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## When He Was Barry

By GUY TREBAY JUN 18, 2009

NOBODY in public office will ever admit to giving thought to how they look. The reasons are too obvious to detail. But by now most people are in on the fact that clothes function like identity flashcards. Politicians obviously know it, and some of them even act on the knowledge. [President Obama](#) is one.

The best thing about Mr. Obama's

appearance is how streamlined and effortless he makes looking good seem. The component parts are minimal to the point of invisibility: cropped hair, a slim suit with modestly padded shoulders, dark laced shoes, a white shirt with a conservative spread to the collar, a red tie that somehow avoids being too obviously a power statement. Yes, he wears his trousers fuller than current style decrees. But

then, smart people aren't supposed to think about stuff like fashion, are they?

Yet even back in 1980, when [Barack Obama](#) was a freshman at Occidental College in California, he had clear-cut ideas about style and self-presentation. He grew his hair long, wore subdued, square-cut Hawaiian shirts and, as one friend said, was rarely to be seen in a closed-toe shoe. When Lisa Jack went scouting that year for subjects to pose for her photographic portrait project, another Occidental classmate suggested she call a guy then known to his friends as Barry.

"A friend of a friend was telling me about this really handsome guy, and he walked into the campus coffee shop," said Ms. Jack, who added that in the Los Angeles of that particular moment, the word "handsome" was not often put into use. Ms. Jack approached the young Mr. Obama about posing for some pictures, then essentially forgot about them until last year's presidential campaign.

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"I hadn't thought about them, and I'm not sure I would have if there hadn't

been a dare," Ms. Jack said last week from Minneapolis, where she has a clinical psychology practice. During a primary, Ms. Jack explained to a friend that even though she supported [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), she would be voting for Mr. Obama out of old-school loyalty.

"My friends thought I was lying when I said I went to school with him," she said.

To prove them wrong, Ms. Jack rummaged around in her basement for negatives shot decades earlier of the man who would be president. If those pictures of Barack Obama, now exhibited for the first time at the M+B Gallery in Los Angeles ([mbfala.com](#)), are far from the carefully devised ones now familiar to us all, they make clear that he always had a sense of the image he wanted to project.

"I photographed a lot of people," Ms. Jack said, "and it was always interesting what they decided to wear to the shoot." One subject arrived in greasepaint. Mr. Obama brought along a leather bomber jacket and a jaunty straw hat.

"Straw hats were not something people wore back then," she said. "It was obvious that he really put some thought into how he wanted to convey himself."

That self-conscious deliberation is there to be seen in the 36 photographs Ms. Jack snapped of a sexy and slightly callow

youth who had a big future ahead of him and more natural style than he knew.



Lisa Jack/Contour by Getty Images

GOING PLACES "Barack Obama: The Freshman," an exhibition of photographs taken when Mr. Obama was an undergraduate, is up through July 18 at the M+B Gallery in Los Angeles.