

Obama's The Audacity of Hope: Portrait of a modern American political operative

David Walsh
14 February 2007

The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream by Barack Obama, New York: Crown Publishers, 375 pp.

Is there a single honest or original thought in Barack Obama's new book? If so, it does not immediately come to mind.

The Illinois junior senator and Democratic Party presidential hopeful's *The Audacity of Hope* is a calculated effort, from its title to its final page, designed to demonstrate his readiness to take the reins of political power in the US. That is to say, while Obama directs portions of his book toward sections of the more well-heeled and complacent Democratic Party faithful, those most inclined to wishful thinking, the audience that primarily concerns him consists of the powerful corporate, financial and media figures who organize and ultimately shape the campaigns of the two major parties' candidates.

Obama was born in Honolulu to a white American mother (born in Kansas) and a black Kenyan father; his parents separated when he was a child. His mother, an anthropologist, remarried and moved to Jakarta. After spending a number of years in Indonesia, Obama lived with his maternal grandparents in Hawaii. He graduated from Columbia University in New York in 1983. Two years later, he moved to Chicago to direct a non-profit project that organized job-training programs.

Obama entered Harvard Law School in 1988, eventually becoming president of the *Harvard Law Review*. He worked for a law firm and taught at the University of Chicago law school before running for the Illinois state senate in 1996. He won a seat in the US Senate in 2004.

Obama uses his ethnicity as a kind of unspoken metaphor for his political approach. Here is a man, the message is intended to convey, who is white and black, liberal and conservative, foreign and American, a man above party ideology and the petty bickering of partisan politics.

In his book, he pursues this theme consistently. "I am a Democrat," he tells his readers on page 10, "my views on most topics correspond more closely to the editorial pages of the *New York Times* than those of the *Wall Street Journal*," and he goes on to enumerate some of the issues that make him a Democrat. "But," he quickly adds, "that is not all that I am.... I believe in the free market, competition, and entrepreneurship, and think no small number of government programs don't work as advertised.... I think America has more often been a force for good than for ill in the world; I carry few illusions about our enemies, and revere the courage and competence of our military."

A few pages later, he criticizes the "smallness of our politics," observing that, "In distilled form, though, the explanations of both the right and the left have become mirror images of each other. They are stories of conspiracy, of America being hijacked by an evil cabal.... A government that truly represents these Americans [those "who are going about their business every day"]—that truly serves these Americans—will require a different kind of politics."

This is merely a further repackaging of the Clinton-Blair "Third Way," a supposed alternative to liberal and conservative policies. In reality, the "Third Way" in the late 1990s became a means of selling to the public, or

at least camouflaging to whatever extent possible, the fierce assault on the welfare state and the shift to the right of all the liberal-reformist or social-democratic parties in Europe and North America.

Unpleasantly enough, in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama's ideological attack on New Deal liberalism takes the form of a rejection of his own mother's outlook. He first explains his own "curious [i.e., essentially hostile] relationship to the sixties" and goes on to refer condescendingly to his mother as "an unreconstructed liberal" and to "her incorrigible, sweet-natured romanticism...her heart a time capsule filled with images of the space program, the Peace Corps and Freedom Rides, Mahalia Jackson and Joan Baez."

A page later, Obama is offering this remarkable tribute: "All of which may explain why, as disturbed as I might have been by Ronald Reagan's election in 1980...I understood his appeal.... Reagan spoke to America's longing for order, our need to believe that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces but that we can shape our individual and collective destinies, so long as we rediscover the traditional virtues of hard work, patriotism, personal responsibility, optimism, and faith."

In other words, Obama argues, objective social forces are not essentially responsible for such ills as poverty, homelessness and social inequality. Margaret Thatcher was right: there is no such thing as society or social responsibility. This is a translation of the Reaganite-Thatcherite program of greed, individualism and worship of the market into the language of the modern American liberal politician.

Just so there will be no misunderstanding, Obama continues, using the code words of the extreme right: Reagan's message "spoke to the failure of liberal government," government at every level had become "too cavalier about spending taxpayer money.... A lot of liberal rhetoric did seem to value rights and entitlements over duties and responsibilities.... Reagan offered Americans a sense of common purpose that liberals seemed no longer able to muster," etc.

Obama attempts to cover all his bases in the book. He criticizes the Republicans and Bush; he speaks of the growing social divide, the policies that hurt the poor, the health care crisis facing millions and so forth. He sheds crocodile tears over the fate of individual workers and individual communities.

For example, Obama laments the fate of Maytag workers in Galesburg, Illinois, their jobs threatened by the company's plans to move operations to Mexico. He describes the situation of one Tim Wheeler, a laid-off steel worker he meets in Galesburg, whose health care benefits have been used up and whose son needs a liver transplant. Obama writes: "On the drive back to Chicago, I tried to imagine Tim's desperation: no job, an ailing son, his savings run out." He subsequently refers to Wheeler's plight twice more in the book.

Obama criticizes Reagan's "policy by anecdote," but how is this an improvement? In fact, Obama has explicitly rejected universal health care 100 pages earlier in his book. In the course of criticizing so-called "either/or" thinking," he rejects "the assumption that we must either

tolerate forty-six million without health insurance or embrace ‘socialized medicine.’ ” His concerns for Wheeler and others are hollow.

It is noticeable that the most aggressive and heartfelt (almost zestful) portions of *The Audacity of Hope* are those in which he solidarizes himself with attacks on traditional liberalism and the supposed sacred cows of the Democratic Party. Here one feels he is most sincere and most comfortable with himself.

From his friendly remarks about Bush, including an anecdote in which he shares a joke with the president and his passing (but significant) remark that “I assume he [Bush] and members of his Administration are trying to do what they think is best for the country,” to his attack on the Democratic Party for running away “from a debate about [moral] values,” to his convoluted support for the attacks on constitutional rights since September 11, 2001 (“I acknowledge that even the wisest president and most prudent Congress would struggle to balance the critical demands of our collective security against the equally compelling need to uphold civil liberties”), to his endorsement of the death penalty, Obama tacks most consistently toward the right.

He counterbalances and effectively undermines his denunciation of the “ethic of greed” in corporate boardrooms and his calling for “a stronger sense of empathy” by adding, remarkably, that this “does not mean that those who are struggling...are thereby freed from trying to understand the perspectives of those who are better off.” Truly, the lack of empathy that persists within the general population for the difficulties of the fabulously wealthy is worrying!

Obama continues, along these lines: “Union representatives can’t afford not to understand the competitive pressures their employers may be under. [This of course is a slur. American union leaders have been *terribly understanding* in that regard!] I am obligated to try to see the world through George Bush’s eyes, no matter how much I may disagree with him. [This, as the contents of the book indicate, should not prove overtaxing for the senator from Illinois.]”

Obama, from a state whose leading city, Chicago, saw requests for emergency food assistance from families with children soar 20 percent in 2006, whose food pantries and kitchens can’t keep up with the demand, whose median income has dropped more than \$2,500 since 2000, whose official, derisory poverty rate has jumped by more than 20 percent since the same year, places his stamp of approval on the destruction of welfare in the US.

He pontificates: “We should also acknowledge that conservatives—and Bill Clinton—were right about welfare as it was previously structured: By detaching income from work, and by making no demands on welfare recipients other than a tolerance for intrusive bureaucracy and an assurance that no man lived in the same house as the mother of his children, the old AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children] program sapped people of their initiative and eroded their self-respect. Any strategy to reduce intergenerational poverty has to be centered on work, not welfare.” Newt Gingrich could hardly have been more eloquent.

Almost no one in American public life is too much of a reactionary *not* to receive a verbal bouquet from Obama. While politely disagreeing with Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia about his supposed strict constitutionalism, our author pauses to note that “I appreciate the temptation on the part of Justice Scalia and others to assume our democracy should be treated as fixed and unwavering,” as though Scalia and the other thugs in black robes gave a fig for the Constitution or democratic principles.

Later, Obama pays tribute to the “sincerity, openness, humility, and good humor” of “even the most overtly, religious senators—men like Rick Santorum, Sam Brownback, or Tom Coburn”—i.e., the pack of reactionary backwoodsmen who make or made up (Santorum, despite his many endearing qualities was sent packing by the voters of Pennsylvania, who seem to have been less impressed in the end than Obama) a good portion

of the Republican senatorial caucus.

And so it goes. Obama is not a stupid man (he obtained his law degree *magna cum laude* from Harvard), and he writes fluidly enough. However, the requirements of contemporary American political life—its proscription of any questioning of the free enterprise system, the utter subordination of the two major parties to the interests of the corporate and financial oligarchy—render his work, and similar efforts by his colleagues in the political establishment, unenlightening, stereotyped, utterly predictable, insufferably dull. Nothing of genuine originality or creativity will emerge from this suffocating atmosphere.

How did we know before we began reading that Obama would devote a final chapter of *The Audacity of Hope* to “Family,” including some seriously self-critical (or self-seriously self-critical) passages on the ups and downs of his married life (“By the time Sasha was born...my wife’s anger toward me seemed barely contained. ‘You only think about yourself,’ she would tell me. ‘I never thought I’d have to raise a family alone.’ ”)? Of course, amusingly, how was the Illinois senator, with his finger firmly in the political breeze, but without any sense of the wider social picture, to know that the entire debate on moral and family “values,” apparently so critical in the 2004 elections, would practically disappear, in the face of the catastrophe in Iraq and the widespread opposition to the Bush administration, by the beginning of the 2008 campaign?

In regard to the war in Iraq, Obama expresses his tactical differences with Bush, while, as noted on the WSWS yesterday, recording his essential agreement with the Bush doctrine of preemptive war (“we have the right to take unilateral military action to eliminate an *imminent* threat to our security”) and calling for more spending on the military. He recommends a conditional “phased withdrawal” of US troops from Iraq, while proposing to redeploy military forces elsewhere in the area and around the globe to protect America’s “national interest.”

He rejects “isolationism,” including the healthy instincts of the 46 percent of those Americans surveyed in a Pew Research poll who conclude that the US should “mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own,” and argues that “there will be times when we must again play the role of the world’s reluctant sheriff. This will not change—nor should it.”

In other words, contrary to the wishful thinking of a sizeable number of left liberals, Obama is a garden variety imperialist politician, whose principal cause for anxiety about the Bush Iraq strategy is its abject failure. He endorses the first Gulf war, praising “George H. W. Bush and his team” for “engaging in the hard diplomatic work of obtaining most of the world’s support for our actions, and making sure our actions serve to further recognize international norms.”

Insofar as Obama presents a program, it is outlined in the lengthy chapter entitled “Opportunity.” He describes “a fundamental economic transformation,” the process of global economic integration, in relatively stark terms: “Pools of capital scour the earth in search of the best returns, with trillions of dollars moving across borders with only a few keystrokes.” Globalization has “brought several billion people into direct competition with American companies and American workers.”

As is the norm in the official political debate in the US, the choices Obama outlines are limited to two: an embrace of free trade and globalization *as is*—i.e., globalization under the aegis of vast conglomerates—or the reactionary policy of economic nationalism. He praises Clinton for his support for the “new economy” and politely rejects the AFL-CIO’s protectionism.

Noting in passing the “bankruptcy of communism and socialism as alternative means of economic organization,” Obama argues for a greater role for government “in dealing with market failures,” while complimenting Reagan (again!) for his “central insight—that the liberal welfare state had grown complacent and overly bureaucratic.” What are

we left with as a program? Not much.

He proposes “investments in education, science and technology, and energy independence,” which “would go a long way in making America more competitive.” A conversation with Robert Rubin, the former Goldman Sachs executive and treasury secretary under Clinton, convinces him that “We can try to slow globalization, but we can’t stop it.” He argues for recasting the New Deal’s “social compact to meet the needs of a new century,” but aside from a proposal to raise the minimum wage, there doesn’t turn out to be terribly much there. He wants to shore up the unions, by tightening regulations at the National Labor Relations Board; he calls for moves to make Social Security solvent, while not opposing the decline in defined-benefit pension plans; and he brings in billionaire Warren Buffett to argue against the Bush tax cuts.

In the end, more hot air: “More than anything, it is that sense—that despite great differences in wealth, we rise and fall together—that we can’t afford to lose. As the pace of change accelerates, with some rising and many falling, that sense of common kinship becomes harder to maintain.” No serious social reforms, that would affect the lives of millions, are hinted at here.

As a final word, one would be remiss to pass over in silence Obama’s relentless genuflection to religion. In the prologue, he describes himself as “a senator and lawyer, husband and father, Christian and skeptic.” In a 32-page chapter on “Faith,” the Illinois senator waxes lyrical on the place of religion in American life and his own. He explains: “Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds...and coming to the realization that something is missing.” [One is tempted to suggest that the missing “something” might be, first of all, a decent job, a decent wage, decent health care and a decent public school system, but that would not be sufficiently spiritual.] He adds, in the self-aggrandizing manner that seems to come naturally to him, “If I have any insight into this movement toward a deepening religious commitment, perhaps it’s because it’s a road I have traveled.”

As it turns out, Obama doesn’t offer any special insight into the phenomenon, except inadvertently. Having concluded that “Americans are a religious people,” the man-who-would-be-President obviously decided early on in his career that an adaptation to religious backwardness would be critical to his advancement. Again, rather distastefully, he rejects his mother’s liberalism, her “willingness to live as a citizen of the world,” in favor of the “African American religious tradition to spur social change,” which in our day means joining hands with charlatans and Democratic Party political exploiters of the black population such as the Rev. Jesse Jackson and the Rev. Al Sharpton.

A priceless passage in *The Audacity of Hope* occurs on page 208 when Obama recounts the day he was “finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church and be baptized.... [K]neeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt God’s spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to his will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.”

Obama is probably not aware of the extent to which his account reminds one of the “conversion” of Elmer Gantry, womanizer and religious huckster, in Sinclair Lewis’s novel of the same name: “Oh, for the first time I know the peace of God! Nothing I have ever done has been right, because it didn’t lead to the way and the truth! Here I thought I was a good church-member, but all the time I hadn’t seen the real light. I’d never been willing to kneel down and confess myself a miserable sinner. But I’m kneeling now, and, oh, the blessedness of humility!” However, one must say that the fictional Gantry surpassed Obama in self-knowledge...he recognized that he was a fraud.





To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact