

EXCEPTIONAL AMERICANS

SIDDHARTH KHAJURIA PISSES ON THE POLITICS OF 'HOPE'

In August 2004, Barack Obama addressed the Democratic National Convention in Boston. It was an astonishing moment. This was the state senator from Illinois, the little-known skinny kid with a funny name who hadn't even made it to Washington yet. Four years on, he's still delivering the same message: Hope, the Audacity of.

Unlikely tales of hope underpin most of Obama's speeches: stories of slaves singing freedom songs and pioneers wandering west, civil rights activists sitting-in and naval lieutenants patrolling the Mekong Delta. "Yes, we can!" proclaim the crowds who've queued for hours to hear him speak. He struts on to stage accompanied by U2 and metaphorically stage-dives away into the night.

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"Don't tell me we can't change," he tells his audiences, "Yes, we can change. Yes, we can heal this nation. Yes, we can seize the future." A politics of togetherness and unity; it sounds delicious. But false choices underpin nearly all political campaigns. What's the alternative to hope and unity? The audacity of cynicism? Disunity and despair? Not likely. Blair was a past-master at the game, "I did what I thought was right." Cheers mate.

Despite the stirring, inspirational, mightily watchable rhetoric Obama puts on our plates daily, there's also a glimpse into that patriotic American dream-mongering which underpins most elections stateside. It's best



understood in the early words of Obama's 2004 keynote in Boston:

"My parents...shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation. They would give me an African name, Barack, or "blessed," believing that in a tolerant America, your name is no barrier to success.

"They imagined me going to the best schools in the land, even though they weren't rich, because in a generous America you don't have to be rich to achieve your potential.

"I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible."

His speeches are sprinkled with a liberal dose of a deep-rooted American Exceptionalism: a belief that his story is uniquely American. That only in the United States, with a belief in the purest of meritocracies, can you work your way up society's greasy pole - if you're poor, homeless, and destitute, deal with it.

His unwavering belief in the power of those who 'can' is delightful for the observer with a roof over his head and pesto in his fridge. But is there more to

the man than the silverest of tongues? Despite professing a benevolent and optimistic patriotism there's a nagging, everpresent fear that lurks in the back of the mind. Is Obama's actually just another power-hungry campaign clinging to the latest rebrand of an American dream that leaves its inner-cities plagued by Third Worldly poverty? Is it really just the sort of cold, calculating, cynical politics he claims to have disavowed?

“Is there more to this man than the silverest of tongues?”

I hope it isn't. But if he secures the Democratic nomination, McCain's campaign will not let themselves be labelled cynics to Obama's optimists, dividers to his uniters, Washington-ites to his outsiders. They're far too clever for any of that. And at some point along the road to November's general, American voters might ask for more than a pleasant sounding Mid-West twang that tells them to believe. They'll wonder what it is exactly they're being asked to believe in.