

The logo for FRONTLINE, featuring the word "FRONTLINE" in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on a red rectangular background.

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IN A HISTORIC ELECTION YEAR, FRONTLINE PRESENTS
THE STORY OF TWO UNLIKELY PRESIDENTIAL CONTENDERS AND
WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT AMERICA

FRONTLINE Presents

The Choice 2008

Tuesday, October 14, 2008, from 9 to 11 P.M. ET on PBS

Encore broadcasts: Sunday, October 26, and Monday, November 3, 2008

www.pbs.org/frontline/choice2008

It has been called one of the most historic presidential elections in our nation's history—Barack Obama versus John McCain. It is a race that pits the iconoclast against the newcomer, the heroic prisoner of war against the first African American nominated by a major party. FRONTLINE's critically acclaimed series *The Choice* returns this election season to examine the rich personal and political biographies of these two men in *The Choice 2008*, airing Tuesday, Oct. 14, 2008, from 9 to 11 P.M. ET on PBS (check local listings).

The Choice 2008, part of "PBS Vote 2008" election coverage, draws on in-depth interviews with the advisers, family and friends closest to these unlikely candidates, as well as with seasoned observers of American politics, who together tell the definitive story of these men and their ascent to their party's nominations.

When FRONTLINE first aired a profile of presidential candidates during the 1988 election, *The Choice* redefined political journalism on television. Now, in an unprecedented election year, veteran FRONTLINE producer Michael Kirk (*Bush's War*, *Cheney's Law*) goes behind the headlines to tell a deeper political story about the candidates, the decisions they made, and why their nominations may indicate a historic change in American politics.

The story begins at the Democratic Convention in 2004 when Barack Obama, a little-known candidate for the U.S. Senate from Illinois, stepped forward to tell his personal story and to call for a move beyond partisan politics.

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“All around were people with tears in their eyes,” Obama’s chief political adviser David Axelrod tells FRONTLINE. “And I realized at that moment that his life would never be the same.”

Also that summer, the future Republican nominee John McCain, a self-described maverick and sometime adversary of the Bush administration, took the stage at his party’s convention to defend the president’s national security policy. In an effort to win the support of his party, the longtime senator from Arizona had decided to try to walk a fine line—a line he had had trouble walking all his life—between being an unconventional outsider and a team player.

“I think McCain’s goal was to make himself more acceptable to the party base without completely surrendering his outsider independent persona, and that was a very complex balancing act,” says Mark McKinnon, a member of McCain’s inner circle and former media adviser to President Bush.

As McCain the maverick was trying to make peace with his party, Obama the newcomer was discovering the afterglow from his speech was leading party elders to suggest the freshman senator consider a future run for the White House. Within two years of his arrival in the Senate, a window of opportunity seemed open if he was willing to take the chance.

“I told him he should do it,” former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle tells FRONTLINE. “The longer he’s in Washington, the more history he has, and the more history he has, the more he’s going to be explaining his votes and his actions and his statements and his positions that undermine his message”—a message that was all about breaking with the past.

FRONTLINE follows the two candidates from deep inside their campaigns as they run the gauntlet of the 2008 primary.

“This primary, more than any in recent memory, severely tested the candidates,” says producer/director Kirk. “Watching how Obama and McCain won reveals much about the men, their ideas, the kind of organizations they have built, and the way they face adversity.”

In the summer of 2007, only months after McCain had officially launched his campaign, he was declared a “dead man walking” by the media and party leaders.

“McCain was stuck in this political purgatory where the people that liked the maverick, the independent, didn’t trust him anymore, and the establishment conservatives still wouldn’t embrace him,” says political observer Charlie Cook.

But McCain persevered, firing much of his staff, scaling back the campaign, and focusing almost entirely on New Hampshire. FRONTLINE tells the dramatic story of this turnaround, with insiders involved every step of the way, which friends say was reminiscent of his determination during his time as a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

At the same time, an Obama candidacy was still seen as a curiosity by the Washington punditry. He was a newcomer to national politics and facing the formidable political team of Hillary and Bill Clinton, but Obama and his advisers sensed an opening.

“The Obama campaign felt that Clinton was vulnerable if they would make the race about something different than the old rules,” journalist Mark Halperin tells FRONTLINE.

One key to that strategy, Obama told his advisers, was to avoid being pigeonholed as an “African American politician.” But as the contest between Obama and Clinton heated up, comments by former President Clinton and the release of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright tapes brought the issue of race, always lurking, to the forefront of the primary campaign.

“In the long run,” observes House Majority Whip James Clyburn, the highest ranking African American in Congress, “it allowed Barack Obama to confront the one thing he

was trying to avoid, and that's the whole question of race, because sooner or later, he would have to confront it."

With the race narrowed to two men—one whose life was focused by his military service and his years as a POW in Hanoi, the other a black child raised by his white family who found identity in grassroots organizing and politics in the African American community of Chicago—America is truly at a crossroads: historic lows in the public's confidence in our country's future; a battered incumbent overseeing an unpopular war in Iraq; a faltering economy as gasoline prices soar.

"This is a moment where people are both terrified and also hopeful," says Kirk. "They have a choice between two extraordinary candidacies, two men who are trying to embody change in a time where many Americans seem to believe partisan dysfunction has curtailed the ability of our political parties to lead."

As journalist Matt Bai concludes, "Both of them in what they convey to voters—one in a long career spanning decades, the other in a lightning flash of a career spanning what seems like minutes—[is] a sense of breaking with the status quo, a sense of change, a sense that things need to be done differently than they've been done before. And the question I think a lot of voters will have to ask themselves is, who's actually going to deliver?"

The Choice 2008 is a FRONTLINE co-production with Kirk Documentary Group, Ltd. The writer, producer and director is Michael Kirk. The producer and reporter is Jim Gilmore. The co-producer and co-writer is Paul Stekler. FRONTLINE is produced by WGBH Boston and is broadcast nationwide on PBS. Funding for FRONTLINE is provided through the support of PBS viewers. Major funding for FRONTLINE is provided by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Additional funding is provided by the Park Foundation. Additional funding for *The Choice 2008* is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting/PBS Program Challenge Fund. FRONTLINE is closed-captioned for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers and described for people who are

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PBS goes behind the headlines throughout the summer and fall with the “PBS Vote 2008” election lineup, offering Americans a unique opportunity to explore the presidential election. PBS’ trusted news brands and personalities bring viewers in-depth information and insight into the issues and candidates. PBS’ election coverage will be led by *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, *Washington Week with Gwen Ifill & National Journal*, *NOW on PBS*, *Bill Moyers Journal* and *Tavis Smiley*, and enhanced by programming from other trusted PBS sources, including *American Experience*, FRONTLINE, *Nightly Business Report* and *P.O.V.* PBS.org’s election hub page, pbs.org/vote2008, will provide further perspectives. The site will aggregate video from PBS, feature syndicable content from across public media and highlight innovative Web-only projects from PBS producers and stations.

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Promotional photography can be downloaded from the PBS pressroom.

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