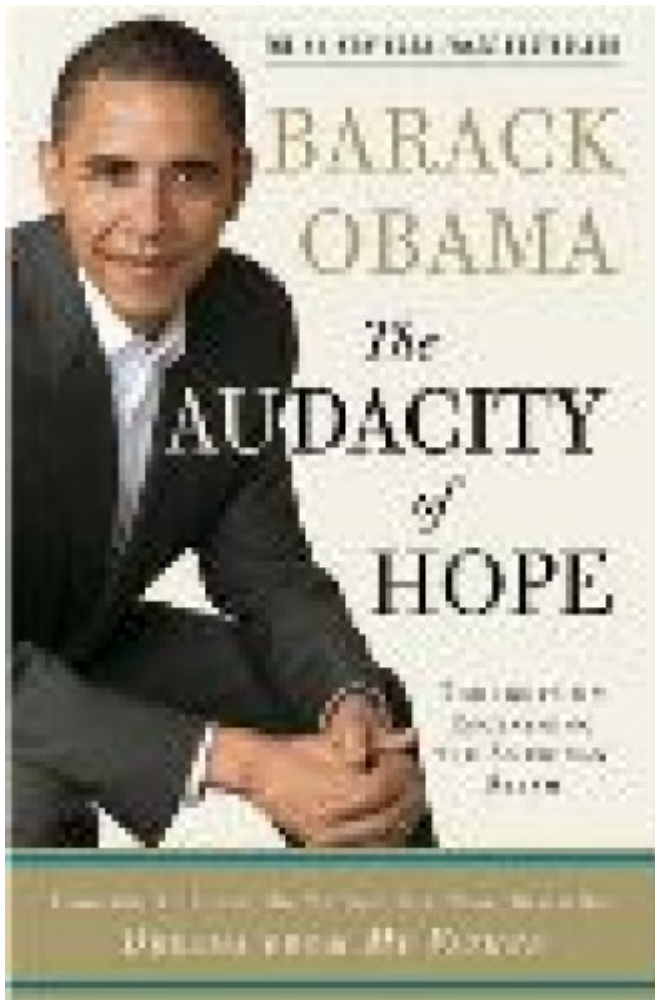


# Hope or hype?

By [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [May 29, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream

Barack Obama  
Crown

The Obama phenomenon is hurtling past the best analogies that we have for it. Three years ago Barack Obama shot onto the national political scene with a sensational speech at the Democratic National Convention. Two years ago he joined the U.S. Senate as its only African-American member. A year ago he was still admonishing admirers to give him time to accomplish something before talking up an Obama presidency. Today he is running for president because he has generated too much excitement to wait for another political season.

In some respects, the echoes of Robert Kennedy in 1968 are strong. No candidate has stirred such an intense reaction on the campaign trail since Kennedy, who might have won the White House had he not been assassinated. Like Obama, Kennedy ran against a controversial war and tapped the repressed hope and idealism of millions in a presidential campaign that he had not expected to wage. But Bobby Kennedy was already a totem of national memory and feeling when he ran for president. Most Americans remembered him as a U.S. attorney general, many regarded him as the successor to the tragically interrupted JFK presidency, some hoped that he stood for something even better, and every American knew him as the brother of a martyred president.

In other respects, the Obama phenomenon is an echo of the political enthusiasm for Colin Powell that peaked in 1995. Powell might have won the presidency had his wife not declared that he would have to campaign as a divorcé; Alma Powell feared the part of white America that would not stand for a black president. Colin Powell's memoir, *My American Journey*, sold nearly 3 million copies while he was contemplating a run for the presidency. Obama is a beneficiary of the fact that many Americans got used to imagining a black president more than a decade ago. But Powell, like Kennedy, received an extensive public grooming before he seemed presidential. Americans did not need to read his memoir to learn that he had been President Reagan's national security adviser and had served as chair of the joint chiefs of staff during George H. W. Bush's presidency. By the end of the Bush 41 administration Powell was the most admired figure in the nation (something that has become hard to remember after his fateful role in the administration of Bush 43).

Obama is acutely aware that he rocketed into national politics with a swiftness and apparent ease that outstrips these analogies. His campaign book, *The Audacity of Hope*, is charmingly candid on the matter of swiftness and only slightly defensive on the matter of ease. He points out, echoing the protests of his 2004 campaign staff,

that he wasn't just lucky; he worked hard to get elected and had an appealing message. On the other hand, he can't deny his "almost spooky good fortune."

Instead of getting hammered with negative ads like other candidates, Obama found himself in a seven-way Democratic primary campaign that produced not a single negative ad. In the final weeks before the primary, his prime opponent flamed out in a divorce scandal. A few weeks later the same thing happened to his Republican opponent. Then John Kerry handed him a convention keynote slot. Next, the Illinois Republicans inexplicably selected Alan Keyes, an eccentric ideologue from Maryland, to run against him. Shortly after his election Obama deadpanned to the Gridiron Club, "I'm so overexposed I make Paris Hilton look like a recluse. I figure there is nowhere to go from here but down, so tonight I'm announcing my retirement from the United States Senate." The following month, bathed in hyperbolic media coverage that treated him as the savior of politics, Obama moved into his Senate office, where a reporter asked him to assess his place in history; Obama noted that he had yet to cast a vote.

In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama stakes out a pragmatic middle ground and deflates the impression that he has no flaws. Poking fun at himself repeatedly, Obama admits to experiencing political "restlessness," enjoying private jets, preferring Dijon mustard, being grumpy in the morning, and fretting that he might have had chicken crumbs on his face when he met Laura Bush. He confesses that for years he taxed the patience and support of his wife, Michelle, as he pursued political success. He admits that in the summer of 2003 he doubted that he had been right to oppose the invasion of Iraq. He acknowledges that his speaking style "can be rambling, hesitant, and overly verbose." But Obama's endearing lightheartedness about himself is another virtue, and as he continues to draw enormous crowds, the media hyperbole begins to seem not so exaggerated.

Obama wrote *The Audacity of Hope* before he knew it would be a presidential campaign book, which may account for its chief defect as one. Because Obama shot into political prominence so quickly and because his background is more complicated and exotic than that of most U.S. politicians, his campaign book needed to lay out the gist of his life story in an early chapter. That doesn't happen. If you don't know the story from his previous book, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), or some other source, you will have a difficult time piecing it together from the asides scattered throughout the new book.

So for those who don't know the story: Barack Hussein Obama Jr. was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, in 1961 to a Kansas-born mother, Ann Dunham, and a Kenya-born father, Barack Hussein Obama Sr., both of whom were students at the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii. When Obama was two years old his parents separated, and they later divorced. His father completed a doctorate in economics at Harvard and returned to Kenya; his mother married an Indonesian student and moved to Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1967. Years later she earned a doctorate in anthropology. For five years Obama lived with his mother and stepfather in Jakarta, where he attended Catholic and Muslim schools. In 1972 he returned to Hawaii without his mother to live with his maternal grandparents and attend an elite and mostly white and Asian school called Punahou, where classmates called him Barry. He graduated from Punahou in 1979.

In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama recounts that in early life he barely noticed that his mother and maternal grandparents were white, that his father in the family photographs was black, that he was biracial and that his extended family was multiracial. As a teenager, however, he found all of it, especially his uncertain identity, perplexing and unsettling. Being biracial was quite common in Hawaii, but there were hardly any blacks. And besides being unusual because of his African heritage, Obama had to deal with being a scholarship student at a cliquish upscale school. All of this was difficult for him, and at times he used alcohol and drugs to help himself not to think about it: "I was engaged in a fitful interior struggle. I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant."

For two years he studied at Occidental College in Los Angeles; in 1981 he transferred to Columbia University, where he earned a degree in political science, specializing in international relations; for three years after college he worked as a community organizer in Chicago, helping churches set up job training programs in poor neighborhoods. The latter experience was formative for him, giving rise to his sustained interest in urban policy, early childhood education and urban cultural initiatives. It was also formative because he decided that he didn't want to live without faith and a spiritual community.

Obama's father was an atheist from a Muslim background. His maternal grandparents dropped evangelical Protestantism for skeptical unbelief, just as they subsequently dropped the mainland for Hawaii. His mother mixed personal secularism with an anthropologist's interest in religion as a cultural phenomenon.

With typical grace Obama expresses tender respect for his parents and grandparents while noting gratefully that he took a different path. He wanted to be a Christian before he became convinced that doing so with integrity would be possible for him. Obama questioned whether joining a church would require him to suspend his critical reason or temper his passion for social justice. Worshiping at Trinity United Church of Christ, he listened to Jeremiah Wright Jr.'s sermons and became friends with Wright, and he found assurance on both questions. Describing his baptism, he writes: "It came about as a choice and not an epiphany; the questions I had did not magically disappear. But kneeling 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."

In 1988 he enrolled at Harvard Law School, where he flourished. Obama's two memoirs barely mention his law school experience, yet it was there that he acquired his radiant self-confidence and diplomatic skills. At the time, the law school's student body was sharply divided along ideological lines. Bitter fights over affirmative action, diversity, critical race theory, liberalism, feminism and getting published in the *Harvard Law Review* were commonplace. Law school professor Derrick Bell dramatically resigned as a protest against the faculty's lack of diversity.

In this environment, Obama became the first African American in the 104-year history of the *Harvard Law Review* to be elected to its presidency. Then as now, he showed a gift for expressing a basically liberal perspective in a respectful, thoughtful, congenial manner that won the trust and respect of people from a variety of perspectives. Avoiding extreme positions and, as much as possible, volatile subjects, he stressed the nonpolitical necessity of the virtues and was known for his capacity to tirelessly search for common ground. But when the issue of faculty diversity roiled the law school, Obama sided clearly with diversity advocates, lauding Bell as a latter-day Rosa Parks. After graduating from Harvard in 1991 he returned to Chicago, directed a voter registration drive, practiced civil rights law, served in the Illinois state senate and for 11 years taught at the University of Chicago Law School.

Though *The Audacity of Hope* has many words in favor of audacity and transformation, its policy sections are very cautious. The only risky position in Obama's portfolio is his opposition to the Iraq War, which was particularly risky when he committed himself to it in October 2002. Speaking to a crowd at Chicago's Federal Plaza, he declared that he could not support "a dumb war, a rash war, a war

based not on reason but on passion; not on principle but on politics.” However, Obama was far from a national figure at the time, and he admits that he had doubts afterward about stepping out so far. When challenged for evidence that he can take a sizable political risk, he points to his opposition to the war.

Otherwise he holds carefully to liberal-leaning middle ground. The presidents that he admires most are Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy because, he says, they represent “transformative politics.” By that standard, Obama needs to decide what he supports that compares to the New Deal or even the Peace Corps. He will not lead the fight for single payer health coverage or scaling back the U.S. military empire; at the moment he is deciding whether he can afford even to advocate a gas tax. Obama thinks that a health care solution must be voluntary and that military spending must be increased, notwithstanding the fact that—as he notes—the U.S. is currently spending more on defense than the next 30 nations combined.

Obama understands keenly that his appeal is mostly personal. Though he is a liberal Democrat, he says that too many liberal Democrats are stuck in “the old-time religion, defending every New Deal and Great Society program from Republican encroachment, achieving ratings of 100 percent from the liberal interest groups.” Though he is a lawyer, he says there are too many of them in Congress. Most people in Washington are either lawyers or political operatives, he observes—in professions focused on winning, not on solving problems. America needs politicians of good will who are devoted to solving the problems of Americans as a whole. And although he knows that some white Americans still harbor hostility toward blacks, “I don’t want to confer on such bigotry a power it no longer possesses.”

The latter refusal is a key reason for the surging crowds that greet him wherever he speaks. Obama generates intense excitement among vast crowds of white listeners and a decidedly more reserved if supportive response from African Americans. *Time* magazine writer Joe Klein asked Obama about his unusual appeal to white voters. Are white Americans desperate for validation from prominent blacks such as Oprah Winfrey, Tiger Woods and Obama? Did his success show the importance of not stoking the racial guilt of whites? Before Klein could get the words out, Obama answered: “There’s a core decency to the American people that doesn’t get enough attention. Figures like Oprah, Tiger, Michael Jordan give people a shortcut to express their better instincts. You can be cynical about this. You can say, ‘It’s easy to love Oprah. It’s harder to embrace the idea of putting more resources into opportunities for young black men—some of whom aren’t so lovable.’ But I don’t feel that way. I

think it's healthy, a good instinct. I just don't want it to stop with Oprah. I'd rather say, 'If you feel good about me, there's a whole lot of young men out there who could be me if given the chance'" ("The Fresh Face," *Time*, October 23, 2006).

In *The Audacity of Hope* he puts it more politically, recalling a former Illinois state senator who was prone to charge racism when people voted a certain way. A white liberal colleague remarked to Obama regarding the senator: "You know what the problem is with John? Whenever I hear him, he makes me feel more white." In the book Obama characteristically starts with a one-handed defense of his black colleague, noting the difficulty of finding a tone that is angry enough but not too angry. Then he switches to the other hand: "Still, my white colleague's comment was instructive. Rightly or wrongly, white guilt has largely exhausted itself in America; even the most fair-minded of whites, those who would genuinely like to see racial inequality ended and poverty relieved, tend to push back against suggestions of racial victimization—or race-specific claims based on the history of race discrimination in this country."

"Rightly or wrongly" is a telling caveat. Obama was a civil rights lawyer. Surely he knows that racial prejudice and white supremacy are deeply entrenched in our society; otherwise we wouldn't need civil rights lawyers to fight discrimination cases against corporations, trade unions and the government. Wherever white people are dominant, whiteness is transparent to them because white supremacy makes white culture normative. The problem is not merely racial bias, but a structure of power based on privilege that presumes to define what is normal and that grants certain privileges to whites as their daily bread. Being able to drive a car without fearing the police and being free from having to be constantly conscious of one's race are two of them.

Obama would never say that. However, he makes the point in his own way. The organized political right has caused some of the "push back" against the cause of racial justice, he observes. More important, the cause is losing for a larger reason, the "simple self-interest" of most white Americans, who, he writes, "figure that they haven't engaged in discrimination themselves and have plenty of their own problems to worry about."

That makes it imperative for those who care about racial justice to talk about the common good, not about a racial "us and them," he argues. No measure aimed at helping racial minorities will get more than short-term support from whites, and no

measure bearing high costs for whites will be supported for any period of time. So although Obama supports affirmative action, he prefers to talk about universal programs that “disproportionately help minorities,” such as creating better schools and jobs that pay well and improving access to health care. He assures readers that he understands the fears of the civil rights establishment. According to the “old” thinking, he observes, racial discrimination has to stay on the front burner; otherwise “white America will be let off the hook and hard-fought gains may be reversed.”

Obama points out that in the past generation the black middle class has grown fourfold and the black poverty rate has been cut in half. Latinos have made comparable gains. Most blacks and Latinos, he argues, have already climbed into the middle class or are on their way, despite the barriers thrown in their way. A good politics will help others get there. It will stress work and opportunity, not racism. As a state senator during the Clinton administration, Obama was a Clinton liberal, not the kind that lived, as he puts it, by “old habits.” He supported welfare reform, fought for day care provisions, and advocated work requirements for welfare recipients. He understood better than many white liberals that a majority of African Americans accepted Clinton’s position on welfare reform.

Obama ventures to say that having grown up in Hawaii will not prevent him from being claimed with enthusiasm by African Americans on a national level. As a biracial product of a multiracial family, he says, “I’ve never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe.” But that does not make him a symbol or champion of “post-racial politics,” he cautions. To think clearly about race, Americans need to view their nation on something like a split screen, holding in view the just, multiracial society that they want and the reality of an America that is not yet just: “I have witnessed a profound shift in race relations in my lifetime. I have felt it as surely as one feels a change in the temperature. When I hear some in the black community deny those changes, I think it not only dishonors those who struggled on our behalf but also robs us of our agency to complete the work they began. But as much as I insist that things have gotten better, I am mindful of this truth as well: Better isn’t good enough.”

On the campaign trail people often recite to Obama, gratefully, a line from his speech at the 2004 Democratic convention: “There’s not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America—there’s the United States of America.” That struck a chord for many who show up at his rallies. He ended that



address with an eloquent, slightly cheeky and utterly characteristic peroration on national unity:

The pundits like to slice-and-dice our country into Red States and Blue States; Red States for Republicans, Blue States for Democrats. But I've got news for them, too. We worship an awesome God in the Blue States, and we don't like federal agents poking around our libraries in the Red States. We coach Little League in the Blue States and we have gay friends in the Red States. There are patriots who opposed the war in Iraq and patriots who supported it. We are one people, all of us pledging allegiance to the stars and stripes, all of us defending the United States of America.

Only someone who had sung "Awesome God" a hundred times in various churches would have understood the resonance of claiming that phrase for the blue states. That sentence alone launched a wave of editorial comment on the possibility of Democrats speaking the language of faith. Obama is fond of saying, "There are a whole lot of religious people in America, including the majority of Democrats." To scrub public language of all religious content, he cautions, is to forfeit the imagery through which most Americans conceive social justice and their personal morality. And when progressives shy away from using religious language in the public square, they allow "insular views of faith" to dominate.

Obama devotes several pages to the difference between being religiously faithful in an open-ended way and claiming religious certainty in a publicly problematic way. He is "anchored" in his faith, he explains, but not rigid or dogmatic about it. He disposes of two difficult subjects—abortion and gay marriage—by using them as illustrations of his point about religion. Obama believes that abortion should be legal and gay marriage should not be legal. However, he accepts some restrictions on late-term abortion, supports civil unions for gays and lesbians, and does not claim absolute certainty for the positions that he takes on either subject. As an elected official in a pluralistic society and as a Christian, he acknowledges, he might be wrong about abortion and gay marriage. Perhaps he will learn that he has internalized society's prejudices on one, the other or both: "I don't believe such doubts make me a bad Christian. I believe they make me human, limited in my understandings of God's purpose and therefore prone to sin." To him the Bible is a living Word that opens to new revelations, "whether they come from a lesbian friend or a doctor opposed to abortion."

Today the U.S. is a profoundly more diverse and multicultural society than the one that produced 42 white Protestant presidents and one Catholic one. For a growing, diverse American constituency, Obama is a symbol of the multicultural, multiracial, cosmopolitan America of the future that already exists. By the time that he finished writing *The Audacity of Hope* last year, he might have realized that he could not resist running for the presidency; the buzz was too strong to put off. On February 10 he announced his candidacy and steeled himself for the first real pummeling of his political career, having no idea what form the attacks would take.

The early returns on that pummeling have been meager. To take them in reverse order: A staffer for a company that works for the Obama campaign recently produced a YouTube video that cast Hillary Clinton in a negative light (Obama promptly denounced the ad, about which he surely had no prior knowledge). In March the *Chicago Tribune* questioned his purchase of stock in two companies whose investors included donors to his 2004 Senate campaign (he denies having known that his broker bought the stocks, which were held in a quasi-blind trust). In February he apparently decided to put a bit of campaign distance between himself and Wright (but they remain close friends and allies). And last fall it was reported that he purchased land on Chicago's South Side in June 2005 from subsequently indicted political fund-raiser Tony Rezko (he had purchased the land from the owner of the lot next-door to his own to enhance the aesthetic balance of his own home and property; he apologized for making what he called a "boneheaded" mistake, then donated the amount of the seller's campaign contribution to charity and vowed to pay closer attention to appearances in the future). Obama also once did some legal work for Rezko's firm, but says he didn't know at the time that Rezko was a slumlord.

For three years political pundits and comedians have complained that Obama is an untouchable icon better named "Obambi." When Illinois Republicans drafted Alan Keyes for their Senate race, one of them told Obama that they figured the voluble, volatile Keyes would be able to knock the halo off his head.

Obama has no halo, but if media scrutiny and opposition research don't come up with something worse than they have thus far, it will seem to his opponents that he is indeed graced with one.