separating Barack Obama from Hillary Clinton when the Democratic primaries ended in June. Obama's margin among elected delegates was almost as thin, just 51 to 48 percent.

But Barack Obama had a crucial advantage over his rivals this year: the support of the national media, especially the three broadcast networks. At every step of his national political career, network reporters showered the Illinois Senator with glowing media coverage, building him up as a political celebrity and exhibiting little interest in investigating his past associations or exploring the controversies that could have threatened his campaign.

These are the key findings of the Media Research Center's exhaustive analysis of ABC, CBS and NBC evening news coverage of Barack Obama — every story, every soundbite, every mention — from his first appearance on a network broadcast in May 2000 through the end of the Democratic primaries in June 2008, a total of 1,365 stories. MRC analysts found that the networks' coverage — particularly prior to the formal start of Obama's presidential campaign — bordered on giddy celebration of a political "rock star" rather than objective newsgathering.

Key Findings:

- The three broadcast networks treated Obama to nearly seven times more good press than bad — 462 positive stories (34% of the total), compared with only 70 stories (just 5%) that were critical.
- *NBC Nightly News* was the most lopsided, with 179 pro-Obama reports (37%), more than ten times the number of anti-Obama stories (17, or 3%). The *CBS Evening News* was nearly as skewed, with 156 stories spun in favor of Obama (38%), compared to a mere 21

anti-Obama reports (5%). ABC's *World News* was the least slanted, but still tilted roughly four-to-one in Obama's favor (127 stories to 32, or 27% to 7%).

- Barack Obama received his best press when it mattered most, as he debuted on the national scene. All of the networks lavished him with praise when he was keynote speaker at the 2004 Democratic Convention, and did not produce a single negative story about Obama (out of 81 total reports) prior to the start of his presidential campaign in early 2007.
- The networks downplayed or ignored major Obama gaffes and scandals. Obama's relationship with convicted influence peddler Tony Rezko was the subject of only two full reports (one each on ABC and NBC) and mentioned in just 15 other stories. CBS and NBC also initially downplayed controversial statements from Obama's longtime pastor Jeremiah Wright, but heavily praised Obama's March 18 speech on race relations.
- While Obama's worst media coverage came during the weeks leading up to the Pennsylvania primary on April 22, even then the networks offered two positive stories for every one that carried a negative spin (21% to 9%). Obama's best press of the year came after he won the North Carolina primary on May 6 — after that, 43 percent of stories were favorable to Obama, compared to just one percent that were critical.
- The networks minimized Obama's liberal ideology, only referring to him as a "liberal" 14 times in four years. In contrast, reporters found twice as many occasions (29) to refer to Obama as either a "rock star," "rising star" or "superstar" during the same period.
- In covering the campaign, network reporters highlighted voters who offered favorable opinions about Obama. Of 147 average citizens who expressed an on-camera opinion about Obama, 114 (78%) were pro-Obama, compared to just 28 (19%) that had a negative view, with the remaining five offering a mixed opinion.

Perhaps if he had faced serious journalistic scrutiny instead of media cheerleading, Barack Obama might still have won his party's nomination. But the tremendously positive coverage that the networks bestowed upon his campaign was of incalculable value. The early celebrity coverage helped make Obama a nationally-known figure with a near-perfect media image. The protectiveness that reporters showed during the early primaries made it difficult for his rivals to effectively criticize him. And when it came to controversies such as the Wright affair, network reporters acted more as defenders than as journalists in an adversarial relationship. If the media did not actually win the Democratic nomination for Barack Obama, they surely made it a whole lot easier.

Obama's Margin of Victory: The Media

How Barack Obama Could Not Have Won The Democratic Nomination Without ABC, CBS and NBC

BY RICH NOYES
MRC RESEARCH DIRECTOR

On August 28, when the junior Senator from Illinois accepts his party's nomination to be the next President of the United States, Barack Obama may wish to spend a few moments thanking network news reporters for making the whole night possible. Since the launch of Obama's national political career at the Democratic convention four years ago, the Big Three broadcast networks have showered Obama with positive – even glowing – news coverage, protected the candidate from the attacks of his rivals, and shown little interest in investigating Obama's past associations or exploring the controversies that could have threatened his campaign.

These are the key findings of an exhaustive analysis of ABC, CBS and NBC evening news coverage of Barack Obama – every story, every soundbite, every mention – through the end of the Democratic primaries in June. Media Research Center analysts examined every reference to Obama on the three evening broadcasts, and found a near-absence of the journalistic scrutiny and skepticism normally associated with coverage of national politicians. Indeed, much of the coverage – particularly prior to the formal start of Obama's presidential campaign in early 2007 – bordered on giddy celebration of a rising political "rock star" rather than objective newsgathering.

That the national media have unfairly tipped the scales in Obama's direction is a fact not lost on the public. The Pew Research Center surveyed about 1,000 adults in late May, and reported that "far more Americans believe that the press coverage has favored Barack Obama than think it has favored Hillary Clinton," with even 35 percent of Democrats seeing "a pro-Obama bias." A Rasmussen survey of 1,000 likely voters released July 21 discovered "49 percent of voters believe that in the general election, most reporters will try to help Obama with their coverage" while "just one voter in four (24%) believes that most reporters will try to offer unbiased coverage."

And a Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll of 900 registered voters released July 24 discovered six times as many think “most members of the media” want Obama to win rather than McCain. According to an article posted on FoxNews.com, “Only about 1 in 10 (11 percent) volunteers the belief that the media is neutral on the race to become the 44th President of the United States....When asked to rate the objectivity of media coverage of the campaigns, Americans feel Obama gets more of a positive spin by a better than 7-to-1 margin (46 percent more positive toward Obama; 6 percent more positive toward McCain).”

Following Her Liberal Heart

“I see this as a moment of transformational change in the country and I have spent my lifetime sitting on the sidelines watching people attempt to make change. I just decided that I can’t sit on the sidelines anymore.”

— Former ABC and CBS correspondent Linda Douglass confirming that she was leaving journalism to work for Obama’s presidential campaign, as recounted by *The Atlantic’s* Marc Ambinder in a May 21 blog entry.

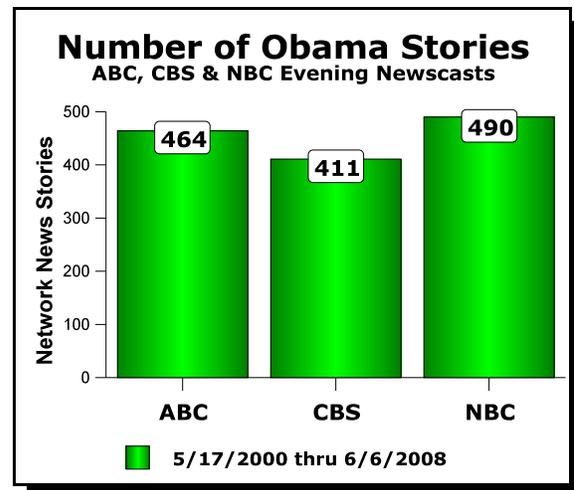
The public believes the media are tilted towards Obama because of the biased performance they witnessed during this year’s primaries. NBC News correspondent Lee Cowan, the reporter assigned to cover the Obama campaign full time during the primaries, admitted in an interview in early January that he felt pulled in Obama’s direction: “From a reporter’s point of view, it’s almost hard to remain objective because it’s infectious, the energy, I think. It sort of goes against your core to say that as a reporter, but the crowds have gotten so much bigger, his energy has gotten stronger. He feeds off that.”

Weeks later, Cowan told the *New York Times’* Jacques Steinberg that it was “hard not to drink the Kool-Aid” surrounding Obama: “Even in the conversations we have as colleagues, there is a sense of trying especially hard not to drink the Kool-Aid. It’s so rapturous, everything around him. All these huge rallies.”

On CNN’s *Reliable Sources* on January 13, *Washington Post* media writer Howard Kurtz asked a former *Washington Post* editor, *The Politico’s* John Harris, whether he thought “journalists are rooting for the Obama story.” Harris referred back to his time at the *Post*: “A couple years ago, you would send a reporter out with Obama, and it was like they needed to go through detox when they came back — ‘Oh, he’s so impressive, he’s so charismatic,’ and we’re kind of like, ‘Down, boy.’” Anchoring news coverage of Democratic primaries on February 12, MSNBC’s Chris Matthews famously confessed after listening to an Obama victory speech, “I felt this thrill going up my leg. I mean, I don’t have that too often.”

To assess the degree to which journalists’ infatuation with Obama contaminated daily news coverage, MRC analysts used our own News Tracking System (NTS) software and Nexis to locate every story mentioning Obama on ABC’s *World News*, the CBS *Evening News* and NBC *Nightly News* from the time Obama emerged on the national stage (the first evening news story mentioning Obama aired on May 17, 2000) through June 6, 2008, the last broadcast before Hillary Clinton formally exited the Democratic race, cementing Obama’s nomination.

The three evening news broadcasts may not be able to tout the high ratings of a generation ago, but together averaged more than 23 million combined viewers from January through early June of this year, far more than their cable news competitors. And unlike the news junkies who flock to the 24/7 cable outlets, the typical broadcast evening news viewer spends less of their day devouring campaign news, which makes them consequently more likely to be influenced by the information and images they receive from these programs.



Analysts found a total of 1,365 news stories and interviews offering at least some discussion of Obama. About two-fifths of these (550) were full reports that focused exclusively, or nearly so, on Obama. Another 170 items (about 12% of the total) were brief, anchor-read items that also focused on Obama. Just under half of the total (645, or 47%) were full reports or interviews that included either mentions of or soundbites from Obama, but did not focus on him. Examples of stories included in this group are: items about the congressional debate over Iraq in early 2007 which quoted Obama along with many other senators; stories about candidate debates where Obama was one talking head among many; or stories about any of his Democratic (or Republican) rivals which included some comments directed at Obama himself. These stories, about 30 percent of which conveyed a distinctly positive or negative spin about the candidate (more about how we determined a story’s spin shortly), were included in the sample to ensure a complete portrait of network news coverage of Obama.

NBC and ABC aired the most total stories (490 and 464 respectively), with the *CBS Evening News* a fairly distant third with 411 stories. As far as stories that focused mainly on Obama, ABC (194) and NBC (198) were practically tied, with CBS again lagging (158 stories). The *NBC Nightly News* aired the most stories with minor discussion of Obama (249), followed by ABC’s *World News* (222) and CBS (174). The remainder were brief items read by the news anchor; the *CBS Evening News* – which had a regular “Campaign Notebook” segment of short items – aired the most such stories (74), followed by ABC (48) and NBC (43).

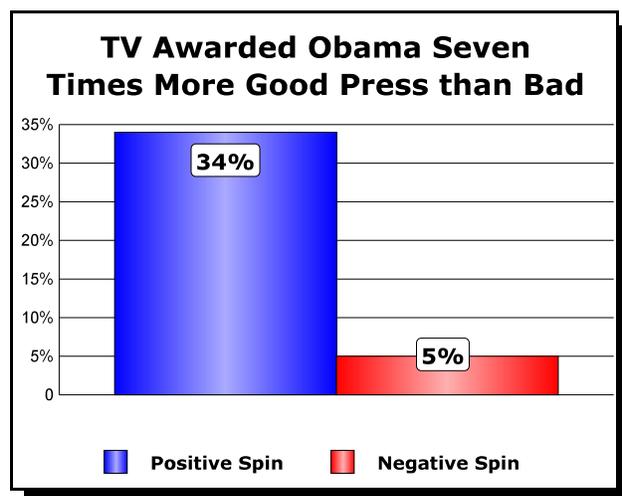
Methodology. For each story, analysts noted the topics discussed (i.e., Obama’s background; positions on policy issues; or his position in the campaign “horse race”), and any soundbites discussing Obama and whether those soundbites conveyed a clearly positive or negative evaluation of Obama. The analysts were also instructed to record the overall “spin” of the story, based on the cumulative information provided in the report and any editorial evaluations made by the reporter or anchor.

Ideally, every straight news report would have a “neutral” spin, with journalists matter-of-factly narrating the key events from the campaign trail and the rival candidates getting roughly equal time to get their points across. But as journalists succumb to the urge to not just report the news but also interpret and analyze it, their commentary frequently imputes a positive or negative spin to the news.

Journalists can provide such direction through their own use of language — on January 6, for example, ABC’s Jake Tapper spoke positively of how Obama “seems to have *captured the imagination of independent voters*,” while on March 7 his colleague David Wright struck the opposite tone, telling viewers that day that “Obama was *struggling to recalibrate his message*.” (Emphasis added.) Alternatively, the reporter can include the opinions of a designated expert or man on the street to contribute an editorial judgment, as CBS reporter Dean Reynolds did in a January 8 piece quoting a New Hampshire voter gushing about Obama: “He’s been able to really bring out the whole young voter core, and really kind of get people excited about getting involved in it.” Analysts reviewing these stories were instructed to look at all of these factors, and then only assign a story a “positive” or “negative” score if the content tilted in one direction by *at least* a two-to-one margin.

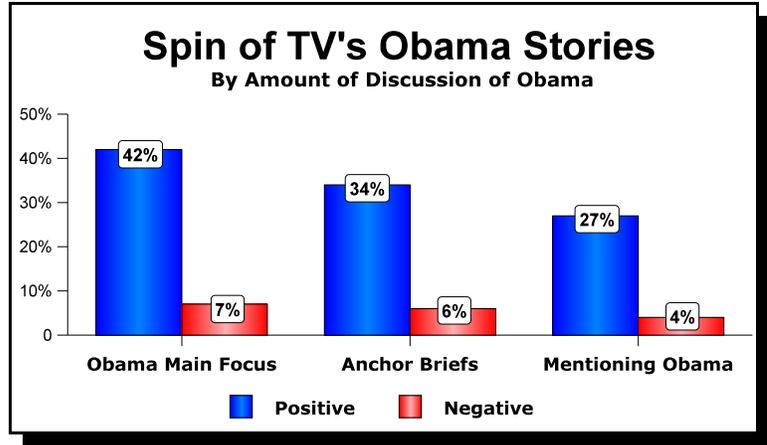
Thus, a score of “positive” was recorded if the total pro-Obama content (support for his policy proposals; positive portrayals of his background and past public service; enthusiastic reaction from the public; and campaign successes such as endorsements and primary victories) outweighed any anti-Obama content (criticism of his policy proposals; negative portrayals of his background and past service; sour reaction from the public; and campaign setbacks) by at least a two-to-one margin. If the negative material outweighed the positive by two-to-one, the item was scored “negative.” If the content was largely neutral, or the positive and negative elements were in rough balance, the story was scored as “mixed” or “neutral.”

Spinning for Obama. Using these criteria, more than seven times as many Obama stories (34%) were classified as favoring the candidate, compared to just five percent that reflected a negative spin. (See chart.) The remaining three-fifths of the coverage (61%) was categorized as mixed or neutral — although, as one might expect, more than half of the neutral items were those that only briefly mentioned Obama. Of stories that focused most heavily on Obama, 42 percent conveyed a positive spin, compared to seven percent that conveyed a negative spin. Of stories merely mentioning Obama, 27 percent were positive and four percent negative; more than



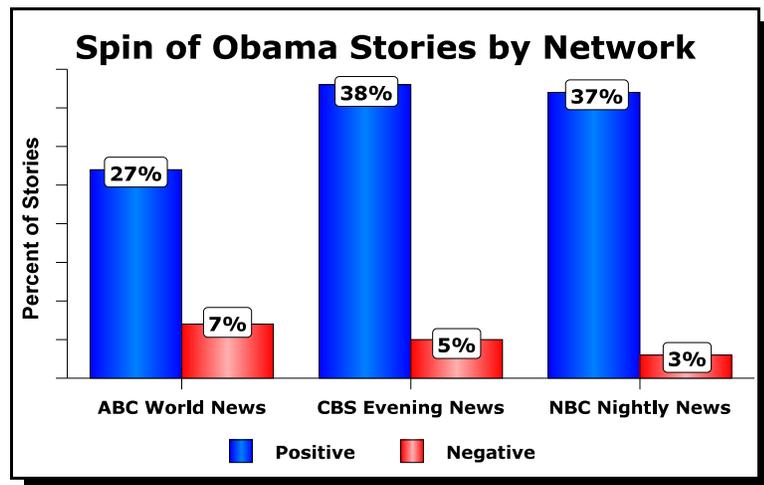
a third of those brief anchor items (34%) were pro-Obama, with just six percent delivering bad news.

As the chart at the right shows, the ratio of positive to negative stories is almost exactly the same for all three categories of stories — between six and seven times more good press than bad press. What differs is the percentage of neutral stories, with those stories that offered the least discussion of Obama naturally incorporating the least spin. Thus, the categories are interchangeable as far as measuring the degree of pro- or anti-Obama tilt.



All three of the broadcast networks showered Obama with far more positive than negative press. ABC's *World News* was the least skewed, although they produced nearly four times more pro-Obama stories than negative pieces. (See chart.) The *CBS Evening News* tilted more than seven-to-one in Obama's direction, while Obama was treated to more than ten times as many positive than negative stories on the *NBC Nightly News*. The significant differences in each network's coverage indicate that Obama's good press was not merely the consequence of events (i.e., gaining endorsements or winning primaries), but also the journalistic interpretation of these events. ABC's reporters covered the same news events as NBC's journalists, but produced significantly fewer stories that were promotional of Obama — and more critical stories — than their competition.

The numbers, however, tell only part of the story. A review of the coverage shows the broadcast networks aided Obama with positive publicity at crucial moments of his campaign —



especially in its earliest phases — even as TV reporters took a decidedly non-adversarial approach to many of the personal controversies that might have threatened Obama's viability. As tight as the 2008 Democratic primaries turned out to be, the media's celebratory approach to Obama gave him an invaluable advantage as he competed for his party's presidential nomination.

In the Beginning...

ABC and NBC viewers first heard the future nominee's name in 2004, when Barack Obama was the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate in Illinois and keynote speaker at that year's party convention. Prior to that, Obama had appeared on a national network news broadcast only once before, on the *CBS Evening News* on May 17, 2000, when he was a law professor at the University of Chicago.

Towards the end of a piece on possible reparation payments to the descendants of U.S. slaves, Chicago-based reporter Cynthia Bowers included a soundbite from a local expert: "Professor Barack Obama supports more discussion of the issue, but says any law would likely be spiked in the courts." CBS then ran this short clip of Obama: "Generally, the Supreme Court has a philosophy that you have to identify a clear wrongdoer and a clear victim."

Professor Obama then vanished from the airwaves, not to return for more than four years. But when Barack Obama again found the media spotlight as a state senator running for the U.S. Senate, he would quickly become a darling of network reporters, and their gushing reviews would help propel him to the top ranks of presidential politics.

In June and July 2004, the networks mentioned Obama in a handful of stories discussing the turmoil among Illinois Republicans after Senate nominee Jack Ryan left the race amid a sex scandal. Then-ABC anchor Peter Jennings referred to Obama as "a popular Democrat," while NBC reporter Ron Allen called Obama "a rising star on the national stage." CBS's Cynthia Bowers, in a story about the potential candidacy of former Chicago Bears coach Mike Ditka, referred to Obama as a "populist Democrat" who was "dominating the polls."

Obama became the center of network attention as the keynote speaker of that year's Democratic Convention, and network reporters praised Obama's personality and biography. Reporter Dean Reynolds, then with ABC, touted Obama on July 27, a few hours before his convention speech: "Democrats could have picked someone more famous for tonight's speech, but the pros saw something special in Barack Obama....He's a terrific campaigner, direct and often funny....[He] might be considered a case study in overcoming barriers."

"He calls himself a skinny kid with big ears, but at 42, Barack Obama is taking on rock-star status at this convention," CBS's Bowers enthused that same night. "His life story has become legend....How well he does tonight could go a long way toward determining whether he becomes a giant in the Democratic Party." Bowers also included a soundbite from an Illinois Republican, Dan Proft, who argued that Obama was even then benefitting from a smitten press corps: "I mean, this guy is way out there, but that is not being heard in this arena again, because of a media coronation that wants to tell a fairy tale and because of a Republican Party that can't get its act together."

The night after Obama's speech, then-NBC anchor Tom Brokaw delivered another positive profile: "His national debut is getting rave reviews....This blessed young father of two is the son

of a Kenyan working-class man and a white Midwestern mother. Both his parents are gone, but the lessons of their love are not.”

In contrast, the networks showed none of that affection for the Republican keynoter that year, then-Democratic Senator Zell Miller. Brokaw described Miller’s efforts on behalf of President Bush’s re-election as “torching his party and its ticket,” and NBC’s Brian Williams branded Miller “a disaffected member of the opposition party.” CBS’s John Roberts suggested a character flaw in Miller’s decision to back a Republican: “Call him disillusioned

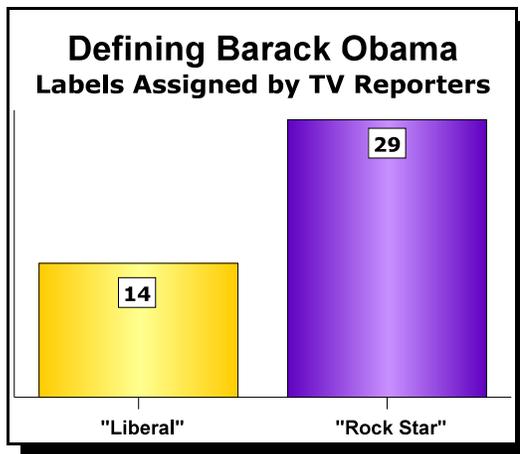
conservative Democrat or turncoat, it’s the sort of remarkable about-face Miller is famous for.”

Roberts was much more positive when he weighed in on Obama’s speech the previous month: “In what even some Republicans call the most effective political speech they’ve ever seen, the convention’s keynote speaker hit what could only be called a home run right into center field.” Roberts then showed this clip of Obama from the night before: “There is not a liberal America and a conservative America. There is the United States of America.”

The notion that Obama’s political approach was actually centrist or non-ideological was not the norm in 2004, as most of these early profiles were straightforward about Obama’s liberal ideology. ABC’s Terry Moran, in a July 25 profile, said Obama “is a proud, traditional liberal.” Two days later, in his profile, Dean Reynolds asserted that Obama is “trying to run a positive campaign with liberal positions.” CBS’s Bowers said Obama “has never hidden a decidedly liberal platform.” And while Brokaw offered no label for Obama in his July 28 profile, NBC reporter Mark Potter did so less than two weeks later, referring to Obama’s “liberal views” in a report on Republican Alan Keyes entering the Illinois Senate race.

But over the next four years, as Obama won election to the U.S. Senate and undertook his presidential campaign, network reporters became much stingier in applying the “liberal” tag to Obama. Correspondents called Obama a liberal only 10 more times through the end of the Democratic primaries, for a total of 14 such labels over nearly four years. ABC reporters were the least reticent to brand Obama a liberal, doing so a total of nine times. CBS’s correspondents only tagged Obama as liberal three times, and NBC just twice in four years.

In contrast, network reporters on 29 separate occasions called Obama some variation of a “rising star,” “emerging star,” “superstar,” and “rock star.” This was a contest NBC’s reporters won, with 15 such salutations of Obama, more than on CBS (8) and ABC (6) combined.



Thrilled by Obama the Campaigner, Yawns for Obama the Senator. Barack Obama became Senator Obama in 2005, but his activities as a U.S. Senator drew scant interest from the

networks. During his first 21 months in office, Obama was mentioned just 20 times — and only nine of those were specifically for his official duties. His most prominent official endeavor was a November 1, 2005 hearing on preparations for a potential bird flu epidemic that garnered him a soundbite on both CBS and NBC; a little over a month earlier, on September 29, 2005, ABC's *World News* had quoted (without video) Obama's warning that bird flu "is a crisis the entire country has to awaken itself to." In all of these stories, Obama was just the source of a single quote, not the center of attention.

Besides that, Obama soundbites appeared in stories remembering Rosa Parks and Coretta Scott King; an oversight hearing on federal spending following Hurricane Katrina; and protesting the government's failure to secure from theft the IDs of 26 million military veterans. In August 2005, NBC quoted Obama rejecting a proposal from Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr., that non-citizens be permitted to vote under certain circumstances. Then-anchor Bob Schieffer conducted a short interview with Obama on the January 31 *CBS Evening News* to get his reaction to Coretta Scott King's passing and that night's State of the Union address by President Bush.

In a January 18, 2005 story about confirmation hearings for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, ABC's Linda Douglass called Obama "the Democrats' newest star," and ran a soundbite of the Senator challenging Rice on Iraq: "I think part of what the American people are going to need is some certainty. Right now, it appears to be an entirely open-ended commitment." Douglass later quit journalism to join Obama's presidential campaign (see box on page 2).

CBS's Byron Pitts saluted Obama for participating in a May 1, 2006 protest on behalf of "rights" for illegal immigrants, the so-called "Day Without Immigrants." Pitts led into a clip of an interview with Obama by trumpeting: "Unlike last month's wave of demonstrations, politicians didn't simply take notice. Today, many showed up." Pitts asked Obama to reply to those "people across the country who say, 'How dare people who broke the law by entering the United States now plead with the Senate and the Congress to do something about that?'"

Obama offered the orthodox liberal reply, "Well, you know, the problem is that we've been engaging in hypocrisy in this country. We don't mind these folks mowing our lawns, or looking after our children, or serving us at restaurants, as long as they don't actually ask for any rights in return."

If Obama's work in the Senate failed to excite network reporters, his prospects as a potential presidential candidate did. On September 17, 2006, then-CBS reporter Sharyn Alfonsi reported on Obama's visit to an annual steak fry hosted by Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, a venue for prospective presidential candidates. Alfonsi's was the first broadcast evening news story to present Obama as a possible 2008 candidate; her only soundbites came from Harkin, Obama and two supporters of an Obama candidacy, including Illinois state comptroller Daniel Hynes, who gushed: "In some cases, you don't choose the times, the times choose you. And I believe this time has chosen Barack Obama."

A few weeks later, on October 13, Obama's profile received a boost as he delivered a commentary on the *CBS Evening News*, part of the broadcast's short-lived "FreeSpeech" segment. Anchor Katie Couric set up Obama: "Tonight, a warning that falling gas prices should not lull you into a false sense of energy security." Obama blandly argued for more efficiency and adoption of alternative fuels: "America's oil addiction doesn't go away when prices come down or the polls close."

Flocking to Barack. Less than two weeks later, on October 22, 2006, Obama on NBC's *Meet the Press* told moderator Tim Russert that he was thinking of running for president in 2008. Like a match had been struck, the networks were suddenly interested in Obama again. That Sunday, all three evening newscasts covered Obama's announcement — CBS included a short item read by anchor Russ Mitchell, while the other two networks produced full reports; ABC's *World News Sunday* even made it their lead item. The next night, all three broadcasts spent a second night covering Obama, with full stories speculating about his potential campaign.

The positive spin evoked the glowing coverage Obama received at the 2004 convention. On the October 23, 2006 *Nightly News*, reporter Chip Reid first called Obama "the newest — and at the moment the brightest — star in the Democratic sky," and anchor Brian Williams confided to Tim Russert that Obama was "a guy that could actually cause excitement over American politics to break out again."

Over on CBS, then-correspondent Gloria Borger enthused: "If every presidential candidate has to have a great story to tell, Barack Obama's life certainly qualifies....He's a certified political phenom, with a best-selling book and a date with *Oprah*....It's the American dream for some Democrats." The lavish praise for Obama extended far beyond the evening newscasts to the rest of the establishment media. (See text box.)

Journalists at the Altar of Obama

"Obama seemed the political equivalent of a rainbow — a sudden preternatural event inspiring awe and ecstasy....There aren't very many people — ebony, ivory or other — who have Obama's distinctive portfolio of talents....He transcends the racial divide so effortlessly that it seems reasonable to expect that he can bridge all the other divisions — and answer all the impossible questions — plaguing American public life."

— *Time* senior writer Joe Klein in an October 23, 2006 cover story "Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President."

"You can see it in the crowds. The thrill, the hope. How they surge toward him. You're looking at an American political phenomenon....[Barack Obama] inspires the party faithful, and many others, like no one else on the scene today....And the question you can sense on everyone's mind, as they listen so intently to him: 'Is he the one?' Is Barack Obama the man, the black man, who could lead the Democrats back to the White House and maybe even unite the country?...Everywhere he goes, people want him to run for President, especially in Iowa, cradle of presidential contenders. Around here, they're even naming babies after him."

— ABC *Nightline* co-anchor Terry Moran, November 6, 2006.

During the final week of the 2006 midterm campaign, the networks covered Obama's campaign efforts on behalf of the Democrats alongside those of President Bush for the Republicans. Obama was included in seven evening news stories over the last five days of the campaign. NBC's reporters touted Obama as a "star" for three successive nights – David Gregory called him "one of the party's emerging stars" on November 3; the next night, Chip Reid relayed how "Democratic stars are hitting the road," as he showed a clip of Obama in Maryland; and the following night Kelly O'Donnell talked about "the Democrats' emerging star, Senator Barack Obama, in Pennsylvania today."

After the Democrats' midterm victories, Obama's early campaign trips on his own behalf were touted as major events. NBC's Chip Reid followed the Senator to New Hampshire in December: "A raucous, standing-room only crowd welcomed Barack Obama on his first trip to New Hampshire today, and he responded with the kind of speech that's been captivating Democrats from coast-to-coast...Ever since he electrified the Democratic convention in 2004, Obama has been treated more like a rock star than a politician."

By the time Obama officially filed his candidacy papers on January 16, 2007 (another event that drew heavy network coverage), he had been mentioned or profiled in 81 broadcast evening news stories – a fairly large number, considering the brevity of his national political career. During the previous two years, the networks showed little interest in assessing Obama's capabilities as a policymaker; rather, reporters praised his personal story and his abilities as a speaker and campaigner. Indeed, TV reporters virtually ignored Obama's work in the Senate, highlighting him only as he stepped into the role of partisan campaigner – the 2004 Democratic convention, campaigning for Democrats in the 2006 midterm elections, and preparing his own presidential campaign.

While none of the networks reported any legislative or policy accomplishment by Obama, a slight majority of stories (51%) nonetheless conveyed a positive spin; all of the remaining stories were neutral or mixed. (See chart on next page.) While some of the longer stories about Obama included brief references to potential bad news topics – his past drug use, his lack of solid policy experience – these negatives were overwhelmed by positive themes. Obama in 2007 had the luxury of launching his presidential campaign having never once been the subject of a negative evening news story.

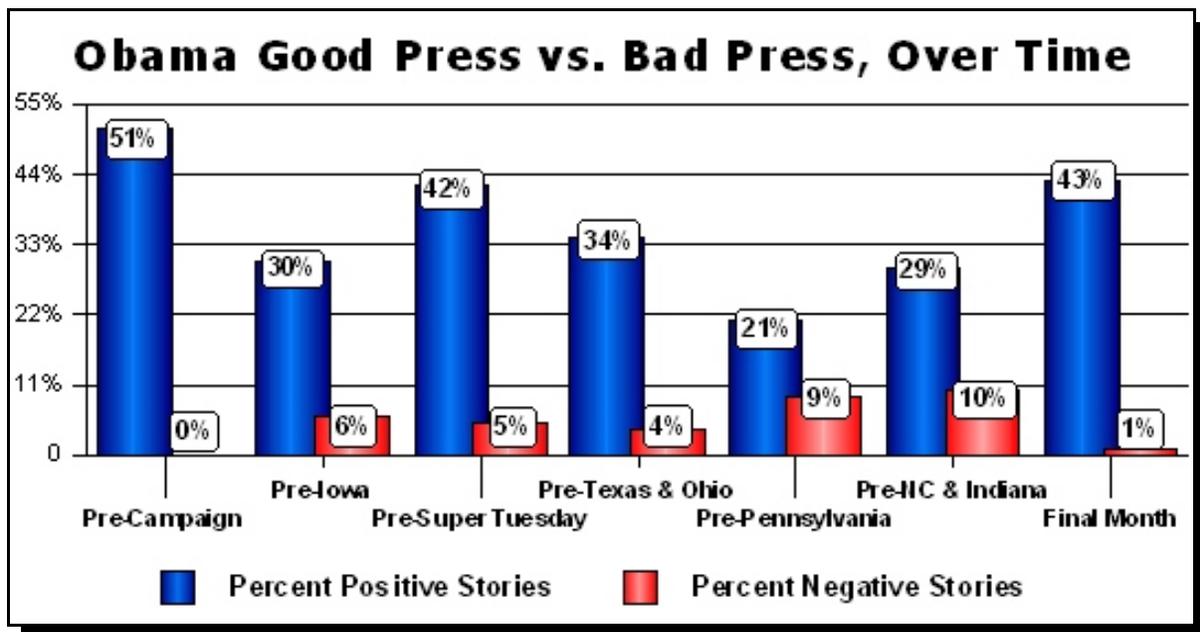
By the time his campaign formally began, the networks had gone a long way toward making the previously unknown Barack Obama a national figure with a near-perfect media image. While the realities of a presidential campaign meant Obama would inevitably receive negative publicity in the months to come, the celebratory themes of his early coverage would be revisited throughout the primaries, giving him a unique advantage on the trail.

Hailing Obama On the Road to Des Moines

Between the effective launch of his presidential campaign on January 16, 2007 and the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008, Obama was featured in 91 network evening news stories and mentioned in 305 additional full reports or anchor briefs. This was substantially more intensive coverage than he had received in the previous two-and-a-half years, but the networks largely maintained their positive approach. More than half of the 91 stories featuring Obama (52%) carried a positive spin, although the large number of stories carrying a neutral mention of the candidate dropped his overall level of good press to 30 percent. Still, the positive stories outnumbered the handful of negative stories by a five-to-one margin. Among the smaller group of stories focusing mainly on Obama, positive stories dominated by a 10-to-1 margin.

Coverage of the first weeks of Obama's campaign mirrored the adulatory treatment that had become customary since the 2004 convention. On ABC's *World News*, which devoted more than four minutes to Obama on January 16, fill-in anchor Kate Snow trumpeted how "Democratic rising star Barack Obama takes a major step toward a run for the White House." She soon touted how "the presidential race got a major jolt today. The man who could become the first African-American President took a major step toward becoming a candidate." Snow even spun a negative into a positive: "His political resume is rather thin, but in the 2008 race, that could be a plus."

"Just two years ago, Obama was a novice mounting a national stage, a young Illinois state senator with a great story: the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, raised in Hawaii with his grandparents, who wound up as the editor of the Harvard Law Review and eventually in the U.S. Senate," CBS's Gloria Borger enthused on the *Evening*



News that same night. “But here’s the biggest question: Is America ready for an African-American President?”

On March 4, all three networks covered Obama’s participation in events commemorating the 42nd anniversary of a 1965 march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama. The networks presented the day’s events as a showdown between Obama and Hillary Clinton, who was also taking part in the commemoration. “It may not mean a thing, but the line to hear Obama is several times longer than the line to hear Hillary Clinton,” ABC’s John Cochran observed. “Some said they admire her, but have been more impressed by Obama.”

But none of the broadcast networks pointed out that in his speech Obama had claimed that his parents “got together” because of “what happened in Selma.” Obama was born in August 1961, three years before the march occurred. In a speech broadcast live on CNN that afternoon, Obama claimed of his parents: “There was something stirring across the country because of what happened in Selma, Alabama, because some folks are willing to march across a bridge. So they got together and Barack Obama, Jr. was born.” (See text box.)

ABC and NBC acted as if the gaffe hadn’t happened while CBS’s Borger only obliquely referred to it: “In March of 1965, Barack Obama was just three years old. Even so, he says, he’s still the product of Selma.” The brief soundbite CBS ran left it unclear whether Obama was speaking figuratively, not literally: “This is the site of my conception. I am the fruits of your labor. I am the offspring of the movement.” (CBS finally got around to reporting the gaffe thirteen months later, in an April 2, 2008 report about candidate mistakes prompted by Hillary Clinton’s claims of ducking sniper fire in Bosnia.)

Later that month, Obama’s hometown *Chicago Tribune* published a long investigative story questioning whether the stories about his early life that Obama presented in his memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, could be trusted. “Several of his oft-recited stories may not have happened in the way he has recounted them,” the *Tribune*’s Kirsten Scharnberg and Kim Barker reported in their March 25 article, “The not-so-simple story of Barack Obama’s youth.”

“Some seem to make Obama look better in the retelling, others appear to exaggerate his outward struggles over issues of race, or simply skim over some of the most painful, private moments of his life,” the *Tribune* discovered. The reporters investigated Obama’s anecdote

Gaffe the Networks Ignored

“This young man named Barack Obama got one of those tickets and came over to this country. He met this woman whose great-great-great-great-grandfather had owned slaves. But she had a good idea there was some craziness going on, because they looked at each other and they decided that we know that in the world as it has been, it might not be possible for us to get together and have a child. There was something stirring across the country because of what happened in Selma, Alabama, because some folks are willing to march across a bridge. So they got together and Barack Obama, Jr. was born. So don’t tell me I don’t have a claim on Selma, Alabama. Don’t tell me I’m not coming home to Selma, Alabama.”

— Barack Obama in a speech in Selma, Alabama shown live on CNN, March 4, 2007.

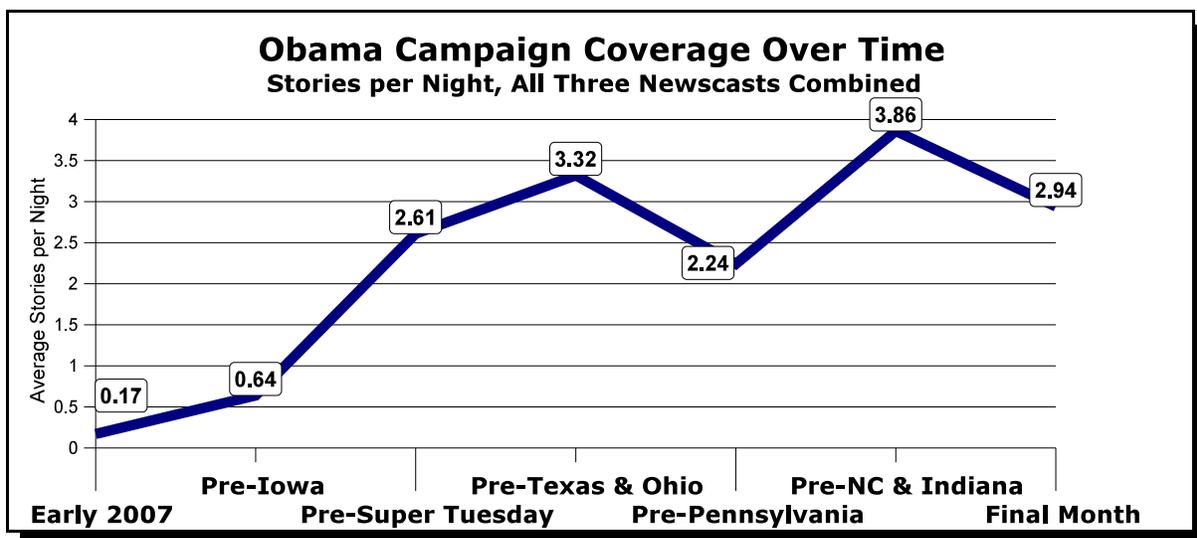
about being deeply affected by a *Life* magazine article about a black man scarred in an effort to lighten his skin. "In fact, the *Life* article and the photographs don't exist, say the magazine's own historians."

As with the gaffe Obama made at the Selma march, none of the evening newscasts bothered to mention the *Tribune* investigation showing potential falsehoods in Obama's memoir.

Over the course of the spring and summer of 2007, much of the coverage was focused on a series of debates between the Democratic contenders. Obama drew mixed reviews after he declared in a CNN debate on July 23 that he would meet "unconditionally" with the leaders of virulently anti-American states, including Iran and North Korea. And his declaration a week later that he would be willing to attack terrorist targets inside Pakistan without that government's permission was portrayed as a rookie mistake. In an August 1 report, ABC's Jake Tapper highlighted an expert from the Council on Foreign Relations who explained the potential consequences of such a unilateral act: "You could have a fall of the government. You could have radical extremism. You've got nuclear weapons there that are controlled by the government. Who would control them when that was done?"

But the networks quickly moved past the gaffes. Indeed, while reporters were impressed with Obama's record-breaking fundraising, their main focus remained on frontrunner Hillary Clinton, sparing Obama the intense scrutiny that he might have faced if he had been the frontrunner. During the first 10 months of 2007, Obama was mentioned an average of once every six days by one or another of the evening newscasts. That rose as the actual primaries and caucuses arrived, to about four times per week during the final run-up to the Iowa caucuses, and then shot up to an average of nearly three stories per night for the remainder of the primaries, or about one story for each newscast. (See chart.)

During the last weeks before the Iowa caucuses, the networks provided Obama with another crucial burst of good press. Over the weekend of December 8-9, talk show host Oprah



Winfrey joined Obama on a trip to Iowa, South Carolina and New Hampshire. Rather than dismissing it as a celebrity photo-op that shed no light on Obama's substantive platform, the networks gave the Oprah tour huge play. All three networks mentioned it on their Friday newscasts, provided full reports on Saturday, Sunday (ABC and NBC only; CBS was pre-empted by football) with additional wrap-up stories on Monday – 13 stories in all.

Every newscast led with Oprah and Obama on Saturday December 8: "Oprah Winfrey shared top billing with the man she has endorsed for president at the biggest rally of his campaign," CBS reporter Dean Reynolds announced. "She can turn a book into a best seller, but can she turn a politician into our next president?" ABC anchor David Muir wondered.

NBC led with Oprah again on December 9, coupled with a new poll showing Obama pulling even with Clinton in early states. Correspondent Lee Cowan included half a dozen soundbites from Oprah promoting her candidate: "For the first time, I'm stepping out of my pew because I've been inspired....Dr. King dreamed the dream, but we don't just have to dream the dream anymore. We get to vote that dream into reality."

The next night, Cowan was still thrilled by Oprah: "Her gravitational pull is pretty hard to ignore. Here in New Hampshire, she brought in the largest pre-primary crowd any candidate has ever had. And that, at least, is a picture of momentum that no campaign could ever buy."

A Double Standard on Cocaine Use. A few days later, the networks rallied to Obama again, this time after a Clinton campaign surrogate suggested Obama's admissions of once using cocaine could be exploited in a general election. The networks' approach was to put the onus on Clinton for engineering a dirty trick. "The Clinton team denied it was an authorized attack and is now trying to contain the damage," argued NBC's Andrea Mitchell on the December 13 *Nightly News*. "But despite the Clinton campaign's denials that they intentionally brought it up, their allies have been frustrated at the lack of attention to Obama's adolescent drug use, leading Obama aides to say tonight this whole episode was deliberate."

While in his July 2004 profile NBC's Tom Brokaw had asked Obama about drug use – "In a book that you wrote before you decided to get into politics, you talked about your errant adolescence. You talked about drinking, smoking some dope, and even doing some blow, it's cocaine. Aren't the Republicans going to come after you on that?" – the network evening newscasts pretty much buried the topic of Obama's cocaine use in their presidential campaign coverage.

Besides the stories suggesting the Clinton campaign was out of line for raising the issue in December, CBS's Gloria Borger on January 16, 2007 briefly referred to the admission in Obama's "candid memoirs that the 45-year-old Senator tried cocaine as a confused high school student." And in a March 9, 2007 story about candidates revealing problems themselves before

they can be discovered by others, CBS's Jim Axelrod noted Obama's "admitting to using cocaine in his autobiography" as well as admitting to a few unpaid parking tickets.

Other than those scant references, the last of which was on December 13, 2007, the network evening newscasts never specifically referred to Obama's acknowledged use of cocaine, preferring less informative language about Obama's past "drug" use. Nor did they give any hint that they had asked Obama specific questions about how old he was when he quit using such drugs and whether he could truthfully pass a standard background check for a sensitive government position.

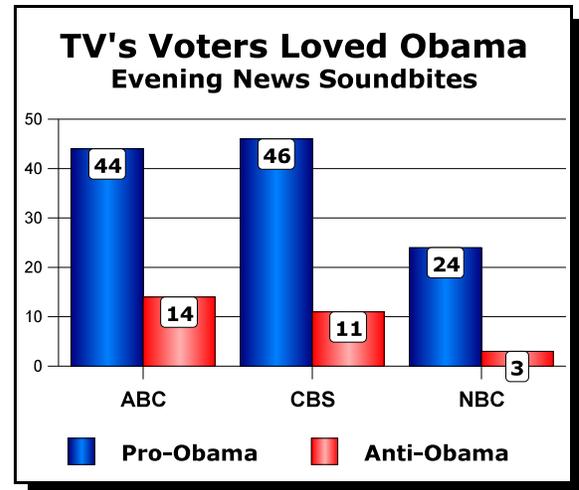
But eight years earlier, back in August 1999, network reporters aggressively pushed Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush to reveal whether he might have used cocaine (he has never admitted doing so), and whether he could have passed a background check when his father took office in 1989.

Filling in as NBC anchor on August 19, 1999, Brian Williams called it "the question that will not go away," while ABC's Charles Gibson said the issue was "dogging" Bush: "Did Texas Governor George W. Bush ever use cocaine, or didn't he? The question is dogging his otherwise smooth campaign." Unlike their approach with Obama in 2007, the networks in 1999 gave no sense that publicizing such allegations was a disreputable smear, even CBS correspondent Eric Engberg noted at the time that for Bush it was both "the press and opponents" who were trying to force the issue into the headlines.

Highlighting Voters for Obama. In the days immediately before the Iowa caucuses, network reporters — and the anchors who parachuted into the Hawkeye State — spent time interviewing likely voters, and those citizen soundbites almost universally praised for Obama. On the day before the caucuses, for example, ABC's David Wright showed Diane Franken, a "political newcomer" at an Obama rally: "He's the first one I've been excited about in 30 years." Over on NBC, Andrea Mitchell spotlighted Monica Green, "a life-long Republican who twice voted for George Bush now canvassing for Obama." Green's testimonial: "I just keep saying, 'Look at the problems in the world, and look at who you think is going to be able to solve those problems.'" And CBS's Dean Reynolds also found two "Republican converts" for Obama. Bob Hamilton explained, "I think he's very genuine," while Shirley Berger said simply, "I like Obama."

In their coverage prior to the caucuses, the network evening news quoted 30 regular citizens voicing their opinions about Obama; 29 were supportive while just one was critical. The sole negative voice belonged to a caller to a black radio program in Chicago highlighted on the February 9, 2007 *Nightly News* — the woman complained that Obama "has never really stood on any black issues." The almost unanimous praise for Obama from ordinary citizens was yet another aspect of the positive network coverage that aided Obama prior to the Iowa caucuses.

Over the remainder of the primary campaign, the voters selected to provide soundbite opinions on Obama stayed positive, although not quite so positive as in the early phases of the campaign. Overall, the networks highlighted 114 positive soundbites on Obama from voters, compared to just 28 that were critical and five that were mixed. Again, NBC was the most positive, with 83 percent of voter soundbites favoring Obama, vs. 79 percent positive for CBS and 73 percent positive for ABC. (See chart.)



It is possible, of course, that Barack Obama could have won the Iowa caucuses on January 3 if the national networks had approached him in a more traditional, adversarial manner. But the fact is that Obama received highly positive national press coverage going into Iowa, which could only have given him an advantage over his rivals.

If he had lost the Iowa caucuses, Obama would have seen the campaign momentum shift to Hillary Clinton, who at that point enjoyed leads in the rest of the early contests. If he had lost Iowa, Obama would have almost certainly have lost the nomination. But by winning Iowa, Obama was able to seize the momentum and began climbing in New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina polls. Looking back, Obama's January 3 victory gave him an edge over Clinton that he never really lost for the remainder of the primaries. Over the next five months, the biggest threats to his claiming the nomination would not be the former First Lady's formidable campaign, but controversies from his past that might have sunk another candidate.

Yet once again, Obama would get even more help from his friends in national media.

Protecting Obama from His Past

With his victory in Iowa, Barack Obama enjoyed a wave of media celebration and momentum going into the New Hampshire primary five days later. Most pundits believed, probably correctly, that if Obama could score another victory in the Granite State, Hillary Clinton would have little chance of stopping his momentum. The night after Iowa, NBC's Andrea Mitchell gushed about Obama's victory speech: "Delivered with the help of a TelePrompter, [it] looked almost presidential, perhaps the passing of the torch to a new generation of politicians and voters."

Over on ABC, anchor Charles Gibson suggested Obama was unbeatable. "How do you run against hope?" he asked George Stephanopoulos, repeating: "How do you run against hope?"

Just hours before the New Hampshire polls closed on January 8, reporters suggested the race was nearly over. CBS's Dean Reynolds told anchor Katie Couric: "Barack Obama anticipates a good result tonight, and at this point there is no reason for him to think otherwise....His campaign organization is brimming with confidence."

On NBC, anchor Brian Williams celebrated with Obama, showing the candidate a copy of *Newsweek* magazine, with a cover story on "Obama's Dream Machine." Williams wondered: "How does this feel, of all the honors that have come your way, all the publicity?...Who does it make you think of? Is there, is there a loved one?"

Obama's loss that night to Hillary Clinton pushed the nomination contest to Nevada and South Carolina, where the issue of race took center stage. The networks' presumption was that the "race issue" would most likely hurt Obama, who would presumably lose the votes of prejudiced whites. NBC's Bob Faw, for example, suggested in December that the South Carolina primary "is a referendum of sort on how much this state is still shackled to its Jim Crow past, and how much it has set itself free."

Did Faw really mean a vote for Obama was a vote for freedom, and that a vote for Clinton was a vote for Jim Crow?

But there was another side of the race issue which showed itself in positive news coverage of Obama as a racial pioneer, exciting African-Americans as the potential first black president. All three networks pegged their Martin Luther King Day coverage to Obama's prospects as a racial breakthrough. According to ABC's Deborah Roberts, "whether or not they accept Obama's message, many black voters are enthusiastic about his candidacy." CBS's Byron Pitts declared that thanks to Obama "race is still an irresistible force in America, but no longer an immovable object."

That same night, NBC's Lee Cowan highlighted Obama's leading the NAACP's annual march in Columbia, South Carolina, "swarmed by supporters" and advocating unity. The following story by Andrea Mitchell cast the Clinton campaign as on the defensive about Bill Clinton's use of supposedly divisive rhetoric. Pivoting off of Clinton's earlier charge that Obama's claim to be the staunchest opponent of the Iraq war was "the biggest fairy tale I've ever

Gushing Over "Son of Camelot"

"Today they gathered by the thousands at American University, sensing a moment of history. John F. Kennedy gave the commencement address here five months before he was shot. And today, the audacity of hope had its rendezvous with destiny. The Kennedy clan anointed Barack Obama a son of Camelot."

— ABC's David Wright on the January 28 *World News*, reporting on Ted Kennedy's endorsement of Obama.

"Passing the torch. Barack Obama is tapped as the candidate to continue the Kennedy legacy."

— Anchor Katie Couric opening the *CBS Evening News*, January 28.

"The endorsement brought the Kennedy mystique to this campaign, not in a whisper, but a roar."

— NBC's Lee Cowan, January 28 *Nightly News*.

seen," Mitchell narrated: "At Ebenezer Baptist Church today, Atlanta's mayor, an Obama supporter, rebuked Bill Clinton to his face, saying electing a black man can be a reality."

Viewers then saw a soundbite from Mayor Shirley Franklin: "Yes, this is reality, not fantasy or fairy tale." Mitchell then noted that "at least two party leaders, Senator Ted Kennedy and Congressman Rahm Emanuel, a former Clinton aide, have told Bill Clinton that as a former president he should stop attacking Obama and dividing the party. But he has refused."

The contrast could not have been sharper — Obama was elevated as a potential breakthrough in achieving racial unity, while the Clintons were challenged as the sowers of racial division. Overall, about 12 percent of Obama's coverage (157 stories) included specific discussions of race. Just under a quarter of those (23%) offered a positive spin on Obama's role as a racial healer. The remaining three-fourths were neutral or mixed; none were negative. Thus, the "race issue" — at least as dealt with on the Big Three networks — was on balance another plus for Obama, and another handicap for his rivals.

Little TV Time for Obama's Rezko Connection. A few hours after those laudatory Martin Luther King Day newscasts, the candidates met in yet another debate where Hillary Clinton attempted to force a negative story onto the media agenda. After Obama slammed Clinton as "a corporate lawyer sitting on the board of Wal-Mart" as jobs were being outsourced, the New York Senator counterpunched: "I was fighting against those ideas when you were practicing law and representing your contributor Rezko in his slum landlord business in inner-city Chicago."

But the networks had little interest in promoting the details of Obama's connection with Tony Rezko, the then-indicted (now convicted) one-time Obama fundraiser. Prior to the debate, only CBS's Katie Couric had mentioned the case, in a brief report back on April 27, 2007, calling it a "potential threat to what's been a meteoric political rise." Couric, anchoring from Chicago, then followed up with a long report about the good works Obama accomplished as a community organizer.

Couric gushed: "Most people stayed in that job for four months. Obama continued to fight for four years, cutting his teeth on community activism, the first measure of leadership skills that are now being tested on a much larger stage."

While all three of the networks ran Clinton's Rezko-raising soundbite on their January 22 newscasts, only NBC's Lisa Myers followed up with a detailed report. On the January 29 *Nightly News*, Myers spelled out how Rezko was a longtime friend of the Obamas whose biggest favor to Senator was helping with the purchase of a home in 2005. The owner had wanted to sell the home and an adjoining lot together for more than \$2.5 million; the Obamas ended up buying the house for \$1,650,000 while Rezko's wife forked over \$625,000 for empty lot. At the time, Rezko was already being investigated for bribery and fraud.

In other words, a man under investigation for bribing state officials had delivered a pricey favor to the Obamas when they needed help buying the house they wanted. At the very least, it looked suspicious.

“Critics say that in paying full price for the lot, Rezko may have essentially subsidized Obama’s purchase, which Obama strongly disputes. The realtor who represented the seller says Obama could not have bought the house unless someone bought the lot at the same time,” Myers reported, adding: “Obama strongly denies any wrongdoing, but now calls the deal a ‘bone-headed mistake.’”

After Myers’ report, NBC essentially ignored the story, offering brief mentions on March 4, March 15 and June 4, the day Rezko was convicted – and the day after the last of the Democratic primaries. CBS’s Dean Reynolds included the bare-bones details of the Rezko transaction as part of a much longer profile of Obama for the February 28 *Evening News*, carefully pointing out that “no one has charged Obama with wrongdoing, something he has been quick to point out.” Apart from minor mentions of the case on March 3 and June 4, the *Evening News* had nothing else to say about the Rezko case, either.

Like NBC, ABC’s *World News* provided a single full report on the Rezko case, timed to coincide with the start of Rezko’s trial in early March. Reporter Brian Ross pointed out that “for all of his stated disdain for fat cats and special interests, Senator Barack Obama has had a long and close relationship with Rezko.” Uniquely, Ross pointed out to anchor Charles Gibson that “prosecutors do allege that in at least two cases Rezko did secretly funnel money to Obama’s campaign as part of his kickback schemes, something Obama says, Charlie, that he never knew.” ABC offered six other minor mentions of the case between March 2 and June 4, but like the other networks did not make it an issue that would dog Obama during the primaries.

Total coverage of the Rezko case: Just two full stories, with 15 miscellaneous mentions of the case between April 2007 and June 2008. The minimal press attention assured that Obama’s Rezko connection would hardly be an obstacle on his road to the nomination – more like a minor speed bump.

Insulating Obama from Reverend Wright. By the time the controversy over Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s radical statements reached the airwaves, Barack Obama had clearly achieved frontrunner status in the Democratic nomination race after an unbroken string of victories over Hillary Clinton from February 9 through February 19. At this point, Obama’s delegate lead would be difficult for his rival to overcome without a major shift in Democratic voters’ perceptions of Obama. The Wright story had the potential, at least, to trigger such a shift, if voters came to believe that Obama, a parishoner at Wright’s Trinity United Church of Christ for two decades, shared some of his longtime pastor’s radical sentiments.

But as with many of the stories that could have been a serious problem for Obama, the networks came to the story late and were loath to suggest a philosophical connection between

Wright and Obama. ABC's Jake Tapper, back in February 2007, briefly suggested Obama's "critics" would ask if "his church here on Chicago's South Side, which expresses a message of black power, is too militant for mainstream America to accept," but made no specific mention of Wright nor expounded on the church's "message of black power." A month later, the *New York Times* reported that Obama had excluded Wright from his formal campaign announcement due to "the campaign's apparent fear of criticism over Mr. Wright's teachings, which some say are overly Afrocentric to the point of excluding whites." None of the networks picked up on the *Times* report.

For nearly a year, the networks stayed silent on Wright and Trinity as a possible problem for Obama. In his February 28, 2008 profile of Obama, CBS's Dean Reynolds broke the embargo by including a short summary of the matter, saying "critics" called Trinity "separatist, racist and anti-Israel," and noted without showing any soundbites that Reverend Wright had pronounced "that racism is how this country was founded and how this country is still run."

Two weeks later, the networks finally picked up on video clips of Wright's sermons, showing him damning America and yelling that the U.S. had deserved 9/11. First to arrive on the story, ABC's Tapper on March 13 incorporated one quote from Wright in a longer piece that mainly focused on criticism of former Democratic vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro, a Clinton supporter, for saying that "if Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position" of Democratic frontrunner. Tapper balanced the piece by noting how Wright "is a member of the Obama campaign's African American religious leadership committee," and played this clip from Wright preaching: "Barack knows what it means to be a black man living in a country and a culture that is controlled by rich, white people. Hillary can never know that. Hillary ain't never been called a ni**er." (The network bleeped the final word.)

CBS picked up on the same quote the next night, plus Wright's "God damn America" sermon in a piece by Dean Reynolds that included the first condemnation from Obama: "Obama today wrote, 'I categorically denounce any statement that disparages our great country.'" NBC held itself to just a short item (without any video clips) read by fill-in anchor Ann Curry, who promised that Obama would appear on "MSNBC's *Countdown* tonight to address this still-brewing controversy." After that 22-second piece, the newscast spent three minutes on a puff piece about how excited Obama's childhood friends in Indonesia were about his candidacy. (See text box.)

"Good Luck, Barry"

"Barack Obama's latest endorsement from his old classmates in Jakarta, Indonesia. [Shows group in front of large banner reading "Good Luck, Barry!"] They'll be sending these photographs to the boy they all knew as Barry....The fact that Obama lived in Jakarta and studied at this school has really captured the popular imagination. It's already working wonders for America's battered image here....His friends hope there'll be no turning back on his journey to the White House. And Barry might attend their next reunion as President of the United States."

— Reporter Ian Williams, March 14 *NBC Nightly News*.

NBC finally got around to a full report on its lower-rated Saturday broadcast on March 15. Correspondent Lee Cowan was protective: “While his public rants are old, new airings of the video prompted the campaign to dismiss Reverend Wright from Obama’s religious advisory committee,” and included a clip of Obama on *Countdown* condemning the comments. After that, NBC and CBS suspended their coverage of Wright until Obama’s race speech the following Tuesday. Only ABC’s *World News* included Wright in their daily political wrap over the weekend and into Monday, when ABC’s Tapper included an old clip of Obama praising Wright: “I’ve got to give a special shout-out to my pastor, the guy who puts up with me, counsels me, listens to my wife complain about me. He’s a friend, and a great leader.”

Obama Wins the Media

“[Barack] Obama really won over his base, he won over the American media. They loved that speech.”

— *The Politico*’s Roger Simon on CBS’s *Face the Nation* on March 23, talking about Obama’s speech on race.

While all of the networks described the Wright-Obama story as a “controversy” and a “firestorm,” none of the networks had at this point aired so much as a single clip from any critic castigating Obama for his long association with Wright — the only soundbites were of Wright spouting off and Obama disapproving of his pastor’s rhetoric. Prior to Obama’s race speech, the networks had excluded any suggestion that the candidate’s deep ties to Wright — including basing the themes of his 2004 convention address and his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, on Wright’s sermons — could indicate that Obama either shared some of his minister’s radical views or had casually overlooked them as unimportant.

And, for the networks, Obama’s March 18 speech quickly changed the discussion from one about a radical minister to one about an African American presidential candidate who had the potential of uniting America. ABC, CBS and NBC framed their coverage as about Obama’s success in “confronting” the issue of “race in America” in an “extraordinary” speech. Both ABC and CBS displayed “Race in America” on screen as the theme to their coverage, thus advancing Obama’s quest to paint himself as a candidate dedicated to addressing a serious subject, not one forced to explain his ties to racially-tinged hate speech.

“Barack Obama addresses the controversial comments of his pastor, condemning the words but not the man,” CBS’s Katie Couric teased before heralding: “And he calls on all Americans to work for a more perfect union.” On ABC, Charles Gibson announced: “Barack Obama delivers a major speech confronting the race issue head on, and says it’s time for America to do the same.” Reporting how “Obama challenged Americans to confront the country’s racial divide,” Gibson hailed it as “an extraordinary speech.”

On NBC, Lee Cowan admired how, “in the City of Brotherly Love, Barack Obama gave the most expansive and most intensely personal speech on race he’s ever given.” Later on the same newscast, *Washington Post* editorial writer Jonathan Capehart was brought on to assess the speech. Capehart declared it a “gift” from Obama: “It was a very important speech for the

nation. It was very blunt, very honest....a very important gift the Senator has given the country.”

That night, only CBS’s Jeff Greenfield — on an *Evening News* panel that included liberal activist Jim Wallis of Sojourners and Debra Dickerson, a blogger for the left-wing *Mother Jones*, who both gave the speech rave reviews — dared to suggest that Obama had unfinished business: “How does a guy who spends 20 years with somebody with notions that seem very bizarre — like AIDS is a government conspiracy — what’s he doing with that guy for 20 years?...I don’t think this speech, effective as it may be in other areas, ends that controversy for him.”

Whether it truly answered any of the important questions about Obama’s relationship with Wright, the speech did effectively end the controversy as a major evening news story, with CBS anchor Katie Couric announcing three days later that her network’s polling had found how “an overwhelming majority of voters, seven out of 10, say he did a good job of explaining his relationship with the controversial Reverend Jeremiah Wright.” Beyond minor mentions, the Wright story was basically history until the Reverend launched his own media tour at the end of April, appearing on PBS’s *Bill Moyers Journal*, speaking at an NAACP dinner and appearing before the National Press Club on April 28, where he repeated many of his past incendiary allegations, and added at least one new one: equating U.S. troops to the Roman legions who killed Jesus.

Rather than point out how Wright’s 90-minute spectacle at the Press Club completely undermined Obama’s initial claim that the short video clips of his sermons had been unfairly taken out of context, the networks cast Obama as the true victim of the now-indisputably left-wing minister. *NBC Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams stressed how “one veteran politico today called it a ‘circus’ and a ‘sideshow.’” Reporter Andrea Mitchell fretted that “Wright’s appearances were an unwelcome distraction for Barack Obama....Supporters described the whole thing as a media circus.”

Once again, *Nightly News* brought on the *Post* editorialist Capehart for his expert analysis. Capehart rued that “unfortunately, the victim in all of this is going to be Senator Obama’s campaign.”

While the Wright story is often portrayed as the most damaging media episode for Obama, the record shows that the broadcast networks calibrated their stories to shield the candidate from the toughest questions and refused to air some of the most inflammatory clips of Wright’s preachings.

[For additional details on how the networks covered this story, please refer to our earlier report from the MRC’s Director of Media Analysis Tim Graham, “Editing Reverend Wright’s Wrongs.”]

Bad Press for “Bitter” Gaffe. Obama actually received tougher coverage in mid-April, after a liberal blogger published a quote from the candidate suggesting small town Americans are “bitter” people who “cling to their guns or religion or antipathy towards people who aren’t like them.” The quote emerged on Friday, April 11, but none of the evening newscasts offered reports that night. That weekend, CBS’s evening newscasts were pre-empted by coverage of the Masters golf tournament, but ABC and NBC produced full reports on their Saturday and Sunday newscasts.

For two days, the network spin was clearly negative towards Obama: “For Senator Barack Obama, the timing could not be worse,” ABC anchor David Muir began on April 12. Reporter T.J. Winick showed a soundbite from political analyst Stu Rothenberg, who opined that the remarks would be “a huge problem,” and Winick concluded by noting how “some voters were actually wearing ‘I’m Not Bitter’ stickers” at a Clinton campaign rally.”

Over on NBC, Lee Cowan reported how “critics claim the comments made him look like a liberal looking down his nose at conservative values.” The next night on ABC, reporter David Wright noted from Finleyville, Pennsylvania, that “one thing that bothers people in this small town is that Obama made those offending remarks out in San Francisco, almost like he was speaking behind their backs – and that makes it an even more bitter pill to swallow.”

Wright quoted a Catholic churchgoer rejecting Obama’s comments about faith: “I don’t think we turn to it out of bitterness. I think we turn to it out of hope.”

Of the seven stories about Obama’s gaffe aired on ABC and NBC over the weekend, five were clearly negative in tone, with the other two mixed, making it the worst two days of press coverage Obama had ever received. But over the next three days leading up to the final debate in Pennsylvania, the tone shifted in Obama’s favor. Nine out of the 10 stories that discussed the issue from April 14-16 adopted a mixed tone, not the negativism seen over the weekend.

Reporters began suggesting that Hillary Clinton’s criticisms had become excessive; ABC’s David Wright found that “talking to some of the voters, some say there’s a danger she’s pushing it too far.” Over on NBC, reporter Kelly O’Donnell forwarded complaints that the “elitist” charge against Obama was out of bounds, because it “amounts to the racially-charged word ‘uppity.’”

Holding Obama’s Feet to the Fire

Anchor Brian Williams: “Last time we were together, I handed you a copy of *Newsweek*, it was the first time you’d held it in your hands with you on the cover. Have you yet held this [*Time* magazine cover declaring Obama the winner] in your hands?”

Senator Barack Obama: “No, I don’t want to. Because the last time it was in New Hampshire and I ended up losing. So, I’m not sure if it’s the magazine or you, Brian, that’s the jinx, but I’m not taking any chances.”

Williams: “Last time, you looked at it and you thought instantly of your mom.”

Obama: “She’d like that picture. She always encouraged me to smile more.”
— *NBC Nightly News*, May 8.

An ABC News debate between Clinton and Obama on Wednesday night shifted the dynamic once again, with pro-Obama stories on all three networks the following evening suggesting the candidate had been a victim of ABC's supposed bias against him, demonstrated by tough questions about Reverend Wright and Obama's relationship with '60s radical terrorist William Ayers. Even ABC's own reporter highlighted criticism of his network from a Pennsylvania voter: "I felt they wasted a whole hour, a good hour, talking about nothing."

Between Wright's radicalism and Obama's gaffe about "bitter" voters, the seven weeks prior to the Pennsylvania primary were, in fact, his worst period in terms of network coverage. But as the chart on page 11 shows, even during this period, Obama still benefitted from twice as many positive stories from the networks (21%) than negative stories (just 9%). The Wright story, as mentioned earlier, actually wound up being a net positive for Obama on the networks, with virtually no direct criticisms of the candidate for his association with Wright, but hearty praise for his March 18 speech on race. And while Obama's "bitter" gaffe earned him negative press, the heaviest criticism appeared during the lower-rated weekend newscasts.

While the bad news certainly hurt, other stories helped prop up Obama's image. On March 28, for example, NBC's Lee Cowan offered a long piece on Obama's late mother that quoted only the candidate and his friends and family. "You know, at night, if I'm saying a prayer, you know, I send out maybe a little message to my mother, and hopefully she's somewhere and can hear it," Obama confided to Cowan. "A quiet but heartfelt whisper over the noise of a presidential campaign," Cowan dramatically concluded.

The day before the Pennsylvania primary, CBS's Bill Whitaker interviewed pro-Obama voters in Philadelphia and reported that black clergy from 200 churches had endorsed Obama. Reverend Ellis Washington contributed a soundbite praising the candidate: "We feel very strongly about the brand of leadership that he's bringing, the fact that he has energized a whole new generation of voters."

After Pennsylvania, Obama's next showdown was in North Carolina and Indiana, where the Clinton campaign touted their candidate's pledge to suspend the federal gas tax for the summer. Obama declared Clinton's plan to be a "gimmick" and – for the first time in the campaign – all three networks dove into a substantive policy debate, seeking quotes from policy experts weighing in on the matter.

Amazingly, every expert cited by the networks in the week before the Indiana primary suggested Clinton was wrong and Obama was right. "The high oil price isn't going to come down just because we temporarily cut the federal tax on gasoline," economist Mark Zandi declared on the April 29 *CBS Evening News*. "Great politics, but apparently terrible economics," ABC's David Wright asserted the next night just before quoting economist Len Burman: "You would be hard pressed to find any economist who would say this is a good idea."

In his report on May 2, NBC's Ron Allen insisted "many economists say it's [suspending the tax] a bad idea, because it could encourage more driving, increase demand and perhaps push

prices up.” CBS was back on Sunday with a report from Priya David pointing out how “150 economists signed a petition saying it’s a bad idea.” The day before the primary, ABC’s Jake Tapper cited no source as he asserted that “policymakers of all stripes think the proposal is a lousy one that may not even save consumers money.” NBC’s Andrea Mitchell shined her spotlight on voters who agreed with Obama that Clinton’s plan was a gimmick. “Oh, yeah, absolutely,” Indiana voter Donna Phelan declared. “It’s politics. They’re saying what people want to hear.”

The unanimous network commentary in favor of Obama’s position in the gas tax debate could only have helped him in Indiana, where Clinton’s final vote margin was just 1.2 percent (50.6% to 49.4%, according to RealClearPolitics.com). And, undoubtedly many economists did think that a temporary suspension of the 18 cent per gallon tax would not significantly affect the real problem of rising fuel costs.

In contrast, four months later (after the primaries concluded) Obama himself promoted swapping 70 million barrels of oil from the nation’s Strategic Petroleum Reserve, a step which he claimed “in the past has lowered gas prices within two weeks.” Would Obama’s proposal really have a genuine effect on prices, or was it also vulnerable to the charge of being a “gimmick”? (Four weeks earlier, Obama had specifically rejected such a step, saying the reserve should only be tapped in cases of genuine emergency.)

Unlike their coverage of the gas tax holiday in late April and early May, the networks on August 4 showed no interest in running Obama’s proposal to tap the emergency reserves by the experts. ABC’s Jake Tapper listed the proposal as he went through Obama’s laundry list of energy ideas, but sought no expert opinion about its merits. Neither did CBS’s Dean Reynolds, although Reynolds at least noted how Obama had flipped positions. On NBC, anchor Brian Williams read a brief item that suggested Obama was “refining” his position (a pun Williams almost certainly intended), but did not spell out exactly how Obama had shifted.

The next night, NBC’s Andrea Mitchell included the Obama proposal in a look at both candidates’ plans on energy. She noted the flip-flop, but the only expert she brought in, economist Fred Bergsten, did not weigh in on the idea to tap the reserves, instead scolding both Obama and McCain for having “not talked much about conservation.”

Thus, no network held Obama’s mid-summer energy proposals up to the same scrutiny they had reserved for Obama’s rivals in the spring — one more gift for the Illinois Senator’s presidential aspirations.

Conclusion: Winning With a Lot of Help From His Friends

Obama’s showing in the May 6 primaries prompted network pundits to declare him the inevitable victor in the nomination contest. “Absent a complete collapse in the Obama

campaign or an act of God,” NBC’s Tim Russert announced on the May 7 *Nightly News*, “this race is over.”

While Obama lost four of the last six primaries and collected 400,000 fewer votes than Hillary Clinton, the disappointing electoral results did not dampen the media coverage. During the final month, the networks would give Obama his best press since the start of his campaign in early 2007. More than four out of 10 network reports were pro-Obama during this period (43%), compared to just one percent that carried an anti-Obama tone.

Rather than subject Obama to the sort of pesky questions a candidate routinely faces, the networks focused on the history Obama was making. “Less than 150 years ago, black men and women were held in involuntary servitude. Slavery was the law of the land. And now, the Democratic Party will nominate a black man to be President of the United States,” ABC’s Charles Gibson celebrated on June 3, the night of the last primary contests. On NBC, Russert enthused how “Barack Obama, who says he’s a skinny black kid from the South Side of Chicago, has defeated the Clinton machine...to be the first African-American nominated for president by a major party. It is an extraordinary night.”

The next night, after Obama had officially collected the last delegates he needed, the networks all followed up with stories about the enthusiastic reaction of black Americans. “In clinching the nomination, Senator Obama has defied a long-held belief among many African-Americans that America would never be ready for this moment,” ABC’s Steve Osunsami argued. On CBS, Byron Pitts compared Obama to John F. Kennedy and declared that “one of America’s oldest and ugliest color lines has been broken.” (See text box.)

The euphoric coverage underscored one of the media advantages that Barack Obama enjoyed throughout the primaries. The success of Obama’s campaign did, in fact, represent a monumental shift in the history of race relations in the United States, a positive development that could rightly be celebrated. But Obama himself was also a partisan politician engaged in a tight contest, and simple fairness would suggest that just as a candidate must not be penalized because of his race, they also should not be elevated because of race. But the networks were clearly enthusiastic about Obama’s potential as a racial trailblazer, and this element of the campaign narrative provided a significant boost to the candidate’s media image.

Celebrating Obama’s Victory

“Barack Obama and his wife Michelle walked into history’s arms last night.... Just like JFK’s journey as the first Catholic President, America crossed a milestone. ...One of America’s oldest and ugliest color lines has been broken, and there’s a new bridge for a new generation.”
— Reporter Byron Pitts on the June 4 *CBS Evening News*.

“I’m curious about your feelings last night. It was an historic moment. Has it sunk in yet?...When everybody clears out, the staff is gone, you’re in the hotel room at night, and you’re alone, do you say to yourself, ‘Son of a gun, I’ve done this’?”
— ABC’s Charles Gibson to Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama on *World News*, June 4.

The early coverage, beginning with the 2004 convention and through the launch of his campaign in early 2007, also aided Obama's cause. Four years ago, Barack Obama was a little-known state senator seeking to win his first statewide office, but the highly positive media reception he received over the next two-and-a-half years made him a well-known national political "rock star." His celebrity profile raised Obama above other challengers in his ability to compete with the universally-known Hillary Clinton for early campaign dollars and supporters. The networks did not select Obama for his keynote role in 2004, of course, but the networks did promote Obama with an enthusiasm that other keynoters – including the African-American Tennessee Congressman Harold Ford, Jr., who spoke at the 2000 convention – never received.

This celebrity component to Obama's coverage also gave him an advantage in the weeks before the Iowa caucuses, when his tour with Oprah Winfrey received heavy coverage from the networks. The tremendously good press Obama received prior to those caucuses could only have helped him in such a tight race, which he needed to win to have a chance for the nomination. Losing Iowa would likely have meant the end of his candidacy; winning it gave him the momentum he needed to challenge Hillary Clinton across the rest of the country.

As the primaries settled into a one-on-one contest, the networks aided Obama with the way they handled stories of his past that might have affected voter sentiments. The candidate's dealings with Tony Rezko, whose trial coincided with the final three months of primaries, was given surprisingly little attention from the networks. The coverage of his minister's radical preachings was handled in a way that spared Obama from most direct criticism, as reporters cast Obama as Wright's victim rather than his longtime friend.

It is possible, of course, that all of these network favors had no effect in boosting Obama's quest for the Democratic nomination. But if the media did not actually win the Democratic nomination for Barack Obama, they surely made his road to the White House a whole lot smoother.

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