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# Memorandum

**To:**

**From:** Terrance R. Kelly

**Date:** January 7, 2008

**Re:** Barack My Soul in the Bosom of Iowa

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Barack Obama's candidacy gradually came upon me. I was originally drawn by the story of his youth, his families, his opportunities, his choices. I was also impressed by those who knew him well, for years or months, and deeply believed in him. Chuck Barnhill was a Heber Smith Fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Law School in 1968. Chuck co-founded the Chicago law firm that Barack joined after he graduated from Harvard Law School. Chuck's firm built a big time national reputation in the prickly areas of plaintiff representation in civil rights, employment rights, voting rights— David v. Goliath type stuff. Chuck is the type of lawyer who makes Goliath call in sick. It said something to me that Barack, who could have gone anywhere, went back to Chicago and joined Barnhill's firm.

Federico Peña served two terms as Denver's mayor, then served in two cabinet positions in the Clinton Administration, Transportation and Energy. There are several parallels between Barack's and Federico's political histories. They came into public life as young men with a message of political transformation. They converted the message into political reality. They were both minorities. Federico joined the Obama Campaign as a National Co-Chair last summer, and by November he was making weekend campaign trips for Barack to Iowa, and elsewhere. Barnhill's and Peña's spirited belief in Barack had an impact.

Senator Obama came to Denver last March. I went to see him at Jim and Pam Crowe's Level 3 bungalow. Interesting collection of about 500 people congregated in what I guess was the Crowe's living room. One of them was Jeannie Ritter, Colorado's irrepressible First Lady. I think she is also the Governor's most trusted political advisor. Another was Denver's Mayor Hickenlooper, who has interesting historical roots in Iowa politics. Obama had two appearances that day. Seemed like near half of Denver was at one or the other. I went to the opening of the Colorado Obama headquarters, and I spent



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a morning doing data entry work, challenging their "Get Out the Vote" software's capacity to deal with "Entry Error." I tried to get to Iowa a few times with Secretary Peña. It was clear that the early action was in Iowa, and it was increasingly clear that Iowa was going to be big.

I was raised and "schooled" in Iowa. Aunt Mary and Aunt Marcella, my nephew Mike and his family, several cousins and my sister-in-law Katie are all in Decorah. In Denver, I was stuck in no man's land, drifting between Christmas Day and New Year's Eve. Little was happening. So I ordered up a Denver-Minneapolis round trip air ticket on December 28, and flew out of DIA to MSP the next morning. Alice offered to drive me to the airport, but then I would have missed the RTD busdriver's tango and samba lessons, delivered in the bus aisle to a befuddled group of Ethiopian airport workers. I drove a Hertz Toyota into Decorah about 6 p.m.

Decorah, Iowa is the county seat of Winneshiek County. Winneshiek County is in the northern-most tier of Iowa's counties, and rests in the far eastern part of the state, one county away (Allamakee) from the Mississippi River. That proximity to the Father of Waters generates rivers, rolling farmland, and great, wooded limestone bluffs. It has a natural beauty that I learned to appreciate only after I left. The county holds about 20,000 residents, scattered between farms, villages and towns, and Decorah contains about 8,000 of the total. It remains a predominantly Norwegian-American community, in part because it is home to Luther College, originally a Norwegian Lutheran Synod school. Downtown Decorah actually hosts a Norwegian restaurant, attached to the world-class Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, and an annual Nordic Fest. Almost each town and village in the county has an ethnic history. Spillville and Protovin were Czech; Ossian, Festina and Calmar were German; Bluffton was Irish; Highlandville, Nordness and Washington Prairie were Norwegian. It is 99.9% white, and the .01% are mostly Vietnamese refugees.

I was raised and attended elementary school in Decorah, and then from 1961-65 I got on the bus with my St. Benedict's Elementary School classmates and daily rode 10 miles each way to Ossian's DeSales Central Catholic High School. The busing of Catholic high school students from several towns to a centralized Catholic school in the village of Ossian was perhaps the last major battle in the American Upper Midwest's replication of the Thirty Years War that beset 17$^{th}$ century Europe.

When I was growing up, Iowa was rock-ribbed Republican. It is more of a swing state these days. I saw three political offices as I drove through Decorah that first evening, Obama's, Edwards' and Clinton's. All had their lights on. I don't believe any of the

Republican candidates had offices in the county. The first 24 hours I visited Aunt Mary, 92 years old and an Obama supporter, and Aunt Marcella, 93 years old and a Clinton supporter. I come from Irish Catholic Democrat stock. (In my youth, that was a redundant observation.) Marcella told me that she hadn't voted in 2004. She couldn't vote for John Kerry (abortion), and she couldn't vote for George Bush (squirrel). She had seen how that election played out, so she was back in the game, bishops or no bishops. I stopped into The Family Table for breakfast. An old dear friend of my brother's saw me and my Obama button and loudly shot out some racist greetings. Which was great, because he was seated a few tables from the Luther College Women's Basketball Team. Their heads shot up in collective, if sleepy, shock, and I received several smiles of sympathy and support as they filed out to their tournament game in Dubuque. I later stopped in at an Elks Club function. I told my nephew Mike that there were more votes at the Elks for Millard Fillmore than Obama, Edwards and Clinton combined.

Victoria McCullough was Obama's county field director. She is a young, bright lady from eastern Tennessee, who had graduated last May from Rhodes College in Memphis . She had been living in Decorah since August. Vicki had put together a "get out the caucus " organization with the help of a local councilwoman, Susan Vagts, other Luther College faculty, students and administration members, people from the surrounding towns and villages, and a few visitors— such as Hugh from South Carolina who had been in Decorah for 40 days, Pete (father) and Nick (son) from Detroit (Pete made "no flip flop" pancakes and sausage breakfasts at the Obama office on his Travelin' Grill), college and grad students, Vicky's friends, and the late arrivals— like me.

The caucuses were to be held on Thursday evening, January 3. Ms. Victoria sent Nick, Pete, John (grad student), Michael (Greenpeace and L.A.) and me to Ossian on New Year's Eve afternoon. We had a highlighted street map (I didn't know that Ossian had street names), and contact information for about 30 people whom the campaign believed to be Obama supporters. Our mission was to confirm and get caucus attendance pledges. Oh yes. It was -0- freakin Fº. Before "wind chill." "Cold" does not do justice to the experience. The people of Ossian were not home. Perhaps some who were at home did not come to the door. Of those that did come to the door, it was obvious that they were not going to make it to the Ossian Community Center Thursday night for a political caucus. Many were over 80, and several were ill. You felt guilty just talking to them in the freezing doorways. Marilyn was the leader of the Obama effort in Ossian. But no one responded to our knocks on her door. It was odd. She had both Obama and Richardson signs in her window, each displayed with equal prominence. Our Obama Ossian team retired across the street to Bambinos for beer, burgers and frost bite

treatment. Nick and Pete kept referring to Bambinos as "Gambinos," apparently thinking they were trapped in a Sopranos' episode. The demographics and health of the bar patrons matched those we had experienced on our door-knocks. They had no reaction to our Obama buttons, to our Eskimo gear or to our presence in general. Pete drove a quiet van back to Decorah as night settled in— New Year's Eve night. We reported to Victoria that the Battle of Ossian was, ah, problematical, with Stalingrad-type ground conditions. Tanks would freeze up. I went to New Year's Eve dinner with my family at Cho Sun's Chinese Restaurant. All you can eat, $9.99 buffet. Damn good; only restaurant in town that was open.

New Year's Day. I reported to headquarters around noon. Word was that we were being sent back to Ossian. Think "Groundhog Day" and Bill Murray. Apparently Victoria was not amused with our prior day's report. We had new highlighted street maps, reaching out beyond the village limits into the six state and county highways that converge on Ossian. We had a broadened list of names. We had an appointment with Marilyn. We had increased troop levels— Colin (grad student) and Sean and George (Luther undergrads). General Victoria's Surge was on.

In Ossian, Marilyn and her sister got some hot chocolate into us. We discovered that Marilyn's Obama-Richardson schizophrenia was caused by the fact that her daughter, a freshman at Drake University in Des Moines, had a staff position with Richardson. A real loyalty conflict. We sat down and went over the names on our voter lists with Marilyn. Of course a few were dead and at least one "was in jail or should be in jail." I pulled out my cell phone and called anyone on our new list with the same last name as a person with whom I had gone to high school at DeSales— Tekippe, Liebold, Lechtenberg and so forth. [Pat was in fact the brother of my classmate Rudy; Hunter turned out to be the grandson of Dick and the grand-nephew of Jim (year behind me) and Ron; Lori's husband was a cousin of Leon (classmate)]. The Mashek's home had been built by my nephew, Mike. Marilyn also made calls to her Obama core. Pete, Nick, John, Colin and Sean went to the homes of the others on our new list, door to door, mano a mano, frozen person to sick person. We drove back to Decorah feeling a little bit better about Obama's situation in Ossian, and reported to Victoria that the Battle of Ossian was now "too close to call."

Thursday night, Aunt Mary and I went to her precinct caucus on the Luther College campus. They expected 40 people, and 150 showed up. Winneshiek County broke 44% for Obama, 26% for Edwards and 22% for Clinton. Ossian Township selected two delegates for Obama, two for Edwards, two for Clinton and one for Richardson. The Ossian result suffers in comparison to the county results, which matched the state results.

But we averted the Lost Battle of Ossian. There was no disaster there. At the celebration back at headquarters, I introduced myself to a young man who turned out to be a Boushka from Protovin. "Bet we're related," I said. "My mother Lucille O'Brien Kelly was a first cousin of Leona O'Brien Boushka from Protovin." Yup. Leona was his grandmother. A fellow from Spillville heard the conversation and asked if I was related to the Mrs. Kelly who taught grade school at St. Wenceslaus for several years. "That's my mother," I said. He paused. "She didn't like me much," he said. "Well, you have an Edwards button on," I noted. In fact, he must have had some special talent that he wasn't using. Mom hated that.