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Barack Obama: The *Vibe* Interview

By jeff Chang



I understand this is a crazy week for you. You have three big bills up - the war supplemental budget aka "Stay The Course Act of 2007," authorizing \$95 billion in additional funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the immigration reform bill, and a lobbying reform bill—that you're dealing with here. You had a huge set of events in Philadelphia yesterday. How do you balance the working life and your family life?

Well, you know, by its nature, a presidential race is out of balance. Your life is out of balance. Cause you're traveling all the time. You're working all the time. You're not seeing your wife and your kids as much as you would like. What I try to do is to just understand that the work I am doing is important enough that it makes it worth the sacrifices. But you never get over the sacrifice of being away from your family. I was home one day this week and rode bikes with my daughters, went to the dentist last week, took 'em out to dinner. But you know it's hard when you leave and they ask, 'Where are you going, daddy?' And, 'When are you going to be back?' So that's the single hardest thing about politics generally, and a presidential race in particular.

There's a brilliant line that your daughter drops on you in the book - *daddy, I just want a simpler life.*

Yeah.

Do you miss that simpler life?

I do. Now I've got Secret Service protection, I can't just jump in a car and drive to the store.

Does that affect you at home too?

Yeah. And I've never been an entourage guy. I've always been somebody who pretty much tries to keep things simple. Even during my US Senate campaign, I was driving my own car until about two months before the primary. You know, I have my map, I'm trying to find a parking space.

No GPS.

Yeah, and all that has changed. I do miss the freedom of anonymity and the freedom of being able to go where you want when you want without a lot of fuss. But again, I think what you always say to yourself is the work that I'm doing and the potential for changing this country's politics is worth it. But the presidential race is not something where you can't be half in and half out. Once you've made the decision - and me and my wife talked long and hard before we made the decision - but once you're in, it's like climbing a mountain. It's easier to just keep on going up than it is to try to climb back down.

You received some support from folks in the industry. L.A. Reid did a big fundraiser for you. You did work with Ludacris in Chicago around AIDS. And you got hammered by the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Daily News*. They were saying you should give the money back to David Geffen because he funds Snoop Dogg. Any plans to give the money back?

No. Look. A lot of this arose around the issue of Imus, and I think a lot of people tried to play political football with the issue, instead of listening to what I had really said. I was criticized by some in the hip-hop community as if I had targeted them. And I was criticized by more conservative or more mainstream commentators for quote-unquote "being hypocritical."

The truth is I stand by exactly what I said, which was that the language, the degrading comments about women that Imus said is language that we hear not just on the radio, not just in music. We hear it on television, we hear it in our barber shops, we hear it in the streets, we say it among our friends, and we are all complicit in, I think, promoting a set of stereotypes or views about women and minorities that are damaging. Minorities themselves. We ourselves perpetrate this, and we all have to take responsibility for that.

I've got two daughters and it's a challenge for me every day to make sure that they're getting a positive self-image and that they are not being swept up in some of the negative attitudes about girls generally and Black women in particular. Now the main responsibility is with the parents, and I've never supported censorship as a strategy to deal with this. But I think it's something that we can all talk about. And so I think that some in the hip-hop community immediately assumed, I guess based on press reports they heard, instead of reading my actual statements, that I had targeted them out by themselves, and others assumed that I was trying to score cheap political points.

But the fact is that we've got a culture generally - not just hip-hop, but a culture generally that is dynamic and exciting and rich and sometimes negative and coarse and not particularly enlightening. We're all consumers of this culture and there's nothing wrong with us sort of saying, 'You know what? Some hip-hop is terrific and powerful and some of it is junk.' Just like country music - some of it is interesting and powerful and some of it is junk, and the same is true of any musical genre, the same is true of movies, the same is true of TV.

There's some TV shows that are violent but actually are powerful and smart and interesting and I think give people insights into the human condition. I watch *The Sopranos* and I think it's a powerful show. There are other programs that are violent just because they don't really have much else to say and so they are just promoting a bunch of blood and gore to sell tickets. I think that we should be sophisticated enough to be able to make those distinctions. But the important thing that I want to simply say is that we all have some responsibilities in this process and government alone is not going to solve these problems. Targeting Imus alone is not going to solve these problems. We've all got to sort of look inward to see whether we're communicating to our children the kinds of values and ideals that are going to make us stronger.

Russell Simmons said that you should work on fixing the problems that cause these lyrics rather than trying to fix the lyrics. Would you agree with that?

I absolutely agree that, in some ways, rap is reflective of the culture of the inner city, with its problems, but also its potential, its energy, its challenges to the status quo. And I absolutely agree that my priority as a U.S. senator is dealing with poverty and educational opportunity and adequate health care. If I'm ignoring those issues and spending all my time worrying about rap lyrics then I'm wasting my time.

On the other hand, I think that there's no doubt that hip hop culture moves our young people powerfully, and some of it is not just a reflection of reality, it also creates reality. I think that if all our kids see is a glorification of materialism and bling and casual sex and kids are never seeing themselves reflected as hitting the books and being responsible and delaying gratification, then they are getting an unrealistic picture of what the world is like. And that's true by the way of the most successful hip hop producers and artists. A lot of them work like dogs, a lot of them work hard, a lot of them are very ambitious, a lot of them are thinking about business in sophisticated ways. But that's not necessarily what you see on videos. What you see on videos is they're just hanging out, bunch of girls in bikinis or sort of running around. That gives our youth an unrealistic picture of what it takes to succeed. So yes, my job is to focus on poverty, education, health care, but I think we have to acknowledge the power of culture in affecting how our kids see themselves and the decisions they make.

What do you get down to? What's on your iPod?

You know I haven't been buying new music lately. Because I don't have time. Look, I'm impacted by my generation. Most of my iPod probably is either jazz classics - Coltrane, Miles Davis - or it's got the songs of my youth, right? So you know Stevie Wonder, Earth Wind & Fire, Aretha Franklin. But every once in a while I will find something that's out right now that moves me, and then I'll pull that down. So when the Fugees were together, I loved listening to the Fugees. I think OutKast

does a lot of interesting work. My fellow Chicagoan Common I think is outstanding. I really dig his stuff. I can't say I keep up compared to my wife and my daughters. They've always got the radio on in their car, so they're a lot more up to speed. You know, the Justin Timberlake and all that stuff...

I have a lot of friends who grew up with hip hop, and now they're parents and they won't let their kids listen to the radio.

I'm more sensitive to it than Michelle is. I'll cringe sometimes when I'm listening to some lyrics and I'll try to turn the down radio. She is, I think, a little more relaxed about it than I.

Yesterday at the rally [in Philadelphia], there were many young people, including a number who aren't even able to vote yet. The two issues that came up the most often for them were the war and paying for education. Let's talk about the war first. You've been having a lot of discussions here in the Capitol about timetables for withdrawal. But you also said yesterday that we were 16 votes short in the Senate of being able to do so. What do you really think it'll take to end the war?

I'll be honest. I don't anticipate Bush changing his mind. He's dug in, I think his attitude is that no matter what happens, he is not going to change course before he leaves office. He's going to try to string this along and then it will be the next president's problem. And my hope is that we can persuade enough Republicans before the next presidential election that it's time to change course so that we can impose a timetable and get the process of moving our combat troops out to start.

You know, 16 votes is not an insurmountable number. But that's what we're going to need - we're going to need a veto-proof majority because he's not going to budge. We've got to create an environment politically around the country where Republican legislators are feeling so much pressure that they are willing to buck their president. If you talk to them privately, they will tell you that they're not that optimistic about the prospects of this surge and increased US involvement but I think they feel like they're lassoed to the president and that they can't move off his position. And I think that's a mistake and the more people put pressure on them, the more they are writing letters and taking to the streets in peaceful rallies, the more I think my Republican colleagues will be nervous about sticking with the president on this.

The other issue was college, but I think the unspoken issue was what the destiny of the generation will be. It seems there have been two major developments over the past two decades: one being the move to end affordability for higher education, and the other being the massive growth in laws that are targeting a lot of the youths, and the massive growth of the prison-industrial complex. Young people are on these two different tracks. And the other part of it is that none of these discussions have been part of a presidential debate literally for a generation.

Well, they will be part of this campaign. I think you're right - that part of the reason we are attracting so many young people is young people recognize their future hasn't been on the agenda, that we keep on making decisions or failing to make

decisions that are going to have more impact on them than they do on current generations.

So let's take a couple of examples you mentioned. I think all young people, regardless of economic status, recognize that the economy is changing, that we're in a global economy, that it's more competitive, that the days when you went to a job and you stuck there for 30 years are over. Every young person is going to have, you know, eight to 10 jobs, careers, before they retire. And so young people I think understand better than anybody that knowledge is their ticket to success.

Now you know the school systems are failing generally when it comes to teaching math and science, making sure that America stays on a technological pace to compete, and so young people are rightly anxious that their life chances over time, their living standards over time may in relative terms decline unless we really ramp up all aspects of our education system.

And the wealth gap between generations has increased dramatically over the last two decades.

Absolutely. So I think young people's instincts are right. Now, what can we do about it? I think for all schools we've got to improve our teaching core. We've got a million teachers who are going to be retiring as the baby boomer generation retires. That's a huge opportunity for us to start paying teachers more, so that we can recruit young people to go into teaching, focus on math and science, give teachers more flexibility and creativity in the classroom, revamp curriculum so that they are more relevant to a modern economy. We haven't changed how we educate our kids since the agricultural era, basically. We still have three-month summer vacations because kids were supposed to go out and help harvest. So that has to be fundamentally restructured.

Then we've got a very specific problem in terms of inner-city schools, schools teaching predominantly African Americans or Latinos or immigrant kids where English is not their first language, rural schools where you've got a lot of low-income white youth that have some of the same problems that you're seeing in the inner cities, and in those schools, we've got to be more intensive in terms of improving the system. It's going to involve investing in early childhood education, so that kids are coming to school prepared. Right now you've got children who, when they get to kindergarten, they're already two years behind. They don't know their colors, don't know their letters, don't know their numbers - not 'cause their parents don't love them, but because they may not have the tools or they may not have books at home, they may themselves have been dropouts and not be capable readers. So we've got to give our children in these communities full access to early childhood education so they get prepared in school.

We've got to put even more money into those schools so that they can recruit teachers, and in some cases, the best teachers may have to be paid more to go to schools in inner-cities or rural communities that are tougher to teach. We're going to have to expand the after-school programs and summer school programs because low-income kids are less likely to get the kind of enrichment outside of the school setting that sustains their learning during the summers or after school.

We've got to embark on some school construction projects. I was down in South Carolina, you've got kids that are going to schools that were built right after the Civil War. All those things are going to impact on the child's learning. Health care impacts on kids' learning. We've got tons of young children in low-income communities that are not getting enough to eat, have undiagnosed health problems, eyesight, dental, may have mental issues that are undiagnosed, and so to the extent that we are making sure that all of them have good quality primary health care that's going to have an impact on their educational performance. So that's a massive investment we have got to make on the toughest schools where the poorest kids are going, but we've also got to revamp the schools generally.

Now, where do we get that money? The war on Iraq is costing us \$275 million a day. If we start phasing down that involvement in Iraq we can take some of that money and devote it to education. The Bush tax cuts - a huge proportion went to the wealthiest 1 or 2% of Americans. We roll back some of those tax cuts that went to the wealthy, we can provide health care for every person in this country, including our children and that will give them a leg up when it comes to education.

And you're right to make the connection between education and incarceration. A huge proportion of young people in the criminal justice system are dropouts, illiterate, didn't have educational opportunities, didn't see a vision for their lives beyond the street corner, and the more we invest on the front-end, the less we're going to have to spend on building prisons.

Another issue is the number of laws that have criminalized young people. Mandatory minimum sentences, for instance. The Sentencing Commission came out this past month and said we should get rid of them for first-time offenders selling under five grams of coke. There is a whole other battery of laws that have targeted young people - such as the sweep ordinances, which were ruled unconstitutional in Chicago - based on the idea that youths of color are 'superpredators.' Is it time for us to start looking at those kinds of laws and start rethinking them, or is it still too early?

Well, I actually think that states are trying to get smart again about crime, instead of just quote unquote "tough on crime." The stupidest strategy that we've been pursuing is, for example, eliminating educational programs in prisons. The notion that taking away the tools for those who are incarcerated to get an education has been somehow good criminal justice policy makes no sense. That's what landed them there in the first place.

I think states recognize that the absence of programs to give ex-offenders opportunities to get job training and transition into gainful employment is being rethought. I think a lot of states are looking at three-strikes-and-you're-out policies as filling up their prisons but not necessarily making the streets safer. So I think you're going to see a healthy debate around dealing with violence.

Do you find it frustrating that in the media there are a lot of non-Blacks writing stories about whether you are Black enough for Black voters? You've got two books out. One of them is all about your search for identity, and yet there seems to be a lot of interest in the media to say, 'Well Clinton was the first Black

president. Toni Morrison settled that a long time ago. Senator Obama, he's multicultural, or maybe something else, we don't know.' Does that frustrate you?

I don't think anybody's talked to Toni Morrison lately! I suspect if you ask her she'd probably confirm that, in fact, I would be the first Black president. [laughs] Yeah, it is interesting. It doesn't frustrate me that much because it's never a problem I have in the neighborhoods. If I go to my barber shop, if you go to the Hyde Park Hair Salon, 53rd Street on the Southside, and you ask my guys in there, people don't understand the question.

It's very much an elite question that's propagated either by the mainstream media that doesn't know very much about African American culture, or a certain select group of African American academics or writers who I think are struggling with their own identities and kind of hoist that on me or project that upon me. But it's something I worked out along time ago, as I wrote about. I know who I am, my friends, my family, my constituency knows who I am, and by the time this campaign is all over, America will know who I am.

It is a sign that we as a culture are still confused about race. I think that there's this assumption that that there's only one way of being Black, that if you are not conforming to a certain pattern of behavior, that somehow you may not be authentic enough. And those of us in African American culture know that you know there's as much diversity in the African American community as there is in any other community. It's the same kind of thing you know when people talk about Asian America. You know, they got to *live* in Hawai'i! And you know there's a big difference between how Filipino folks and how Korean folks think. So there's just, I think, an education process taking place. The good thing is that you see young people being much more sophisticated about these issues, because they've grown up in a more multicultural society and the media they access has a lot of different faces in it, and a lot of different people, and I think that makes me hopeful for the future.

Last question, and this one's for my editor. Fashion. What do you like to wear? Will you be wearing Air Force Ones on Air Force One?

You know I gotta admit I'm a pretty conservative dresser, mainly just because...

But you have a thing with ties, though, you don't like to wear ties.

I don't like ties if I don't have to, mainly because I spill stuff on 'em, and...

I was wondering if it was a Hawai'i thing.

Well that's part of it. You know, you get all choked up. But I'm generally a pretty conservative dresser, mainly because I just don't have enough time to think about what I'm wearing. So if I find like some pants that fit, I'll just buy like five pairs and I'll just keep recycling them until they get so many holes in them that it's time to move on.

It was funny because *Esquire* chose me as one of the 20 best-dressed men in the world, and my wife couldn't believe it! Cause I've got, like, *holes with sweaters in 'em* and suits all shiny and worn! And she was like, she was funny. She talked about how there's probably some guys sitting in a cafe in Milan who spend all their

time thinking about the latest Armanis and stuff, going, 'Who is this guy Obama?! How did he get there?!' I think the fact that I keep it simple and stupid probably works for me.

Is she, in addition to everything else she is, your dresser?

No, no, no. She's actually pretty good about it. She knows I'm conservative when it comes to dressing. So she's stopped trying to buy me stuff, cause she'd get me, you know, some lavender something or other, and I'd be like, 'Honey, I'm not gon' wear this.' So she gave up on that. All she asks is that I don't have holes in my clothes, that I don't have patches, things like that. But no, I think growing up in Hawai'i, you don't think about clothes that much.

You're used to wearing slippers, shorts, a t-shirt.

Right, a t-shirt. And that's how I grew up! So now I just buy what looks good and is not gonna go out of fashion.

Well, it's embarrassing for me to ask this, but what kind of suit are you wearing right now? Your watch? Your shoes?

No! I don't know! Nah! I'm not gon' worry about that!