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Obama Must Convince Voters of Toughness

By **CHRISTOPHER WILLS**
The Associated Press
Monday, February 4, 2008; 4:27 AM

CHICAGO -- If [Barack Obama](#) is going to reach the White House, he'll have to convince voters that he's tough enough to handle both the political combat of a general election and the stresses of the presidency.

That's a bigger job for Obama than for most other presidential candidates.

At 46, he's younger than the others. He's a newcomer to the national scene, so voters haven't had as much time to weigh his strengths and weaknesses. And Obama can't reassure voters by pointing out how he handled some high-profile personal or political crisis.

[John McCain](#) can talk about the searing experience of being a prisoner of war. Rudy Giuliani, who has abandoned his run for the presidency, was mayor of New York during the Sept. 11 terrorist attack. [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) has faced years of criticism from the right.

The closest Obama comes to such a crisis point is his loss in a race for Congress. The loss could have derailed his political career, but he quickly bounced back to launch _ and win _ a longshot bid for the U.S. Senate.

Those who know Obama scoff at the idea that he might not be tough enough.

"Barack is a plenty cool customer. He's not a person who is easily rattled," said Judson Miner, his former law partner.

Some of his friends argue that Obama's entire life has been a test of his character _ growing up half-white and half-black, no father, moving between Hawaii and Indonesia, being away from his mother for extended periods.

It's a view shared by one expert on presidential leadership.

"From what I know about the man's life, goodness, I'm impressed that he's been able to get as far as he's gotten," said Warren Bennis, founding chairman of the Leadership Institute at the University of Southern California.

Obama has been in the Senate for just three years. Before that he served in the Illinois legislature, practiced law and taught at the University of Chicago. He's been in a couple of tough political races, but the major challenge always came in the primary _ he has never faced a serious Republican opponent.

Clinton is using her tough-as-Kevlar image as a selling point in the Democratic primary, telling voters she can handle whatever Republicans might throw at her.



Democratic presidential hopeful, Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., visits with reporters during a flight between Wilmington, Del., and Chicago, Sunday, Feb. 3, 2008. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast) (Charles Rex Arbogast - AP)

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