

Jorg Gray: Obama's watch is epitome of recessionista chic

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For conclusive evidence that he really is “no drama Obama”, look no further than the US president's watch. He may have gone to Harvard Law School but there is no flashy Rolex on this former community organiser's wrist. His love of sports is renowned, but the gym junkie has not gone for a timepiece with a heart-rate monitor.

Barack Obama wears a minimalist Jorg Gray 6500 Chronograph, an analogue watch with a simple black strap and three small dials, movement provided by the run-of-the-mill Japanese company [Citizen](#).

The \$250 timepiece is the epitome of recessionista chic for a president who finds himself trying to dig the world's largest economy out of a very deep hole.

It also sets him apart from other world leaders: Italy's Silvio Berlusconi has a \$540,000 Vacheron Constantine, while Vladimir Putin, the Russian prime minister, sometimes sports a \$60,000 Patek Philippe and Nicolas Sarkozy of France, sometimes called “President Bling-bling” has a \$30,000 Rolex Cosmograph Daytona as his day-to-day watch.

When Mr Obama became president and wore the large, black watch on election night and Inauguration Day, watch aficionados were scratching their heads trying to figure out the obscure brand.

But the watch came from the Secret Service gift shop, a present from his security detail on his 46th birthday in August 2007.

It turned out the woman who ran the gift shop for Secret Service employees had ordered 50 “Jorg Gray” watches printed with the service's logo from Logomark, a company making corporate watches for corporations: the free watches handed out after touring a company headquarters. Watch connoisseurs were not impressed.

“It's a perfectly fine watch, it's just not that exciting,” says James Gurney, editor of QP, a London-based watch magazine. “It's a standard, middle-of-the-road watch, the kind of thing that a democratically nuanced leader of the free world needs.”

But Mr Obama has hardly taken off his Secret Service since he was given it. “It's a big, eye-catching watch and he wears it all the time,” says Jeff Stein, an Atlanta lawyer and part-time horologist who first identified the make of Mr Obama's watch. “He's as likely to wear it with a tuxedo as when taking off somewhere in a helicopter.”

Companies spend millions having celebrities advertise their watches: Tag Heuer has Brad Pitt, Rolex has Roger Federer, and Omega watches are touted by Nicole Kidman and George Clooney.

But Jorg Gray has the most famous man in the world wearing its watch – for free, although the company is not allowed to use Mr Obama's image to advertise its product.

“Celebrity endorsement does work,” says Mr Gurney. “Jorg Gray was extraordinarily lucky to get the most glamorous president, the one who everyone wanted rather than the one who won the nasty way.”

Thanks to the president's implicit endorsement, the brand has gone from being a giveaway watch to an item sought after by Obama-philies.

They are sold in 250 shops in 15 countries, as well as online. “Because he wore this watch, we have been able to establish it as a brand. I don't know that we would have ever have been able to launch a retail brand without him,” says Trevor Gnesin, president of Logomark.

Jorg Gray now sells a “commemorative edition” for \$325. Because companies are prohibited from reproducing the Secret Service logo, the faces are plain but feature an inscription on the back reading “The 44th President of the United States Barack H. Obama”.

Asked about sales figures, Mr Gnesin says they have grown from zero in retail sales 18 months ago, to close to \$1m a month now.

The watch has become something of a political thermometer too. “You can see how people feel about the president just by the sales – when people approve of something he's done, sales surge. And when they're pissed off, sales take a drive,” Mr Gnesin says.

Just after Mr Obama declared in August an Islamic centre should be allowed to be built near Ground Zero in New York, Mr Gnesin saw an “influx” of online orders from Muslim-majority countries.

But First Family endorsement does not always mean commercial success. [Hartmarx](#), the company that made a suit, overcoat and a dinner jacket for Mr Obama’s inauguration, filed for bankruptcy last year and was sold, while Maria Pinto, a Chicago designer who produced many of Mrs Obama’s dresses, closed her shop after sales waned.

There is also Mr Obama’s political fortune. If Jorg Gray sees a spike in sales when the public approves of something the president does, it ought to be concerned about poll ratings, now below 50 per cent.

For that reason, Mr Gnesin has tried to diversify rapidly. “We’re trying to avoid being a one-watch company,” he says, “so we have moved very, very quickly to have a range of watches.”

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