

Introduction



It is now a commonplace that the election of Barack Obama marks the opening of a new period in America's long racial history. The unlikely rise of a black man to the nation's highest office—someone who was a mostly unknown state senator only five years before he was inaugurated president—confirms the view of many, especially whites, that the United States is a postracial society. At last, the shackles of discrimination have been broken and individual merit is rewarded, regardless of skin color. In this view, blackness—once the clearest marker of difference in American society—has lost some or all of its stigma. Barack Obama, in the most common formulation, transcends race; his ancestry fuses African and European into a new hybrid; his political vision of unity discredits those who cling bitterly to notions of racial superiority and, at the same time, rebukes those who harbor a divisive identity politics fueled by an exaggerated sense of racial grievance.

As with all interpretations of the relationship between the past and the present, the notion that Obama's election marks an epochal change in racial dynamics is not without its critics. Obama himself offers a tempered view, suggesting that even if America has advanced considerably over the last forty years, some racial prejudices remain in place and some racial discrimination still exists. In his view, we have realized much,

but not all, of the dream of racial equality. Other commentators, like Berkeley historian David Hollinger, suggest that Obama heralds the emergence of a new, multihued racial order, a majority-minority society where static notions of race are losing their purchase, and where race-specific remedies like affirmative action have outlived their usefulness. Many scholars and pundits further to the left, by contrast, are skeptical that much has changed at all. They point to the angry denunciations of Obama during his campaign and since his inauguration (Obama as Muslim, Obama as black man in whiteface, Obama as witch doctor, Obama as noncitizen) as evidence of a deep-seated racism that is inflamed by the discomfiting presence of a brown-hued man in the White House. In the most dystopian vision, offered by Duke sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the symbolism of an African-descended president obscures a deeper, more troubling reality: the “Latin Americanization” of the United States, namely, the emergence of a society where a tripartite system of color gradation will supplant the “one-drop rule” of racial classification, but where the darkest-skinned racial minorities remain concentrated at the bottom.¹

Whether any of these interpretations are right remains to be seen. The past is littered with predictions—usually offered with utter certainty—that proved to be completely wrong. Despite the tragedies of the past century, teleological views of history maintain a powerful grip on our imaginations. But if the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, it just as often veers off course. Whether optimistic, tempered, or pessimistic, our visions of the present and the uncertain future are shaped by our understandings of the past, for to predict something new means that an old order—a historical phase—seems to be or is passing. When it comes to race and equality, our visions of the past and future depend on how we interpret

the most important social and political movement in modern American history: the struggle for civil rights, black power, and racial equality.

By virtue of his life story, the racial identity that he has chosen and the one that he has had chosen for him, his intellect, and his political ambition, Barack Obama has become both America's first African American president and the nation's most influential historian of race and civil rights. About race and its legacy in the United States, Obama has been occasionally candid and but more often coy and indirect, for it quickly became conventional wisdom that "injecting race" into national politics was a risky strategy. Yet for all of its political risks, race is a topic that has animated Obama's entire adult life, from his explorations of black power in college, to his work as a community organizer in Chicago, to his career as a politician representing a mostly black district in the Illinois State Senate. No nationally prominent political figure—at least since Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr.—has offered such detailed reflections on race as Obama's in his two memoirs and in some of his key political speeches, especially in Philadelphia in March 2008, in the aftermath of a firestorm provoked by the release of videotapes of sermons by his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Jr. Even when Obama has raised racial issues offhandedly, they have become national news. His aside, in August 2008, that he did not resemble other presidents on dollar bills, led his opponent John McCain to accuse him of "playing the race card, and playing it from the bottom of the deck." And his brief commentary on the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., at the end of a fifty-minute-long press conference on health care in July 2009, led to weeks of heated debate. Obama's mere mention of race in the peculiar political climate of early twenty-first-century America led critics to label him as racist, divisive, and

a monger of racial grievances, or, conversely, as courageous, prophetic, and a truth teller.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, his 2005 political memoir, Obama admitted that “I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.” On race, however, Obama is more than a blank screen. Over the course of his political career he developed a distinctive view of his own place in America’s racial history and used that reading of history to mold his political career. After experimenting with different narratives of the history of black power, black politics, and civil rights, Obama fashioned a personal and political identity that rested on a single, powerful, and conventional reading of modern American history. It is one that reinforced a grand narrative of racial reconciliation, an account of America moving inexorably toward racial equality, or, as Obama put it in his most famous speech, “toward a more perfect union.” The power of Obama’s understanding of race comes from its fundamental optimism, its articulation of a deeply American belief in the inevitability of progress. How Obama understands America’s history of race is not simply a matter of biographical interest, for the ways that we recount the history of racial inequality and civil rights—the narratives that we construct about our past—guide our public policy priorities and our lawmaking and, even more fundamentally, shape our national identity. Barack Obama’s powerful evocation of the past to fashion a message of hope and reconciliation is more revealing about the racial politics of modern America than it is about the past or about the relationship of that past to our present.

And likewise, Obama, the most intellectual of presidents since Woodrow Wilson, developed a powerful and politically pragmatic analysis of the relationship of racial discrimination, economic restructuring, family dysfunction, and poverty. He

fused together his experience as a resident, activist, and politician living and working on Chicago's South Side with a sociological understanding of race, class, and inequality. Obama encountered the deindustrialization, urban disinvestment, and everyday insecurity of Chicago's poor with the eyes of a social scientist, the heart of a churchgoer, and the political pragmatism of a centrist Democrat. Combining these attributes, he built on and reinforced an important shift in understandings of race and the underclass that reoriented both social science and public policy in turn-of-the-century America.



This book is a history of the recent past. It spans the period from the late 1970s to 2009, the adult lifetime of Barack Obama. It is not a conventional biography, but rather three thematic essays that situate Obama squarely in the context of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American politics, intellectual life, culture, and society. Obama came to an understanding of race in a particular historical period—in a time of sociological paradox, ideological confusion, and intense debate about racial politics that followed the “classic phase” of the civil rights movement. He came of age as part of a generation of African-descended Americans who found opportunities unimaginable only a few decades earlier, but who also lived in a society when, at the same time, many of the measures of racial inequality worsened. He entered public life at a moment when racial controversies roiled urban neighborhoods and college campuses and dominated partisan politics, including Republican efforts to capture disaffected white Southerners and Democratic efforts to retain the allegiance of disaffected blue-collar whites. Race figured centrally in key debates over late twentieth-century public policies including

welfare, affirmative action, criminal justice, and education. Obama's understanding of America's racial past, his interpretation of the social dynamics of race in the present, and his vision of the future all bear the marks of his experience coming of age and entering public life in post-1960s America.

My approach in this book is to bridge intellectual, cultural, political, and social history, exploring Obama as intellectual (someone who has thought broadly about race in American society, and who has engaged, often deeply, with social scientific and religious thought about poverty and inequality); Obama as politician (someone who has crafted a public image, one that includes a rereading of civil rights history, in service of building a winning electoral coalition); and Obama as policymaker (someone who combines intellectual analysis and political calculation in choosing what public policies to support, which to downplay or neglect, and which to oppose).

To understand Obama's life and times requires an examination of race and racial politics. It is safe to say that few domestic issues have been more controversial in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America. And few issues have generated more passion among scholars and journalists. Debates about civil rights, black power, race consciousness, and inequality are often couched in predictable and analytically problematic formulations that reflect the moral dualism that still shapes our understandings of race. The first binary—"race versus class"—inflects much scholarship and liberal journalism about race. Either race matters as a dominant force or it is a screen—or a form of false consciousness—that masks far deeper inequalities of class. This is a simplistic formulation that downplays the ways that racial and economic disadvantages are fundamentally intertwined, and fails to address how the American economy generates inequalities that

affect people regardless of their background but are still disproportionately borne by people of color. A second binary—with special hold in public discourse—is “racism versus color blindness.” This contrasts a pathology and a principle, a flawed reality and an ideal. But it, too, does not stand up to close scrutiny. As legal scholar Richard Thompson Ford has argued, to hurl the invective “racist” loosely is to put too much weight on individual beliefs or values. And conversely, to proclaim color blindness is to overlook the ways that racial inequalities persist and sometimes harden regardless of the good intentions or the benign disposition of any single actor. There are stone-cold racists in America, and there are people who believe that they are wholly free of prejudice. Ultimately, the most enduring racial inequalities in the United States today are not the consequence of conspiracy or intention, or even the unconscious prejudice that neuropsychologists argue exists in the amygdala; rather they stem from the long-term institutional legacies of economic and public policies that have systematically disadvantaged African Americans and, when left unaltered, continue to do so in key realms of American life today.² The third binary is “pessimism versus optimism.” Either America is still a profoundly racist society, or we have mostly overcome past racial injustices. Any clear-eyed examination of race in modern America must recognize the changes that have transformed the life chances of African Americans in the United States since the mid-twentieth century, and that enabled Barack Obama’s remarkable ascent through some of America’s most prestigious institutions and ultimately to the White House—most of them the result of grassroots activism, litigation, and public policy innovation. And it must also account for what even a cursory review of census data, opinion surveys, and health, educational, and housing statistics reveals: namely, that racial gaps are deep and persistent in

American life. Those statistics, the way that Obama understands and interprets them, and the ways that Americans in general make sense of them, are at the heart of this book.



Writing recent history presents many pitfalls. Many authors are engaged in political combat, with a personal or political stake in elevating, maintaining, or diminishing the reputation of a national political figure. Those who have dug into the political trenches, fighting for a particular piece of legislation or battling ideological foes, might be tempted to misread a historical argument as a thinly veiled polemic, or to make assumptions about the author's politics and hunt for his biases. This book is not intended as a pro-Obama or anti-Obama tract; it is not an op-ed or a policy paper. Rather it is informed by my interests as a historian and sociologist trying to make sense of the still-significant reality of race in modern America. For the sake of full disclosure, I note that I voted for Barack Obama in 2008, made a modest financial contribution to his campaign, and served as a member of his campaign's urban policy advisory committee. I have also written opinion pieces and given public lectures that express sympathy with some of his policies, skepticism about some, and outright criticism of others. Yet in the pages that follow, I strive for balance.

My purpose here is neither to write a hagiography of Barack Obama nor to defend him against his political enemies. That will surely disappoint some of his most fervent supporters, like a distinguished academic in the audience at the Lawrence Stone Lectures in Princeton, where I presented an earlier version of this book, who objected to part of my argument because, as she stated, she agrees "with everything that Barack Obama has ever said." In the following pages, I sometimes

point out inconsistencies in Obama's thinking about race, but not as an attempt to discredit him by keeping a tally sheet of "flip-flops" (for few if any politicians or ordinary citizens are wholly consistent in their beliefs over time). Nor is my task to measure Obama by the yardstick of authenticity that defines many African American public figures (the oft-raised questions "Is Obama too black?" or "Is Obama not black enough?" are unanswerable and uninteresting). And my approach is not that of many presidential scholars, to highlight such attributes as leadership, greatness, or uniqueness (an assessment of such qualities will be the task of another generation of historians and political scientists with quite different interests from mine). Rather than hurling a polemic, drafting a scorecard, or fighting today's political battles, I offer a historical vantage point on the very recent past, favoring analysis over a blow-by-blow account of newspaper headlines, and privileging the long view over flash-in-the-pan controversies and the passions of the moment.

As much as is possible, I attempt to escape from the strait-jacket of current political discourse. For example, I emphasize, where appropriate, Obama's political motivations. This risks misinterpretation because of the way that "political" and "politician" have become pejorative terms in modern American life. And the possibility of misinterpretation is compounded by Obama's own rhetoric. A significant component of his appeal during the campaign of 2008 was that he ran (as have many successful national candidates, especially in the post-Watergate era) as an antipolitician, a reformer who distances himself from the equivocation, self-interest, partisanship, and hyperbole that are inevitably part of electioneering and policymaking. But to take that rhetoric at face value, to view Obama as somehow antipolitical, is to overlook the fact that he fashioned a campaign strategy with a seasoned

and effective team of media advisers, speechwriters, and handlers. He raised more money than has any other candidate for higher office in American history, and he used it to craft and disseminate an image that many voters found compelling. So when I describe Obama's use of civil rights history (to take an example from the first chapter) as part of his political image making, that should be read as a straightforward description of what men and women running for office do, not as an attempt to besmirch his reputation by branding him a "mere politician." There is nothing inauthentic about finding an identity, developing an intellectual analysis of social problems, and then repackaging them for political purposes.

This book focuses on just one aspect of Obama's career (and, it should be said, not the one that he has prioritized in his presidency) and on one dimension of America in our times (America's long history of racial division and the struggle for racial representation and equality). Race is important, but it cannot begin to explain everything about contemporary American politics and society. There are many other books to be written about Obama—and many that will not, for good reason, put his racial politics in the center. *Not Even Past* is, by necessity, a first draft of what is a larger and still-unfinished history of race, identity, inequality, and power in modern America. But it is also something more—a reflection on history—and how we remember it, use it, and shape it to understand our present and our future.

I

“This Is My Story”:

Obama, Civil Rights, and Memory



*“Rosa sat so Martin could walk...
Martin walked, so Obama could run...
Obama is running so our children can fly!”*

So goes a poem that circulated widely during the last weeks of the 2008 presidential election.¹ This short piece of verse encapsulates the relationship of Barack Obama to collective memories of the civil rights movement. It is a story of debt: Obama owes his success to the past generation of civil rights protesters. It is a story of redemption: Obama’s political career realizes their dream that skin color be no longer a bar to ambition. And it is a story of hope and promise: Obama’s victory will open up extraordinary opportunities to the next generation. The poem offers an unself-conscious interpretation of history—it is powerful because it provides Obama with a political genealogy in the most important social movement of the twentieth century and offers a teleological view of America on an inexorable path of progress.

It is by now axiomatic that Obama’s election as the first African American president of the United States brought the