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humane suggestions for economic reform such as only a learned Marxist could do. But President Kenyatta didn't like it. He angrily summoned Barack Sr. to his office. According to his son's later account, Kenyatta told his father "that because he could not keep his mouth shut, he would not work again until he had no shoes on his feet". So this brilliant man was plunged back into dire poverty. To console himself for his lost dreams, Barack Sr took to drink. When Kenyatta finally died in 1978, Barack Sr was rehabilitated, but by that time he was broken and embittered. He later lost both legs in a car accident, and subsequently his job. A further car accident in Nairobi killed him in 1982, aged only 46, exactly the present age of his son. Barack Jr was only to meet his father once, as shown in the now famous photograph.

Barack Jr went with his mother to Indonesia, where he was given an Indonesian step-father for a while. After four years in a Jakarta school, he was shunted back to Hawaii, where he was looked after by other relatives while his mother pursued her career elsewhere. In his books, Barack Jr has often expressed gratitude for the sacrifices his battling family made for him. Others helped too. His childhood mentor, whom he describes in his first book only as "Frank", was probably Frank Marshall Davis, a Chicago Communist who had been driven into exile in Hawaii by the FBI because of his "Un-American activities."

By age 18, his family decided that Barack Jr should be offered a really good formal education. So they pooled their resources to make it possible for him to follow in the footsteps of his father. Young Barack did not let them down, but carved out a glittering academic career at Columbia, Chicago and Harvard Universities, becoming the first ever black editor of Harvard Law Review. He did not confine himself to academia but practised as a civil attorney who helped the poor. For three years he worked as a community organiser on the tough south side of Chicago, just as Davis had done before him. It was there, while working under the direction of

another socialist named Gerald Kellman, that Obama built his first political base.

Obama first ran for public office in 1996, for the Illinois State Senate, winning easily. He successfully moved up to the Federal league in 1995. Since then he's been returned twice as Senator for Illinois, most recently by a record landslide win of 73 to only 27 per cent for his Republican opponent. He and his wife have built their combined wealth to \$1.3 million, most of which came from the sales of his books. Obama made his reputation as an author with his first book, *Dreams from my Father*, which is devoted entirely to that man of tragedy from Lake Victoria.

Obama's political record is chequered. On domestic matters, very good, on foreign affairs - very bad. He has issued uniformly pro-imperialist statements on Cuba, Iraq, Sudan, Israel and Pakistan. He even ventured one quite ignorant comment about Sri Lanka in January. The Tamil nationalist MDMK have recently been trying to ingratiate themselves with him. Whether Obama would continue in this lamentable vein as President remains to be seen. But we should not discount the possibility that he knows the limits within which he must work. If he were to begin by saying, for instance, that Israel must abide by all the UN resolutions pertaining to it, Obama must know he would not last five minutes in US politics. He is far from stupid. Perhaps he also understands the wisdom of Epicurus's doctrine about adhering to local religious customs. For although there was no real religion at all in his upbringing (he admits his father to have been a 'confirmed atheist'), Obama may feel it prudent to go along with Christianity. In the Senate however, where his words really count, he did present Bills to de-escalate the war in Iraq, and to prune tens of billions of dollars from the gigantic US defense budget. The latter remains one of his main election planks, one that takes some political courage to uphold in America.

On domestic issues, Obama is thought by many, including McCain, to be the most liberal member of the entire US Congress. He stands for universal guaranteed health care, free college tuition, state-run wage insurance

as they have in Europe, more public housing, free child care, progressive tax reform. And that, he says, is just for the first term!

Obama is distrusted and feared by the American Right. He has also been attacked by what styles itself as the American Left. Obama has made enemies for rejecting the single-issue approach to politics previously taken for granted among the US Left. They want him to copy Rev. Jessie Jackson by leading a loose coalition of groups purportedly representing women, Afro-Americans, homosexuals, Latins, trade unionists, Native Americans, the environment, etc. etc. The Revolutionary Organisation of Labour (Maoist), for example, has criticised Obama for not supporting the creation of a new American nation-state, which they have decreed will be called 'the Black Belt South'. Groups of that kind have already written off Obama as just another Colin Powell. But Obama answered his critics with a fine speech on race (March 8th), where he offered sympathy for white workers' legitimate grievance that they have borne the

costs of low-wage immigration plus divisive social policies such as affirmative action. One may choose to dismiss his words as vote-seeking, nevertheless Obama is the first black US politician ever to talk in this way.

It is far too early to discard the possibility that Obama is sincere. He won the crucial South Carolina primary on the votes of millions of white workers as well as black. Jessie Jackson never managed this, because his Rainbow coalition alienated white workers, who instead preferred Bill Clinton. Despite all claims to the contrary, workers are not dupes or fools. Obama has shown an inspiring capacity to heal old wounds between workers across the colour line, rather than aggravate them this is totally new. If gun-crazy America allows him to live, and he can defeat McCain, his first actions as President will be well worth watching. Who knows? We may find that the most important question about Barack Obama Jr is not from what race he comes, but from what class.

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