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"What Minority Lawyers Can Learn From Obama"

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A few months ago in the pages of *Texas Lawyer*, I offered up lessons women lawyers should learn from U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., who was running for president of the United States. Now, it only seems fair to impart some lessons minority lawyers should learn from her opponent, U.S. Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., now the presumptive Democratic nominee.

This is not to say that there's nothing to be learned from U.S. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., the presumptive Republican nominee. He's undoubtedly a statesman and may well be our next president. Still, he's white and he's male; I just don't know anything about being either of those two things.

Just as with Clinton, it doesn't really matter whether you support Obama. His campaign offers wisdom for all lawyers who ever have walked into a room and realized that nobody there looks like they do.

Don't let lowered expectations equal lowered performance. Obama started life in 1961 as the child of a Kenyan father and a Kansan mother. The "skinny kid with the funny name" grew up with an absentee dad, which could have provided an excuse for leading a less-than-illustrious life. (If you've read his first book, "Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance," you know he gave "less than illustrious" a shot during his youth.) But he rigorously pursued his education, became the first African-American to lead the *Harvard Law Review* and won a cakewalk election to the U.S. Senate in 2004.

Nevertheless, when he threw his hat into the presidential ring as a first-term junior U.S. senator from Illinois, nobody truly expected him to start what even his most ardent critics admit is a national movement, propelled by unprecedented interest among young people and a fundraising machine that has blown away the competition.

That is the beauty of this country. For better or worse, we're not so bound to tradition that people can't surpass their own expectations of themselves -- or others' expectations of them. Regardless of whether our ancestors came here in chains, fled here from dictatorships or famine, or just wanted something better, Americans always make our own destinies.

Obama has never let others' expectations or excuses pre-determine his destiny. For minority lawyers who may suffer from what President George W. Bush famously has called the "soft bigotry of low expectations," Obama offers a useful road map to success, whatever one's political ideology: Early struggles do not rule out future successes. Others' limited ideas about one's potential are not insurmountable barriers to achievement.

Don't make it about race. Until he had to face it head on (because of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright hubbub), Obama rarely spoke of race. Whether it's because he's half Anglo and, therefore, probably as comfortable around white people as he is around people of color, or he just knew better, Obama didn't dwell on the issue. It's not as if he had to remind voters that he's black. They could pretty much figure that one out on their own.

This absence of explicit discussion of race probably helped make a wide range of voters from a number of different races comfortable with him. In fact, early on in the race, he didn't even get much traction with African-Americans, because he wasn't perceived as being black enough.

Being a person of color in a predominantly white profession is difficult, no doubt. I spent much of my early career painfully aware of my Asian-ness. I noticed whether there were other Asian lawyers at events, and I worried about whether my clients would accept me as their counsel. As time went on, though, I realized that being Asian was only one element of my identity and, thus, only one point of contact with those around me.

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Regardless of skin color, most people are basically alike. If the person I'm working with or for isn't Asian (and chances are they're not), there are still a million other things I might have in common with them: kids, tennis, work, "Dancing With the Stars," etc.

My ethnic heritage is ingrained in my DNA, as it is in Obama's. But it's not the only thing we have to talk about, and it's not the only thing about us worth knowing. Obama's ability to win the White House will hinge not on his race, but on whether he can unite a majority of the electorate around the many things we all have in common. Likewise, for young lawyers of color, their success will hinge on their ability to convince their clients that they're the best lawyer for the job. And that's rarely about race.

Dress better than you have to. Business casual dress codes have been nice for all but two groups of people: dry cleaners and young professionals who still have to prove their worth. Obama clearly knows the pitfalls of underdressing. You rarely see him in anything but a suit, and that likely has helped win over some otherwise reluctant voters.

Likewise, lawyers of color, who aren't yet the norm in our profession, have to get past the hurdle of people assuming they're only there because of affirmative action. Don't give people who make that assumption any ammunition -- and casual dress is ammunition. If you want to be taken seriously, dress seriously. I'm not saying you should wear a suit on the golf course, but the worst thing that can happen if you show up to a meeting wearing a suit and everybody else is wearing khakis is that you look sharper than the rest of them. That's not so bad.

Thick skin is the best kind of skin. This was one of the lessons women lawyers needed to learn from Clinton, and it applies equally to minority lawyers and Obama. [See "What Women Lawyers Can Learn From Hillary," Texas Lawyer, March 24, 2008, page 29.]

Way back in May 2007 -- more than a year ago and long before any presidential candidate has ever had it -- Obama was put under Secret Service protection. I sincerely doubt this was because the agency just really likes him.

Though polite society has abandoned overt racism, it's still out there, as virulent and ugly as it ever has been, and I don't doubt for a second that Obama has been on the receiving end of some pretty nasty stuff, including death threats.

On top of that, he has gone through a bruising primary race against a tough opponent, and he knows the worst is yet to come. If he didn't have thick skin, he would never have made it through law school, let alone a long and challenging primary battle.

Being a lawyer is tough. Being a minority lawyer is tougher. Not everybody in a lawyer's professional universe is nice; some are even racist. You'll have to deal with those people, and do so gracefully. But the prize will be worth it.

We're at a unique time in history, when we've had two historic candidates -- a woman and an African-American -- with a shot at winning the presidency. Whether Obama eventually wins in November will depend on a lot of factors, one of which is whether he can win over voters in a country that only 50 years ago required blacks to drink from separate water fountains.

But regardless of agreement or disagreement with their politics, we can all -- man, woman, black, white, Asian and Hispanic -- learn a lot from Obama and Clinton about professionalism, tenacity and courage.

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