

A Promised Land

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‘We are the Moses generation.’ Dr Otis Moss, a veteran of the civil rights movement, friend of Martin Luther King and former adviser to Jimmy Carter was addressing reassuring words to the latest aspirant for the presidency, the young Barack Obama. ‘We marched, we sat in, we went to jail ... We got us out of Egypt, you could say.’ But, added the Revd Moss, we could only travel so far. ‘You, Barack, are part of the Joshua generation ... ultimately it will be up to you, with God’s help, to build on what we’ve done, and lead our people and this country out of the wilderness’ (p. 122). In *A Promised Land*, Obama describes in intimate and often touching detail his attempts to lead the American people, Joshua-like, into the great national homeland it had always aspired to become, the very embodiment of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Obama was elected US President for two four-year terms, from 2008-2016, handing over courteously to Donald Trump on the latter’s inauguration day, 20 January 2017. Shortly afterwards, drained after eight years at the helm—and all the more so by ‘the unexpected results of an election in which someone diametrically opposed to everything we stood for had been chosen as my successor’ (p. xiii)—Obama settled down to work on this, the first of what is intended to be a two-volume memoir. It is a detailed account of Obama’s political life, from his early decision to run for local office (and then the US Senate) in Illinois, through to his campaigning for the US presidency and his first two-and-a-half years in the White House. The present volume concludes after the execution of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. There is clearly a long way to go in Volume 2, on which Obama is presumably working right now, his former Vice President Joe Biden having taken over the top spot from Trump.

As in his previous books, Obama is a highly engaging writer. In 1995, when in his mid-30s (and considering running for a seat in the Illinois Senate), Obama published a basic autobiography, or at least a memoir of his youth, which he entitled *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. Born in 1961 in Honolulu (two years after Hawaii had achieved US statehood), Barack never really knew his Kenyan-born father, as his parents divorced when he was a small child. But his highly independent-minded American mother, Ann Dunham (originally from Kansas) had a profound and beneficial impact on the lad. After her divorce, Ann—‘forever the architect of her own destiny’ (p. 26)—married a young man from Indonesia and, when Barack was six, the family moved to Jakarta. At age ten Barack was back in Hawaii, where he

attended high school, then went to live for the first time in mainland America, where he enrolled at Occidental College in Los Angeles for a couple of years, going on to Columbia University in New York, where he majored in political science. Barack's next move was to Chicago, where he undertook community work on Chicago's South Side (and made an emotionally-charged visit to Kenya to visit some of his relatives on his father's side). Then, from Chicago to Harvard Law School, where he was the first black person to be president of the *Harvard Law Review*, after which he returned to Chicago, where in 1992 he married Michelle Robinson, with whom he went on to have two daughters, Malia and Sasha. Obama became a civil rights attorney and an academic, teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School while also, in 1997, becoming a Democratic member of the Illinois Senate, commuting back and forth to the state capital, Springfield.

Ambitious for further advancement, Obama ran unsuccessfully for the US Congress in 2000, while retaining both his academic and state senatorial posts until 2004 when, having been the hugely impressive keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention, he went on to be elected a member of the US Senate. In his DNC speech, Obama stressed the importance of having 'the audacity to hope', a phrase that had first caught his attention from a sermon he had heard in church, and which led to the title of his next book, *The Audacity of Hope*. Published in October 2006, this contained a series of essays about Senator Obama's political views and values, his all-embracing and ultimately optimistic attitudes towards race, religious faith and family, the US Constitution, and the wider world. *The Audacity of Hope* proved an instant best-seller and, in early February 2007, Obama announced his candidacy for the US Presidency. In the elections of November 2008, Obama won the presidency and the Democrats won a majority of seats in both Houses of Congress.

A Promised Land is richly infused with details of Obama's personal background. Barack's 'mom', for example, is a frequent presence, especially in the earlier sections of the new book. When she is diagnosed with uterine cancer, Barack invites her to come and live with, or near, his home in Chicago. But mom says no: she's happy to stay where she is in Hawaii under the eye of her ageing mother 'Toot' and Barack's half-sister Maya. Maya keeps in touch with Barack, reporting on their mother's gradual decline. But when she calls to tell him that mother has died, his sadness is intensified by a sense of shame that he was not there at her bedside. Again and again, such as when Obama is struggling to get his healthcare programme passed by Congress, he thinks back to his 'mom' and, praying and hoping he won't let her down on a project he knows she would have approved of, weeps a little. As for 'Toot' (short for Tutu, or Grandma in Hawaiian), she lived on until late 2008 and, just a few days before the all-important presidential election, Obama made a 36-hour trip to Hawaii to say goodbye to her. Toot died shortly afterwards and at his final campaign rally Barack spoke about his granny: how she had grown up during the Depression and worked on an assembly line while 'Gramps' was away during the war. 'She was one of those quiet heroes that we have all across America,' he told his audience (p. 199). 'And in this crowd,' he continued, 'there are a lot of quiet heroes like that'—parents and grandparents, he said, who, working hard all their lives, have the satisfaction of seeing that their children, grandchildren, and maybe their great-grandchildren live a better life than they did. 'That's what America is about,' Obama concluded. 'That's what we're fighting for.' Next day, he was elected President.

A Promised Land contains substantial sections on the Obama administration's efforts to confront and reverse the financial crisis that broke out in 2008. The housing market was in nosedive when he became President, while US troops continued to be heavily involved in the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, Obama had promised voters that, once in power, he would create a healthcare policy from which all could benefit and also, in time, effect an American-led global agreement whereby to tackle and solve the problem of climate change. To all these projects Obama gives detailed attention, much of it devoted not only to the complex issues involved but also to the often crude partisanship of his opponents in what he senses is becoming an increasingly divided and destructive political world. Under these circumstances, how far can he, as President, fulfil all the promises and expectations with which he had come to power? When he heard he had won the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2009, his initial reaction was one of somewhat embarrassed surprise. With the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, he knew he might soon find himself pressed to commit

more soldiers to war rather than to usher in the new era of peace for which he yearned, and for which he was being rewarded.

In the course of a highly absorbing, almost novelistic, but arguably overlong book, we are introduced to a large and varied cast. Some are well-known public figures such as Hillary (Clinton), Nancy (Pelosi), Joe (Vice-President Biden), Mitch (McConnell) and Ted (Kennedy). In addition, we encounter advisers like David Axelrod ('Axe') and Jon Favreau ('Favs') and a host of other aides, friends and political colleagues, and adversaries, all of whom we gradually get to know by their first names and nicknames. Typically, when introducing someone new, Obama tells us not only the public role the person performs but also something about the personality concerned, what he or she looks like, how they act and are regarded. Rahm Emanuel, Obama's first Chief of Staff for example, the 'enfant terrible of the Clinton administration', was '(s)hort, trim, darkly handsome, hugely ambitious and manically driven. Rahm was smarter than most of his colleagues in Congress and not known for hiding it' (p. 209). Carol Browner, Obama's 'climate czar', was '(t)all and willowy, with an endearing mix of nervous energy and can-do enthusiasm' (p. 490) while Senator Lindsey Graham was '(s)hort in stature, with a puggish face and a gentle southern drawl that in an instant could flip from warming to menacing' (p. 505). Obama, while fundamentally opposed to almost everything his predecessor George W. Bush had stood for, found Bush and his wife personally kind and courteous when they showed the Obamas over the White House prior to the presidential handover. 'I promised myself that when the time came, I would treat my successor that same way' Obama writes (p. 207).

Throughout the book, Obama links the public and the personal. Whether it's his mom or his grannie, Michelle or the girls, or the professional friends and colleagues with whom he becomes close (or opposes), the writing is packed with character and personality—his own not least. He is forever wondering about his motivation and his capabilities, especially when considering running for office. From the outset Michelle was sceptical, discouraging even, asking her highly sensitive husband why he would want to undertake the risks involved in any political campaign. In order to achieve what, she'd ask, adding sardonically that he must imagine he's got some magic beans in his pocket and that he'd climb up the resulting beanstalk, kill the giant in the sky and bring down a goose that will lay golden eggs (p. 45). She was equally sceptical when they discussed the possibility of Barack running for the presidency. Late one night, soon after he had announced his candidacy, Barack found his brain in overdrive and his nerves jangled. Michelle, the 'early bird' in the family, was asleep beside him and Barack crept downstairs and poured himself a drink. 'My deepest fear,' he began to feel, 'came from the realization that I could win' (pp. 74-5).

Once in office, Obama's highly trained intelligence was no doubt a bonus. He clearly understood all the documents that arrived on his desk, insisting he was thoroughly briefed regarding every issue, staff meeting, Congressional bill, or foreign trip coming up in the diary. Unlike many US Presidents before (and since!) Obama liked to draft, often by pen, the basic text of all the major speeches he was due to deliver. He had always read very widely, from Tocqueville, Whitman and Thoreau to Russian novels, the works of Toni Morrison and John le Carré, and histories of the US Civil War, the Victorian era, and the fall of the Roman Empire. At a meeting with Prime Minister Maliki of Iraq Obama had discussed basic ideas of democracy, including how far to accommodate the needs and views of opponents. Afterwards he notes in passing that Maliki clearly hadn't read the '*Federalist Paper*' No. 10, one of the great founding documents in American history, in which James Madison, contemplating the potential US Constitution, had considered the political implications—and dangers—of a democracy in which all decisions arose simply from the fact of everyone having a vote.

But perhaps Obama's intellectuality was also, in some ways, a disadvantage. Describing himself as a 'flawed, often uncertain person' (p. 196), he admits that, when asked a question, he would often offer 'circuitous and ponderous answers, my mind instinctively breaking up every issue into a pile of components and subcomponents ... If every argument had two sides, I usually came up with four!' (p. 83). When on the campaign trail, Axe told him repeatedly that questions on TV shows were not there to be answered. 'Isn't that the point?' Obama would reply. 'No Barack, that is *not* the point,' said the assertive but ever-amiable Axe, explaining that, half the time, the moderator's job was to trip you up and Obama's was to say a few

words to make it seem he had answered the question and then move on to what he really wanted to talk about (pp. 88-9).

In some ways, *A Promised Land* reads like a latter-day *War and Peace*. As with Tolstoy (whose work Obama mentions during a description of his first official visit to Russia), historical references and legacies abound. He reminds us how the West Wing of the White House was constructed during the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt and we read in some detail of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. When Obama is sworn in as President, the Bible he uses is the one used by Abraham Lincoln at his inauguration, and he relishes the desk in the Oval office that was presented to the United States in 1880 by Queen Victoria, ornately carved from the hull of a British ship that an American whaling crew helped salvage after a seaborne catastrophe. Like Tolstoy, Obama employs a wide and varied vocabulary, his text frequently enriched and embellished with metaphor, dialogue, and, when appropriate, relatively unusual words such as *tamp*, *lede*, and *passel* (as well as others you will doubtless know but which I would not wish to use in an essay addressed to a respectable IHR readership!). Sometimes Obama fails to remind us clearly of exactly what or whom or when he is writing about, and the text can be annoyingly lacking in precise dates. The reader must also get used to a host of initials and references, not always explained to the uninitiated. Some, such as the FBI, the CIA, ASEAN and the GOP, you will doubtless already be familiar with, as you will possibly be with the DREAM Act, START, AARP and TARP. But remember that what came to be called 'Obamacare' was the Affordable Care Act (ACA), and be prepared to familiarise yourself with COIN (Counter Insurgency), SWAT (the Special Weapons and Tactics unit detailed to protect the President) and the PDB, the President's Daily Brief, the top-secret intelligence package delivered to the President each morning (which Michelle called Barack's 'Death, Destruction and Horrible Things' book). But don't give up; one of the book's many strengths is a lengthy and minutely detailed index. And it is also richly and beautifully illustrated with photos, public and private, including a lovely snap of Obama walking along a corridor of the White House with his beloved little dog 'Bo'.

The more immersed I became in the minutiae of this memoir, the more I wondered whether Barack Obama was, perhaps, too intelligent, too well-read, too aware of all sides to all arguments, to be able to cut through the sometimes crude politics of an increasingly divided, impatient America, to be able to lead it as he had had the audacity to hope. Highly equipped with the ability both to campaign and to govern, he would cry out confidently to his admirers during the run-up to becoming President, 'Yes, we can!'. But sadly, as his new book makes clear, he sometimes couldn't. From his earliest years in the White House, Obama evidently confronted widespread and fundamental antipathy towards, for example, his idea of pump-priming a failing economy, Keynes style; closing Guantanamo; establishing a nationwide system of healthcare; or setting up a global agreement to reduce the dangers of climate change. This was not the American way, his opponents would argue. As some of the more antagonistic cried out, Obama was essentially an alien to the American Dream, as the USA became increasingly divided between a traditional 'left' and an increasingly vociferous and angry 'right'. He was foreign-born (a lie promoted by Donald Trump), black-skinned, and trying to impose centrist, socialistic rule upon a nation governed since its foundation by a federal system subject to regular state and national elections. Somehow, Obama maintained his dignity, his intelligent affability, and his political dream. And, as his first two years in the White House stretched eventually to eight, his achievements, though less than he had hoped, were nonetheless impressive. If many of the fundamental aims and ambitions of the Joshua generation remained and remain unfulfilled, I greatly look forward to reading about Obama's further advances towards the promised land when he has completed Volume 2.

Photo of a young Obama and a local resident of Chicago (c) POLARIS/EYEVINE

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