

## The Making of a “New Face” for Democracy in the U.S. and Abroad

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By Arnold August, October 2011

David Axelrod was hired by Obama as his media adviser for his political career. Axelrod worked out of Chicago since 1972, first as a *Chicago Tribune* political writer and later opening up a consulting firm. He quickly earned a reputation for campaign policies “with an aptitude for African-American campaigning.” For example, he led the re-election of Harold Washington (1987) after Washington had a difficult time in his original campaign whereby he nevertheless emerged in 1984 as the first African-American mayor in Chicago’s history. Axelrod and Obama met for the first time in 1992. They were working among Democratic leaders in Chicago, where Obama was a community organizer. Axelrod then worked for Obama as media consultant for his 2004 campaign for the United States Senate.

When Obama decided to run for the 2008 presidency, Axelrod was again chosen as the man to run his media strategy. During the presidential election, David Axelrod was credited with revolutionizing modern-day campaigning. Astute enough to realize America was looking for a fresher, more progressive president who could unite the nation and inspire even the most apathetic and ambivalent citizens, Axelrod implemented a “bottom-up” grass-roots campaign style. He ingeniously created short television biographies of Obama as the quintessential face of the American Dream. Axelrod’s television biographies made a virtually unknown Obama accessible to America, assuring the nation that the presidential candidate would work diligently to unite races, political parties and foreign nations. Axelrod also promoted Obama as the bipartisan face of change by implementing other technology-laden campaign tactics.<sup>1</sup>

In the April 2008 edition of *U.S. News and World Report* on Obama’s two decades in Chicago politics leading up to the presidential campaign and victory, an article quotes his adviser, Axelrod, as saying that, in Chicago politics, “People are upfront in their self-interest.” And in the context of politics in Chicago, Obama’s own friends acknowledge that, to succeed, one has to be, among other characteristics, a “self-promoter.” Axelrod concludes that Chicago is “a great place to learn about politics and what motivates people.” The person who hired him as a community organizer twenty years before his push for the presidency and still “a close friend” said, “I don’t think he would have ended up where

he is if he hadn't come to Chicago. It's where he got an incredible education in real politics." The article goes on to say:

In finding out about the importance of the Churches in American and Chicago society, despite having little previous interest in religion, Obama joined [Jeremiah] Wright's growing church to deepen what one friend called "a whole web of relationships" in the community that gave him a strong political base and a well-connected mentor.... Seeking to cultivate as many relationships as he could, Obama took up golf, because so much business was conducted on the fairways.<sup>2</sup>

After he graduated from Harvard Law School, the same article continues, he worked for a Chicago law firm specializing in civil rights, "these experiences giving him many contacts in the power structure."<sup>3</sup>

As the appropriate springboard for the 2008 Democratic nomination, under the aegis of Axelrod, they launched his presidential campaign when Obama was invited to give the keynote speech to the Democratic National Convention, confirming John Kerry and John Edwards as the candidates for president and vice-president respectively. The keynote script was well worked out: Obama's characterization of his father as a "goat-herder," and as a cook and domestic servant to the British, and replete with American Dream images and reconciliation of "Democrats and Republicans," "blacks, whites and Latinos." Given the importance of the foreign policy role and the needs of the "military-industrial complex" to be assured, it is noteworthy how Obama praised Kerry. Obama went out of his way to mention Kerry's role in the Vietnam war, not once, not twice, but three times in a very short speech: "From his heroic service to Vietnam... [And then again] Lieutenant Kerry did not hesitate to risk his life to protect the men who served with him in Vietnam, President Kerry will not hesitate one moment to use our military might to keep America safe and secure." [And, as part of the "politics of hope,"] Obama highlighted "the hope of a young naval Lieutenant [Kerry] bravely patrolling the Mekong delta."<sup>4</sup> "Vietnam" as the buzzword, or the code of assurance, has been a continuous theme in Obama's political evolution from the very beginning of his youth to today. It constitutes the "defining touchstone" that marks his full integration as a potential spokesperson for the "military-industrial complex" and the "1%"

elite. This is in direct opposition to the goals and aspirations of Martin Luther King, an opponent of war and U.S. aggression.

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<sup>1</sup> Biography. n.d. "David Axelrod Biography." bio. At <<http://biography.com/people/david-axelrod-431900>>.

<sup>2</sup> Washington Post. 2004. "Transcript: Illinois Senate Candidate Barack Obama, Keynote Address at the Democratic National Convention." (July 27). At <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A19751-2004Jul27?language=printer>>.

<sup>3</sup> Walsh, Kenneth T. 2008. "Chicago's Presidential Classroom: Two Decades in the Windy City Shaped Obama's Political Aspirations." *U.S. News and World Report*, 144, 11 (April 21), p. 32–42.

<sup>4</sup> Washington Post, op. cit.