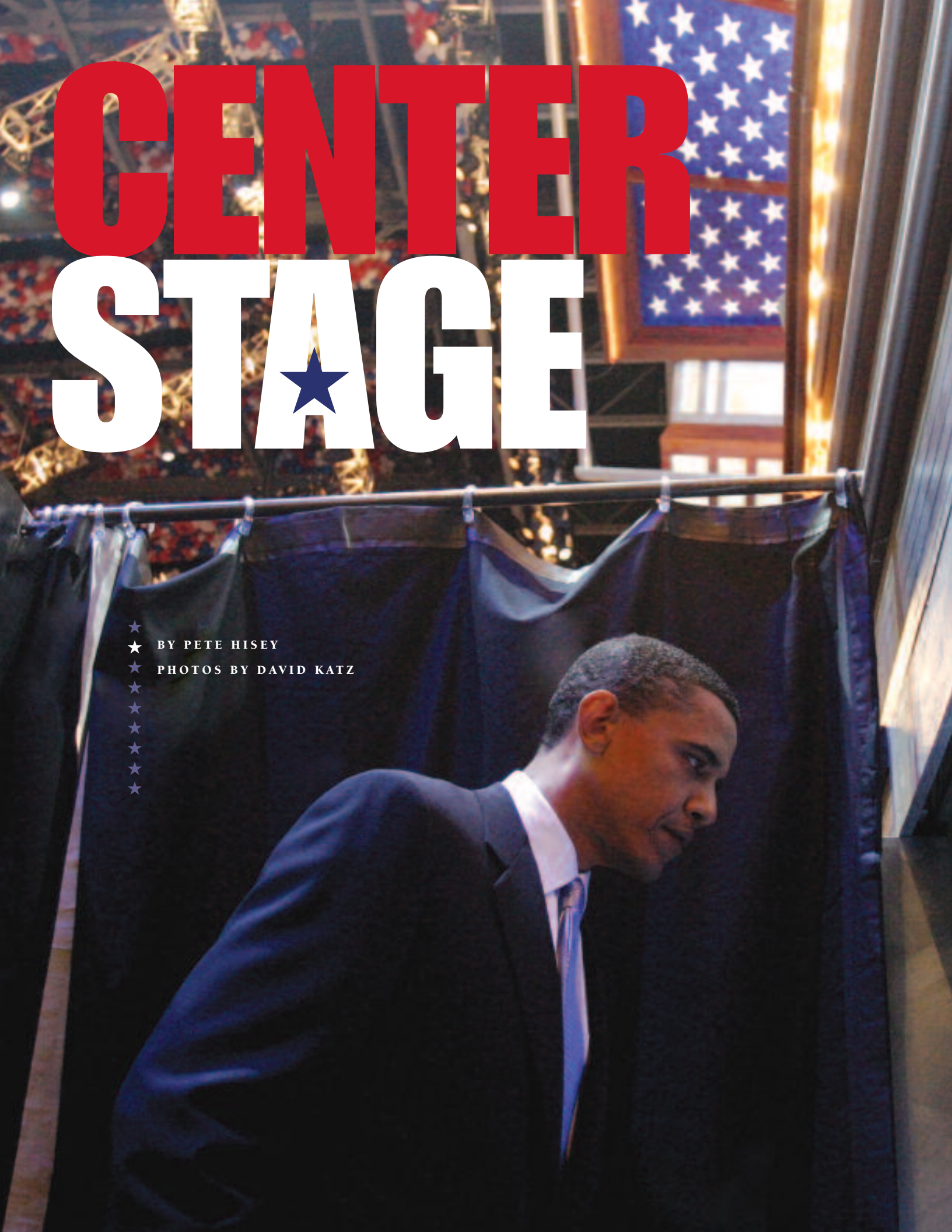
CENTER STAGE

BY PETE HISEY

PHOTOS BY DAVID KATZ





From Freeport (Aug. 1) to Rochelle (Aug. 2) to Olney (Aug. 3), Obama pressed the flesh with supporters of all stripes on a five-day, 39-town swing through rural Illinois.

Twenty-five years after his arrival at Oxy, Illinois senatorial candidate Barack Obama '83 electrified millions with his star-making speech at the Democratic National Convention in July. On the road with America's hottest politician

THE CALENDAR SAYS JULY 31, but it's mid-August hot (temperature: mid-90s; humidity: likewise) as Barack Obama '83 steps from his RV in small, union-friendly Ottawa, Ill., about 80 miles southwest of Chicago. The hot dogs and corn on the grill go untasted as the boyishly handsome politician—fresh from his career-making keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention—slowly moves through the parking-lot crowd of 350, which reluctantly parts to allow him to reach the stage where two-term U.S. Senator Dick Durbin awaits.

"We had a pretty good week in Boston, didn't we?" Durbin teases the cheering Ottawa crowd. "We had so many memorable moments: John Edwards, Bill Clinton, Ted Kennedy, and Teresa Heinz Kerry. And John Kerry gave one of the greatest acceptance speeches ever." The crowd applauds loudly. "And some of you might remember a speech on Tuesday night," he adds, and the masses erupt again.

After a general, but astringent, attack on the Bush administration, Durbin segues back to Beantown's breakout star. "You know, that convention was just a madhouse: CNN, television cameras, thousands of people chanting, signs everywhere, just madness. I thought to myself, before I introduced him, that it might just intimidate Barack a bit, so I went backstage. And there he was, head in his hands. I said, 'Barack, what's wrong?'

"'Dick,' he replied, 'I've been working and working on this speech, and it's just not good enough.' 'Barack,' I said, 'you're my friend, you're going to be a star, you're going to be my colleague in the Senate. I will do whatever I can to help you. Here, take *my* speech!'"

The crowd, hanging on every word, breaks out in laughter. "And didn't he do a great job?" Durbin finishes, introducing Obama as "the next senator from Illinois." The candidate who takes the stage is more relaxed, low-key, and conversational than the figure who electrified the Democratic faithful, prompting Heinz Kerry to predict, "He will be president someday." As Obama sees it, politics isn't about big speeches and reporters and TV lights. It's about connecting with people and doing his best to serve them.

"This state needs a workhorse, not a show horse," Obama tells Ottawa. He touches briefly on the issues he cares most about: Eighty percent of Illinois schools are running at a deficit; anyone can be bankrupted at any moment by a sudden catastrophic illness; America will fight for freedom, but it should only fight the right wars; and Americans should be able to work for a living wage that makes their kids' future just a bit better, and be able to retire in dignity.

The election may be more than three months away, but Obama's 39-city victory tour is officially under way. Come November—barring an unlikely political hurricane named Alan Keyes—Obama will be the first African-American man elected to the Senate since the Civil War. They say hindsight is 20/20, but with national media falling over themselves to praise him, would-be opponents dropping out of the field left and right, and a nine-vehicle caravan in tow, anyone new to Illinois politics may not realize how unlikely that victory was.

BARACK OBAMA WAS A LITTLE-KNOWN THREE-TERM STATE senator representing Chicago's South Side when he announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate in early 2003. A senior lecturer and constitutional law specialist at the University of Chicago Law School, he had no money, a staff in the single digits, and, as he puts it, he was a guy from South Chicago "with big ears and a funny name."

His main opponents out of a field of seven were Blair Hull, a multimillionaire with a gift for self-promotion, and Cook County treasurer Dan Hynes Jr., Democratic scion and a career machine politician. The two dominated the race early on, with Hull (the subject of a long profile in *The New Yorker*) running buses full of senior citizens up to Canada to fill prescriptions, while yard signs sprouted throughout the state for Hynes.

All Obama could do was run the activist, community-oriented campaign that had been his hallmark on his way to the state Senate.

"The grassroots work paid off," he says today. "We had more enthusiasm, more volunteers, and it was just infectious. And we managed to raise enough money at the last minute to go on television during the last three weeks." While Obama was surging in the polls, Hull's campaign imploded amid media accusations of spousal abuse and a self-admitted drinking problem, while Hynes—a nice guy without a lot of ambition—ran a middling race relying on his middling support base.

When the results came in on March 16, Obama notched one of the greatest upsets in Illinois history. "I thought we would win, but I would be lying if I said we would win by 30 points," he says.

But he won by a landslide—and the Democratic Party took notice.

BORN IN HAWAII TO A KENYAN FATHER AND A CORNFED Kansan mother—their marriage disintegrated when his father left for Harvard—young Barack Obama spent his early childhood in Jakarta, Indonesia, before returning to Hawaii, where he was raised with the help of his grandparents. He attended Punahou School on scholarship, and then enrolled at Occidental in 1979 on a full scholarship. His basketball skills caught the eyes of the coaching staff, but as a sophomore, Obama ditched his hoop dreams for academics.

"Barack was a bookworm," says Hasan Chandoo '81, a financial consultant in New York and Obama's roommate during his sophomore year at Oxy. "He had to quit basketball to concentrate on his school work." Chandoo notes that Obama first became politicized at Occidental, where the two became involved in the anti-apartheid movement and attended rallies for causes like Citizens in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). "He could have made a lot of money, become an investment banker. But it was clear that he was taken with politics. He was always reading a book like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and it took over his life."

TOP: Obama's front man on the RV tour, U.S. Senator Dick Durbin, *right*, warms up the crowd at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield Aug. 18. **ABOVE:** The Southpaw Obama autographs a newspaper for a supporter at a campaign stop in Galena Aug. 1.

"I got into politics at Occidental," Obama says in an interview between campaign stops. "Occidental was still investing in South Africa. I made a conscious decision to become involved in public policy." That decision would lead him to Columbia University and his first exposure to both community organizing and cold weather after his sophomore year in Eagle Rock. "I really wanted to see New York and become more involved in politics," he explains. "Everyone says I made it overnight, but it was 20 years of work, if that's overnight."

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IT TAKES A LOT OF EGO TO BE A POLITICIAN, FROM SMALL-town mayor to president of the United States. You have to be able to stand up in front of people and tell them, in essence, that you are better than they are, while at the same time assuring them that you're no better than they are.

The Obama who emerges onstage is more humble, and less fiery, than the Barack star (rhymes with rock star) the public expects. Subdued yet forceful, he will repeatedly disavow the star status he's attained, telling audiences that it's all hype and he is concerned only with the meat and potatoes of politics. Often, one of his last lines in a speech is, "The most important office in America is that of politician."

"Democrats are not running against people, we're running for people," Obama tells a partisan gathering of Democrats who have packed the VFW Hall in the scenic yet depressed town of DePue. "There's nothing partisan about giving people a living wage, a decent education for their kids, real healthcare that won't send them to the poorhouse, and the chance to retire with dignity." Following an explosion of applause, Obama concludes, "People are tired of politicians attacking each other instead of attacking problems." That line plays so well it finds its way into nearly every speech that follows.

Obama comes into his second race for national office with some impressive credentials, ones he uses sparingly on the stump. He was a good student at Occidental (where President Richard Gilman nominated him for a Truman Scholarship during his sophomore year) and he bloomed as a community leader while at Columbia, where he worked for an outreach program in Harlem, an extension of CCNY, City College of New York. That led to a paying job when he graduated, and he spent several years there working for community colleges, until he decided that civil rights law was his future and enrolled at Harvard Law School in 1988.

There, with a fiery background in organizing, he really hit his stride. He became the first African-American president of the *Harvard Law Review* in 1990. It was also the first time he was publicly called "too white," a charge he would face later in Chicago, as he named mainly whites to positions with the *Review*. The charge would recur a decade later when he took on Bobby Rush, a former Black Panther and popular Chicago congressman, where he went down to a humiliating defeat. "I got spanked good," he told the press at the time, and he learned.

Campaign staffers, for instance, are terrified of any hint that Obama thinks the race is sewn up. Asked point-blank what committees he wants when and if he reaches the Senate, he pauses, then almost ducks. But after reflection, the answer is firm: He wants to be on healthcare, foreign policy/intelligence, and tax policy committees. Given his rising-star status in the political world, he, like freshman Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, will probably get his wish.

More than 600 supporters turned out in Ottawa, Ill., for Obama on July 31.

KEWANEE IS ONE OF THE PRETTIEST TOWNS IN ILLINOIS, with graceful green lawns folding down to the pond and park that form the center of the town. Congressman Lane Evans, central Illinois's most beloved politician, is on hand to introduce Obama (his was the only significant endorsement Obama received before his primary win). The audience here numbers close to 1,000, the speeches here are more polished, and the roles have become more defined. Durbin will attack Bush and promote Kerry; Obama will take the high road in an effort to draw in the independents and disaffected Republicans who are starting to salt the crowd as the campaign moves south and west. "I don't think George Bush is a bad man," Obama says. "He didn't cause 9/11 or the recession. But he didn't do enough to help."

The next stop is Monmouth, a Democratic stronghold and home of Monmouth College, where 300 people have been waiting in a sold-out auditorium for more than an hour. Here, among friends, he takes on George Bush, calling him the "Can't Find It President," referring to not only weapons of mass destruction, but jobs and Al Qaeda as well. "This is an ideologically driven foreign policy that never lets facts stand in the way," he says. "We have to regain the respect of the world and regain our standing in the family of nations." The audience of academics and students goes wild.

The next stop, Oquawka, is the polar opposite from Monmouth. Its chief claim to fame is that you can toss a rock into the Mississippi from the town green, and the bars all offer $1 beer in acknowledgment of the large number of unemployed locals. Again, the turnout far exceeds the campaign's projections, numbering about 300 in a town whose population isn't much more than that, and the union presence is again the deciding factor. When Obama takes the stage, he is at his most aggressive. Republicans are "knuckleheads" and "just don't get" that the country needs better education, better health care, better jobs. "When I went to school, we all took music and art and played sports, and today in Illinois, too many kids have to pay for that privilege," Obama says, calling it "profoundly un-American. We are spending hundreds of billions of dollars for a war that didn't have to be fought."

After a miserable night in a downscale hotel in DeKalb, the bleary-eyed campaign clambers into minivans and SUVs and heads for the local bandshell. This is the heart of Republican country, House Speaker Dennis Hastert's home base, and at 9 a.m. on a Sunday morning, the advance men have predicted a turnout of 300 or so. Instead, 1,400 rabid fans are stomping and cheering as the RV pulls up. A punk band is playing a new song about "rocking for Obama," and a woman holds up her 6-month-old grandson, "Baby 4 Obama" printed on the poor tyke's forehead in blue ink.

Convention photo by Kevin LaMarque/Reuters

ABOVE: Michelle and Barack Obama acknowledge the cheering masses in Boston in July. As a student at Oxy, "It was clear that he was taken with politics," says roommate Hasan Chandoo '81. "We knew we would never get rich this way," says Obama (on the trail for ice cream with his wife and kids, **LEFT,** in Galena Aug. 1). "I'm not really motivated by money."

This rock star treatment may be getting out of hand.

The partisan blood is flowing, and both Durbin and Obama turn it up a notch. The stage is awash in Democratic hopefuls in a vastly Republican town, and the GOP-bashing never stops. Ruben Zamora, a local teacher taking on the hopeless task of running against Hastert, gives a brave speech as the audience ignores him and rushes at Obama. Women walk away saying, "I touched him." Another says, "I will never wash this hand again."

For the first time, Obama introduces his bona fides. "I have a record: I worked on getting health insurance for kids who had none, on an earned income tax credit for those who needed it, and reforming a broken death penalty system." Then, aware that up to a third of the audience is Republican, he launches into an unabashed appeal to bipartisanship, saying, "We are not in boxes. We have mutual concerns." An impassioned speech follows—perhaps the most impassioned an audience has seen him—and the reaction is nearly hysterical. His staff has to move in to pull him out of the crowd, like bouncers at an Usher concert.

STOP NO. 10 IS BELVIDERE, IN AN APPROPRIATELY NEW DEAL WPA community center, where a spillover crowd has been waiting for more than two hours. Obama owes much of his success to these lily-white, often Republican rural towns (where the only African-Americans in evidence besides Obama are two of the reporters covering the campaign). For the first time since Monmouth, Durbin and Obama have a real stage, but they choose to speak from the floor.

Obama continues the hard sell, ticking off his accomplishments in the state Senate before launching into a pitch for the Republican vote. He outlines his stance on outsourcing jobs, providing healthcare for all, making sure every war sends young people into battle for the right cause, and making the public schools work for all. "What is partisan about that?" he asks to thundering applause. One Belvidere spectator, a self-identified Republican, claims he will vote for Obama *and* George W. Bush: "I vote by personality, and Obama has it."

The caravan rolls on to the Democratic stronghold of Rockford, arriving two hours late. More than 2,000 people stand in a riverside park, among them, for the first time, a significant number of blacks and Latinos. Here, the rock star quotient reaches new heights. Women flock to the RV, with sealed copies of the *USA Today* cover story with Obama's photo, and when they can't get near Obama, seek out his wife, Michelle, for her autograph. Another woman appears to be hawking 8x10 color photos of Obama, and word reaches the campaign that Obama lithographs are going on eBay for $70. (A reporter's suggestion to the campaign staff that they should sell T-shirts and posters is met with an icy glare.)

In this friendly environment, both Durbin and Obama become more partisan, with Durbin even suggesting that John Kerry will ride Obama's coattails in this election. That brings up an interesting point: A local paper carried a cartoon of a female Democrat holding up a sign that says, "Dated Dean, married Kerry, lusts for Obama." Obama ducks questions about how he might help Kerry, feeling it's presumptuous. But in a one-on-one interview, he finally says, "My job is to take care of business here in Illinois. I want to make Dick Durbin majority leader in the Senate. But if I can make contributions in the swing states, like Ohio and Missouri, of course I will be there."

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, THE TWO-LANE BLACKTOP TOUR reaches Galena, a small resort town overrun with crystal shops (three of them on Main Street alone). Every other sign touts Republican native son Ulysses S. Grant, and the campaign is expecting 250 or so. But more than 1,000 pack the lawn in front of the Old Market House. There are even kids watching from trees, and a random canvassing of the crowd reveals spectators from Iowa, Wisconsin, and even Ohio, all of whom have made the trek to see Obama.

Again, Obama is running late, and frankly, the crowd doesn't get the most for its money. Durbin's voice is failing and Obama is fading fast. His wife and children—Malia, 6, and Sasha, 3—have returned from a water park, and Obama speaks bravely, but exhaustion is setting in. After the speech, the campaign lingers to visit an ice cream shop. With one more stop still to go before day's end—historic Mount Carroll, population 1,832—campaign workers are on their cell phones: We are two hours late; can we blow this place off? The answer comes back. There are 250 people waiting in the town square, at 9 p.m. on a Sunday. The caravan lumbers on.

Mount Carroll may be small, but it has the most amazing Civil War monument, perhaps 70 feet tall, with beautifully carved Union and Confederate soldiers on either side of its pure white marble face, and a timeline of the war in the middle. In pitch darkness, Durbin and Obama stand on a retaining wall in front of the monument, with townsfolk crowding around them. There are no microphones, no introductory speakers, and the pair are both exhausted, but the rapport is tangible. Both speak softly, and there is dead silence, so they can be heard. And both give heartfelt, simple speeches. It fits so perfectly with the sense of the place—of how politics must have been 150 years ago—that even the jaded campaign people are taken aback.

As Obama speaks in the pitch dark, to an all-white audience, the words carved in the monument, SLAVERY ABOLISHED, float over his head. It's unlikely that the person who carved those words a century ago could have conceived of an African-American standing underneath that monument, running for the U.S. Senate.

THE OBAMA CARAVAN ARRIVES AT THE hotel late, and to everyone's surprise the owners, Democrats to the core, have kept the restaurant open and even set up a hospitality suite. Obama and Durkin head to their rooms, but most of the staff and press, like roadies, gather in the suite to drink beer and eat the veggie platter and cheese and catch up on news and sports. Former presidential hopeful Alan Keyes (who ran for U.S. Senate in Maryland in '88 and '92) has newly surfaced as a GOP contender. The staff is extremely circumspect, but it is clear that they like that concept. After names such as legendary football coach Mike Ditka and aged rocker Ted Nugent threatened to turn the election into a joke, Keyes raises the level of competition—despite polls that will show Obama opening up an even bigger lead with his entry into the race—and Illinois will see some of the most entertaining debates in years.

At a Monday-morning stop in Dixon, the boyhood home of Ronald Reagan, Obama and Durbin again are met by an overflow crowd that has closed down Main Street. As the caravan moves on to the next town, Durbin is asked the question: Why are you spending three days helping a guy who could win easily without you? "I met Barack and his wife eight years ago, before they had those babies, and Loretta and I liked them immediately. I knew he had a great future, and you just saw it."

Obama is an open and available person, but he has learned to be wary of the press. He carefully considers every question, but he answers them all fully. Yes, he believes he will win, no matter who the opponent. Yes, he wants certain committee appointments, even if it seems arrogant to assume he will win. And yes, he thinks the rock star treatment will fade as the campaign turns to debates and advertising.

One question remains. How did he get that keynote speech gig? The answer is almost prosaic. Shortly after his primary win, he toured with Durbin through downstate towns to thank them for their vote. Upon their return, Kerry was in Chicago, and spoke at one of Obama's fundraisers. The next day, Obama returned the favor and the two couples had dinner that night.

A few weeks later, in late April, Obama heard there might be a speaking role for him at the convention. "I never expected anything like the keynote speech," he says, "but I was aware that they were interested in me."

Maybe it was Heinz Kerry, who thinks Obama might be president someday, or it might be Kerry's staff, who saw a rising Democratic force. But someone spoke up, and three weeks before the convention, Obama got the word. And the rest is history in the making.

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Headline Act

Photo by Brian Snyder/Reuters

Highlights from Obama's keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in July:

My parents shared not only an improbable love, they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," believing that in a tolerant America your name is no barrier to success. They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential.

…People don't expect government to solve all their problems. But they sense, deep in their bones, that with just a slight change in priorities, we can make sure that every child in America has a decent shot at life, and that the doors of opportunity remain open to all. They know we can do better. And they want that choice.

…If there is a child on the South Side of Chicago who can't read, that matters to me, even if it's not my child. If there's a senior citizen somewhere who can't pay for their prescription drugs, and has to choose between medicine and the rent, that makes my life poorer, even if it's not my grandparent. If there's an Arab-American family being rounded up without benefit of an attorney or due process, that threatens my civil liberties.

It is that fundamental belief—I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper—that makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams and yet still come together as one American family. E pluribus unum: Out of many, one.

Now, even as we speak, there are those who are preparing to divide us—the spin masters, the negative ad peddlers who embrace the politics of anything goes. Well, I say to them tonight, there is not a liberal America and a conservative America—there is the United States of America. There is not a black America and a white America and Latino America and Asian America—there's the United States of America.

The pundits like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states—red states for Republicans, blue states for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the blue states, and we don't like federal agents poking around in our libraries in the red states. We coach Little League in the blue states, and, yes, we've got some gay friends in the red states. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and there are patriots who supported the war in Iraq.

We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the Stars and Stripes, all of us defending the United States of America. In the end, that's what this election is about.