

Interview with Jim Edgar
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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: The next person I wanted to ask you about is President Barack Obama. We had talked about him before, but it was always in the context of these other decisions that you were making or with the Blagojevich situation. What do you think about his emergence as a politician?

Edgar: Oh, it's phenomenal. I mean, here's a guy that's a state senator, and all of a sudden he's president (laughs) of the United States within a matter of, what, a little more than two years. That's a phenomenal accomplishment.

DePue: Did he have a prominent role, as you recall, in the Illinois Senate?

Edgar: No, no. When I was there, he was a freshman member, and he was in the minority party, so that's about as insignificant as you could be. I think he was elected in '96, so the last two years I was governor, he was in the state Senate. But I remember early in that session after the election, my staff person who was working the Senate came to me and said, "Boy, there's really a bright new African American in the Senate. He is really impressive." I was rather dubious. I had heard that before. As I often said, when I was a young person, we thought Jesse Jackson was really special; then I think most of us decided that wasn't true. So I was a little... They make good speeches; sometimes they don't follow up. So I wasn't real sure. But I didn't have many dealings with him.

I think probably the only time I can remember, there was a bill that the Simon Institute at SIU had pushed—Mike Lawrence had been very much involved—on campaign funding laws. Obama had been a cosponsor, along with Kirk Dillard—

(laughs) unfortunately for Kirk Dillard, because what later cost Kirk Dillard the governorship was doing that commercial saying that Obama had worked across the aisle, which was true. That was probably one of the few times I was around Obama while I was governor. The thought, at least in our office, was, He does seem like a pretty impressive young man, and maybe he is different than a Jesse Jackson. This might be real. But I don't think any of us thought at the time about being president. About that time, a little after I left office, was when he ran for Congress in that primary—

DePue: Against Bobby Rush.

Edgar: Bobby Rush—but he finished third. Bobby Rush was the incumbent and supported by the black Democratic political organization, of which Obama had never really been part. He was from Hyde Park, and you've got to understand, Hyde Park's the University of Chicago; that's far different from the South Side of Chicago black Democratic organization. It was funny when Emil Jones talked about, He's like a son to me.¹ I don't think anyone ever thought that was true back early on, that Emil Jones had this rapport or feeling toward Obama quite like that. When he finished third, you just figure, He's at a dead end; Hyde Park Democrats don't usually do well in the city because the rest of the Democratic Party doesn't think like Hyde Park. That's a very liberal, independent kind of...

DePue: It's almost like being a lakefront liberal?

Edgar: Nah, it's even different. Lakefront liberals are just wealthy; Hyde Park is more intellectual and more removed from the rest of the area around there. It's kind of an

¹ After Obama's inauguration, Jones said "My godson's the president now. I feel good." Greg Hinz, *Crain's Chicago Business*, January 19, 2009.

island in that thinking, as opposed to the rest of that area, particularly in Democratic politics. Hyde Park Democrats sometimes might make coalitions with Republicans to do reforms and things like that, though Obama was a little more of a regular Democrat than that. But he was not from the South Side; he just happened to live on an island that was located in the South Side.

So he seemed fine. I remember talking to him one time right before the Senate race came up. I ran into him and talked to him for a while, just sitting outside of a meeting someplace. We had some mutual friends. I thought he seemed like a pretty impressive young guy. When the Senate race came up, initially I didn't have any thoughts of it because I thought we were going to have our incumbent senator running, so it wasn't something I had to think about. I thought, Obama would be a pretty attractive candidate if he could get the nomination. Later on, when I was in the mix a little bit, one of the things I thought, Well, Obama really wants to be senator and might be a pretty good senator; I don't know if I really want to be senator. But at that point, he was running about third in the Democratic primary. I always thought he would do better than that. I thought he probably was the kind of African American who would play well in suburbia. He's the Colin Powell type, which I think is what you need to win in a state like Illinois. So I thought his speech at the Democratic convention was one of those turning points in American politics. I mean, that made him. From then on in that campaign for the Senate, he was kind of like a rock star. I had him here at U of I. We never could get students to turn out for anything, outside of maybe they show up at a rock concert; I don't go to those, I don't know.

DePue: Or the Illini playing.

Edgar: Or a really good game, yes. But they showed up for Obama. I've never seen anybody political coming to town that can draw any kind of a crowd. They were hanging off the rafters. You just knew this was kind of special, the way he connected with folks.

DePue: Your limited experience with him from the Illinois perspective: did you see him as a moderate Democrat, then?

Edgar: My sense of him was that he was somebody who could work with Republicans. He was very articulate, very bright. He wasn't necessarily caught up with, you know, it's all Democrat. He was a smart guy that had to work across party aisles. He had a record of that, I thought; I wasn't in the Senate, so some of them might have a different perspective. When he was in the minority, he was pretty good at working with the majority. Of course, you had to work with the majority if you were in the minority. I'm not sure how he worked with the minority when he was in the majority at that point. But I was surprised and disappointed that it seemed like he started out more partisan as president than he should have, and I think that cost him. As we talk here, the tax cut compromise is working its way through Congress. That is the type of Obama I thought we would see: much more pragmatic. I think that's what that 20 percent in the middle who elected him—that independent kind of voter, some Republicans, probably, some Democrats—that's what they thought they were going to get. Instead he became viewed as much more partisan. Now, not all his fault—the Republicans are pretty partisan, too—but as president, you've got to rise above that.

When he started to run for president, I thought it was too soon. I didn't know how Hillary Clinton and the Democrat primary... Now, I thought if he could get to the general election he could be pretty tough, but in a Democrat primary, I thought the Clintons had that all sewed up. That, to me, is amazing that they didn't have that all sewed up. That he was able to win the nomination was quite an accomplishment. I think when you got to the general election, the way things were going, whoever the Democrats nominated were going to win that election, probably. But for him to win that Democratic nomination against Hillary Clinton at that point in history was somewhat amazing.

DePue: What do you think, then, about the critique of him from the conservative wing of the Republican Party? It's been pretty candid and harsh in many respects—calling him a socialist, all the questions about his birth certificate—but especially about his politics and how left he is of center.

Edgar: Well, probably not a whole lot different than some of the Democrats are doing about George Bush not being very bright and just being this right-wing... I think they both are not to that extreme, though I do think (laughs) a little bit more came out of Obama from that community organizer background, rather than some state senator who had a good track record of reaching across the aisle and working with the Republicans. I think a little more of that prevailed.

DePue: Were you surprised when the stuff came out about his church and Jeremiah Wright?

Edgar: Oh, no, no. I think that's a lot to do about nothing. I'm just glad he went to church, for Pete's sake. Most politicians don't really go. They claim they do, and very few of them do. Those that do, unfortunately, sometimes the churches are so extreme. And

many of the black leaders were members of that church. I've not spent a lot of time in black churches—I've spent some—and they're different than white churches. The ministers talk differently. I don't think you got to be blamed for your minister, what the minister says. I mean, how often can you get in trouble in American politics for going to church, and he got in trouble for going to church. I just thought it was kind of ludicrous.

I also thought the thing about where he was born... First of all, I don't care; it's where you grow up that matters, not where you were born.

DePue: Well, it's a constitutional issue, though.

Edgar: I know that, and all I know is, wasn't McCain born in Panama? But that was okay! I have no reason to think he wasn't born in Hawaii, but I think it's a lot to do about nothing. I think far more important: where did he grow up? Now, if you want to question, "Well, he grew up in Indonesia part of that time," all right, take a look at that. I think that has pluses and minuses. Maybe he missed some of the things that we got growing up here, but he also has a much better perspective of the world. I like to have a president that has a perspective of the world that's probably a little more relevant than someone who grew up in Charleston, Illinois, and never traveled.

You figure his combination—he was raised by his grandparents, who were white, so he was exposed to probably more of the white culture than the black culture, until he got out of college and was a community organizer in the South Side of Chicago. That is maybe where he got his black experience. Now, growing up in Hawaii—I'm not sure Hawaii is your typical state, but it's a multiracial culture. I

think somebody who can be comfortable in any environment, I think that's good for a president.

DePue: Some would say Hawaii is an example of how you can have a harmonious mixture of a variety of different ethnic groups and religions and the whole spectrum.

Edgar: Yes, yes. And the warm weather probably helps too. I don't know. But yes, he came out of an environment where he didn't get hung up on some of these things that we get hung up on, and we probably shouldn't get hung up on. I thought his background actually was the best you could have to be the first African American president, because he's half African American and he's half-white. We don't have too much of that because we wouldn't have racial marriages—that was tabooed. But I think he came in kind of understanding both far better than anyone else would have. So again, I thought that was a plus.

I have to say, election night, I was in Chicago, and I was excited for the nation: the fact that we had elected an African American president, and I thought he was someone who engendered a lot of enthusiasm among young people, which I think is important. A lot of people who had never been involved or who had been turned off seemed like they were involved. I thought that's good, and I still think that's good. I wish to some extent he'd had a Republican Congress off the bat, and I think he wouldn't be viewed as partisan as he's viewed by many of the Republicans. There's some from the right, it doesn't matter what he does, they're going to dislike him and they're going to attack him, just like Democrats who did that to President Bush. I also thought President Bush might have been viewed more favorably by more

Americans if he'd had a Democratic Congress to work with, because they both had track records—

DePue: Well, he did his last few years.

Edgar: But not the first, not to start off, when you have all that goodwill going with you and you have a lot of momentum when you're elected president. Because they both, I thought, had track records of working effectively with the other party before they became president.