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REVIEW ESSAY

Honolulu, Harvard, and Hyde Park

The Making of Barack Obama

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Barack Obama's appeal has always been something of a paradox. On the one hand, Obama's election as the United States' first African American president can be seen as a triumph for "identity politics" and a blow to the traditional hammerlock that white Protestant males have had on the presidency since George Washington. On the other hand, Obama moves the country closer to an era of nonracial or postracial politics, in which racial identity will matter less.

Obama is a clear break from past generations of black politicians. In the parlance of the civil rights movement, he is a member of "the Joshua generation" -- a term drawn from the Bible that refers to the generation of Jews who remembered the Exodus but lived to enter the Promised Land. And he has embraced a very different path than those of other black politicians, such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. With a white mother and a father who lived in the United States only briefly, Obama had little personal connection to the forces and history of African American identity. Growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia, two places where black-white relations were marginal and distant forces, young Barry Obama's life was touched only tangentially by race. From that background, he emerged as the most commanding figure in African American politics ever and was the first Democratic candidate to win a majority of the popular vote since Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

Who is Obama? What does he really believe? How has his quest to find and understand his place in the world shaped him and his vision for the United States? These are the questions that David Remnick, the author of *The Bridge* and the editor of *The New Yorker*, sets out to investigate in *The Bridge*, an intelligent and searching portrait of Obama. Although he covers ground that has already been examined by other writers (most notably Remnick himself), Remnick nevertheless manages to frame important questions about the current occupant of the White House. *The Bridge* is a significant accomplishment and a compelling read. At its best, it illuminates some of the

The book is not always at its best. Most readers will feel that Remnick spends entirely too much time on accounts of the ultimately irrelevant candidates who tried and failed to stop Obama's march to the White House. Instead, Remnick should have put his intelligence to work on the mostly white world of liberal Hyde Park, which had a profound effect on Obama during his years in Chicago. This is a regrettable oversight, as Remnick's narrative makes clear, white (and often Jewish) friends and associates formed a critical political network. Remnick has a gift for laying bare the cultural and intellectual forces at work in a person's life. Had he turned that searchlight on Hyde Park, he would have produced a much richer account of the president's personal and political journey.

When it comes to the world of black Chicago, Remnick gets closer to the story. His portrait of Representative Jesse Jackson, the former Black Panther who defeated Obama in a congressional primary, is particularly sharp. His portrait of Jeremiah Wright, the spellbinding preacher who built the church in which Obama found his faith, also leaves readers wanting more. The book's dominant metaphor is a bridge -- Remnick compares Obama's rise to the bridge in Selma, Alabama, that was the site of one of the most significant struggles of the civil rights movement -- and to some degree, the image closes as many doors as it opens. The image is a composite of African American politics, religion, and culture are about much more than civil rights. By scanting the cultural context, Remnick leaves readers with a less than totally satisfying depiction of Obama's encounter with the world of Chicago.

THE PRESIDENT FROM NEW ENGLAND

Nevertheless, Remnick delivers some fresh insights about the president's personal and political odyssey. He offers new perspectives on American society as a whole -- particularly when it comes to understanding the president. Obama is a product of New England's commitment to social and global reform. The Bostonian vision of the United States as "a city on a hill," whose government is the moral agent of a society of good people determined to promote justice and establish virtue, has fueled some of the country's most important and lasting social movements. This tradition that seems to have shaped Obama most profoundly.

The high school that Obama attended in Hawaii, the elite Punahou School, was founded in 1841 to educate the children of the New England missionaries who led the kingdom of Hawaii into both Christianity and the United States. In 1851, it was opened up to students from all racial and religious backgrounds, and today, like the oldest New England boarding school, it attempts to infuse its students with an ethic of service, along with solid academic skills. This Exeter of the Pacific did more than give Obama the academic skills he would need at Columbia Law School; socially and culturally, it helped prepare him for both the ideas and the people among whom he would have to be cast.

At its best, the tradition of New England reform, with its moral earnestness and its willingness to challenge the powers of a strong state, is a nonracial or postracial vision. Punahou's 1851 decision to open its door

and non-Christian students reflected more than the missionary ambitions of its founders; it represent England faith in the essential equality, and even similarity, of all people under the skin.

That same faith led more modern representatives of the New England spirit to promote the admission numbers of nonelite and nonwhite students to schools like Punahou and Harvard Law. But the goal of establishment reformers was less the celebration of diversity than its abolition. That is, just as the missionaries believed that given Christian values and education, the Sandwich Islanders would build their own version of England commonwealth, so modern reformers have believed that giving African Americans, Romanians, and other formerly marginalized Americans greater access to better education would ultimately lead them to live by New England's core values.

This seems to have worked in Obama's case. Just as President John F. Kennedy, the Harvard-educated Boston Irish-ward politician, out-WASPed the WASPs by placing himself firmly in the line of high moral and political leadership, so Obama has used his eloquence and conviction to emerge as the leading representative of this old and deeply American political tradition. Yet the perception among some Clinton supporters, Obama would say, like the narrator of the famous William Blake poem, "I am black, but O, white!" nearly ended his political career in 2000, when Rush humiliated him in a congressional race.

For Obama to emerge as a postracial candidate, he first had to become racial; he had to find a way to connect with African American history, culture, and values. The quest to connect with African American history, culture, and values shaped much of Obama's personal and political activity from adolescence through 2006. Remnick does a better job with this development than many writers because he grounds much of his story in Obama's struggle to find his way in America. And for a white writer, he gives an unusually detailed and nuanced portrait of the intellectual world in which Obama had to find his way.

More would have been better. In particular, readers would have benefited from a fuller and richer treatment of Wright. He represents the road that Obama ultimately chose not to take: Wright's Afrocentric theology and impassioned black nationalist rhetoric offered a competing vision with which Obama had to come to terms in black Chicago -- but that could never adequately express either the hopes or the vision that Obama brought with him from Hawaii and Harvard. Forced to choose between the spirit and legacy of New England embodied in the likes of Oliver Wendell Holmes and McGeorge Bundy on the one hand and the Afrocentricism of Wright on the other, Obama stands with Massachusetts every time.

BLACK LIKE HIM

The path Obama had to navigate as he built an identity and found friends and allies within the world of African American politics was a winding one. Remnick moves rather too quickly along it, but he does appreciate the magnitude and difficulty of Obama's progress. Although the circumstances of Obama

his cosmopolitan upbringing and education with the hopes and fears of a particular community of voters. In a unique, the task is common. The U.S. educational system is largely deracinating: it aims to do more out of Iowa; it wants to take the Iowa out of the boy. For those graduates who seek a career in electoral process must be reversed.

Returning to Arkansas after his years as a Rhodes scholar and Yale law student, Bill Clinton, the greatest modern American political history, had to reconnect with an American vernacular. George W. Bush made the transition from Andover, Yale, and Harvard Business School back to the pork rinds of Texas. The political fortunes of the Kennedy dynasty seem connected to the way that each succeeding generation moved from Harvard and less South Boston; by contrast, each generation of the Bush clan has moved further away from blue-blooded, bluenosed Connecticut roots toward a more total immersion in rising American subculture.

Given the unique and uniquely charged history of black America, African American politicians face challenges that their white, Latino, and Asian peers do not. The loyalties are deeper, the suspicions on all sides are more explosive. Obama's success in finding a path through these obstacles to a political stance and style that has attracted both black and white voters to his side reveals a power and a capacity for empathy and a receptiveness to others that recalls both Clinton and Ronald Reagan.

Reflecting on Obama's path from Harvard Law to the South Side of Chicago also helps one understand his political appeal. Learning to integrate his New England value system into a public persona that Chicago's black voters gave Obama a potent and even mythic political appeal, but it also left him with the folks out in the hills clinging to their God and their guns. For many Americans, the New England strong state acting as the enforcer of a common moral purpose has always been something to resist. Jacksonian radicals fought to abolish the state establishment of religion in Connecticut and Massachusetts; the abolitionists fought the abolitionists and then the Freedmen's Bureau during Reconstruction, the white working-class North united in defiance of Prohibition, and so on.

Obama's effect on this populist tradition is like that of a red flag on a bull. As a New England reformer, a larger, more intrusive state, and as the most prominent beneficiary of New England's determination to protect its most elite institutions, Obama represents forces that many populists instinctively oppose. At the same time, nothing in Honolulu or Cambridge or Chicago taught Obama what Clinton learned in Arkansas: how to connect with these people and to know what, and what not, to say to them. The economic crisis of 2008 and the consequent unhappiness with the Bush administration gave Obama an opportunity to be heard by populist voters. At his inauguration, they have shown signs of retreating to their former loyalties and ideas. Obama's hopes for 2012 may turn on his ability to bridge yet another divide in America's soul and to reach out to a constituency that has proved resistant to his charms.

THE WORLD BEYOND

Students of foreign policy will be bemused and somewhat alarmed by the near-total absence of evidence in Remnick's book that Obama ever showed any interest in foreign policy before running for president, the mention of the human rights scholar Samantha Power as an adviser to and influence on Obama, and the narrative descriptions of Obama's sojourns abroad with his mother and a fascinating account of his first career in Kenya. But to judge from this book, Obama spent little time dealing with foreign policy until he got the Senate committee assignment he really wanted and was forced to make the best of an appointment to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. While traveling with Senator John Kerry and others in 2001 over the poor security surrounding Russian nuclear materials and was seized by the importance of getting nuclear material under better control. This is a worthwhile idea, and it bore fruit at the recent Nuclear Security Summit, but one looks in *The Bridge* in vain for more clues to the future of U.S. foreign policy under Obama's administration.

It seems reasonable to infer that Obama's foreign policy instincts, like his domestic policy ideas, are rooted in a New England tradition that blends a form of moralism tempered by pragmatism, a faith in strong government and a commitment to leading by example. One could look to John Quincy Adams for an example of the foreign policy ideas to which Obama might aspire. Like Adams, Obama believes in American power and in an American foreign policy that does good; yet also like Adams, he prefers to hold power in reserve when he can and is aware of the United States' capacity to err. Whether he can succeed in foreign policy as well as Adams did remain to be seen. Adams was immersed in diplomacy all his life, whereas Obama is still finding his way.

The Bridge is a biography of a life still being shaped; everyone, including Obama, will know much more about who he is and what really counts to him once his presidency has drawn to a close. This makes for a book that in many ways is frustratingly open ended and sometimes feels unfinished. Nevertheless, it accomplishes the one thing it needed to do: it encourages readers to ask the right questions about Obama.

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