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A lucky man

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Barack Obama's trip abroad has been going better than he could have dared hope



Illustration by Peter Schrank

THIS week Americans have been bombarded with images of Barack Obama posing as the commander-in-chief. Mr Obama standing shoulder-to-shoulder with world leaders. Mr Obama flying in a helicopter over Iraq with General David Petraeus. Mr Obama shooting hoops with the troops. Mr Obama boarding a jumbo jet with his name emblazoned on the side. And John McCain? He was photographed on a golf cart with the 84-year-old George Bush senior.

Mr Obama's carefully choreographed trip was clearly designed to address his biggest weakness—his wafer-thin CV on foreign and military affairs. He had not visited Iraq since January 2006. Before this week he had never visited Afghanistan, the country that he describes as the front-line in the war on terror. He has not served in the army. In polls Mr Obama lags behind Mr McCain by some 20 points on the question of whether he has the experience to do the job.

But Mr Obama's trip was designed to do more than address a weakness. It was designed to turn a weakness into a strength. Mr Obama wants to prove that he represents a new kind of leadership, as different as you can get from that of Messrs Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld. This means demonstrating that he can offer new solutions to vexing problems in the Middle East—hence the first half of his trip. It also means demonstrating that he can wield America's soft power effectively—hence his triumphalist romp through Old Europe. An Obama

spokesman summed up the trip's implicit message simply: "When President Bush goes abroad, there are big crowds protesting. When I go abroad, there are big crowds cheering."

This was the boldest move in a campaign marked by bold moves. Democrats usually adopt a defensive crouch when it comes to foreign policy. Bill Clinton and Al Gore all but ignored it in their runs for the presidency. John Kerry wore his service in Vietnam like a shield. But Mr Obama has marched into Republican territory with his head held high.

It was also a risky move. There was the risk of looking presumptuous. Presidential candidates do not usually fly around the world in their own personalised versions of Air Force One. There was the risk of crossing the line between talking to foreign leaders and negotiating with them. And there was the risk of a gaffe; Michael Dukakis never recovered from looking silly in a tank.

But these worries have been silenced by events. The decision of the Iraqi prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, more or less to endorse Mr Obama's timetable for withdrawing American troops from Iraq sent shock waves through Washington, DC, discombobulating the White House and driving the McCain campaign into panic. And the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan underlined Mr Obama's argument that America needs to devote more resources to the country that nurtured Osama bin Laden.

Even the Bush administration played into Mr Obama's hands. It signalled its willingness to work with the Iraqis on a "time horizon" for troop withdrawals. And it dispatched a high-ranking State Department official, William Burns, to participate in multilateral talks with Iran over its nuclear programme. Mr Obama had made talking to Iran a centrepiece of his campaign, something the Republican right has fiercely resisted.

Mr Obama still has problems with his Middle East policy. He loudly opposed the "surge" that has clearly helped to stabilise the country and has made all the heady talk of a timetable for withdrawing American troops possible. Many American military commanders, including Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and General Petraeus, worry that a 16-month timetable may destabilise the country, as do lots of Iraqis.

Still, there is no doubt that this week has seen the balance of advantage shift in Mr Obama's direction. Mr McCain's ace in the hole has been his claim that his opponent is too naive and inexperienced to be trusted with the big decisions—that he will withdraw precipitously from Iraq to satisfy his liberal base and thereby undermine America's war on terror. But Mr Obama can now claim some vindication. The Iraqi government has seemingly moved closer to the central tenet of his foreign policy. And the facts on the ground in Afghanistan give credence to his original objection to the Iraq war, that it was distracting attention from the real front-line in the war against terrorism. He also stepped through Israel and the West Bank with a fair degree of agility.

This was the riskiest part of his tour, and it went off without running into serious problems.

Showing him up

Mr Obama's progress has been making the McCain campaign look even more flat-footed than usual. Mr McCain added to the misery this week by making another in a long list of foreign-policy slips of the tongue by referring to the "Iraq-Pakistan border". And a campaign ad blaming Mr Obama for the rising price of oil was met with widespread ridicule. The McCainiacs have resorted to lashing out at the media's liberal bias: a complaint which is perfectly justified. Even before three news anchors accompanied Mr Obama on his trip, the networks had devoted twice as much coverage to the Democrat as the Republican and much the same is true of newspaper column-inches. But it is the complaint of defeated conservative campaigns the world over.

Mr McCain may yet prove to be a more formidable candidate than he now seems. He is still only an average of two points behind Mr Obama in national polls, a remarkable result given his shambolic campaign. But he needs to introduce more order into the chaos that surrounds him. And he needs to do a much better job of defining his opponent rather than allowing his opponent to define himself, which will mean recalibrating his arguments about Iraq as well as sharpening his tone. This week has made that job a lot harder.