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08 THE 2008 CAMPAIGN: Style; Advertising; Fund-Raising

In a Time Of Crisis, Is Obama Too Cool?

By **PATRICK HEALY**

DUNEDIN, Fla. — Where many politicians would have aspired to show anger, Senator Barack Obama spoke in a soft, even tone as he reached the crescendo of his speech Wednesday about government mismanagement of the economy.

“At this defining moment, we have the chance to finally stand up and say, enough is enough,” Mr. Obama, the Democratic presidential nominee, told a ballpark packed with 11,000 people here.

Two hours later, after Senator John McCain, the Republican nominee, said he would temporarily stop campaigning because of the economic crisis, Mr. Obama looked downright unflappable at a news conference. Referring to this week of economic peril — and tweaking his Republican rival — Mr. Obama said flatly, “Presidents are going to have to deal with more than one thing at a time.”

However forceful and passionate Mr. Obama can be, his speeches and public appearances this week have underscored how he is sometimes out of sync with the visceral anger of Americans who are losing their jobs and homes. He often talks about growing up on food stamps and about having paid off his student loans only recently, yet his tone and volume, body language, facial expressions and words convey a certain distance from the ache that many voters feel.

“People want presidents who lead and relate to them — they don’t want presidents who analyze and seem above it all,” said G. Terry Madonna, a pollster and director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College in Lancaster, Pa. “Obama still comes across as dispassionate to the point of coolness. He is so comfortable in his own skin, he can be hard to connect with for people who are struggling.”

Discussing the Iraq war earlier in the campaign, Mr. Obama did not need to come across as livid because many voters saw him as right: he was the only top-tier presidential candidate who opposed the war from the start. Now the economy is the issue of the day, and Mr. Obama has largely been delivering Mr. Fix-It speeches and pointed critiques.



Barack Obama, after his meeting at the White House on Thursday. A supporter said of him, “People don’t want theatrics here, they want steadiness.”

“For the candidates, it’s show, not tell,” said Ruth Sherman, a political communications consultant. “Saying you understand is not enough, you have to be able to show it. Obama’s dispassionate approach on the economic crisis fails him on this front because his delivery contradicts his words.”

Whereas former Vice President Al Gore and Senator John Kerry struck populist tones during their presidential bids, Mr. Obama is having none of it. For better or worse, his performance in this time of financial peril goes to the heart of who he is. Mr. Obama may have looked subdued as he arrived at the White House on Thursday for a meeting on the economy, but he also stayed calm and ultimately prevailed at a similarly urgent point in his primary campaign against Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, whose turn toward populism helped her win the Ohio and Pennsylvania primaries.

“I think it would be more popular in the short term politically to be more populist on the bailout and Wall Street,” said Gov. Michael F. Easley of North Carolina, a Democrat, “but people know in their gut that a populist approach won’t solve the problem.” Indeed, Mr. McCain has come under criticism from some voters — and from conservatives in his own party, like George F. Will — for railing against Wall Street and proposing to fire people and enact economic policies that conflict with his record.

For Mr. Obama, the financial crisis poses different risks. He wants to appear fired up over the economy, but he has written before about wanting to avoid appearing like a stereotypical angry black man. Unlike Jesse Jackson, the Rev. Al Sharpton and other black leaders whose fulminations could

scare white voters, Mr. Obama is not from and of New York, Detroit, or the segregated South; he grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia. To some degree Mr. Obama faces the opposite challenge from fiery black leaders who came before him: Is he too cool for a crisis like this one?

“He may not be everything to everybody on the bailout, and he may not be a barnstorming speaker on this issue, but he is speaking credibly and seriously and honestly,” said Senator Russ Feingold, Democrat of Wisconsin, who joined Mr. Obama at a rally on the economy in Green Bay on Monday. “People don’t want theatrics here, they want steadiness.”

If voters in Michigan and Ohio do not demand stemwinding speeches from Mr. Obama, they may be left wondering where the passion is in his signature line, delivered at a fund-raiser in Chicago on Monday night: “We don’t get too high when we’re high, we don’t get too low when we’re low, we just try to do the job.”

Reba Younce, who attended Mr. Obama’s rally here on Wednesday, came away with just that impression of him. A 61-year-old independent voter and a former deputy in law enforcement, Ms. Younce said she would vote for Mr. Obama, in part because of his temperament.

“His way of approaching things may not work for everyone who’s angry nowadays, but I sense some anger just below the surface,” Ms. Younce said.

“Though if things keep getting worse, he may need to turn it up a little, to show passion some more.”