



## BOOK REVIEWS

# Rereading Obama

The first volume of the President's memoir is beautifully written, insightful—and informed by his occasionally frustrating multi-dimensionalism.

BY JAMES T. KLOPPENBERG FROM MARCH 4, 2021, 3:51 PM - 18 MIN READ

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**A Promised Land** by Barack Obama • Crown Publishing • 2020 • 448 pages • \$45

Barack Obama's *A Promised Land* beckons readers to return to a lost world. In that world Americans believed that facts could extinguish lies. Most people embraced the democratic ideals of equality, diversity, inclusion, and self-rule. Five decades of sustained agitation for racial and gender justice seemed to culminate in the 2008 election of the nation's first Black President. *A Promised Land*, the first of a projected two volumes, traces Obama's unlikely ascent and the early years of his presidency, when a dangerous fantasy slithered into the minds of a surprisingly large number of Americans. Told repeatedly that a corrupt conspiracy of nonwhite people and radical socialist elites was out to subjugate tradition-loving white Americans, millions mobilized against the imaginary threat. Years later, on January 6, 2021, a mob bewitched by that very fantasy—and encouraged by the President who succeeded Obama—stormed the Capitol.

Readers who savored Obama's brilliant autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, and his study of American history and politics, *The Audacity of Hope*, might initially find *A Promised Land* less than satisfying. Obama explains that he wrote the book to give readers a sense of "what it feels like to be president," and political junkies will relish the blow-by-blow accounts of Obama's campaigns and his fine-grained descriptions of the inner workings of his Administration. He admits that his wife generally avoided talking with him about the "horse-race" side of running for office and the nuts and bolts of governance, which she found less than compelling. I'm with her.

*A Promised Land* is well crafted and sometimes lyrical. Obama dreamed of becoming a writer, and that ambition shows. The prose often shimmers. Chimamanda Adichie's splendid review in *The New York Times* showcases the "imaginative richness" of Obama's "literary vision" and the modesty of his self-assessments. He sets scenes vividly, evokes emotions brilliantly, and with a novelist's skill characterizes the dozens of world leaders, political operatives, friends, and family members flowing through his narrative. Charming asides and anecdotes testify to Obama's undeniable devotion to his wife and daughters and give readers the jibes, jokes, and games that kept his team afloat in rocky waters. Here is the youthful, self-confident Obama who enchanted so many Americans on his road to the White House, and whose cool seemed to cocoon him from the chaos surrounding his presidency.

Obama entered American politics an exceptionally acute thinker. His books and his speeches, including the 2004 keynote at the Democratic National

Convention that catapulted an obscure Illinois state senator to national prominence, revealed not only a way with words but a distinctive epistemic humility. He knew what he did not know. Now, after eight years in the Illinois state legislature, two in the U.S. Senate, eight in the White House, and four of reflection, does the author of *A Promised Land*, chiseled by decades of political wrangling, still resemble that earlier thinker? Obama's desire to see every issue from every side made him a hero to some of his early admirers, and a target for those to his left and his right. He opens *A Promised Land* by saying he hopes "to inspire young people" to careers in public service. Observing, accurately, that "this nation's ideals have always been secondary to conquest and subjugation, a racial caste system and rapacious capitalism," complicates that aspiration. Yet even in the bleak days of a pandemic, he refuses "to abandon the possibility of America." As he did in that 2004 speech, he channels the closing pages of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where the protagonist invokes "the principle" that will endure despite the blindness and cruelty of individual people. We must learn, Obama writes, to "cooperate with one another, and recognize the dignity of others." Notwithstanding our national appetite for domination, the world "watches America—the only great power in history made up of people from every corner of the planet, comprising every race and faith and cultural practice—to see if our experiment in democracy can work." Paraphrasing Ellison, he asks whether the United States can "live up to the meaning of our creed." *A Promised Land* is Obama's answer, characteristically multi-dimensional, to that question.

Readers of *Dreams* will recognize Obama's capsule account of his upbringing, even though he offers few of the details that made that book so engaging. His mother and his grandparents, who raised him in his Kenyan father's absence, were "suspicious of 'doctrines' and 'absolutes.'" His mother asked him a simple question: Did he want to be a person who thinks only of himself or one who, because "can imagine how others must feel," wants to avoid hurting them? Obama confesses to partying harder than he studied through high school, and even in college he often only pretended to care about ideas that he thought might interest the girls who interested him. Endearingly self-deprecating as the portrait is, the letters he wrote to his girlfriends, made public in the more thorough of his biographies, reveal a much more reflective—and earnest—young man already wrestling with serious questions.

At this stage he cared little for the "rigged game" of politics, but the civil rights movement was an exception: "democracy that was earned, the work of everybody." At

Columbia—he transferred there from Occidental to start his junior year—he slowly began taking ideas more seriously, even too seriously. Plunging into serious writers made him “fierce and humorless,” yet he stumbled onto something that stuck with him. “Uncertainty” and “self-doubt” made him avoid “settling too quickly on easy answers” and accustomed him to questioning his own assumptions. The experience of his family’s love inoculated him against “the revolutionary formulas” of his leftist friends and kept him from claiming “victimhood” for himself. Practical politics was full of riddles. “When was compromise acceptable and when was it selling out, and how did one know the difference?”

His experience as a community organizer in Chicago, Obama writes, confirmed his faith in “the basic decency of people,” a judgment difficult to square with his account in *Dreams from My Father*. There he described a harrowing run-in with gun-wielding teens, hopeless and inured to violence, and the endless frustrations involved in fighting City Hall. Working out of the basement of a Catholic church, he discovered a community of faith in which “it was okay to doubt, to question, and still reach for something beyond the here and now.” The experience confirmed his trust in “the common thread that existed between people.”

Asking why he left community organizing for Harvard Law School, Obama’s nagging self-doubt resurfaces. Was it his mother’s advice that poverty is overrated, his belief that change comes from within the power structure, or simple ambition that propelled him to Cambridge? Once there, he found the ideas that had animated him springing to life, and only his “enthusiasm” enabled him to excel. Obama’s self-effacement persists not only through his account of law school but also through the courtship of his dazzling law-firm mentor, the young Michelle Robinson, whose family brought him stability and warmth.

Obama’s youthful political idealism did not survive his earliest campaigns for elective office. People knew the difference between good and bad policy, he writes, but “it just didn’t matter.” Elected to the Illinois State Senate, he was told by an old hand that politics is just a business, like selling cars. If Obama expected more, it would drive him crazy. He stayed for eight years, in part because redrawing the (gerrymandered) lines of the state’s electoral districts tempted him. “Wasn’t this what I was after—a politics that bridged America’s racial, ethnic, and religious divides, as well as the many strands in my own life?”

For the same reason, he reports, he decided to run for the United States Senate. A speech against the Iraq War had earned him some notoriety, and when he won the Democratic primary in a landslide and was invited to give the 2004 DNC keynote, plaudits, money, and veteran advisers started rolling in. That address, “The Audacity of Hope,” proclaimed the unity of the American people. Obama offers a brilliant account of the experience of delivering that speech, which echoes a powerful passage in *Invisible Man*. “There’s a physical feeling,” Obama writes, “a current of emotion that passes back and forth between you and the crowd, as if your lives and theirs are suddenly spliced together, like a movie reel, projected backward and forward in time, and your voice creeps right up to the edge of cracking, because for an instant, you feel them deeply; you can see them whole. You’ve tapped into some collective spirit, a thing we all know and wish for—a sense of connection that overrides our differences and replaces them with a giant swell of possibility—and like all things that matter most, you know the moment is fleeting and that soon the spell will be broken.” But Obama was wrong. The spell endured, and he rode it to the Senate. *Dreams* rocketed up the bestseller list. A second book contract followed.

In Washington, Obama noticed the difference between his older colleagues, who had friends across the aisle, and the “sharper ideological edge” of his fellow first-term senators. Still, finding common ground had long been his strength, and he was confident he could do it again. When Michelle had asked him why he would uproot their young family, he said he might “spark a new kind of politics, or get a new generation to participate, or bridge the divisions in the country better than other candidates could.” It was, Michelle replied, a pretty good answer.

**A**fter securing the nomination, Obama found himself running not only against John McCain but also against McCain’s running mate, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, whose inexperience and stupefying ignorance seemed only to endear her to conservative voters. Her appeal was “a sign of things to come, a larger, darker reality in which partisan affiliation and political expedience would threaten to blot out everything—your previous positions; your stated principles; even what your own senses, your eyes and ears, told you to be true.” That darker reality shadows much of *A Promised Land*.

Once elected, Obama faced the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s. His progressive agenda included universal health care and immigration reform, but he wanted “to avoid doctrinaire thinking” and “listen respectfully to what the other side had to say.” Critics on the left faulted him then, and have faulted him ever since, for his excessive flexibility and his naive hope of bipartisanship. Yet Obama never wavered. His inaugural, “A More Perfect Union,” issued his signature call for unity in the face of partisan division.

Despite what he calls his “kinship with left-leaning economists,” Obama chose the “centrist, market friendly” Larry Summers and Timothy Geithner as his principal economic advisers. Their “experience” and “intelligence” outweighed impulses to remake the economy or punish those responsible for the recession. He chose Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State and kept George W. Bush’s Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, for the same reason: They would question his own assumptions. Yet Obama’s narrative reveals that he never seriously considered more radical steps. His principal goal was preventing economic catastrophe, and his ideas about foreign policy “owed at least as much to the ‘realist school’” of figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr as to more left-leaning critics, whose ideas, as in domestic policy, seem not to have tempted him.

By now journalists and social scientists have thoroughly explained our unprecedentedly partisan politics. Obama offers an excellent summary of the prevailing wisdom: The post-1945 “consensus” quietly preserved white male supremacy and excluded women and nonwhites. Our twenty-first century “big sort” reflects racial and gender backlash, party realignment, culture wars, union busting, technological change, gerrymandering, big money, and new media. Obama says he recognized all that in 2009. Mitch McConnell, who had no friends and no convictions beyond his “almost religious” opposition to campaign finance reform, once stopped Joe Biden from explaining his position on a bill by saying, “You must be under the mistaken impression that I care.” If Obama understood from the start McConnell’s “discipline, shrewdness, and shamelessness” in service to his “single-minded and dispassionate pursuit of power,” why try to work with him?

The answer is simple and convincing. “For me, reaching out to Republican members wasn’t just tactical.” For years “I had argued that people across the country weren’t as divided as our politics suggested, and that to do big things we needed to move past partisan bickering.” Not only had E. J. Dionne demonstrated exactly that in *Why Americans Hate Politics*; it was also the central argument in Obama’s own *Audacity of*

*Hope.* Had Obama been no more than an ambitious schemer, as some of his critics contend, then why did he fail to act more ruthlessly? Why not instruct Democratic senators to attack the filibuster on Day One? From his initial, nightmarish meetings with Republican congressional leaders, they showed iron-clad discipline: “a refusal to work with me or members of my administration, regardless of the circumstances, the issue, or the consequences for the country.” Ever since Newt Gingrich initiated his slash and burn strategy in the 1990s, Republicans had been opposing everything and conceding nothing. Yet Obama persisted in seeking bipartisan support. Why? His epistemic humility was not a bug but a feature of his character, not a flaw but a conviction.

The Recovery Act, laden with concessions that infuriated progressive pundits and activists, nevertheless passed by just a whisker, thanks to the grudging support of conservative Democrats and a few moderate Republicans. Efforts to cope with cascading crises—housing, banking, automakers’ bankruptcies, and later the Gulf oil spill—followed the same pattern. Obama’s advisers considered various options, selected the least bad, and were hammered as socialists by the right and as spineless by the left. Obama’s descriptions, explanations, and justifications might suggest that when he picked Summers and Geithner, his path was set. Yet Obama is too self-aware to leave it at that. “Someone with a more revolutionary soul” might have tried more radical experiments. He was “a reformer, conservative in temperament if not in vision. Whether I was demonstrating wisdom or weakness would be for others to judge.” When the economy rebounded by the summer, his advisers congratulated themselves for averting disaster, and his critics on the left savaged him for squandering a rare chance to wrest control from America’s investment bankers and CEOs.

The Affordable Care Act stands as the signal achievement of Obama’s first two years, and *A Promised Land* traces the tortuous steps toward its passage. Had Obama been operating with a clean slate, a comprehensive single-payer option might have looked attractive. But given the need to attract moderates, Mitt Romney’s Massachusetts model seemed to him the most palatable. Republicans mobilized to block this “government takeover,” the phrase that focus groups found most damning, and while legislators held their fingers to the breeze, the Tea Party gathered momentum. Its themes had been knocking around conservative circles for decades. With the Koch brothers supplying fuel and Fox News, Rush Limbaugh, and Glenn Beck supplying heat, a simmering stew of racism, rage, and resentment boiled over. For conservatives, Obama was now public enemy number one. Even so, through an obscure gambit known as “budget

reconciliation” and with just enough support from Democrats in conservative districts, the health-care bill passed by a margin of seven votes in the House, albeit without the public option demanded by progressives. Although fully aware of its limitations, Obama reports feeling even deeper satisfaction with its passage than he felt on election night. It was, he writes, “a promise fulfilled.”

**D**emocrats suffered a historic setback in the elections of 2010, losing 63 House seats in the worst rout since 1938. Obama felt cheated. “We *had* saved the economy,” he observes, and “we *had* stabilized the global financial system.” Moreover, “we *had* put guardrails on Wall Street” and invested in clean energy, infrastructure, public lands, internet access for rural schools, and student loan reform. It was, Obama contends, the most productive congressional session in 40 years. Certainly, the Recovery Act, the Dodd-Frank Consumer Reform and Wall Street Protection Act, and the ACA, their limitations notwithstanding, constitute Democratic Party achievements as significant as any since the mid-1960s.

Writing about his many trips overseas, Obama offers splendid sketches of world leaders and incisively excavates the roots of international tensions. Obama claims that, having grown up seeing the United States through the eyes of non-Americans, his perspective was colored by their criticisms. Yet earlier decisions again constrained his options. As long as the United States supported Pakistan, and Pakistan aided the Taliban, the “pretzel-shaped logic” of U.S. policy hamstrung efforts to corral terrorism. Nowhere in *A Promised Land* does Obama address his Administration’s preferred approach to the problem: drone strikes. U.S. drones killed thousands in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen during his presidency. No one knows how many were civilians. He claims to have resisted the Pentagon’s demands for even bigger troop increases, but having earlier opposed “stupid” wars, he concedes that our continuing efforts in Afghanistan as well as Iraq have achieved little.

Some of his travels sobered him. A trip to India prompted him to wonder about the human impulses toward “violence, greed, corruption, nationalism, racism, and religious intolerance.” Was the desire “to beat back our own uncertainty and mortality and sense of insignificance by subordinating others” just too powerful “for any democracy to permanently contain”? Such impulses lay in wait everywhere, “ready to resurface whenever growth rates stalled or demographics changed or a charismatic leader chose to ride the wave of people’s fears and resentments.” Of course, the power of those



impulses was already apparent in the United States. While in Brazil, Obama was struck by the “grinding poverty” of children in the favelas of Rio and his powerlessness to do anything about that problem anywhere—including at home. Readers who recall the rationale for his Senate run, the rationale Michelle found persuasive, will sense the pathos in those reflections.

Following the 2010 election, the nation’s mood changed perceptibly. The Republican Party’s center migrated toward the fringe. With his antennae tuned, as always, to the lowest frequencies in American culture, huckster Donald Trump picked up the “birtherism” conspiracy theory and ran with it. After Fox News interviewed Trump on the subject, the mainstream media picked up the story. Soon Trump was everywhere. Forty percent of Republicans polled thought Obama was born outside the United States. As Obama points out, Republican leaders were quick to adopt Trump’s strategy. “They, too, understood that it didn’t matter whether what they said was true. They didn’t have to actually believe that I was bankrupting the country, or that Obamacare promoted euthanasia”—or that he was born in Kenya, a lie that became even more preposterous after Obama released his long-form birth certificate in a vain effort to stop the madness. The only difference was Trump’s “lack of inhibition. He understood instinctively what moved the conservative base most, and he offered it up in an unadulterated form.”

*A Promised Land* ends with the now-familiar, almost too-good-to-be-true juxtaposition of Obama skewering Trump at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner one night and announcing the raid that killed Osama bin Laden the next. That success proved cathartic for Americans, yet it also prompts Obama to pose questions his readers should ask themselves. What would it take to bring the “same level of expertise and determination to educating our children or housing the homeless as it had to getting bin Laden”? Could the nation “apply the same persistence and resources” to the problems of poverty, climate change, and universal child care? Obama concludes that we can no longer even imagine “uniting the country around anything other than thwarting attacks and defeating existential enemies.” Why?

Earlier in the book, reflecting on how earlier generations enacted programs such as Social Security and Medicare, Obama points out that Americans once “understood the advantages of a society that at least tried to offer a fair shake to everyone and built a floor beneath which nobody could sink.” But that social contract “required trust. It required that we see ourselves as bound together, if not as a family then at least as a

community, each member worthy of concern and able to make claims on the whole.” That trust has now disappeared, particularly across “the fault line of race.”

The culprit is the fantasy that government itself has become untrustworthy. Government is now “the problem,” as Ronald Reagan put it, because it extends benefits to people, nonwhite people in particular, unworthy of support. Obama explains that he had entered politics “to rebuild the American people’s trust—not just in government but in one another. If we trusted one another, democracy worked.” But when trust eroded, when concern for one another gave way to selfishness, then democracy ceased to work. In the aftermath of Joe Biden’s inspiring inaugural address, which echoed the central themes of Obama’s speeches, many Americans wonder if we can take steps toward restoring that trust. Our democracy depends on it.

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