

All Too Human

*Disappointment with Obama among young people is inevitable.
Disillusionment doesn't have to be.*

To watch your son accept a major party's nomination for governor ought to be a joyful occasion for any father. But not for Bernard Spitzer. It was late May 2006, spring was in full bloom, and I was driving Bernard and his wife Anne to the Buffalo airport, after the conclusion of the New York State Democratic Party convention. Their son, Eliot, had just accepted the party's nomination for governor, and he was cruising to a blowout victory. Eventually, he would capture nearly 70 percent of the vote, a state record for a gubernatorial candidate. His advisers often whispered—sometimes rather loudly—about a future White House run.

But that afternoon, all Bernard wanted to know was why I, at such a young and ostensibly unspoiled age (I was 21), would want to work in an enterprise as unscrupulous as politics. I was taken aback; the answer seemed too obvious to articulate. But Bernard pressed, gently but relentlessly in his Austrian accent, for the roots of my decision to intern for his son.

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I had spent the previous three years as a student volunteer for various Democratic candidates. I did so not because of immense affection for any particular candidate, but because I viewed the Democrats as a bulwark against the Bush Administration and the increasingly radical conservatism of the Republican Party. Eliot Spitzer was different. With his commitment to progressive principles, with his ethical certainty, he was, in no small way, my political hero.

And so I told Bernard that, when I began volunteering for political campaigns, I was comforted by the example his son had set. Politics, Eliot Spitzer seemed to demonstrate, could be more than a televised competition for a dwindling number of votes or a debate over micropolicies that would never affect the voters en masse. In the right hands, politics could be public service. The answer to Bernard's question, in other words, was his own son. Eliot Spitzer had convinced me that, contrary to common wisdom—and even in this day and age—politics could indeed be ethical.

What I didn't know at the time was that my hero was also Client Number Nine. Less than 18 months after his election, Spitzer suffered one of the most ignominious falls in recent political history—one that brought an early end to a hapless, corrupt administration. I therefore approach the rise of Barack Obama with a certain degree of caution. As young people get involved in politics in record numbers, we need to look beyond his surface appeal and the possibility of immediate transformation Obama offers. It's not that Obama is somehow less impressive than he seems. But politics must be about more than any man or woman. It's about the ideas that guide us, and the consequences those ideas can bring about. Hanging too much on one individual will either lead to disappointment or delusion, as we sweep problems under the rug to preserve our idealized version of the politician.

Comparisons between Obama and John Kennedy were made frequently throughout the campaign. The community blogs on Obama's website were filled with gushing comments, including one that appropriated Lloyd Bentsen's famous dig at Dan Quayle: "Senator, I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a hero of mine. Senator, you are America's new Jack Kennedy." At least Caroline Kennedy had the genetic qualification to make the comparison, writing in her *New York Times* endorsement, "I have never had a president who inspired me the way people tell me that my father inspired them. But for the first time, I believe I have found the man who could be that president—not just for me, but for a new generation of Americans." Among some of his most passionate supporters, Obama is seen less as a human being and more as a Great Leader, someone who will transcend the divisions of the past four decades and cure all

that ails us. While alluring, this line of thinking is dangerous. It is not only ripe for parody, it is potentially harmful—not just to the Obama Administration, but to the creation of a long-term progressive moment.

Presidential hero worship requires convincing large swaths of the public that you can do no wrong. Even setting aside the post-assassination myth-building, Kennedy had it: At his lowest point, 56 percent of the nation still approved of his performance, the highest low point for any president since Gallup introduced the approval rating poll. Moreover, Kennedy electrified a generation of voters in a way unseen in modern times. His youth and poise gave him rock-star status before the Beatles ever went on Ed Sullivan. But focusing on Kennedy's heroic visage obscures the real deficits of his presidency. He miscalculated on the Bay of Pigs. He was painfully slow on civil rights. His admirable commitment to

defending democracy took America on a direct path to the Vietnam War. He was, in short, fallible, even if we remember him as a demi-god.

Kennedy was fallible in other ways, as well. Bernard Spitzer was on to something that spring afternoon: Politics is sometimes a sordid business, with only small and cramped quarters

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for the ethically pure. Kennedy, of course, understood this well, even if his followers didn't. He stole (or allowed Mayor Richard Daley to steal) Chicago in 1960 from Nixon. He, too, had a complicated private life, to say the least, with details of his affairs and underworld connections coming out only after his death.

To his credit, Obama has tried to temper his supporters' wildest expectations—to knock the halo from his own head. "I'm reminded every single day that I'm not a perfect man. I will not be a perfect president," he said on the stump, and in his pre-election 30-minute commercial. He frequently deflected his supporters' enthusiasm away from him and back on to them. To the crowd that watched him accept the Democratic nomination in Denver, he said that this election has "never been about me; it's about you." His campaign website blared an Obama quotation exhorting his supporters to not just believe in his ability to bring about "real change," but in their ability to do the same.

Yet one wonders if enough of his supporters—especially those twentysomethings and teens who flocked to his campaign—have listened. The campaign trail this year was crowded with young Obama volunteers who previously wanted nothing to do with politics. On one level, this is a good thing. But the enthusiasm has occasionally overflowed. At a rally in Alexandria, Virginia, last February,

I winced when I caught sight of a group of young Obama supporters who, to show their affection, had painted the candidate's name on their faces. When Obama entered the gymnasium, they shouted deliriously. Following Obama's victory speech in Iowa last January, *American Prospect* blogger Ezra Klein wrote, "Obama's finest speeches . . . enmesh you in a grander moment, as if history has stopped flowing passively by, and, just for an instant, contracted around you, made you aware of its presence, and your role in it. He is not the Word made flesh, but the triumph of word over flesh, over color, over despair."

The personality cult surrounding Obama reminds me of the similar cult that surrounded Eliot Spitzer—of which I was a member. While driving the Spitzers, I was enthralled by the possibilities their son represented, as were thousands of other young people. Friends of mine who had no interest in politics praised him effusively. Over the course of the school year before his election, I distributed endless garbage bags of "Students for Spitzer" pins. Spitzer promised, during his quest for the governor's mansion, that "on day one, everything changes," and I believed him. You don't have to listen hard to hear an early version of the instantaneous, transformational change that many think was promised by the Obama campaign.

Spitzer's administration, though, was a disaster long before his fateful trip to the Mayflower Hotel. The fact that he won a record number of votes, which some speculated would give him a broad mandate to govern, did not deter the legislature from running roughshod over him. The paralysis and insularity that has marked New York politics for generations proved invulnerable to the force of Spitzer's popularity, and it eventually swallowed him whole. The impossibly scandalous coda to his career was embarrassing, but somehow inevitable. He had already disappointed—and he would have even if his political failings and personal foibles were not as dramatic.

Obama, thankfully, is clearly not burdened by the pathological personality flaws that brought down Spitzer. But the Obama Generation will still need to get used to the near-impossible predicament confronting President Obama.

Despite the overwhelming number of Democrats now in Congress, and the national consensus to turn the page on the last eight years, the constellation of policy challenges confronting the nation will require Obama to compromise and, at times, accept defeat. At a basic political level, many of the new Congress members who have been swept into office since 2006 come from moderate to conservative districts. They may find themselves, for reasons of ideological differences or just electoral politics, unable to support the broadest version of the Obama agenda.

And while setting priorities sounds like a benign task, those who regard Obama as a hero now may be disheartened later by the priorities he sets. During his campaign and into his administration, Spitzer was embroiled in a conflict over whether gay marriage was a “top priority” on his agenda, or merely one among many. Obama will have to decide between pursuing universal health care and bailing out homeowners, between winning in Afghanistan and intervening in Darfur. These are the hard choices of governance for which there are no easy answers. If Obama can only solve seven of the, say, 20 biggest challenges facing the nation at the present moment, that would surely disappoint many. And yet, if you think of Obama as a baseball player, that record would also make him a .350 hitter, all but guaranteeing him a spot in the Hall of Fame.

For young people with the wildest hopes for Obama, the gap between expectations and reality will be jarring. Counterintuitive as it sounds, the future of the progressive movement will depend on incorporating the first (and only) principle of the apathetic: Politicians are not saviors. The long-term accomplishments of politicians form the basis on which they ought to be judged. Delivering soaring oratory, or making grand promises during an election, is not enough. The accomplishment of progressive ends is what truly matters. To accomplish them in the current climate of uncertainty will require a spirit of experimentation, which only increases the opportunities for disappointment.

At stake over the next four years will be our decimated financial system, and the impoverished communities that the Bush economy left behind. When it comes to global warming and the urgent need for alternative energy, we'll have to make up for precious lost time. And we'll have to return to our place as the world's leader for peace and stability while continuing the war in Afghanistan. That's just the tip of the iceberg. None of these tasks will be remotely easy. The stumbles along the way may be disheartening, and inevitably there will be those who become disenchanted and drift away from politics. But if we configure our expectations correctly and understand the great but also limited possibilities of a president, those numbers will be small. The cynicism of previous generations, the kind voiced by Bernard Spitzer, will not be proven wrong by enthusiasm on the campaign trail, but by a commitment to public life that remains steadfast no matter what it encounters. ▀