

Bernard Schoenburg: Obama comfortable among friends

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President BARACK OBAMA hasn't forgotten his Springfield roots.

That was very clear when he returned to the capital city last week to mark Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday. ([Listen to the audio of his speech.](#))

Given the nature of today's 24/7 cable news networks, all of us who knew-the-president-when can see virtually his every public move. When he's giving a speech anywhere in the world, we can watch. When he reacts with reporters or participants in a town hall meeting, we get to hear almost every word.

And what that demonstrates is that the affable guy with the quick smile who was just another state senator not so many years ago is still out there. So is the serious debater who was known to argue his points on the floor of the Illinois Senate. The president has lots of serious stuff to deal with these days, and he plays that game well, too.

But Obama's smile sure seemed genuine when he was among old friends and colleagues at the Crowne Plaza hotel, where he spoke to the Abraham Lincoln Association banquet about lessons he has learned from the 16th president.

And, in the familiar setting of Springfield, he exhibited some of that bipartisanship that he keeps talking about wanting in Washington.

As Obama greeted others at the head table, he called former GOP Govs. JIM THOMPSON and JIM EDGAR "two of the finest governors that we've had in the past." He mentioned former Illinois first lady LURA LYNN RYAN by name. He said new Democratic Gov. PAT QUINN will do "outstanding work for us in the future." And he called LORETTA DURBIN, wife of U.S. Sen. DICK DURBIN, D-Ill., of Springfield, "my dear friend."

"I do feel guilty," he said when greeting Durbin's wife, "because Dick was the one who brought this event to my attention. I'm here, and he's there."

This got a good laugh, because Durbin had already addressed the crowd via a taped message on videoscreens. Durbin had to stay in Washington, D.C., to make sure he didn't miss a vote on the stimulus package Obama was pushing, which passed a day later.

"Part of the reason that Dick Durbin has been such a great friend, not just to me but to the people of Illinois, is because his work always comes first, and he has been unbelievable in providing leadership in the Senate, through thick and thin," the president added. "I'm very, very grateful to him. He is one of my greatest friends, and I would not be standing here if it were not for Dick Durbin."

Obama also turned his attention to people in the audience. He noted that his former state Senate colleague, now-Attorney General LISA MADIGAN, was "in the house." He pointed out state Treasurer ALEXI GIANNOULIAS, "who's going to be playing basketball with me at some point"; Comptroller DAN HYNES, who he called "just an incredible supporter during this past race"; and new Senate President JOHN CULLERTON, D-Chicago, who he said is "one of the sharpest legislators that we've ever had."

Giannoulis often played basketball with Obama during the presidential campaign.

Obama then wondered if Illinois House Speaker MICHAEL MADIGAN, D-Chicago, was there. He was.

"It's good to see you," the president said.

Yes, the president often lists dignitaries in a crowd when speaking. But these are people he has known for a long time. Once he got into his prepared remarks, Obama alluded to an old Lincoln response to a voter who said he had put that president into office.

"Well ... it's a pretty mess you've got me into," Obama said Lincoln replied. "But I forgive you."

"So whoever of you think you are responsible for this," Obama ad-libbed, "we're taking names." That was one of the lines that got some hearty laughs.

But the one that cracked the president up was his own line recalling Lincoln, when "simply a Springfield lawyer who'd served just a single term in Congress" hanging around and "maybe wondering if somebody might call him up and ask him to be commerce secretary."

Earlier that day, of course, U.S. Sen. JUDD GREGG, R-N.H., withdrew his name for the post — the second Obama nominee to do so, the other having been New Mexico Gov. BILL RICHARDSON.

Having covered Obama in the state Senate, during his run for the U.S. Senate, and during the time he was in that office, I was lucky enough to get [a 10-minute telephone interview with the president](#) after his appearance in East Peoria and before he took Air Force One to Springfield.

In that call, too, he seemed very much the same person he was when he worked in Springfield. I sought reaction to a speech earlier in the day in Springfield by former Arkansas Gov. MIKE HUCKABEE, a former GOP presidential candidate and now a FOX TV personality, who has said Obama took a “sharp turn to the left” since taking office. I paraphrased for the president something Huckabee had said earlier in the day. “What we’re doing in Washington today is sacrificing our children and our grandchildren for our immediate benefit,” Huckabee had said.

“Come on, Bernie,” the president said with a laugh. “You think I haven’t learned anything since I got here?”

He wasn’t going to get into this fight, but he was good-natured about it.

At the dinner, Obama impressed some I spoke with because it seemed so clear he has studied Lincoln and used the 16th president as an example.

In the interview, I asked if his link to Lincoln could be considered a key factor in his achieving the office he holds. He laughed a bit at that one.

“Oh, I don’t think anybody was out there thinking, ‘Well, the guy comes from Illinois like Lincoln; let’s vote for him,’” Obama said. “I had to make the case that I could lead the country in a new direction.

“I personally, though, draw great inspiration from him, and his life offers so many different lessons,” Obama added. “I often find myself reflecting on his work as I look at the challenges that we face today.”

Which is why he was a good person to give that speech.

Personal greeting

Springfield Mayor TIM DAVLIN and his mother, NORENE DAVLIN, were led out of the ballroom during President Obama’s speech — but not to worry. It was for a good cause.

Davlin said he was asked to go behind the ballroom to be greeted personally by the president once the speech was over.

The mayor said he was “lucky enough to get my mom back there and get a picture taken” with Obama. His mother proudly said she got a kiss from the president.

The mayor said he didn’t squeeze any lobbying time out of the brief hello, but he did get the president’s autograph on five or six small cards. One went to his mom, and Davlin mentioned some other relatives who will get them as well.

“It was all good,” he said.

National attention

Lincoln's 200th birthday, combined with a visit to the capital city by President Obama, made Springfield the center of the news universe for at least part of Thursday. And five University of Illinois at Springfield students — graduates and undergraduates — were among those to get some national attention.

Among people interviewed at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum on CNN were GUILA AHERN, YOLANDA BEAMAN, CHARLES OLIVIER, MIKE ZIRI and RENEE RATHJEN.

Ziri, a graduate student and an elected member of the board overseeing the Prairie Capital Convention Center, told CNN that Lincoln helped push America toward real equality, and he thinks Obama today is changing people's minds about race.

"And I'm proud of that, coming from Lincoln's hometown," Ziri said.

Rathjen lauded Obama's clear support for gay rights. Ahern, who has a brother who not only served in Iraq but was mentioned by Obama in his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, praised Obama's support for troops and for his effective campus political organizing.

Beaman and Olivier both discussed how the issue of race has evolved in America. And Olivier also praised the Obama campaign.

"As an African-American male, I feel like Barack Obama is really (representative of) the American dream," he said. "That's what really mobilized me and inspired me to donate money to his campaign."

Bernard Schoenburg is political columnist for The State Journal-Register. He can be reached at 788-1540 or bernard.schoenburg@sj-r.com.