

A Promised land

Barack Obama

I started writing this book shortly after the end of my Presidency.

I want to give an honest rendering of my time in office, where possible give readers a sense of what it's like to be the President of the USA

More than anyone else, this book is for the young people- an invitation to one again remake the world, and to bring about through hard work, determination, and a big dose of imagination, an America that finally aligns with all that is best in us.

**When I complained of boredom, my mother would ask me to read a book and “come back and tell me something you learned”
This is how reading became a habit.**

When I look at my journal entries as a student, I realize I was fierce and humorless, aching to make a mark on the world, wanting to be part of something grand and idealistic, which evidence seemed to indicate did not exist.

Enthusiasm makes up for a whole lot of deficiencies, at least that was true for me at Harvard law school. I became the first black head of the *Law review*. *My hand kept going up in all class discussions and my classmates rolled their eyes.*

In my first congressional election in Illinois, I lost by 30 points, I ran an ineffective campaign.

In 2000, I went to the democratic national convention, I couldn't get a car in LA because my Amex card was over the limit, I didn't have a pass to enter the main hall and saw the processing on a TV screen and flew back to Chicago just as Al Gore was accepting the nomination!

This story talks about the unpredictability of politics and the necessity of resilience, given where I ended up

On that flight back from LA, I was forty, broke, coming off a humiliating defeat with my marriage strained. For the first time in my life, I felt I had taken a wrong turn.

I talked to a number of people in my constituency and realized I needed to speak to and the widest possible audience. And the best way to do that would be to run for a state position – the US senate. I would be the first African American if I got elected.

I contacted the media consultant David Axelrod who asked me to wait and run for mayor a few years later.

Whether in sports or politics, it's hard to understand the precise nature of momentum. By early 2004, we had it and Axelrod coined the tagline "Yes we can" (I thought it was corny)

On the way back from an event ,I got a call from someone on the John Kerry staff, inviting me to do a keynote at the Democratic national Convention. Axelrod offered to pull a team together to write my speech, but I declined, I wanted to write the speech myself.

For the next several days, I write the speech on paper, the words came quickly , as summation of the politics I'd been searching for. My head felt full of voices – my mother, my grandparents, my father. At one point I remembered a phrase from my pastor Jeremiah Wright – *the audacity of hope.*

I was supposed to speak for 8 minutes that day at the DNC and then we negotiated for 17 minutes. It was the first time I practiced with a teleprompter.

I've only watched my 2004 DNC speech once, with make up I looked young, I can see a touch of nerves at the start, but there comes a point in that speech where I find my cadence. The crowd is quiet not roaring, it's the kind of moment I have come to recognize in later years, on certain magic nights.

After that night and speech, I became a national star and wherever I went , media followed me and more people came to hear me speak at every event.

**I won the Illinois senate seat by 40 points,
the maximum margin of difference ever.**

Many people said I should run for President. I felt I didn't have the experience. I went to meet Ted Kennedy who said " The power to inspire is rare, moments like this are rare, you think you might not be ready and you will do it later. But you don't choose the time, the time chooses you. You seize the only chance you have or you decide you will live with the knowledge that the chance passed you by"

Axelrod told me “ The presidential race can be exhilarating, but it's mostly misery. It's like a stress test. And for all your talent, I don't know how you will respond. Neither do you. The whole thing is crazy, so undignified and brutal, that you have to be a little pathological to do what it takes to win.

By nature, I am a deliberate speaker. I was just plain wordy and that was a problem. When asked a question, I offered circuitous answers with piles of components and subcomponents. If an argument had two sides, I came with four.

As we moved closer to nomination, my world shrank further. My movements became restricted. It was no longer possible for me to walk through a grocery store.

Through the political circus, people had heard my call for something different. Even if I had not been at my best, they divined what was best for me.

I promised myself that I would not let them down.

I was already considering a role for Hillary in my administration. I don't know how she felt about me. She and Bill did everything we asked of them when I became democratic nominee.

Family has sustained Joe Biden, but so too is his buoyancy of character. Tragedy and setbacks may have scarred him, but they hadn't made him bitter or cynical.

I would never fully rid myself of the sense of reverence I felt whenever I walked into the oval office. I entered not an office but a sanctum of democracy. Day after day, its light comforted , fortified and and reminded me of the privilege of my burdens and duties.

President bush did everything he could to make the 11 week transition between me and him and smooth as possible.

I wanted Bob Gates who worked for President Bush in my team because I was portrayed a starry eyed idealist and hence I wanted someone who would push me back against my own biases.

I thought Hillary was the best suited for the Secretary of state job. My staff advised me against it. However , I saw her as intelligent, smart and she had star power, all qualities needed as diplomatic relations were getting strained everywhere in the world.

Nothing prepares you for the first few weeks in the white house. Everything is new and unfamiliar. A vast majority of the appointees are still in process of being confirmed. Staffers are trying to figure out where heir parking passes are etc.

Rahm told me “presidency is like a new car, it starts depreciating the minute you drive it off the lot”

Larry Summers told us that unemployment is a lagging indicator, meaning the full impact of job losses didn't show up as a recession started.

I was lucky that the members of the press placed Malia and Sasha off limits in their press coverage, something both me and Michelle wanted badly if our children had to grow up normally.

My team allowed me to use a blackberry, though only for sending and receiving e mails from a list of twenty contacts only. I couldn't make any calls or listen to anything on the phone.

Michelle called it a play phone for toddlers where u pressed a few buttons for effect.

The first family pays out of pocket for any new furniture they want to put in the White House, just as it does for the food, the groceries etc.

For all their talk of wanting people to get along, American voters rarely reward politicians for cooperating with the governing party.

Press reporting or the 24 hour TV news cycle in the USA typically follows :

report what one side says

report what the other side says, the more insulting the better

and leave it to opinion polls to sort out who's right.

The stimulus package we launched after the financial crisis, helped millions weather the economic storm, and medical care for those whose lives had been upended.

Three months into my residency, more people were suffering than when I started.

I had run not to fan anger and allocate blame. I had to rebuild the American people's trust. If we trusted one another democracy worked.

It is often said that a President gets too much credit when the economy is doing well, and too much blame when it slumps. In normal times, that's true.

For the duration of his tenure, I found PM Manmohan Singh to be wise, thoughtful, and scrupulously honest.

Despite its progress India remained a chaotic and impoverished place, largely divided by religion and caste, captive to the whims of corrupt officials hamstrung by a parochial bureaucracy that was resistant to change.

Even those who complained about America's role in the world, still relied on us to keep the system afloat. To varying degrees our allies pitched in offering help by contributing troops etc.

I was always left with the same set of questions I wrestled with as a young organizer in Chicago. How useful is it to paint the world as it should be when it is difficult to achieve it. Was Havel right in suggesting that by raising hopes I was bound to disappoint people?

When I think back to my early conversations, its hard to deny that I was overconfident. I thought the issue of health care was so straight forward that everyone would support it.

As a matter of principle, I believed a president should never publicly whine about criticism from voters- its what you signed up for in taking the job.

One thing was certain, a pretty big chunk of people, including some of the very Americans I was trying to help didn't trust a word of what I said.

In politics, the stories told were more important than the substance achieved.

On October 9,2009, the white house telephone operator woke me up at 6 am and Robert Gibbs my staff member was on the line.

**He told me that I had got he Nobel peace prize
My first question was “ For what?”**

I told Michelle I got the Nobel peace prize , she said “ great “ and went back to sleep!!

War is both terrible and sometimes necessary. Reconciling these contradictory ideas requires the community of various nations to evolve higher standards for both the justification and the conduct of war.

Around the world, public attitude towards the USA improved after I took office. This better perception helped our allies to support USA in Afghanistan etc.

**I visited Russia and met Medvedev , Putin
and Gorbachev.**

**Putin had one problem with the narrative
today.**

Russia was no longer a superpower. Russia lacked the wide alliances , Russian economy was smaller than Italy, Canada and Brazil. It depended on exporting Oil, minerals and arms.

**As we exchanged pleasantries etc., I noticed that Putin had a casualness to his movements, a disinterest in his voice that indicated someone being accustomed to being surrounded by subordinates and supplicants.
Someone who had grown used to power.**

For Putin, the Americans had been arrogant, dismissive, unwilling to treat Russia as an equal partner and constantly trying to dictate terms to the world.

I met Gorbachev, 78 years old, he struck me as a tragic figure. He had won a Nobel peace prize. Now he was disdained in his country. Gorbachev was a reminder of the fleeting fickle nature of public life.

**I found Putin to be like a Chicago ward boss,
but with nukes and a UN security veto vote.**

The Un hasn't always lived up to its expectations. The UN is only as strong as its most powerful members allow it to be. Any significant action needs the support of the five veto power nations, US, Russia, China, UK and France.

For all its shortcomings I felt the UN served a vital function. Some of the Un reports could sometimes shame countries into action and better behavior and thus strengthen international norms.

China and US managed to avoid open conflict for more than three decades as China became a superpower. The Chinese government had faithfully followed Deng Xiaoping's advice "hide your strength and bide your time"

US had a huge deficit with China and we couldn't afford a low Chinese currency. When I was in a trade discussion with Premier Wen, I felt like I was haggling over the price of chickens at a market stall rather than a discussion between the two big economies in the world.

The presidency changes your time horizons, rarely do your efforts bear fruit right away, the scale of problems around your neck is too big for that. You learn to measure progress in small steps, each might take months to accomplish. Your ultimate goal might take a few years.

Environmentalists hailed Kyoto as a turning point in the fight against global warming. However in the USA, it required an two thirds vote from the senate and it hit a brick wall.

It's the nature of politics and the nature of the presidency that because of a bonehead mistake, an unforeseen circumstance, a sound but unpopular decision or the inability to communicate, the headlines turn sour and the public finds you wanting.

In such a situation, your opponents smell blood in the water and go after you, while your allies aren't quick enough to defend you.

Because of the size of bonuses, voters considered the bank bailouts a scam that had allowed the barons of finance emerge from the crisis relatively unscathed.

In early 2010, polls showed that more Americans disapproved of the economic stewardship than approved, flashing red light that explained why we lost so many sure seats of the senate.

Keeping up morale is the role of a leader, I couldn't delegate that. I tried to be generous in praise and measured in criticism. I made it a point to get everyone's views even the junior most person.

I was tough if people fell out of line, I called and fired Hillary once when she stepped out of line as also the many generals. I wanted the team to follow the script we agreed and be the best at it.

I would walk around the white house, peep my head into various cabins and say hello and generally chit chat.

Many senior women in the white house were feeling low because their voice wasn't being heard and the men weren't even sensitive to this.

I had a dinner at the white house with all these senior women and asked them for help.

I then made it a point to signal this to the senior men.

I cant say we solved all the concerns raised but things got better.

Obstacles and struggles rarely shook me to the core. Instead depression was likely to creep in on me when I felt useless, without purpose – when I was wasting time or squandering opportunities.

Michelle and I started a music evening at the white house where we got artists from various styles to come and sing for about a 100 people.

One Paul Mc Cartney sang 'Michelle' for Michelle. I was wondering if her parents would ever have thought that a Beatle would actually sing the song to her!!

In July 2010, we got the Fran Dodd act passed . It was a significant triumph, the most sweeping change to the rules governing America's financial sector since the new deal.

The Frank Dodd act was the equivalent of building better codes, better smoke detectors and sprinkler systems.

However we could communicate this to the Americans because you cannot write a speech around ‘derivative clearing houses ‘ and ‘proprietary trading bans’

A president has no choice but to multitask, as Michelle would say, “ you are the guy in the circus , spinning plates at the end of a stick”

Changing practices and culture in a government is very hard.

When we had the deep horizon oil spill, I sensed a certain bitterness creep into my voice – a bitterness I recognized as a companion to self doubt.

The US government did t have better technology that BP to handle the crisis. Americans don't like paying higher taxes to fund for things that haven't happened but could happen.

After the mid term election where democrats were thrashed, the pundits said that I had tried to do too much and hadn't stayed focused on the economy.

As far as I was concerned, the mid term results didn't prove that the agenda was wrong, it proved that I had failed to rally the country.

I realized after the elections that justifying the past mattered little, planning what to do next was more important.

In many respects modern day India is counted as a success story, having survived many governments , bitter feuds within political parties and all manners of corruption scandals.

PM Manmohan Singh and I had developed a warm and productive relationship. He was a man of uncommon wisdom and decency. He was unwilling to go ahead of the bureaucracy in matters of foreign policy.

PM Manmohan Singh told me “ In uncertain time. The call of religious and ethnic solidarity can be intoxicating. And, its hard for politicians not to exploit that in India or elsewhere”

Rahul Gandhi seemed smart and earnest, his good looks resembling his mothers. He was keen to know about my 2008 campaign. He was like a student , who had done his coursework and was eager to impress the teacher but deep down lacked either the aptitude or the passion to master the subject.

Would the baton be successfully passed to Rahul fulfilling the destiny laid out by his mother and preserving the Congress party dominance over the divisive nationalism touted by the BJP?

We worried about the autocratic nature of every Arab government, not just the lack of true democracy but also the fact that those who help power seemed entirely unaccountable to the people they ruled.

Contrary to the beliefs in the Arab world, the US is not a grand puppet master pulling the strings in the countries where it does business.

My daughters were growing faster than I expected. Malia was a teenager. At nine Sasha looked like a kid, but I noticed a shift in her attitude to me. She was less inclined to let me tickle her , she seemed impatient and was embarrassed if I tried to hold her hand in public!!

As for Trump, I had never met the man, was vaguely aware of him over the years, as an attention seeking real estate developer.

For most of my first two years in office, Trump was complimentary of my performance. He told Bloomberg that “overall he’s done a very good job”

I authorized the raid on Abbottabad to get Bin Laden.

After the authorization, I was in Miami Dade University speaking to the graduates- I spoke of the American Idea , our individual determination to reach past the circumstances of our birth and the collective ability to overcome our differences to meet the challenges.

After the seals got Bin Laden, I phoned Bill Clinton, George Bush, Gordon Brown, Zaradari to convey the message.

After the Abbottabad raid, we could sense a shift in the mood of the nation. For the first time in my presidency I didn't have to fend off republicans on some principle or answer any accusations.