

A Peak Inside McCain And Obama's Offices



The personalities and personal histories of John McCain and Barack Obama are as evident in the artwork, books and mementoes in their Senate offices as in any words they may utter.

McCain's office oozes comfy clutter and informality: random piles of books, a fortune-cookie message taped to the desk, an abundance of tchotchkes and bric-a-brac.

Obama's office feels more like a gallery of modern art: precisely placed objects, sparsely adorned surfaces, clean lines, choreographed displays.

Both offices show their occupants' sentimental streak: McCain has a picture of his favorite high school teacher, and a 1904 Navy register that lists his grandfather as a midshipman. Obama has a photo of the cliff in Hawaii where his mother's ashes were scattered into the Pacific, and a tiger-beating stick from his grandmother's village in Kenya.

A walking tour of the Senate offices of the two presidential candidates tells a tale of their occupants:

McCain

The Arizona senator's office was decorated by his wife, Cindy, when he moved into his current suite in the Russell Office Building in 1995. She shipped in rugged wooden furniture, Southwestern artwork, a rocking chair, even the brass chandeliers.

Since then the decor has, well, evolved.

Family photos proliferate in haphazard abundance. Gifts from foreign leaders -an antique sword, an 18th century muzzleloader, a knife and sheath - are propped here and there, booty from overseas trips. Random stuffed animals are part of the scene, a dancing hamster in nautical attire among them. McCain, an avid reader, has books stacked seven- or eight-high along the length of a window sill. They include "For Whom the Bell Tolls," his favorite.

The desktop is a repository for this and that: a Barry Goldwater bobblehead, a stuffed Teddy Roosevelt, foam dice, a mug full of bird feathers, a stuffed green witch with "Army" written on her hat, a bracelet bearing the name of a soldier killed in Iraq, various patches, rocks, coins, pins. A note scrawled by a young constituent reads, "Please call us or We'll call you." The desk itself oozes history: It once belonged to Goldwater, the Arizona senator much admired by McCain.

Many of the items in the office are trinkets that friends and visitors have handed the Republican senator.

"Some of them he finds really cute and he keeps them - and they stay, and stay and stay," said Mark Buse, the senator's chief of staff.

Could there one day be a dancing hamster and a Goldwater bobblehead in the Oval Office?

McCain, in an interview, laughed and told the AP: "There should be." He added that he'd seen a McCain bobblehead recently. "Maybe we'd have to have that," he said. "You've got to have a little humor."

Taped to one corner of McCain's Senate desk is a message from a fortune cookie that clearly struck a chord: "Your principles mean more to you than any money or success." Slipped under the desk's glass cover is a handwritten phone number for McCain's spry-at-96 mother, labeled "Roberta at home."

Obama

Obama has been a senator only since 2005, and his office in the Hart Office Building has a fresh, clean look to it.

"He played a big part in putting it all together," said Ashley Tate-Gilmore, the Illinois senator's executive assistant - right down to selecting the straw-colored tint of the walls and carpeting. When the office was due for new carpeting, he wanted exactly what he had before. That particular carpeting had been discontinued, but Senate officials scrounged around to find an identical replacement.

The decor is carefully choreographed. When an assistant shifted the location of one painting while Obama was away, the senator had it moved back.

"He's tidy. It stays tidy," Tate-Gilmore said.

Obama has a "wall of heroes" containing historic photos of those the senator admires. Abe Lincoln is there, as well as Gandhi with his spinning wheel, Martin Luther King Jr., and John F. Kennedy. The arrangement includes a framed original program from the 1963 March on Washington where King delivered his "I have a dream" speech. There also is a framed copy of the Life magazine cover from 1965 showing civil rights marchers in Selma, Ala. It is signed by John Lewis, a protester who was bludgeoned at Selma and now is a member of Congress.

Another of Obama's office walls displays a more personal collection of photos taken by his former personal assistant, David Katz, an amateur photographer. The photos, hung five tiers high, show Obama in various political settings, such as the Democratic National Convention and a Rainbow PUSH event, but also in more intimate encounters with his wife, Michelle, and daughters Sasha and Malia, and at home in Chicago.

One item that Obama originally planned to mount on the wall took a last-minute detour. It's a white Gibson guitar that Obama received as a Rock the Vote honoree. The holes were already drilled to hang it on the wall when a guitar player who happened to be visiting the office convinced Obama that the instrument should be preserved in its case. (Obama himself doesn't play.)

Obama's office is as notable for what's missing as for what's there.

The credenza behind his desk contains a handful of file folders in one drawer, but otherwise is completely empty. Not many knickknacks: To avoid any ethical problems, Obama declines to accept most gifts, even the trinkets that visitors and admirers offer.

The most prominent item in the office used to be a set of red boxing gloves autographed by Muhammad Ali, displayed next to a photo of the boxer towering over a fallen Sonny Liston during their 1965 rematch. The

photo is still there, but the gloves have been put in storage. Aides said visitors to the office were too prone to handle the keepsakes.

Likewise, Obama's two Grammy nomination medals - for the senator's recorded readings of his memoirs - were once on display, but have been put away for safekeeping because visitors were fiddling with them.

McCain

McCain's office is a comfortable place. Before he was off running for president, he'd start his mornings seated on the burnt red tufted-leather couch reading the papers while having coffee and the occasional doughnut. The back of one door is covered with leftover bits of tape: It's where aides tape up McCain's schedule when he's in town.

The office has a strong Southwestern flavor. McCain especially loves four stunning black-and-white prints of weathered Native Americans photographed by Goldwater, who died in 1998. Over the couch is a watercolor of a Native American girl tending sheep, painted in soft blues and oranges by impressionist Jeffrey Lunge. It is titled "Give Us This Day."

The mantel of an imposing marble fireplace is covered with various awards bestowed on McCain, and a few tired-looking plants. Almost lost among them is one of McCain's most prized possessions: a baseball signed by Red Sox great Ted Williams, a childhood hero.

It's also easy to miss a number of other items whose historical significance is belied by their unpretentious display.

In one corner, in a simple black frame, hangs a three-page telegram from 1968 that recounts McCain's refusal to accept early release from detention as a Vietnam prisoner of war. The once-classified cable from Averell Harriman, then the chief U.S. negotiator to the Paris Peace Talks, tells about a discussion he had with the top negotiator for the North Vietnamese. It states: "At tea break Le Duc Tho mentioned that DRV had intended to release Admiral McCain's son as one of the three pilots freed recently, but he had refused."

On a nearby table sits a fist-sized chunk of reddish rock mounted on a base with the inscription "Hoa Lo - Hanoi Hilton." It's another small but powerful reminder of McCain's five and a half years as a POW. In another corner, among family pictures, is a small framed photo showing the statue of McCain that the Vietnamese government erected in Hanoi to mark the spot where he was hauled out of a lake after he was shot down. For all of the randomness, the office contents seem to fit together, with one jarring exception. There is only one glad-handing political photo in the office, and it is of McCain posing with the late Rev. Jerry Falwell and Falwell's wife, Macel, in 2006. The inscription to McCain from televangelist Falwell reads: "You are a great American, a national treasure and I am glad to say my good friend." That would be the same Falwell to whom McCain referred as an "agent of intolerance" during his first presidential run in 2000. They reconciled.

Obama

Obama's desktop, once used by former Illinois Sen. Paul Simon, is a testament to discipline.

It is home to two family photos, a very uncrowded inbox, a mug full of pens, and little else. It does include one sentimental item given him on the campaign trail: a carving of a wooden hand holding an egg, a Kenyan symbol

of the fragility of life.

Perhaps the most powerful piece of artwork in the office is a towering portrait of former Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, an oil on canvas by Chaz Guest on loan from the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago. Obama has spoken often of his admiration for the nation's first black Supreme Court justice.

Fellow Sen. Edward Kennedy supplied his colleague with one of Obama's favorite pieces. Obama had visited Kennedy's office and admired a painting by the Massachusetts senator of a beach scene on Cape Cod. A few days later, a framed copy of the artwork arrived at Obama's office, inscribed by Kennedy: "To Barack - I love your audacity. With great respect and warmest wishes."

Obama's Midwestern connection shows in a massive painting of an Illinois field called "Illinois Colorscape," a watercolor on paper by Harold Gregor, a noted painter of the American heartland. The only books sitting around are two tomes neatly stacked on an end table: "I Have Risen," a collection of essays by African-American young people, and the catalog of the U.S. Senate's fine art collection.

Are there any cracks in all of this office discipline?

Obama does doodle, his aides report.