

David J. Garrow, "The Mastermind Behind Obama's Political Ascent," Washington Post Book World, 9 February 2015, p. B7.

Believer: My Forty Years in Politics By David Axelrod Penguin Press. 509 pp. \$35

David Axelrod's "Believer" is a likable enough political memoir. Neither Barack Obama nor Hillary Rodham Clinton will find a single embarrassing anecdote among its pages. Indeed, anyone interested in Axelrod's long career as a successful political consultant may wonder, as an earlier presidential contender once asked, "Where's the beef?" The answer, obvious even to readers who are not Walter Mondale or Gary Hart, is that "Believer" is a totally vegan entree, a warm and nutritious puree containing hardly a single tasty morsel.

The big news in "Believer" is that Susan Axelrod, the author's spouse, is a truly wonderful, wonderful, wonderful wife and mother. Beyond that, notable revelations are few and far between. Jesse Jackson Sr. can be "a shameless hustler and relentless self-promoter." Yawn. Obama views snarky New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd with deep "contempt" and was "patronizing and disrespectful" to her during a brief conversation. Big whoop. Michelle Obama has "frustrations" that can "boil over" and once "slugged my arm, and not in a playful way." She could have aimed higher.

President Obama's first chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, was so "desperate" to keep first friend Valerie Jarrett out of the White House that he avidly sought her appointment to Obama's vacant Senate seat. Astonishing. The impressive Chicago house the Obamas purchased in 2005 is a "mansion," and "Barack felt he owed Michelle the home" after eight years as a political-absentee husband and father. Remarkable. President Obama was still "surreptitiously" smoking and would go to "farcical lengths" to hide it. Unbelievable. Obama calls Axelrod a four-syllable obscenity and walks out after his debating skills are critiqued the night before his awful 2012 performance against Mitt Romney. Wow! Barack Obama, thin-skinned and petulant? Who'da thunk it!

Axelrod can be self-revealing as well as self-critical. He admits to suffering from "debilitating self-doubt," understandable indeed for someone with a mother who often paid him no heed and a father who committed suicide while Axelrod was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago. As a young, married journalist at the Chicago Tribune, one whose eldest child was suffering from severe epilepsy, "I far too often ditched my responsibilities as a husband and a father." In 1984, Axelrod switched sides to become a campaign consultant, but he once disparaged his mentor, Sen. Paul Simon, as "an aspiring hack trapped in a reformer's body."

His daughter's illness "placed a great strain on our family" and led him to decline a 1992 offer to be Democratic presidential nominee Bill Clinton's communications director. "This great opportunity would likely destroy my family. It was a watershed moment in my life." Axelrod oversaw some campaigns he chooses not to mention, confessing that he was "proud of many (though by no means all) of my clients." He offers a highly incomplete account of why he declined to undertake Obama's ill-advised 1999-2000 challenge to Democratic Rep. Bobby Rush.

Concerning his late-2002 agreement to take on Obama's Senate race, Axelrod interestingly writes that "Obama offered a path back to the ideals that had drawn me to politics in the first place." He adds a pro-forma denial of complicity in the perfectly timed document-dump that took down one of Obama's top primary opponents while embracing what he calls Obama's "pragmatic willingness to do what was necessary in the heat of battle."

Come 2006, Axelrod advised Obama to be the antithesis of George W. Bush, whom voters saw as "hyper-partisan, ideological and unyielding." Boy, does that memo echo differently eight years later to observers who might apply the same terms to Obama himself! Axelrod seemingly apologizes for some of the charges that Obama's campaign flung at Hillary Clinton, writing that "the attacks we wielded against her would look even more dubious in the full blush of history." He also states that some of Obama's 2008 primary defeats were Axelrod's fault, acknowledging that "I had made some poor judgments."

During the fall 2008 race against Republican John McCain, Obama rallies that displayed "a cult-of-personality quality" worried both Axelrod and his candidate. "We may be the victims of our own success," Axelrod recounts Obama telling him. "The expectations are so high. It's going to be really hard to meet them."

The final third of "Believer," covering Obama's years as president, is the most mundane portion of the book. Complaining that "Rahm wanted Obama out in public constantly," Axelrod presciently worried about the cumulative impact of "overexposure and too many B-level press events."

Only twice does "Believer" relate comments whose inclusion may be more purposeful than their immersion in Axelrod's bland puree might otherwise suggest. One occurs in 1991, when Axelrod quotes Al Hofeld, a now-little-remembered Senate candidate, as warning that "we won't get national health care until we're ready to take on the insurance lobby" and "we won't get guns off our streets until we're ready to take on the NRA." Prescience indeed!

The second comment has immediate relevance. "Believer" is appearing shortly after Obama proposed a \$4 trillion 2016 budget, including a \$474 billion annual deficit, while decrying what he termed "mindless austerity." But back in early 2009, Axelrod recounts, Obama told him that "before we're done, we have to do something about the deficits. I don't want to leave the next president the kind of mess they handed to us." How might the Obama of 2015 respond if confronted by the Obama of 2009? What was that signature campaign slogan he and Axelrod made famous? "Yes, we can!"

David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Martin Luther King Jr. His next book, "Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama," will be published in the winter of 2016-17.