

On the Road with Obama

Oregon Delegate

Andrew Simon '10

Attended Democratic
National Convention

Andrew Simon is a junior from Portland, Oregon. An American studies major, he examines U.S. politics, foreign policy, religion, and literature. He is spending the fall 2008 semester at the Bard Globalization and International Affairs Program in New York City.

At Bard, Simon serves on the Student Judiciary Board and is the president of the Bard Political Union, an organization dedicated to presenting public forums in which Bard students and national opinion leaders debate contemporary political and cultural issues. After Bard, he hopes to attend law school and enter public service.

In June, Simon was elected to serve as a pledged delegate from Oregon to the Democratic National Convention in Denver. A longtime supporter of Senator Barack Obama, he played a major role in organizing the Bard for Obama campaign. Shortly before the convention, the *Bardian* interviewed him regarding his candidate. Our questions and his replies follow.

What attracted you to Obama's candidacy?

Senator Obama frequently speaks about bipartisanship. That's what initially led me to support his candidacy. There are some big issues that my generation will have to deal with—addressing climate change, fighting poverty, and redefining America's role in the world. These issues are too important for us to stick in the middle of political dogfights. I think that President Obama will be a lot like President Lincoln, who often sought advice from political opponents. Even though we're Democrats, we can't afford to disregard the other half of the country. If there's one thing that we've learned from the Bush administration, it's the value of criticism. I want leaders who engage, rather than ignore, their critics. I hope that the Obama administration gives Senator McCain a place at the table.

One of the major concerns regarding Obama, voiced even by some of his fellow Democrats, is his lack of experience. Do you feel that this is a valid criticism?

It's a valid criticism. I won't spin the facts by saying Senator Obama has more experience than Senator McCain. But I disagree with the notion that experience is more important than judgment. Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney, two of the most experienced people in American government, orchestrated a horribly flawed foreign policy. I'm confident that the Obama administration will be led by individuals with both experience and judgment.

As the campaign enters the home stretch, how much of an issue do you think that race will play?

None, I hope. But this is a strange election at a defining moment in American history. So who knows what will happen? All we can do is continue to work hard for the causes we believe in and try not to let the distractions get in our way.

Energy is a crucial issue of this campaign. In light of that, how do you feel about Obama's recent about-face on offshore drilling?

Senator Obama said that he will support limited offshore drilling only if it's part of a comprehensive energy package. I'm not an expert and I don't know the short- and long-term economic and environmental implications. But I do know that some of his supporters will disagree with him on this one and I hope they voice their concerns. I also hope they don't turn away from his campaign. You know, Bard professors do a great job of teaching criticism—not just of others, but of ourselves. They try to teach us that we aren't always right. We can be misinformed, biased, and just plain confused. I'm often all three. So it's frustrating when people, especially those who know the value of critical thinking, stick to one perspective and refuse to vote for any candidate who slightly differs. You want to vote for someone who you agree with all of the time? Run for office and vote for yourself. But even then, the chances that you'll always agree with yourself are slim to none. So just learn to compromise!

Do you think that the promises proffered by Obama's campaign can realistically be met in a four- or even eight-year term under the present political system?

I don't know. This game of holding our public officials to their campaign promises is one of the greatest absurdities of American politics. Public officials will inevitably flip-flop. But that's not always bad. Facts change daily. There are always new developments and new ways of thinking about the developments. We can't keep the wrong answers because they were the first answers. And the truly unfortunate part of the campaign-promises game is that no politician could get elected if he said that. No one would vote for a candidate who says, "I don't know what I'll do when I get in office." President Obama will have the right values and priorities. So instead of holding him to old answers, let's hope he comes up with new, better answers. I think he will.

The Democratic National Convention is sure to be one of the more charged such events in recent decades. What are your personal expectations for the convention?

I'm expecting a lot of noise and bright lights. But the sensory confusion isn't limited to the convention; it'll likely continue through the general election. In my limited observation of American politics, I've noticed something endlessly chaotic and, at times, circus-like. But when we follow our candidates and watch and analyze their every move, when every word has an implication and when every association or friendship is questioned, what can we expect? And maybe I'm young and naive, but I have faith that from the chaos emerge public servants who really care about making people's lives better and communities stronger and healthier. Walt Whitman has a great poem about the 1884 election. He looks at the wild commotion of American politics and concludes, "These stormy gusts and winds waft precious ships / Swell'd Washington's, Jefferson's, Lincoln's sails." In other words, America keeps moving forward.



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