

Ryan Nees  
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## Obama's "Definitive Moment of Change"



Barack Obama leaves his campaign bus in Kempton, Indiana. (Photo by Ryan Nees)

CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa - The Coliseum Veterans Memorial Building is a hulking limestone presence that seems to rise from the river which runs through the middle of Cedar Rapids. Bridges connect each side of the hallowed island to the city. Its forbiddance is only matched by the force of the thousands who gathered inside on the eve of the Iowa caucuses.

The stakes couldn't have been higher for Illinois Sen. Barack Obama. His campaign had spent the days leading up to the caucuses fervently urging his supporters to translate enthusiastic rally crowds into crowded caucus sites. Doubts had nagged Obama's campaign for weeks as the media speculated that his enthusiastic crowds would materialize on caucus night as little more than a Howard Dean-like fizzle.

"Understand that all these political writers over the last couple days, they've been questioning whether you are actually going to come out," Obama told the crowd of 2,000 gathered in Cedar Rapids on Wednesday. "They don't believe it because every year people say 'young folks are going to come out, and they don't come out.' The question is: are you going to prove them wrong?"

"Are you going to prove them wrong?" he repeated.

There were signs on the ground that they would. In Cedar Rapids, where Obama, Clinton, and Edwards all held events Wednesday, Obama turned out three times the number of people at the Veterans Memorial Coliseum as did Edwards at the Marriott Hotel and nearly five times the number Clinton did at Kirkwood Community College.

Of the top three Democratic contenders, Obama's campaign took the most extraordinary steps to prod his crowds to caucus. At seven rallies Wednesday local field directors played games of caucus trivia with the crowds, imploring Iowans to answer questions about their caucus location, how the caucus works, and what time the doors closed. In Des Moines on Wednesday, Obama staffer Ali Sutton tossed tee-shirts to the winners. The campaign distributed golden "tickets to change" to high school and college students with information about their caucus sites. Then there were Obama's own pleadings, which he repeated at every event.

Obama asked his crowds Wednesday for a show of hands of first-time caucus-goers. In Des Moines, about 40 percent raised their hands. In Cedar Rapids, the number pushed 60 percent, a stunning figure given that when Edwards asked the same question to a packed room at Saints Rest Coffee House in Grinnell, the number could have been counted on one hand. It proved prophetic about Obama's chances.

Turnout Shatters Anticipations

Obama's Iowa co-chairman, former Iowa Democratic Party chairman Gordon Fischer, used to get laughed out of rooms predicting a turnout of 200,000. In the end, it exceeded 239,000, about 100,000 more than in 2004.

"I felt like the crowd sizes, not only for Obama, but also for the other candidates, were amazing," Fischer told HPI. "And the intensity and energy and enthusiasm for Obama particularly, but also for the other candidates, simply had no precedent ... it is astonishing. He brought together such a coalition. It wasn't just young people. It was older people, it was minorities, it was progressives. He brought together a coalition of folks ... for the

Iowans were inspired.

"Now the verdict is in," Axelrod said. "The question people are asking is who represents the most authentic voice for change and I think Obama emerged as that candidate in this campaign, with what voters said today. This is an urgent moment for this country. We've got a lot of problems and we're not dealing with them right now. I think people recognize that and they expressed that tonight."

Watching an Obama speech is like watching a virtuoso conductor lead his orchestra, summoning lifts and swoons. He blankets the audience with energy and engagement. Men and women move spontaneously, responding aloud to his words, shouting "amen" and "that's right." Obama touches hearts and souls, connecting the summoned flock anew with their long-forgotten hopes and dreams.

Obama engages a crowd with a smooth ease that electrifies. He urges them not to give up on "the dream that so many people fought for [though it] feels like it's slipping away."

In Cedar Rapids, the senator sprang into the great hall of the Coliseum as "Only in America" played over the speakers and plastered himself to the overflowing risers of supporters that tiered around the perimeter of the hall.

One middle-aged woman in the crowd threw herself at the senator, wrapping a right arm around him and burying her head into his shoulder. He stopped and reached up to her, whispered in her ear, and she curled both arms around him in raw emotion. She kissed his cheek and cried.

The hope Barack Obama so often speaks of is not just printed on the signs outside his rallies. It can be seen in the face of the Cedar Rapids woman and the hundreds just like her that basked in the consecrated hall, desperate for a chance to believe again.

"All of you were hungry, I was betting that all of you were desperate for a different kind of politics, one based on our common values," he told his audience. "A politics that wasn't based on ideology but on practicality and common sense: a politics that cared more about straight talk than about spin and P.R."

"He's captured people's imaginations by talking about the possibilities of this country and being straightforward about the challenges we face," Axelrod said. "We've had a politics that has divided us for so long and hasn't really appealed to our sense of common purpose and shared ideals, and he speaks to those."

In Des Moines, Obama took the stage with wife Michelle and daughters Malia and Sasha waving to the crowd of more than 3,000, an audience of millions watching live around the world. Obama's campaign sent out e-mails minutes before, with the simple subject line: "Turn on your television." It was a brief message: "We just won Iowa, and I'm about to head down to

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