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Obama raises the stakes for McCain and the GOP

By LAWRENCE C. LEVY

Finally, climactically, this was Barack Obama's night.

Capping a week that featured one momentous, magnificent Big Speech after another - Teddy, Michelle, Hillary, Bill and even Joe and his "I'm a helluva success" riff - Obama's had to be the Biggest Speech. For a man already admired (and derided by Republicans) for his silver ("slick") tongue, for his charismatic ("celebrity's") ability to move the masses, a man whose rise through history began with the barnburner in Boston - even that man had a big job to soar over these high bars.

But soar he did amid the flashes of thousands of cameras and chants of "yes we can." In an address at once inspiring and illuminating, Obama delivered both an emotional appeal to the nation's heart and a sobering array of solutions to its problems. In one of the most electrifying moments, aimed at defusing a concern heard in whispers and polls, he defended himself as a patriot. "I love this country, and so do you, and so does John McCain," he declared. "The men and women who serve in our battlefields may be Democrats and Republicans and independents, but they have fought together and bled together and some died together under the same proud flag - so I've got news for you, John McCain. We all put our country first."

In reintroducing himself, his ideas and his dreams for the country, Obama did not directly take on the issue of race. But on the 45th anniversary of the day that Martin Luther King shared a dream that Americans would "look at the content of his character, not the color of his skin," the first black candidate of a major party implicitly asked voters to "march ahead" and do the same. Obama tried to persuade them to see his character itself as something other than the caricature so skillfully promoted by Republicans.

Nobody can say, even after the first flash polls come out, if he erased all or most of the lingering doubts about his experience and agenda, but his speech could only have helped him in that task. If Obama did not "close the deal" after a successful convention, his speech at least opened negotiations with the white middle class voters who remain skittish, if not hostile.

"I get it," he crooned. "I realize that I am not the likeliest candidate for this office. But I stand before you tonight because all across America something is stirring. What the naysayers don't understand is that this election has never been about me. It's been about you."

All through the week at the Democratic convention, New York state's delegates spent more time talking about local politics than about national. Not Thursday. On the day Barack Obama would stage this audacious, high-stakes acceptance speech at an open-air football stadium in tornado season, New Yorkers focused far more on what their standard-bearer needed to tell the nation that night.

"We heard the compare and contrast from the Clintons and others," Schenectady Mayor Brian Stratton said of the drawn differences between Democrats and Republicans, Obama and McCain. "Now we need to hear more details, more specifics - what's the 'change we can believe in' and how will he make it happen as president?"

Obama went only part of the way. He talked at length on many subjects about what he would do - talked tough about following Osama bin Laden "to the caves in which he lives" - but said little about how he would do it. But the essence of the speech was about coaxing voters to imagine him rising to the

occasion when and if the real call - and not a campaign text message - comes at 3 a.m. To imagine him at the gates of a factory trying to save their jobs.

Obama and the Democrats are far better off than a week ago. In his opening tribute to the Clintons and Ted Kennedy, the Great Houses of the Democratic party, he merged the narrative strands of the convention into a tapestry of unity. In lionizing his grandmother and her struggle to overcome bias against women in the workplace, he reached out to Hillary's crucial constituency. It doesn't mean they or any of the "naysayers" will be satisfied; Obama still has much work to do with millions of swing voters. But Obama and the Democrats raised the bar - and the stakes - for the Republicans already massing in Minnesota.

Perhaps not as exciting or highly rated as the international games that concluded Sunday, the Olympics of American politics continues in the Twin Cities for another intriguing and important week.

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