The brainchild of Barack Obama: *Life, Larry and the Pursuit of Unhappiness: An Almost History of America*

Ed Hightower
14 July 2026

Life, Larry and the Pursuit of Unhappiness: An Almost History of America is a seven-episode HBO sketch comedy limited series created by Larry David and Jeff Schaffer, produced by Barack and Michelle Obama's Higher Ground Productions, that premiered June 26.

Each half-hour episode drops a Larry David-style curmudgeon into a pivotal moment of US history—the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the first telephone call, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat and so forth. Many guest stars are familiar from David's prior productions, including Jerry Seinfeld, Bill Hader, the late Rob Reiner, Jon Hamm, J.B. Smoove, Susie Essman and Lin-Manuel Miranda, with Samuel L. Jackson as narrator.

Those earlier productions made David's name and fortune: *Seinfeld* in the 1990s, followed by his more quasi-autobiographical *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, which aired on HBO in 120 episodes from 1999 to 2024.

Life, however, is the brainchild of none other than Barack Obama, timed to the country's 250th anniversary. The former president introduces the first episode and flagship sketch on the Declaration of Independence. He even provided David "notes" on the show.

The series suffers from this sponsorship from birth. The rot is not in this sketch or that one; it lies in the central conception and the assumptions that go along with that. A history of America underwritten by the man who presided over the world's most predatory imperialist power for eight years was never going to be permitted to discover or uncover anything of significance.

It is revealing and rather pathetic that individuals like David, who has some brains and a sense of humor, seem to genuinely believe that Obama—the initiator of "Terror Tuesday" and "kill lists," the president, frankly, of the intelligence agencies—is the apotheosis of civilized behavior and political sagacity. This WSWS perspective from 2017 effectively sums up Obama's period in office: "Obama's legacy of war, repression and inequality."

This reviewer criticized *Curb Your Enthusiasm* 11th season, for capitulating to the complacent, affluent Democratic Party milieu it once skewered—most shamefully in the finale's uncritical celebration of Alexander Vindman—while treating world-historical crises like the Ukraine war and the pandemic on the narrowest possible terms.

Things have only soured since then, unfortunately.

One may chuckle at David's version of Alexander Graham Bell, who cannot stomach a woman's eagerness for new ring tones and advanced settings on the very first telephone. Samuel Tilden's rage at winning the popular vote for president in 1876, only to lose the Electoral College by a single vote, will delight someone inclined to host expensive Democratic Party fundraisers.

Fans of *Curb* will notice recycled material on social norms—mildly funny in modernity, but not improved by time travel. So, David reprises his invective against cutting in the buffet line with similar conduct *in the bread lines of the Great Depression*. Tee-hee! Same with dating widows of the recently deceased. David's "first crack" at the Declaration of Independence included in its list of grievances that no one should say "Happy New Year" too late into the month of January.

David's light-mindedness reflects the outlook of Hollywood's affluent liberals and the circles in which they navigate, abrasively, obnoxiously or otherwise. Nothing needs to be taken all too seriously. Everything will be sorted out at the next cocktail or garden party, or the one after that. We can have a hearty laugh about anything, from segregation to trench warfare.

The idea of taking historical moments and figures as subjects for satire is perfectly legitimate. Sketches featuring John C. Calhoun making South Carolina "great again," or Woodrow Wilson making the world safe for segregated oligopoly, would be welcome.

But satire of that kind requires more than a knack for zany anecdotes and boisterous repartee. Real historical

© World Socialist Web Site

knowledge—how the figures spoke for definite social classes and layers—is required. This is doubly true at a moment when the Trump administration wages war on history itself, including the Civil War and the plight of the enslaved.

But David simply injects himself into historical episodes and has a bit of sport. "Wouldn't it be funny if historical figure X did quirky thing Y" serves as the formula for every sketch, and the results are poor, even derisory. David boasted to CBS Sunday Morning that he and the creators had done no historical research for the project. It shows.

Comedy and satire can take part in history rather than merely borrow its costumes. Mark Twain's late anti-imperialist writings flayed the "Blessings-of-Civilization Trust"; Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" remains the standard for turning polite economic language against its practitioners; John Heartfield's photomontages—Hitler as a marionette, his palm open behind him for the industrialists' millions—identified the class forces behind fascism at a time when official opinion saw only a vulgar demagogue; and Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* mocked Hitler while American officialdom was still doing business with him.

More recently, Jesse Armstrong's *Mountainhead* lampoons the tech billionaires—"Frankenstein monsters" assembled from Musk, Zuckerberg, Thiel and Andreessen, for whom "Planet Earth's like an all-you-can-eat buffet"—and Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* understood that the catastrophe confronting humanity is not an errant individual but a ruling class incapable of responding to science.

That is genuine satire: it names the social forces and individuals at work. Nothing of the sort is attempted here.

The point is clearest in the series' most ambitious bid for relevance. One widely viewed segment of *Life, Larry and the Pursuit of Unhappiness* depicts George Washington's farewell address (1796), including his announcement that he would not seek another term as president. Washington's advice against political partisanship is interrupted by—surprise!—Larry David, who anticipates a future president so foul he would override constitutional and democratic norms.

The speech pours scorn on Trump, unartfully and from the standpoint of viewing Trump as a despicable *individual*—a pedophile, a crook, a swindler and so on. There are no oligarchs pulling his strings, no aristocrats or nobility behind Trump's contemporary redcoats, no real insight at all. Tellingly, the sketch devolves into a shouting match and an unruly mob—an 18th-century rendering of today's "highly partisan politics" and "divisive political climate," as polite commentators refer to it.

The sketch regurgitates a basic tenet of the outraged, stirred up petty bourgeoisie, one that explains nothing about the Trump phenomenon: the people are stupid. It is hasty work, too. No real setup–just dumping Trump in Washington's lap and blaming the American population for it.

Another point regarding Obama's repugnant involvement. One wants to ask: is this the drone murderer Barack Obama, the Wall Street bailout Barack Obama? The one who made Mitt Romney's healthcare scheme federal law? It feels a bit like *The Late Show with the Commander-in-Chief*, brought to you by the Central Intelligence Agency Center for the Performing Arts. Even more than *Curb*, the present work represents a circling of the wagons. Decrepit liberal Hollywood and the Obamas—exhibiting signs of self-delusion and lulling the audience about the import of American history and present political reality at the same time.

Nor is this Higher Ground's first such operation. The company's Oscar-winning debut, *American Factory*, presented workers' conditions honestly enough while promoting the UAW and the Democratic Party.

The Obamas should be the *subject* of comedy, not the producers of it. (*The Onion* hit hard on their business ventures with the headline "Obamas to launch a series of mid-size trucks.")

Great satire compels the artist to stand apart from his own social layer—far enough apart to see it, and to offend it. At his best, David demonstrated flashes of that capacity. Under Higher Ground's patronage, those flashes will never be permitted to catch fire. A comic history of America worthy of the name—one alive to the revolutionary content of 1776 and 1861, and to their repudiation by the class the Obamas represent—remains to be written.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site