

# Obama is going to have lots of fun

MON-SUN T 1.2.09, M/S 21

THE press around the world boomed in the last two weeks about how President Barack Obama must now get down to the “hard part” of the job.

Never has a cartel (this time of existing and past presidents) so conspired to fob off a self-serving myth — that “getting there” was the easier part, and now they had to get down to work.

Obama set out on such a crazy quest two years ago that those who said he’d make it, like your present correspondent, were deemed so crazy that none dared print it — except my column in the *New Straits Times*.

Indeed, my repeated predictions of his victory submitted to Manila’s press were so ignored that I could almost hear them saying “he’s nuts” in the newsrooms.

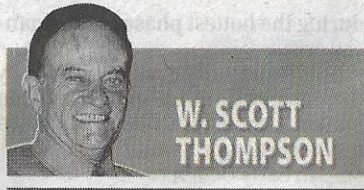
Obama’s quest looked impossibly hard — two years of campaigning away from home, eating rubber chicken every night and sweating out the primaries.

And now it’s the hard part? With Air Force One? With hundreds of thousands directly reporting to him and his staff, trying to figure out in advance his own leanings so that their “advice” is politically correct?

With thousands of Secret Service protecting him no matter where (even on the back stairs with call girls, if we’re talking about John F. Kennedy)? With chefs and butlers, masseurs and, yes, interns to chant “Yes We Can”?

With a magnificent 12-room family quarters and a weekend retreat a short helicopter ride away?

It is inconceivable that any prince could be rich enough to buy a tenth of that with all his billions.



W. SCOTT THOMPSON

I had a father-in-law who served at various second and third-level presidential appointments, who always said that “the higher you go, the easier it gets”.

Like him, I too, as an assistant secretary of state, had an immediate staff of 10 and a few thousand reporting to my underlings, a car at my disposal.

But when he became deputy secretary of defence, he added a helicopter to whoosh him to his Potomac estate in eight minutes rather than the hour-long limousine ride. But he complained that his boss, the secretary, had it still easier: all the assistant secretaries beaming in his presence to assure him of the “brilliance” of his decisions.

Oh, carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders? That’s wearying? No, it’s not. It’s an opportunity.

Obama might well bring peace to the Middle East and dry up the recruiting grounds of terrorists, if he gives the Israelis tough love.

What truly is wearying are the favour and job seekers. That’s everybody.

A president’s mere suggestion or murmur bends contracts and suggests promotions to the acolyte’s boss to move the upstart ahead. So the leader insulates himself.

You have to have a tough alter-ego



Barack Obama taking his oath in front of the Capitol in Washington as his family watches on Jan 20. Now that he is president, everyone will be falling over each other to do whatever the president wants because of the power he wields. — AP picture

whom everybody fears, to whom you can send the importunate. Who will growl at you if you are seeking to bend presidential standards or principles?

There are splendid pictures of JFK gazing out of a White House window, and the captions usually suggested the weight and burden of leading the world. Hogwash!

He loved it, and he loved his ability to slip off to the orgy area — the “swimming pool” — four or five times a day (“otherwise I get a headache”, he famously said), as soon as Jackie was out of sight. Her Secret Service had direct lines to his, in case she

came back early from horseback riding. Or, in reverse.

Famously, a young Secret Service agent full of idealism complained how his first assignment was to guard the back stairs of a hotel on the first presidential trip, up which a line of beauties was stepping to a presidential embrace.

True, times have changed. Obama can’t do what JFK could, but he wouldn’t want to. Who’d want Michelle as an enemy?

But even the world’s leaders will be bowing and scraping to get Obama’s favour. He doesn’t even have to oblige a sitting (Philippine) president stop-

ping down in Chicago to offer respect (and hoped-for approval).

African leaders are trembling at the thought of his “advice” to clean up their act.

What would a phone call by Barack Obama to a few southern African leaders do to the negotiations in Zimbabwe? My guess: Robert Mugabe isn’t sleeping well.

And how about the Kikuyu president of Kenya who stole the election from, yes, a Luo no less, several years ago? The Luo is now prime minister — and a half-Luo, Obama, is president of the United States. That Kikuyu isn’t stealing anything next time.

So please, headline writers, spare us. The “hard part” is behind the new president. No candidate ever toiled harder to get there.

Now his every smile and beckoning will confer favours, promotions, banquets, honours.

He wants an easy vacation away from the capital? Is there a paradise in the world whose leader won’t contrive an instant invitation?

It is rumoured Obama will make his first overseas trip to Indonesia, where he spent his childhood.

There, he can pray in Arabic and Bahasa with President SBY, and when they then say the Lord’s Prayer in English *sama sama*, the first gigantic step will be taken to heal the frightful religious division of the world, the late Sam Huntington’s “clash of civilisations”.

And that’s supposed to be difficult? Throw in a few days in Bali — “dawn of the world”, as Nehru put it ... and we’re supposed to call this tiring?

Newspaper editors, get real. Show the fun — and opportunity — of leadership, not the burden.