

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXIII-33

Barack Obama. *A Promised Land.* New York: Crown, 2020. ISBN: 978-1524763169 (hardcover); 978-0525633761 (paperback).

11 April 2022 | <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT23-33>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Thomas Maddux | Production Editor: George Fujii

Contents

Introduction by Fredrik Logevall, Harvard University	2
Review by Eliot A. Cohen, Johns Hopkins SAIS	5
Review by Susan Colbourn, Duke University	8
Review by James H. Lebovic, The George Washington University	11

INTRODUCTION BY FREDRIK LOGEVALL, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

In reading Barack Obama's mega-bestseller, *A Promised Land*, I was reminded of an assertion that John F. Kennedy made in the mid-1950s, well before he became president. Chatting with his longtime British friend David Ormsby-Gore, Kennedy said that his reading of history had convinced him that there were usually two legitimate sides to every major political problem. The diehards of the right and left, in their persistent demand for simple solutions, did not understand this fundamental point. "He knew that if you were President of the United States or indeed had any position in public life, for good or evil, somebody had to make decisions and you had the responsibility of making decisions," Ormsby-Gore later said of the conversation. "You did your best but you would be foolish to assume that you were omnipotent and all-seeing or that you were necessarily always right. The best you could hope for was that you were likely to be right more often than somebody else."¹

The Englishman might have been speaking of Barack Obama, or at least the Obama we encounter in this 701-page book, which appeared in 2020 to massive interest—in its first 24 hours, it sold nearly 890,000 copies in the United States and Canada. The first of two planned volumes, *A Promised Land* takes us through Obama's childhood and youth, his rise in politics, and the first two and a half years of his presidency. Time after time, we learn, Obama as president spent hours, even days, weighing the pros and cons of this or that policy action, looking at all sides of the issue; often, he concluded his options ranged from bad to worse. Unlike most political memoirists, Obama sketches out the case of his adversaries and even on occasion acknowledges their points. He frankly admits to questioning his assumptions and having misgivings about his policy decisions, and he muses about the limits of presidential power to affect change in a complicated world. ("Per his reputation, Obama is still questioning and second guessing," James H. Lebovic writes in this forum.) Usually, he gropes his way toward the middle path.

National security and military affairs take up slightly less than half of the book. Specialists won't find much that is new on the principal policy decisions of 2009-11, but they will get insights into how Obama saw the geopolitical landscape and his nation's place in it, how he evaluated his allies and adversaries, how diplomacy and statecraft intersected with domestic priorities. Though relatively inexperienced in foreign policy when he entered office, he soon "grew more comfortable—and efficient—in my role as commander-in-chief," and came "to experience my responsibilities the way I imagine a bomb-disposal expert feels about clipping a wire or a tightrope walker feels as she steps off the platform, having learned to shed excess fear for the sake of focus—while trying not to get so relaxed that I made sloppy mistakes" (429).

Of his crowning achievement—the risky and successful raid on Osama bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan in May 2011—he notes the tremendous amount of planning and preparation involved, then adds, ambivalently: "Was that unity of effort, that sense of common purpose, possible only when the goal involved killing a terrorist? The question nagged at me.... [T]he fact that we could no longer imagine uniting the country around anything other than thwarting attacks and defeating external enemies, I took as a measure of how far my presidency still fell short of what I wanted it to be—and how much work I had left to do" (699).

Was there an Obama grand strategy? Not really. In its place we find a kind of incremental ad-hocism, a pragmatic tendency to take things as they come, one by one, together with a wariness of unforeseen consequences and a recognition of America's limited ability to remake the world. Yet a certain faith in American exceptionalism also seeps through the pages. "This much was true, though," he writes. "At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the United States could legitimately claim that the international order we had forged and the principles we had promoted—a Pax Americana—had helped bring about a world in which billions of people were freer, more secure, and more prosperous than before" (329). And elsewhere: "[A]t every

¹ Fredrik Logevall, *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917-1956* (New York: Random House, 2020), 599.

international forum I attended...even those who complained about America's role in the world still relied on us to keep the system afloat" (339).

As our reviewers make clear, even at seven hundred pages, *A Promised Land* is far from a full-fledged account of Obama's early interactions with the world. On nuclear policy, for example, the book is mostly silent, even though it consumed abundant time and attention in the administration's first years. In the same way, key aspects of the US response to the Arab Spring go unaddressed. Readers hoping for an in-depth or even a cursory assessment of Obama's fraught relationship with Richard Holbrooke will come away disappointed. (The former top aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gets but one passing mention.) Most important, we learn not nearly enough about Obama's late 2009 decision to escalate US military involvement in Afghanistan. "Why did Obama settle on a half-way solution that gave none of the major contenders what they wanted?" Lebovic rightly asks. "Even as Obama opted for additional troops, he had his eye on withdrawal. So, why the troop increase?"

Lebovic is nonetheless highly complimentary in his assessment, as is Susan Colbourn. Lebovic praises the volume for its "candidly reflective" and generous tone, and its shrewd insights. He usefully reminds that "when viewing decisions from afar, we tend to exaggerate the discretion and information available to policymakers and thus their room to maneuver." To Colbourn, Obama's writing is evocative and vivid, his analysis "infused with a sense of history." Far more critical is Eliot A. Cohen, who pairs Obama's penchant for lengthy deliberation and self-criticism with "a palpable self-confidence to the point of arrogance." According to Cohen, "empathy is one of [Obama's] weak points," which I take to mean that he finds Obama lacking in empathy—an uncommon view even among otherwise harsh critics of the former president. Obama's oft-quoted description of Vladimir Putin—a Chicago ward boss except with nuclear weapons and veto on the UN Security Council—Cohen finds inapt, and he sees little to admire in the administration's national security decision-making overall during these years. Still, the essay concludes on a notable and perhaps grudging upturn, as Cohen acknowledges that Obama looks good in comparison with his successor and possibly also his predecessor, and that his foreign policy record, though "mediocre," puts him in the middle rank among American presidents.

In narrative terms, it makes sense that Obama would conclude the book with a dramatic retelling of the raid on the bin Laden lair in Abbottabad. In substantive terms, too, it may make sense, if as Colbourn suggests the mission was a "hinge point" of Obama's presidency. But there's arguably also something jarring about the choice to end a much-anticipated work of presidential memoirs with an account of the targeted killing of another person. In any case, as we leave the story in the spring of 2011, the bulk of the Obama years are still head of us, not least the surreal year of 2016 and the inauguration of his successor on January 20, 2017. How, we're left to wonder, will he choose to end volume two?

Participants:

Fredrik Logevall is the Laurence D. Belfer Professor of International Affairs at Harvard University. His most recent book is *JFK: Coming of Age in the American Century, 1917-1956* (New York: Random House, 2020), which won the Elizabeth Longford Prize for Historical Biography and was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year.

Eliot Cohen is Robert E. Osgood Professor at the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) where he has taught since 1990 and served as the school's ninth Dean. He is also the Arleigh Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for International Studies. His books include *The Big Stick* (2017), *Conquered into Liberty* (2011), and *Supreme Command* (2002). In addition to public service in the Department of Defense he served as Counselor of the Department of State in 2007-2009. He writes frequently for major news organizations and journals and is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic*.

Susan Colbourn is associate director of the Triangle Institute for Security Studies, based at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy. She is the author of *Euromissiles: a Transatlantic History*, forthcoming from Cornell University Press in 2022.

James H. Lebovic is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at The George Washington University. He has published widely on defense policy, deterrence strategy, arms control, military budgets and procurement, foreign aid, democracy and human rights, international conflict, cooperation in international organizations, and military intervention. He is the author of six books including *Planning to Fail: The US Wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Oxford University Press 2019), *Flawed Logics: Strategic Nuclear Arms Control from Truman to Obama* (Johns Hopkins University 2013), *The Limits of US Military Capability: Lessons from Vietnam and Iraq* (Johns Hopkins University 2010), and *Deterring International Terrorism and Rogue States: US National Security Policy after 9/11* (Routledge 2007). From 2015-2017, he served as chair of the International Security Studies Section of the International Studies Association.

REVIEW BY ELIOT A. COHEN, JOHNS HOPKINS SAIS

Pity the psychological profiler working for a foreign intelligence service who had to make sense of Barack Obama. Free (presumably) of the filters created by besotted admiration or unhinged loathing, he or she would still have to sort out the contradictions on display in this volume of memoirs. What is he? Idealist or ruthless Chicago pol? Devoted husband and father, or egotist who subjected his formidable wife to his extraordinary ambitions? Eager to bring America home, or to evangelize its ideals (as he understood them) abroad? Cosmopolitan by virtue of his birth and unusual upbringing overseas and in Hawaii, or a product of the bitter tale of American racial politics? Supreme rationalist, or dreamer for whom realities could be swept aside by his own magic and ‘the fierce urgency of now’?²

The contradictions clearly absorb the former president himself, who, after all, has now devoted three volumes to figuring out who he is and why he became that way.³ And because he wrote this memoir himself, this book is somewhat more interesting than the usual run of presidential reminiscences, suffocated as they often are by the ghost writer’s craft and the self-protective instincts of men eager to shape what History (with a capital H) makes of them.⁴

The most interesting element of *A Promised Land* are Obama’s own ambivalence and self-doubt, which permeate the book, and his vantage point, which is often that of a spectator (generally admiring, but occasionally gently critical) of his own performance in office. To make our profiler’s challenge more difficult, this self-doubt is coupled with a palpable self-confidence to the point of arrogance that makes him more of an enigma than ever. “Hell, I myself was too complicated, the contours of my life too messy and unfamiliar to the average American, for me to honestly expect I could pull this thing off” (121).

The extent to which Obama acknowledges some of his weaknesses and inner turmoil is striking, and to some extent shocking. Of his decision to run for the presidency, against his wife’s wishes, he writes “Was it just vanity? Or perhaps something darker – a raw hunger, a blind ambition wrapped in the gauzy language of service...’It’s like you have a hole to fill,’ Michelle had told me early in our marriage” (71). He acknowledges “A sensitivity to rejection or looking stupid. Maybe even a fundamental laziness” (13). He dreams of disappearing into anonymity and how happy that would make him (545). These are some of the keys to our understanding of him, as well as his understanding of himself.

A forum other than this is better suited to examine Obama’s domestic agenda. Still, one should note that his own account is often – unintentionally, one suspects – damning. His Chicago mentor and adviser, David Axelrod presciently spells out exactly why his attempt to overhaul medical care in the United States will run into furious opposition (377). Obama ignores him. He still has trouble understanding why Massachusetts voters voted for Scott Brown over Margaret Coakley in 2009 (416-418). He is surprised (and again, still to some extent baffled) by the thorough trouncing the Democrats received in the 2010 midterms (594), but concludes that the fault was his for not being as eloquent as President Franklin D. Roosevelt in explaining his policies. His scorn for the Tea Party movement prevents him from wondering what was bubbling up beneath it, other than sentiments and people he appears to have despised (273-274). And, finally, a domestic political historian may wonder why this gifted political operator left an institutionally feeble Democratic Party that not only lost the 2016

² The phrase was used by Martin Luther King at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963. Full text at <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/1963-march-washington>.

³ Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Crown, 2004) and Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown, 2007).

⁴ Among the disappointments must be reckoned Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1971).

presidential election to Donald Trump, but that was repeatedly outmatched and outfought in state and local elections that year and beyond.

As a decision-maker Obama was analytic, generally cautious, and cool: “no drama Obama” as the saying had it, and these are undoubtedly valuable qualities in a president. *A Promised Land* confirms but does not add much to this picture of him, but he is clearly proud of these qualities, which steered his administration away from any obvious disasters, even as they frustrated both friends and opponents. These were his strengths as an executive; but there were weaknesses as well which emerge in this book.

Obama notes that “the nature of the presidency” is that “Sometimes your most important work involved the stuff nobody noticed” (387). That is the nature of all executive responsibility and suggests that the 44th president suffered from lack of experience. He was surrounded by keenly admiring junior subordinates, but very few heavyweights, and with them he had an ambivalent relationship: judging by his own acid memoirs, Robert Gates, the Secretary of Defense, found little to like about the President and his team. It is noteworthy that he talks more and more admiringly about Ben Rhodes, his 31 year old foreign policy speechwriter, than about Hilary Clinton, his Secretary of State.

Obama’s blind spots are telling. Early on, for example, he criticizes then Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld (without mentioning President George W. Bush), and in addition to denouncing their arrogance interprets theirs as a tale of “incrementalism and decorum, the endless positioning” that corrupts Washington (64). Empathy is one of his weak points, and here it is quite clear that he cannot imagine what it was like for the Bush leadership (including National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, whose name he omits) to react to the shock of 9/11.⁵

This lack of understanding for those on the other side of the political or even the social fence appears in other ways. He describes compelling his secretary of defense and top military leaders to sign a memo on Afghan strategy, which he confesses in retrospect was “somewhat heavy-handed” (443). In fact, it was an act of mistrust that helped poison Obama’s relationships with leaders who were bound to interpret this in the worst possible way.⁶ It could be worse: “Joe and a sizable number of NSC staffers viewed McChrystal’s proposal as just the latest attempt by an unrestrained military to drag the country deeper into a futile, wildly expensive nation-building exercise” (432) a view that Obama entertains and does not wholly reject. It is one thing to consider a plan too aggressive, or unlikely to succeed, or ill-conceived: this, however, is more of a slur on motives than a critique, but the President does not comment on that.

On its own evidence *A Promised Land* is anything other than a tale of foreign policy or military farsightedness. He was cautiously optimistic about Iraq in 2009 and convinced that withdrawal was safe. “‘Once we’re out,’ I told [White House Chief of Staff] Rahm [Emanuel], explaining my decision, ‘the last thing I want is for us to have to go back in.’” (315). When the Islamic State came roaring back, conquering Mosul, the United States went back in, of course, with a small American footprint but at the price of considerable devastation to the local population. Obama was pessimistic about Afghanistan and appropriately so, but approved a surge whose purpose and strategic logic is unclear, while declaring that the United States would leave there as well, one of the early moves that undermined Afghan confidence in American resolve. He launched an undeclared war in Libya for which, unlike the invasions of Iraq in 1991 and 2003 he chose not to secure Congressional authorization for the use of military force, failed to plan for follow through or even acknowledge its chaotic consequences, and dismissed the constitutional objection that he did so without Congressional authorization not on the merits, but

⁵ I should note that I served as Counselor of the Department of State from 2007 to 2009 working directly for Secretary Rice.

⁶ The memoir of Obama’s defense secretary, Robert M. Gates continually returns to this theme. See his *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf, 2014). I have an extended review of the book in “*Man at War: A Defense Chief Straddles Two Worlds*,” *The Weekly Standard*, March 10, 2014, 34-38.

because it was made by Republicans, “a party that had repeatedly given previous administrations carte blanche on the foreign policy front” (667).

Like other presidents, he tilted at Israeli-Palestinian peace, the perpetual windmill of American foreign policy, to no avail. He concluded that China’s challenge to the American position in the world was “decades away – and that if and when it came, it would most likely happen as a result of America’s strategic mistakes” (338). This prediction was off in terms of timing, scope (he is thinking economics, not Chinese geopolitical strategy and military buildup) and diagnosis. China’s challenge materialized within years of his leaving office, to include the crushing of Hong Kong’s autonomy, increased aggressiveness in the South China Sea, and its turn to so-called “wolf warrior” diplomacy. He notes that he viewed Russian President Vladimir Putin as just like a Chicago ward boss, just with nuclear weapons and a veto on the UN Security Council (466), rather than something of an altogether different scale and set of motivations. He still idolizes Gandhi, in a bit of late twentieth-century idealism merited neither by the Mahatma’s economic primitivism or his actual accomplishment in freeing India of colonial rule. He thinks that dissent in the Soviet Union during the Cold War was “of a piece with...the larger struggle for human dignity taking place elsewhere in the world – including America” (457). The word that comes to mind here is shallow.

Obama looks very good by comparison with his successor and some will consider that he looks very good by comparison with his predecessor. Possibly so. But judged on his own terms, and indeed by his own words, he stands in the middle range of American presidents. He possibly became President too young; he possibly fell victim to his own, partially self-created myth. And with regard to American statecraft and military policy, his own account makes him appear simply mediocre.

REVIEW BY SUSAN COLBOURN, DUKE UNIVERSITY

Standing before tens of thousands of Czechs packed shoulder to shoulder into Prague's Hradčanské Náměstí on April 5, 2009, President Barack Obama laid out a bold vision: a world without nuclear weapons. "I'm not naive," he told the crowd assembled that day. "This goal will not be reached quickly — perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us the world cannot change."⁷

A Promised Land, the first, beautifully written installment of the forty-fourth president's two-volume memoir, is evocative. Obama has an unmistakable flair, and his writing paints a vivid picture. The reader seems to be sitting in the 'Beast,' right next to Obama, as the limousine ascends the back streets of the Czech capital's historic center, the Staré Město, winding past the crowds all bundled up and ready to hear the president's address. Of the thousands gathered, Obama draws parallels to the recent past: to the crowds that took to the streets in 1968 as part of the Prague Spring, and to those who did the same, in even greater numbers, in 1989 and ultimately unraveled Communist rule in Czechoslovakia (349). Conscious or not, it is a direct echo of his words in Prague that April morning, where he appealed to that same past — and to the possibility of change. "Those are the ghosts of 1968. Those were the joyful sounds of the Velvet Revolution. Those were the Czechs who helped bring down a nuclear-armed empire without firing a shot."⁸

Obama's telling is instructive. What he shares about the Prague speech is not really about the promise, however fanciful, of a world without nuclear weapons or the obstacles he faced in its pursuit (let alone those his successors will continue to face, should they pursue that same goal).⁹ Instead, like so much of *A Promised Land*, it is infused with a sense of history.

Part of that history is personal. Those crowds in Prague, for example, take us back to a younger Obama, when he sat "glued to my second-hand TV set" watching the Velvet Revolution unfold in the final weeks of 1989 while he studied at Harvard Law School (349).

But Obama is also — consciously — part of a much larger history. "I would often surprise people," Obama writes, "by citing George H. W. Bush as a recent president whose foreign policy I admired" (217). Rhetorical devices, too, place Obama — and his presidency — in the broader sweep. Just two pages later, Obama sets up the preparations for his own inauguration with a capsule history, starting with George Washington and the very first inauguration. Everything, Obama reminds us, has a history.

Two episodes, each of them brief vignettes in a book that clocks in at 700 pages, stand out for this historical sensibility and their almost poignant telling. After that April speech in Prague, Obama recounts a brief meeting with the Czech dissident-turned-president, Václav Havel. "You've been cursed with people's high expectations," Havel remarked to Obama at the meeting's close. "It means they are also easily disappointed. It's something I'm familiar with. I fear it can be a trap" (350-1). It is Havel's observations that serve as the final word on the president's trip to Prague.

A hundred pages later, another, similar meeting unfolds. Running late, with the day's schedule in tatters thanks to a meeting with a long-winded and grievance-filled Russian President Vladimir Putin, Obama describes a short meeting with the last president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev. Almost all of his description focuses not on the subject of their

⁷ "Remarks By President Barack Obama In Prague As Delivered," April 5, 2009, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-barack-obama-prague-delivered>.

⁸ "Remarks By President Barack Obama In Prague As Delivered."

⁹ For a discussion of Obama's scant treatment of nuclear issues in *A Promised Land*, see George Perkovich, "Obama's Non-Nuclear Memoir," *War on the Rocks* (blog), December 9, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/obamas-non-nuclear-memoir/>.

conversation, but on Gorbachev's fall from power and from grace. Gorbachev, as Obama writes, was "a strangely tragic figure." Once powerful, a reformist whose efforts had been recognized with a Nobel Peace Prize, "he now found himself largely disdained within his own country" (466).

The parallels are too striking to ignore: the ambitions and promise of reform, the dangers of high expectations, the backlash of a fickle public.

The past shapes Obama's telling, but the present has left its fingerprints everywhere. *A Promised Land* is as much a book about the administration in office at the time of writing – that of Donald J. Trump – as it is about Obama's own. "Trump," as one reviewer put it, "haunts this book like a ghost."¹⁰

A portrait of the Obama White House, it is filtered through the experience and reactions of living through the ensuing Trump years. A sense of disappointment is palpable, as is Obama's frustration with the direction the arc of history seems to be bending.

What is history had unfolded differently in our time? What if the 2016 election had turned out differently? I can't help but wonder what Obama's memoir might have underscored, highlighted, and omitted had Hillary Rodham Clinton been elected.

Like most works of the genre, *A Promised Land* ticks a few, predictable boxes. It is a statement on the Obama record and, at times, a defense intended to shape how his two terms in office are remembered. Sure enough, there are no shortage of explanations, many of them accompanied by a detailed accounting of the available options on whatever the issue in question may be.

The absences illuminate even more.

Obama provides colorful detail regarding the counterterrorism policies pursued by his Republican predecessor George W. Bush. He tells of the Bush administration's Top 20 list with stats not unlike a collection of baseball cards and shares chief of staff Rahm Emanuel's quip that "al-Qaeda's HR department must have trouble filling that number 21 spot" (354). But when he turns to explain why his administration chose to continue the counterterrorism policies they had inherited from the Bush administration – one of the more surprising choices for a foreign policy helmed by a former instructor of constitutional law – the details all but vanish.¹¹ We, as readers, are simply informed that the program was necessary. It is not exactly the kind of justification that convinces the unconvinced.

¹⁰ Constance Grady, "In his new memoir, Obama defends — and critiques — his legacy," *Vox*, 19 Nov. 2020, <https://www.vox.com/culture/21573728/barack-obama-memoir-promised-land-review>.

¹¹ On the continuities between the Bush and Obama policies, see Kathryn Olmsted, "Terror Tuesdays: How Obama Refined Bush's Counterterrorism Policies," in Julian Zelizer, ed., *The Presidency of Barack Obama: A First Historical Assessment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 212-226.

A Promised Land is not, of course, dedicated solely to foreign policy. Indeed, much of this rich and detailed memoir is dedicated to major domestic issues, be it the administration's economic recovery program, the fight over healthcare, or the travails of political partisanship. Some of the most fascinating parts of the book come in his portrayal of his wife Michelle as she navigates his career ambitions and tries to juggle them with her own aspirations and priorities. "Did you say *we*?" Michelle retorts, in one conversation about a potential 2008 bid for the presidency. "You mean *you*, Barack. Not *we*. This is *your* thing" (70).

Even more of it deals with Obama's road to the presidency from his childhood in Hawai'i, through state politics in Illinois, and on to the U.S. Senate. Here, Obama's reflections can be a reminder of how sprawling and complex the making of U.S. foreign policy is. He recalls, for instance, traveling to Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan with Richard Lugar, a Republican from Indiana, where the two toured nuclear storage sites, part of the monitoring of the Nunn-Lugar framework. That 2005 trip was, as Obama puts it, "a reminder of just how big the world was and of the profound human consequences of decisions made in Washington" (62).

That same idea appears time and again in *A Promised Land*, part of a tension surrounding the United States and its role in the world. Describing his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama recalls his travels abroad in what he terms "an elaborate audition on the international stage" (159). It is not surprising that the presidency is an office with immense global power and influence. But there are still reminders of what that means in practice. By pulling back the curtain on the presidency to some degree, giving readers a glimpse of the day-to-day of the office, Obama offers details that underscore this global reach. 'The Beast' is a prime example. Why is the presidential limousine crawling through the streets of Prague on an April morning in 2009? It's always there, no matter where in the world the President of the United States happens to be. A seemingly trivial detail, the presence of this peculiar presidential transport does encapsulate the truly global nature of the U.S. role in the world and hints at the immense bureaucracy that makes that role possible. After all, what does it say that the U.S. president brings his own custom, up-armored limousine to crisscross the globe?

A Promised Land takes us into the presidency, the good, the bad, and the frustrating. Obama's reflections have much to tell us about his road to the presidency, as well as the issues and challenges that defined his first years in the Oval Office.

Even more about Obama's years in power comes through by reading between the lines, taking cues from the book's structure and rhetorical devices. Take, for example, the final chapter. The dividing point between this volume and a still-forthcoming follow-on, the last chapter deals with the raid to capture the leader of al-Qaeda Osama bin Laden in the spring of 2011. Implicitly, this structure seems to cast the bin Laden raid as a hinge point in his administration. The other major thread of that final chapter? None other than New York businessman Donald Trump's obsession with the president's birth certificate.

 REVIEW BY JAMES H. LEOVIC, THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

A short review cannot do justice to Barack Obama's memoir—the first since Obama left office as the 44th President of the United States. Its length, at roughly 700 pages, and coverage, spanning Obama's early life through first presidential term, are two obvious reasons. It is a coming-of-age story, a chronicle of Obama's seemingly meteoric rise to the presidency, and a first-person account of Obama's major presidential decisions and actions. But the memoir is also an informative historical work for its insights on policy, and policymaking, during the Obama presidency.

Of course, leaders write memoirs to put their own gloss on history. Yet the volume is candidly reflective; judicious, even generous, in its assessment of others; and remarkably balanced in tone. For instance, in commenting on the historic U.S. position in the world, Obama observes that "(a)t times, we bent global institutions to serve Cold War imperatives or ignored them altogether; we meddled in the affairs of other countries, sometimes with disastrous results; our actions often contradicted the ideals of democracy, self-determination, and human rights we professed to embody." But then the counterpoise. "Still, to a degree unmatched by any superpower in history, America chose to bind itself to a set of international laws, rules, and norms. More often than not, we exercised a degree of restraint in our dealings with smaller, weaker nations, relying less on threats and coercion to maintain a global pact" (329).

Underlying it all, however, is a frequently stated yearning for progress on multiple fronts, as Obama confronts harsh obstacles to progress at home and abroad. The memoir speaks loudly and often then to a promise unfulfilled. As Obama asks, "How useful is it to describe the world as should be when efforts to achieve that world are bound to fall short?" That is, "Was it possible that abstract principles and high-minded ideals were and always would be nothing more than a pretense, a palliative, a way to beat back despair, but no match for the more primal urges that really moved us, so that no matter what we said or did, history was sure to run along its predetermined course, an endless cycle of fear, hunger and conflict, dominance and weakness?" (366).

Thus, for me, the memoir also reads as tragedy. The tragic lies in the rise of an ugly countermovement that mischaracterized Obama's goals and achievements and would soon drag the country into a dark, retributive period. Even Obama's farewell address, which makes glancing reference to the continuing enmity, now seems hopelessly idealistic. In Obama's words, "For every two steps forward, it often feels we take one step back. But the long sweep of America has been defined by forward motion, a constant widening of our founding creed to embrace all and not just some."¹²

Where Obama offered hope of realizing the principles, the "idea" and "promise" of America (14), to which Americans claim to aspire, his opponents disparaged him for assailing those same principles. The worst of the opposition sought to delegitimize him and his presidency, and to tarnish his legacy. The tragedy is not that political opponents tried to make their case, or necessarily even how they did it. The real tragedy is that much of the broad base, to which Obama addressed his appeal, embraced the twisted arguments and deceit of the opposition. They saw, or at least claimed to see, no conflict between those same lofty principles and the new 'style' of governance under the next administration. They would ignore or champion the attacks and affronts of that administration despite its coarsening rhetoric, scurrilous lies, institutional breaches, norm violations, flagrant unprofessionalism, investigatory stonewalling, malign neglect, duty derelictions, and intentional divisiveness. They would share responsibility, then, for the consequences which would leave U.S. domestic policies and foreign relationships adrift, or in shambles, and the country split as in no time since the U.S. Civil War.

That said, we should not grade Barack Obama, on a curve—contrasting light with darkness. We should recognize Obama's virtues, *as strengths*. But we can also acknowledge Obama's deficiencies and limitations, then, without fear of validating the many unjust criticisms that were leveled at Obama by his successor.

¹² <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/farewell>

The early chapters detail Obama's early life—his familial relationships and personal alienation—as he struggled to find his identity and purpose. To his credit, Obama evolved, rather than 'emerged,' into adulthood in these chapters. He admits to partying too much and studying too little, and then, for the wrong reasons: reading the deep thinkers as a “worthless” strategy for picking up girls (p. 10). But he eventually harnesses his desire for something bigger—that is, bigger than himself (38)—with ever-greater impact (42), as he moves from his roles of community organizer, Illinois State Senator, U.S. Senator from Illinois, and then, presidential contender and president. Along the way, he questions his own motivation: “Was it just vanity? Or perhaps something darker—a raw hunger, blind ambition wrapped in the gauze language of service?” (71).

Whereas his relatively rapid rise suggests a strategy and plan, Obama highlights the unexpected opportunities that greased his ascent and the obstacles, family concerns, and gaffes and missteps—including “circuitous and ponderous answers” to questions (83)—that constrained it. His racial background is, of course, a persistent, albeit intermittent, part of his story, and was often thrust into the foreground by those who subtly, and not so subtly, made it an issue. Obama appreciates the symbolic importance of his presidential candidacy, and his election to the country's highest office, and the special attention that he received for breaking new ground. He also acknowledges the resulting animus, though less as it directly affected him, and more as it reflected the state of race relations in a country that had yet to deliver fully on its promise. For some Americans, “(h)aving the son of a black African with a Muslim name and socialist ideas ensconced in the White House with the full force of the U.S. government under his command was precisely the thing they wanted to be defended against” (310). He gives the birther conspiracy the most attention in that regard; and, in that context alone, he dwells on its most nefarious proponent.

He remained a bit wary of the attention he received as he became a national and then global personality. He recognized that the adulation stemmed in no small part from the hopes and expectations of others. When told by an adviser, in 2009, that he received the Nobel Peace Prize, his initial reaction supposedly was, “for what?” He observes that his young daughters joyously announced the prize, minutes later, with the perhaps bigger news that it was their dog Bo's birthday (439). He viewed his early speeches in April 2009 in Prague, where he expressed his desire for a 'nonnuclear' world, and in June 2009 in Cairo, where he announced a 'New Beginning' in U.S. relations with the Muslim World, not as opportunities to make a personal splash but as events that he could make significant, if he rose to the occasion.

The memoir's coverage and organization, especially of the presidential years, reflect the deliberate, and deliberative, style that we associate with its author. It proceeds methodically, chapter by chapter, through the major issues of his presidency—the early economic-recovery effort, the environment, health-care reform, meetings with European allies, the Iran nuclear program, Middle East peace negotiations, the Arab Spring, the Afghan 'surge' decision, the Libyan intervention, and the killing of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, among others. The chapters present the issues in historical context, assess the current political challenges and policy constraints, and discuss the logic that led Obama to his decisions and actions.

Obama nevertheless brings the discussion to life by peppering it with anecdotes, backstories, and conversational snippets that disclose much about the people in his orbit and their relationship to the president. “So, what ideals have we betrayed lately?” (639) he asks Samantha Power, the trusted White House adviser who was deeply committed to human rights. Obama sometimes pierces the drama of momentous events with contemporaneous asides including humanizing conversations with family members. In the critical moments before he greenlighted the raid on Osama bin Laden's headquarters in Pakistan, Obama endured family ribbing over dinner about the way he ate nuts, selected his footwear, and forwent sweets because—quoting his wife, Michelle—they bring “too much joy” (687).

His descriptions of various domestic and foreign leaders further enliven the presentation. The descriptions—like the one for German Chancellor, Angela Merkel—are often vivid, insightful, even empathetic: her “eyes were big and bright blue and could be touched by turns with frustration, amusement, or hints of sorrow. Otherwise, her stolid appearance reflected her no-nonsense, analytical sensibility.” He notes her initial distrust of him due to his “oratorical skills” but surmises that “in a German leader, an aversion to possible demagoguery was probably a healthy thing” (334-335). His generosity makes his critical appraisals, as of Russian President Vladimir Putin, that much more scathing: “Putin did, in fact, remind me of the sorts of men who had once run the Chicago machine or Tammany Hall—tough, street smart, unsentimental characters who

knew what they knew, who never moved outside their narrow experiences, and who viewed patronage, bribery, shakedowns, fraud, and occasional violence as legitimate tools of the trade. For them, as for Putin, life was a zero-sum game; you might do business with those outside your tribe, but in the end, you couldn't trust them" (466). Obama's description (to a presidential adviser) of U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham punches with greater efficiency: "You know how in the spy thriller or heist movie, you're introduced to the crew at the beginning...Lindsey's the guy who double-crosses everyone to save his own skin" (505).

In all of this, Obama balances the role of actor and narrator—participant and observer. His assessments of his record seem more explanation than defense—and rarely, if ever, defensive. Per his reputation, Obama is still questioning and second-guessing. Would a President Hillary Clinton or John McCain have had better success in bridging the divide in Israel-Palestinian peace negotiations (634)? Throughout the memoir, he expresses his doubts, notes his regrets, concedes points to his opponents, and commends the sincerity and capabilities of those with whom he disagreed, sometimes greatly, over policy. If he seems detached, it is not to redeem himself, gloss over the facts, or avoid responsibility for less-than-successful decisions.

To say, however, that Obama's portrayal of events is balanced and generally dispassionate is not to say that it is complete. While Obama might supply some of the missing pieces when he chronicles his second term in a subsequent volume, there remain curious lapses in coverage here. We read, for instance, of the negotiations aimed at extending the presence of U.S. combat troops in Iraq beyond the 2011 departure date negotiated by the Bush administration. The negotiations abruptly ended when, in 2011, the Obama administration, in offering but a small troop commitment to Iraq, required that Iraq's parliament approve any deal. Why Obama reached that decision, especially since he would later send troops back to Iraq, in 2014, without imposing that condition, requires explication. Obama's failure to mention these events, let alone explain his actions, seems glaring.

But some of the incompleteness results because the events, as presented, beg for an explanation. Obama's decision, in late 2009, to send an additional "surge" force into Afghanistan illustrates this point. Again, Obama grants the contenders a fair hearing—a conclusion strengthened by comparing his rendition of events with those of a self-described critic, Robert Gates, then Secretary of Defense (as a Republican holdover from the Bush administration). Despite Gates's tribute to Obama's significant decisional attributes ("refreshing and reassuring") and character (his "dignity" and "personal integrity"), the former secretary impugns Obama's commitment to the Afghan war effort. In Gates' words, "Given his campaign rhetoric about Afghanistan, I think I myself, our commanders, and our troops had expected more commitment to the cause and more passion for it from him."¹³ Gates reserves his harshest criticism though for Obama's circle of advisers, Hillary Clinton excluded. In his view, they claimed unfairly that the military had connived to constrain presidential choices; unjustly fought military troop requests and then reneged on troop commitments; and constantly sought to impugn, even sabotage, the military mission in Afghanistan. In his words, White House advisers and staff "worked to show [Obama] had been wrong [to surge troops into Afghanistan), that the Pentagon was not following his direction, and that the war on the ground was going from bad to worse"... "(T)here was no understanding of or sympathy for the challenges involved in what we were trying to do, only an opportunity to accuse us of walking away from our commitments to the president."¹⁴

Gates spares no ink in his effort to discredit then vice president Joe Biden, but he suspects that Biden, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, and other critics were operating under Obama's "protective umbrella." Yet, despite the fervor and detail of Gates' portrayal of the event, they fit comfortably with Obama's more general assessment of events—except,

¹³ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 299.

¹⁴ *Duty*, 474-475.

perhaps, for the conclusions. In Gates view, “In the end, I felt this major national security debate had been driven more by the White House staff and by domestic politics than any other in my entire experience.”¹⁵

For his part, Obama praises Gates as “practical, even-keeled, and refreshingly blunt” (430). He states his inclination now to “believe Gates when he said there was no coordinated plan by [Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Michael] Mullen, [General David] Petraeus, or [General Stanley] McChrystal to force my hand”—in knowing “that all three men were motivated by a sincere conviction in the rightness of their position” (435). He acknowledges that Gates questioned the presidential commitment to the war (in conversations with third parties), “no doubt attributing it to ‘politics’ as well” (436). What Obama adds to the story is positional perspective. He confirms Gates’s suspicions about the presidential backing of dissent: “(t)he truth was that I considered Joe [Biden] to be doing me a service by asking tough questions about the military’s plans.” Obama claims that he could count on a more open exchange of views with the dissent coming, not from him, but from Biden (319). Obama’s position, as president, also confers a wider-angle lens: “Tensions between White House staffers and the Pentagon got worse, with NSC staff feeling stonewalled when it came to getting information in a timely fashion and Gates quietly fuming over what he considered to be the NSC’s constant micromanagement” (438).

These portrayals are a far cry from dueling realities (a *Rashomon* effect),¹⁶ much less an exercise in finger pointing. In a sense, Obama’s version helps complete the story, though Obama and his defense secretary differ somewhat on their assessment of Obama’s motives, and the influence of domestic politics. But Obama’s revelations still do not answer a basic question. Why did Obama settle on a half-way solution that gave none of the major contenders what they wanted? He decided to send a *compromise* number (30,000) of troops to Afghanistan, for only a *limited* time, to engage in *localized* counterinsurgency. Indeed, he did so without offering a standard for evaluating the mission’s success or agreement on what local success would mean for the future direction of the U.S. mission. Even as Obama opted for additional troops, he had his eye on withdrawal. So, why the troop increase?

Questions remain concerning other ‘big’ decisions. Obama openly discusses the intense debates among his advisers over the appropriate U.S. response to the Arab Spring. For him, the battle pitted heart against mind; among his advisers, the split, as elsewhere (311-312), was generational. His younger advisers advocated support for the Arab street and its democratic aspirations; his more seasoned advisers fretted the strategic implications of losing a loyal partner in Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s president. Obama ultimately conceded to the wishes of the more senior group. He recognized the poor democratic prospects of the Middle East and the instability likely from overturing the existing order to make political conditions in the region decidedly worse (641-651). By contrast, in Libya, Obama eventually committed to enforcing a no-fly zone. His decision was influenced by the multilateralism of the effort, the broad support for intervention within his advisory group, and the potential for extreme bloodletting were Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to stay in power. Yet Obama does not address the strong trepidations about the future of Libya that informed his policies toward Egypt. This is certainly a lapse given the instability that regime change would soon bring. His remarks in that regard are relatively brief (668).

I admit that political scientists are better prepared to address these questions, which require answers from a safe distance. I also admit that, when viewing decisions from afar, we tend to exaggerate the discretion and information available to policymakers and thus their room to maneuver. Apart from the deficiencies of key decisions, then, we must value what democratic leaders bring to their position. We, as citizens, benefit when our leaders hold themselves to high standards of integrity; recognize the scope, depth, facets, and interconnectedness of policy problems; assemble competent advisors who proffer a full range of viewpoints; dedicate themselves to the difficult tasks at hand; and struggle to balance noble aspirations

¹⁵ *Duty*, 384.

¹⁶ I note, however, that Obama and Gates do present starker differences when discussing the firing of Stanley McChrystal as U.S. commander in Afghanistan, in the wake of insubordinate comments made by him and his officers revealed in a June 22, 2010 *Rolling Stone* article. See <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/the-runaway-general-the-profile-that-brought-down-mcchrystal-192609/>. But, even here, the differences are more interpretative than factual.

with realism, mindful of the consequences of both 'good' and 'bad' choices. In these important regards, Barack Obama raised the standard for the presidency, whatever the symbolic virtues he brought to the office.