

The Education of a President (Figure 1)

Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson were largely self-taught; the majority of their successors attended public schools.



ILLUSTRATION / BRUCE SANDERS DESIGN

The Early Education of Our

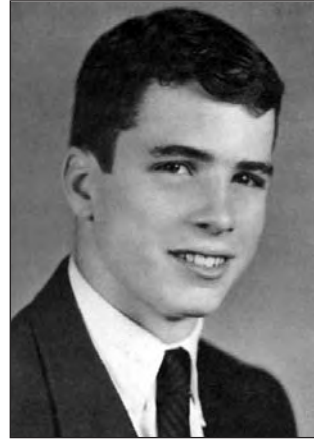


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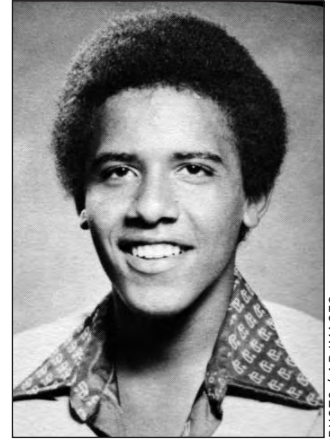


PHOTO / AP IMAGES

John McCain is a child of the thirties. We have yet to have a president who was born in that turbulent decade. Barack Obama is a child of the sixties, another decade yet to produce a president.

Next President

One of them, Barack Obama, was awakened at four in the morning in Jakarta to study from a correspondence course; the other, John McCain, attended grade school in old airplane hangars. Both went on to elite private high schools.

Whether it is the image of Abraham Lincoln studying by log cabin candlelight or George Washington dutifully copying the

Not much in public schools BY PETER MEYER

Rules of Civility and Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation into his schoolboy notebooks, presidential schooling has long been a national fascination (see Figure 1).

Today we have a graduate of Columbia College and Harvard Law (Obama) taking on a graduate of the Naval Academy and National War College (McCain). Harvard boasts seven presidents as alumni (including George W. Bush's business degree); the Naval Academy, just one (Jimmy Carter). But it is the early schooling—how did they get there?—that is most fascinating. George Washington's early education is remarkable for what is not known about it, but there is general

agreement that if he had much formal education, it ended at about age 15. Teddy Roosevelt, said to have had an “uneven” education at home (strong in biology, French, and German but deficient in math, Latin, and Greek), graduated from Harvard *magna cum laude*. Harry Truman, the only president since 1897 who did not graduate from college, got up early too, at five in the morning, to practice piano.

We might ponder the fact that neither John McCain nor Barack Obama had the experience of attending the public school down the street, standard fare for most Americans. Just how the two candidates’ early schooling informs their assumptions and beliefs about education reform is hard to know, but their stories provide an interesting window through which to view their policy beliefs (see sidebar, page 33).

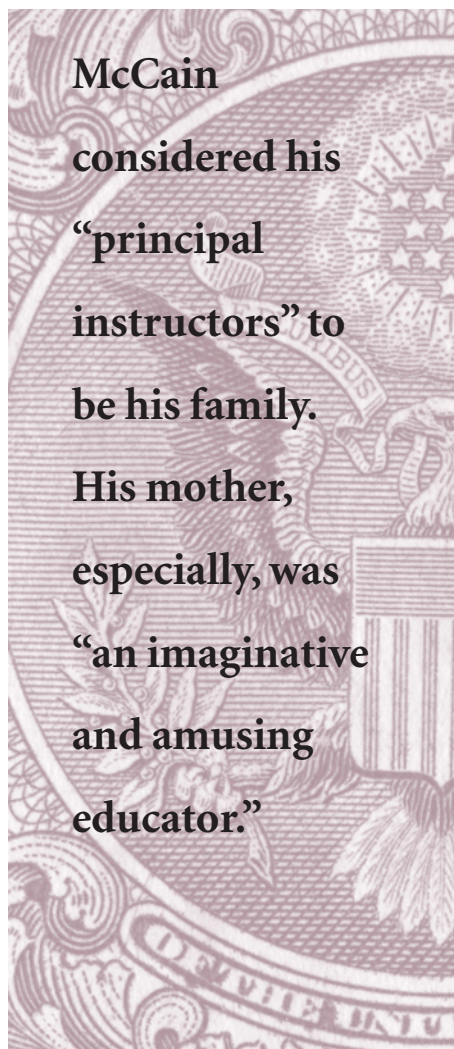
Unique Men— In Similar Ways

After a grueling primary season this year—for the Democrats, at least—it seems in retrospect that there was something inevitable in the pairing of John McCain and Barack Obama as the two contenders for the presidency in 2008. Two distinct generations, two unique backgrounds, two very different world-views: white/black, old/young, right/left.

John McCain is a child of the thirties (born in Panama, August 29, 1936), and more than one commentator has noted the fact that we have yet to have a president who was born in that turbulent decade. He grew up in the middle of a hellish war in which his father and grandfather were both fighting.

Obama is a child of the sixties (born in Hawaii, August 4, 1961, another decade yet to produce a president) and like McCain in the 1940s, though too young to call it his war, came of age in the middle of a hellish conflict.

McCain is like an old shoe, known to us since that heroic return in 1973 from five and a half years of captivity in Vietnam. Obama is the new sneaker, a little-known Illinois state legislator before he delivered an electrifying keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Just two years later (October 23, 2006) he graced the coveted cover of *Time*, with the provocative headline, “Why Barack Obama Could Be the Next President.”



Judging from their published memoirs, the early education of both men came mainly from what they were taught at home. If one goes by book titles—*Dreams from My Father* (Obama, 1995) and *Faith of My Fathers* (McCain, 1999)—Dad was key, but in fact both credit their mothers for much of their success. “What is best in me I owe to her,” says Obama about his mother, Ann, who died in 1995 at age 52 of ovarian cancer. John McCain calls his mother, Roberta, age 96 and still a presence on the campaign trail, his principal teacher, and much of the story of his early life, as he writes, is how “I became my mother’s son.”

Despite their book titles, both candidates in fact grew up missing their fathers. In Obama’s case, Barack Sr. left Hawaii (bound for Harvard) when his son was a baby; he didn’t return until Barack Jr. was in 5th grade, and then only for a four-week visit. For McCain the separation was more institutional, as McCain’s father, a Navy submariner, was gone for long periods of time, including most of World War II, when the future presidential candidate was just starting school. For both Obama and McCain, the “missing” fathers explain in part their unique early educational experiences.

McCain: “Mother’s Mobile Classroom”

The essential McCain is a warrior, or so his autobiography portrays him. “For two centuries, the men of my family were raised to go to war as officers in America’s armed services,” he writes.

One of his first memories is of a December day in 1941. He was just five and his family was standing on the front lawn of their house in New London, Connecticut, site of the Navy’s first submarine base, when a passing black car slowed down and the driver, a naval officer, rolled his window down and shouted at his father, “Jack, the Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor.” McCain’s father left immediately. “I saw very little of him for the next four years,” McCain writes.

Born in America’s Panama Canal Zone, where both his father and grandfather were stationed, John McCain’s life pattern was set almost immediately: at three months old he moved, thanks to his father’s transfer, to the submarine base

in New London. The family relocated frequently to accommodate his father's assignments. Though McCain says he went to more schools than he can remember in those early years, *USA Today* reports he "attended some 20 schools before Annapolis, where he graduated fifth from the bottom in 1958."

"My mother often despaired over the quality of our education," recalls McCain. "When asked today how her children were educated, she is apt to respond that we were raised to be ignorant."

McCain calls the base schools "sub-standard." Sometimes the schoolhouse was "nothing more than a converted aircraft hangar," he writes. "The classes mixed children of varying ages. We might have one teacher on Monday and a different one on Tuesday. On other days, we lacked the services of any teacher at all." Needless to say, he was "often required in a new school to study things I had already learned. Other times, the curriculum assumed knowledge I had not yet acquired."

If the accommodations and scheduling were not idiosyncratic enough, the frequent moves, says McCain, were the "chief obstacle to a decent education.... As soon as I had begun to settle into a school, my father would be reassigned." Though McCain says that such a "transient childhood" was simply a way of life, it was not a life lived by most Americans. "Seldom if ever did I see again the friends I left behind," he says. (Years later he was accused at a candidate forum of being a carpetbagger by running for office in Arizona. "Listen, pal," McCain shot back, "I spent 22 years in the Navy.... The place I lived longest in my life was Hanoi.") The moves also exacerbated a defensiveness about fitting in that in turn contributed to the young McCain's lifelong bad-boy reputation. At each new school he made a point, he says, "to impress upon my classmates that I was not a person to suffer slights lightly" and "grew more determined to assert my crude individualism." He was disciplined regularly, "often for fighting."

Not surprisingly, perhaps, McCain liked this early schooling "for the very quality that caused my parents to despair—its informality." But he also admits to developing his own interest in literature. He spent the summer of 1946 with his widowed grandmother at her home, where he occupied a bedroom furnished with his father's belongings, including a "substantial collection of the authors he had favored as a

boy." Those authors included Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, James Fenimore Cooper, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and Booth Tarkington. "I spent most of the summer reading one volume after another," he says. The experience gave McCain a "lifelong love of reading."

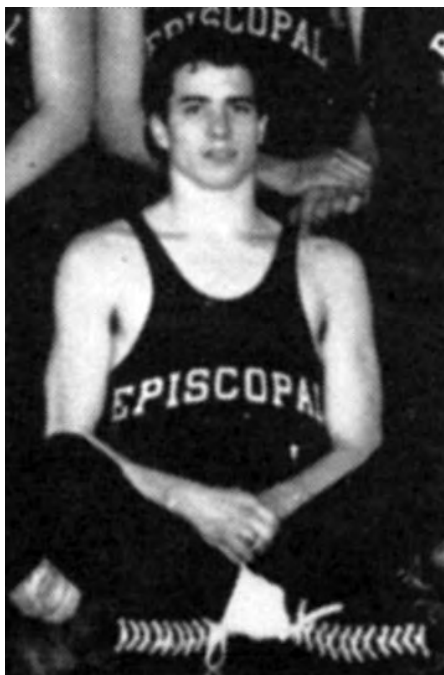
But in the end, McCain considered his "principal instructors" to be his family. His mother, especially, was "an imaginative and amusing educator." The daughter of a successful oil wildcatter, Roberta Wright ran off to Tijuana to marry Jack McCain, then a young Navy ensign. "Society coed elopes with navy officer: Roberta Wright defies family," ran a headline in the *San Francisco Examiner* at the time. As *Time* magazine reported, "Just 19, she brought her college textbooks on her honeymoon."

Married 48 years (Jack McCain died in 1981), Roberta never complained about the long absences from her husband and would later comment on the Navy lifestyle, sounding remarkably like her presidential candidate son when he speaks of the teaching profession (see sidebar). "If you chose the Navy, you do what it requires. A lot of wives didn't like that, and thankfully they left."

It is no wonder that McCain attributes most of his early learning—and his reputation as a "hell-raiser"—to "my mother's mobile classroom." Roberta used the many family relocations as teaching opportunities for her children (John has a younger brother and an older sister). "Field trips" included stops at the Carlsbad Caverns, the Grand Canyon, the Petrified Forest, George Washington's Mount Vernon, Andrew Jackson's Hermitage, and dozens of museums, churches, buildings designed by celebrated architects, natural phenomena, and the homes of historical figures all over the country. During one cross-country trip, Roberta brought along a couple of college students to help keep the kids in line. (She had reached "the end of her maternal patience," McCain recalls, after throwing a thermos, while driving, at her disruptive son—"hitting me on the brow, knocking me temporarily mute, and denting the thermos.")

McCain's parents "resolved finally to put an end to our haphazard education" and enrolled the young John in Episcopal High School, a prep school in suburban Virginia, to give him some consistency in his schooling. And he arrived, he recalls, "with a little bit of a chip on my shoulder."

Years later, still the disciplinarian, Roberta scolded her son after reading that he had sworn at his Hanoi captors.



He arrived at Episcopal High School, McCain recalls, "with a little bit of a chip on my shoulder."

PHOTO / WWW.EPISCOPALHIGH SCHOOL.ORG

“He better never speak like that again,” she told a journalist, “or I’ll smack him bald-headed. Of course, he almost already is.”

Obama: The Importance of Race

One of Barack Obama’s first memories is sitting on his grandfather’s shoulders watching one of the *Apollo* mission astronauts arriving at Hickam Air Force Base, not far from Pearl Harbor. But the moral for Obama was very different than it would have been for warrior McCain. “With his black son-in-law and his brown grandson,” recalls Obama, “Gramps had entered the space age.” The moral was a racial one.

It is clear from *Dreams from My Father*, which is subtitled *A Story of Race and Inheritance*, that Obama sees much of his essence as that of a black man. “A black man with a funny name,” he would joke when first running for office, in the Illinois state senate. Racial identity is as much at the core of Obama’s political being as prisoner of war is John McCain’s trademark. “I ceased to advertise my mother’s race [white] at the age of twelve or thirteen,” he says, “when I began to suspect that by doing so I was ingratiating myself to whites.” Obama goes out of his way to highlight his struggles with the issues of his race in his autobiography. “I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America,” he writes in *Dreams*.

Barack Obama’s first defining experience was being born to a white mother and black father, a biracial baby arriving at a time when America was seething with racial tension. His mother, Stanley Ann Dunham, whose parents were Kansas natives, was born on an army base during World War II and then moved with her parents to California, then to Texas and Washington where her father was pursuing furniture business opportunities, before landing in Honolulu. Ann met Barack Obama Sr., a native of Kenya who came to Hawaii to study economics, during a Russian class at the University of Hawaii.

It was fortunate, perhaps, as Obama writes in his memoir, that the Dunhams’ daughter brought a black man home in Hawaii, where “race-mixing” could happen without upsetting the established order “back home.”

The two married in 1961, when Ann was just 18; Barack Jr. was born later that year. But Barack Sr. had lofty goals

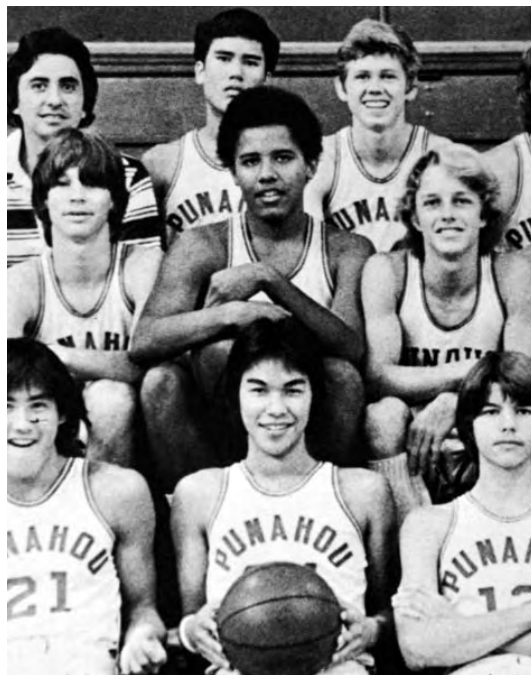
and when he was accepted at Harvard to pursue a Ph.D. in economics, he went without his wife and young son—and he never sent for them. (Years later the future presidential candidate would learn that his father had had another wife, in Kenya.) His parents divorced when Barry, as he was

known throughout his childhood, was very young. “I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told,” Obama would recall.

Thus began an early life with what the *New York Times* called “A Free-Spirited Wanderer Who Set Obama’s Path”—his mother. Even next to John McCain’s mobile classroom, Barack Obama’s early education was unconventional. “When I think about my mother,” Obama told *Time* magazine, “I think that there was a certain combination of being very grounded in who she was, what she believed in. But also a certain recklessness. I think she was always searching for something. She wasn’t comfortable seeing her life confined to a certain box.” *Time* writer Amanda Ripley concluded, “Obama is his mother’s son.”

Barry was six when his mother, herself just 24, bundled him up and flew to Jakarta, to join her second husband, Lolo Soetoro, an Indonesian whom she had also met at the University of Hawaii. She had pre-enrolled Barry in a Catholic school, Franciscus Assisi Primary, but Obama says his education began on the drive to their new home: passing “men and women [who] stepped like cranes through the rice paddies, their faces hidden by their wide straw hats. A boy, wet and slick as an otter... on the back of a dumb-faced water buffalo, whipping its haunch with a stick of bamboo...” Their modest stucco house was at the end of a road that “turned from tarmac to gravel to dirt” and included a pet monkey that Soetoro, who was working as a geologist for the army, had bought for Barry as a welcoming gift. There were also chickens, ducks, two birds of paradise, a white cockatoo, two baby crocodiles (in a fenced-off pond), and a big yellow dog behind the house. The first day there, his stepfather bought a chicken from a street vendor who slew it on the spot. “The boy should know where his dinner is coming from,” said Soetoro.

Obama attended Franciscus Assisi for two years. He didn’t seem to mind that the other children called him “Negro,” remembers Bambang Sukoco, a former neighbor. When his stepfather got a better job, with an American oil



His mother sent Barry back to Hawaii, to live with her parents and enroll at Punahou, an elite Honolulu prep school that his grandfather had arranged for him to attend.

What Would They Do for Education?

Both Barack Obama and John McCain have outlined their campaign positions on education. It isn't hard to trace the lines of Obama's thinking back to Ann Dunham. The fact that his mother worked so hard to compensate for "inferior Indonesian schools," writes Shelby Steele in *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can't Win*, may have instilled in Obama a belief that "momma...developed the academic skill upon which Obama's successful life was built." In fact, parental involvement is a theme of many of Obama's speeches on education policy. "There is no program and no policy that can substitute for a parent who is involved in their child's education from day one," he told a Manchester, New Hampshire, audience in November 2007. "There is no substitute for a parent who will attend those parent/teacher conferences, make sure their children are in school on time, and help them with their homework after dinner. And I have no doubt that we will still be talking about these problems in the next century if we do not have parents who are willing to turn off the TV once in a while, and put away the video games, and read to their child. Responsibility for our children's education has to start at home."

The high standards are surely the legacy of a mother who woke her son up at four in the morning to study. This legacy helps explain Obama's detailed (15-page) plan for education reform, which includes a "zero to five" program that gives Early Learning Challenge Grants, a quadrupling of Early Head Start spending, and "affordable and high-quality child care" to ease the burden on working families. For K-12 education, he proposes programs to "recruit math and science degree gradu-

ates" to teaching and "ensure that all children have access to a strong science curriculum at all grade levels," more funding for "intervention strategies in middle school" for "teaching teams, parent involvement, mentoring, intensive reading and math instruction, and extended learning time"—all to address the "dropout crisis." He wants a new Teacher Service Scholarship program to "cover four years of undergraduate or two years of graduate teacher education" and includes "alternative programs for mid-career recruits in exchange for teaching for at least four years in a high-need field or location."

John McCain is a minimalist by comparison, and, in that sense, may be a product of his free-wheeling childhood schooling. On his web site, McCain offers no detailed plans for reform, but makes it clear that he is a supporter of school choice, home schooling, and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). "Public education should be defined as one in which our public support for a child's education follows that child into the school the parent chooses," says his campaign policy statement on education. "No Child Left Behind has focused our attention on the realities of how students perform against a common standard." Asked by *Essence* magazine if fixing NCLB would be a priority, McCain replied, "Absolutely." He will, his campaign web site says, "fight for the ability of all students to have access to all schools of demonstrated excellence, including their own homes."

Obama speaks of "a new era of mutual responsibility," but has little good to say about the era's most formidable accountability tool. "No Child Left Behind has done more to stigmatize and demoralize our students and teachers in struggling schools than it has to marshal the talent

and the determination and the resources to turn them around. That's what's wrong with No Child Left Behind, and that's what we must change in a fundamental way."

Though McCain is careful to praise teachers—he called it "an underfunded profession" in an address at his Episcopal High alma mater last April—he does not shy from tough talk about accountability. He advocates merit pay "for the best of them" and encourages those who have "lost their way...to find another line of work." He cites the need to "shake up failed school bureaucracies with competition, empower parents with choice, remove barriers to qualified instructors, attract and reward superior teachers, and have a fair, but sure process to weed out incompetents.... Parents should be able to send their children to the school that best suits their needs just as [wife] Cindy and I have been able to do, whether it is a public, private, or parochial school. The result will not be the demise of the public school system in America, but competition that will help make public schools accountable and as successful as they should be in a country as great and prosperous as ours."

One has to search hard to find mention of "public school choice" in Barack Obama's education plan. But it is there, under the heading, "School-family contracts." These contracts, says the Obama plan, would include "information on tutoring, academic support, and public school choice options for students."

So far, the candidates' beliefs about how best to improve America's schools, though seemingly rooted in personal experience, are also predictable, hewing close to established party lines. However, we have yet to hear a full and open discussion of education policy.

company, the family (Ann gave birth to a daughter in 1970) moved to a nicer neighborhood and Barry was enrolled in a public school.

Ann also enrolled her son in a U.S. correspondence course and “five days a week she came into my room at four in the morning, force-fed me breakfast, and proceeded to teach me my English lessons for three hours before I left for school and she went to work.” When he protested, his mother simply said, “This is no picnic for me either, buster.”

Ann Dunham had “confidence in needlepoint virtues,” says her son, but was, even in far-away Asia, fully engaged in the issues of the day. “She would come home with books on the civil rights movement, the recordings of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Dr. King.” She told him stories of black children forced to read books “handed down from wealthier white schools but who went on to become doctors and lawyers and scientists.” These stories chastened him about his reluctance to get up at four in the morning.

But there was no *madrassa* school, as a flurry of press reports had it in early 2007. The report was not that farfetched, given the fact that Obama had written in *Dreams* that “In Indonesia, I’d spent two years at a Muslim school” and had “Koranic studies.” That may have seemed exotic when Obama wrote about it in 1994, but in a post-9/11 world, attending a “Muslim school” sounded positively traitorous. “Are the American people ready for an elected president who was educated in a Madrasa as a young boy and has not been forthcoming about his Muslim heritage?” asked *Insight* magazine in January 2007. Since the question was attributed to Hillary Clinton’s camp, it was fair game for the national media for several news cycles. Eventually, Obama somewhat doused the flames by explaining that in Indonesia, where the majority of people are Muslim, government schools were Muslim, but in demographics only. Obama was Christian and was sent to the government school because his mother and stepfather couldn’t afford the private schools.

Then, when Barry was only 10, his mother sent him back to Hawaii, to live with her parents and enroll at Punahou, an elite Honolulu prep school that his grandfather had arranged for him to attend. “This wrenching decision

seemed to reflect how much she valued education,” writes Ripley in *Time*. His mother would be a peripatetic presence after that, coming and going as she earned a Ph.D. in anthropology and traveled through Southeast Asia for the Ford Foundation.

His grandfather took him to the new school, for his first day of 5th grade, five blocks away. Obama recalls being in a daze that day, treated as an oddity. One girl asked if she could touch his hair (he said No); another student asked if his father ate people. Obama was considered a good student in the college preparatory program. His dad was smart, a member of Phi Beta Kappa, and counseled his son, during a brief visit that first year at Punahou, not to be shy about doing well in school. “It’s in the blood, I think,” he told his son. Barack stayed with his white grandparents and at Punahou, graduating high school in 1979.

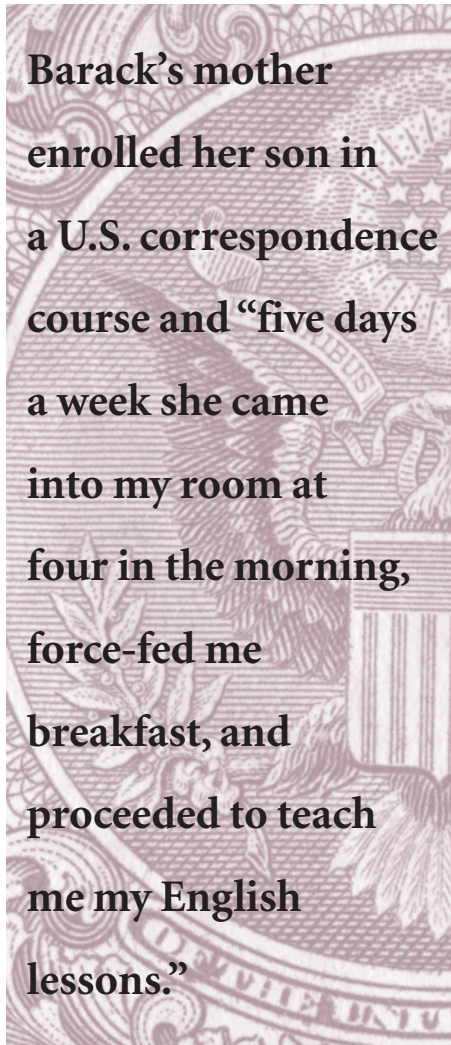
“He was always bright and personable; questioning without being arrogant about it,” recalls homeroom teacher Eric Kusunoki. “He was a good devil’s advocate.”

Classmate Bobby Titcomb recalls, “I could see he was bound for bigger things.... He looked at the world more globally than the rest of us. There was something driven about him.”

That could have come from his mother, who sent letters to her son, encouraging him. “It is a shame we have to worry so much about [grade point],” she wrote his senior year, “but you know what the college entrance competition is these days. Did you know that in Thomas Jefferson’s day, and right up through the 1930s, anybody who had the price of tuition could go to Har-

vard? ... I don’t see that we are producing many Thomas Jeffersons nowadays. Instead we are producing Richard Nixons.” Though McCain and Obama are as different as any two men could be, their early education experiences were remarkably similar in one respect. They both had schooling journeys very different from those of most American children. How their experiences translate into policy will be the sequel that all education policymakers are waiting for.

Peter Meyer, former news editor of Life magazine, is a freelance writer and contributing editor of Education Next.



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