

BARACK OBAMA

44th President, 2009–2017

Overall
Rank: 12

— ★ —

Total Score:
669

Included in the C-SPAN survey for the first time in 2017, historians ranked Barack Obama in 12th place overall. He ranked in the top eight of all presidents in pursued equal justice for all (3rd), moral authority (7th), and economic management (8th). His lowest ranking was in relations with Congress, where he's ranked in the bottom five of all presidents (39th).

Party: Democrat
b. August 4, 1961, Honolulu, Hawaii
First Lady: Michelle Robinson Obama
Age entering office: 47

Historian: David J. Garrow

David Garrow won a Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for his biography of Martin Luther King Jr. He later spent nine years on his biography of Barack Obama, Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama. He sat with us for a two-part interview for Q & A on May 12, 2017.

Once you choose to run for president of the United States and succeed, your earlier life, your biography, is a major part of American history. Barack Obama actually had a much more interesting, much more richly varied earlier life than we have, to a large extent, known up until now. People are aware that he grew up in Hawaii and lived a bit in Indonesia as a child. But the really transformative period of Barack's life, in his mid-twenties, came when he was living in Chicago for the first time, 1985 to 1988. He was working as a community organizer on the far South Side. His first immersion in an African American community is distinct from his multi-ethnic international earlier life. [He was] also living in a very intense private relationship with a young woman in Hyde Park[, Illinois], and it's during those years that he comes to define

himself both as a black man and as someone who aspires to a political career and is aiming for the presidency.

[I spent eight hours with Barack Obama, off the record, for this project.] My first visit to see Barack in person was April of 2016, probably an hour and twenty minutes or so in the Oval Office. After that, I offered to let him read the typescript manuscript of the whole first ten chapters of this book. And he did that over the course of the late summer [in 2016]. I then went back for three-plus hours on two different Sundays in October of 2016, and then I believe December 4, 2016, after the election. Barack sat there with the marked-up typescript and we went through it chapter by chapter. [He did not read my epilogue, which] was still being composed and edited down during that fall. [He disagreed with some of what he read about my book.] I think what I can say without violating Washington ground rules, which are ground rules that don't match up pretty well with academic history, is that once someone has written their own account of how they remember their life, that when they're presented with other witnesses, multiple, multiple witnesses whose memories significantly differ, someone who's already written their version remains very firmly attached to their version.

Barack Obama is very deeply attached to the version of his life that he put forward in his book *Dreams from My Father*. That's a book that stops in 1988, when he's leaving Chicago before he goes to law school. In my book, only the first four chapters overlap with *Dreams from My Father* because I go all the way through Harvard, through all his years in Illinois politics and his US Senate campaign in 2004. My very purposeful intent with this book has been to produce a book of record that folks will still be using and relying upon twenty-five or thirty-five years from now.

I began reading about Barack in early 2008 when he won the Iowa caucuses and burst on to the political scene as a serious presidential contender. All throughout 2008, I was disappointed by the quality and the depth of journalism about his earlier life. I thought that the mainstream media was simply being insufficiently curious about him. On the other hand, we simultaneously had all of these wacky oppositional actions out there regarding where was he born. Was he really Muslim? And so, I came to this project with a professional belief that someone

of my background and experience should tackle this and do the best, most thorough job I could as an experienced scholarly historian. . . . And now, nine years later, it's over one thousand interviews. And that's counting people one by one; no one counts four times just because I spoke to them four times. . . . One of the great strengths of this book stems from the fact that all throughout the 1980s, Barack Obama was quite a letter writer. There are many people who still have long handwritten letters from Barack.

. . . At the time that Barack is a young child in Hawaii, Frank Marshall Davis is living in Honolulu. Frank, earlier in his life, had been a very prominent black poet in Chicago. Frank had married a wealthy white woman in the late '40s, and they decided to move to Hawaii because they were going to experience a whole lot less racial discrimination as an interracial couple in Honolulu than in Chicago. By the mid-1960s, one of Frank Marshall Davis's best friends in Honolulu is Barack's grandfather, Stanley Dunham. Stanley and his wife, Madelyn, Barack's maternal grandparents, pretty much raised Barack in a very modest, small apartment in a building in downtown Honolulu. Stanley was an amateur poet himself, a man who enjoyed dirty limericks, and he and Frank Davis would hang out together. Stanley was very conscious of having a grandson who was half black, and Stanley went out of his way to introduce his grandson, Barry, back at that time, to Frank Davis.

For Barack, Frank Davis was the first adult African American male who he knew, someone the age of a grandfather. . . . Barack as a young man, when he's in high school, when he's in college, is writing poetry, or trying to write poetry some people might say. There's no question that Frank Davis did have some formative impact on Barack. But Barack no more knew that Frank Marshall Davis had actually been a communist in the 1940s than he knew that Bill Ayers, later a good friend in Chicago, had been involved in planting bombs. In neither instance is it a reflection upon whom Barack is, what people had done years earlier.

One of the most striking things with Barack's own memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, is the almost complete absence of women in that book. Barack himself, back in the 1990s, spoke with regret about how he pretty much left his mother [Ann Dunham] out of that book. . . . His Genevieve

[Cook] relationship, and especially his Sheila Jager relationship, were defining, transformative relationships, yet in his own telling of his life story, they are 99.8 percent absent. [The three women that I write the most about in my book besides Michelle Obama, his mother, and his grandmother are: his first college girlfriend, starting in 1981, Alex McNear; Genevieve Cook, whom he dated in 1984–1985; and Sheila Jager, who was in his life starting in 1986.]

Genevieve Cook, like Barack, was someone from a very rich international background. Her father was an Australian diplomat, a government minister. Her mother was a very prominent arts figure who, with Genevieve's stepfather, lived in Indonesia. Genevieve went to Swarthmore College, wrote a very erudite undergraduate thesis about young people who came from nowhere, whose homes were the world. So, the overlap between Barack's life—Hawaii, Indonesia, no father in the picture, his mother traveling the world—and Genevieve's life is very striking.

Genevieve Cook, whom Barack meets in New York after he graduates from Columbia and they became involved very quickly with each other, was just starting out teaching public school and was unhappy as a teacher. It's probably without question the most difficult period of Barack's life. Right out of college, he takes a job and stays in it for precisely 365 days at a financial publishing firm called Business International Corporation. Everyone else who worked at BI, as they called it, was quite happy there. They are a nifty set of people. It's now owned by The Economist Group. But Barack was entirely a fish out of water.

This is 1984, '85. He describes it in a letter to his mother as "working for the enemy" because Barack's private politics as of 1985 were certainly anti-capitalist in some fashion. At the end of 1984, when he hits the 365-day mark, Barack quits BI and is trying to find something else to do in New York. He works [briefly] for NYPIRG, New York Public Interest Research Group, a Ralph Nader-type group, up at City College in West Harlem. . . . But Barack found trying to organize undergraduates at a commuter school unfulfilling, and he leaves that as of May of '85. He is living in an almost hovel of a situation in Hell's Kitchen on the west side of Manhattan when he sees a job ad for a beginning community organizer in Chicago. That job ad is what begins his progression.

Genevieve Cook's journal for 1984, 1985, which she shared with me almost in its entirety, . . . documents and details just how much cocaine Barack was using with his best friends in New York—they are providing it; he is not spending his money—throughout the spring into the early summer of 1985. That's when it ceases. Let's get that point on the record: there's no drug use after that.

Genevieve [also] gave me copies of all the letters and postcards that Barack had written to her between 1984 and 1986. . . . The letters confirmed Genevieve's story: Barack asked her to accompany him to Chicago. She declined. But Barack continued to write her throughout his time in Chicago.

Sheila Jager, [the other important relationship from this period, is] half-Dutch, half-Japanese. On the paternal Dutch side of her family, her grandparents are honored in Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial, for helping protect Jews in the Netherlands during World War II. Sheila, likewise, had lived in Paris for a time [and] written a very erudite undergraduate thesis. These were all very impressive young ladies.

Sheila dates to the spring of 1986, and her testimony on this [period of Barack's life] is very powerful. With some of his community organizing buddies in 1987, '88, Barack would talk about being interested in a political career, becoming mayor of Chicago, because [of] Harold Washington, the first black mayor of Chicago, who ended up dying very tragically in the fall of '87. Washington was a very formative political presence for Barack even though they barely met each other. By 1987, a year and a half into being a community organizer, Barack has understandably concluded that organizing community groups is not going to produce transformational change. He concludes that he needs to pursue a political career. Now, with his male friends, he's saying, "Maybe I could become mayor." But with Sheila and with a second woman, a community activist woman to whom he was very close, Mary Ellen Montes, . . . [he was saying something more]. It's very powerful that Sheila has memories of Barack saying to her, "I feel I have a destiny and that I'm thinking I could one day become president of the United States." Mary Ellen Montes's memories of what Barack was saying to her in 1987, 1988 match up identically with Sheila Jager's.

Barack and Sheila begin living together in the early fall of 1986 after having been introduced three or four months earlier by one of Sheila's fellow graduate students, a Pakistani academic. . . . All through Barack's time in college during the 1980s, his really close friends were neither white nor black. They were mainly international South Asian young men, Pakistani or Indian ethnicity, from successful families. This is part of Barack's fundamental international grounding as a young man.

. . . It's a very intense relationship; Sheila takes Barack home that Christmas [1986] to meet her parents in northern California, and they are already talking about marriage. . . . Barack and her father argued. Sheila's parents didn't think a community organizer was the best potential husband material, and so nothing comes of the marriage issue right then. But Barack and Sheila continue to live with each other for another eighteen months in Chicago. By that time, Barack has made the decision to pursue a political career, to go to law school. He asks Sheila to join him at Harvard. Sheila says no because she wants to get on with her fieldwork, her own professional career as a scholar. But she does go to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and very privately, quietly, lives with Barack for a month or more even then. And they remain involved with each other [at some level] until early 1991.

In the spring of 1990, . . . Barack is elected president of the *Harvard Law Review*. [He is the] first black person to ever have [this role. That's] . . . very important.

Barack and his best friend during law school, Rob Fisher, co-authored a 250-page unpublished book manuscript that Rob and his mother have held on to. It's a fascinating document. Half of it is about race and racial policy, and the stance that Barack and Rob take in that manuscript about civil rights process and civil rights policy is a very significant window looking forward into Barack's political life. Rob is white. He's originally from southern Maryland, tobacco farm country. Rob is a little bit older than Barack, had a PhD in economics from Duke. He had taught economics at Holy Cross College in Worcester, Massachusetts, before starting law school at the exact same time as Barack. They meet on day one at Harvard. Scores and scores of their classmates whom I've spoken to, without exception, described Barack and Rob as the two brightest people in that Harvard Law School class of 1991. They had an amazingly

intense intellectual friendship across those three years, taking almost all of their courses together and, in the third year, writing this long book manuscript together as part of a seminar paper process for Professor Martha Minow, later the dean of Harvard Law School.

First and foremost, the unpublished book manuscript that Barack and Rob Fisher wrote during their third year of law school at Harvard, the chapter that's about race and racial politics and racial policy, there's nothing in there that to me as a progressive Democrat, who knows race, finds surprising. But there's a lot of material in there that could have been used [during his presidential bid] in Republican attack ads to present Barack as a dangerous figure. If people are old enough to remember Lani Guinier, a well-known African American law professor nominated in 1993 by President Clinton for a Justice Department post, her nomination was abandoned because of critical reactions to some footnotes she had in law review articles. That's what I think could have happened with that book manuscript.

Barack's political aspirations and sense of destiny lead him to push Sheila Jager aside. During that time there was a well-known political figure in Chicago, a hugely respected man, [Illinois State] senator Dick Newhouse, whom everyone in black Chicago believed could never go higher because he was married to a white woman. So, it is in the political tradition of black Chicago in the late 1980s and in the early 1990s, that for a black man to aspire to represent black Chicago, it is necessary to have a black spouse.

[Barack, then twenty-seven, first met Chicago lawyer Michelle Robinson, twenty-five, when he served as a summer associate at her Chicago law firm, Sidley Austin, in 1989. They began dating and continued a long-distance relationship when he returned to Harvard.] Barack and Michelle joined Trinity United Church of Christ in early 1992 in order to get married there that October. Barack had first come to know Reverend Jeremiah Wright five years earlier when Barack was working as a community organizer. Reverend Wright's church was a little outside the geographical boundaries of Barack's neighborhood where he was organizing. But Reverend Wright began to have a big impact, in part a paternal impact, on Barack even in 1987, '88, before Barack leaves to go to law school.

I love Jeremiah Wright, and I'm proud to say that, but that comes from the part of me that is grounded in Martin Luther King Jr. because of my own previous book on Dr. King. Black liberation theology, which Reverend Wright represents, is a radical doctrine. One of my oldest and closest academic friends, James H. Cone, a theologian at Union Seminary, is the leading progenitor of black liberation theology. What Jeremiah's church came to represent was the living embodiment of what black theologians like Jim Cone, like Cornel West have championed. . . . Barack and Michelle were not there for [one] of Reverend Wright's most notorious sermons [about racial justice, which later became an Obama campaign issue], and I don't think Reverend Wright's preaching is in any way reflective of Barack Obama's beliefs. Trinity Church was a great church to be a member of if you were an aspiring young African American politician in Chicago. Many good things can be said about Reverend Wright, [and] I would say, too, that no one should be judged by history for the three stupidest things they've ever said. . . . The immense amount of good that Jeremiah Wright has done in his life vastly outshines how any of us might feel about a sermon like that.

. . . Everyone who knew Barack in high school, in college, in his first few jobs, before he goes to Chicago in 1985, thought he was a completely unremarkable person; that's the Barack Obama of 1985. Three years later, after the three years in Chicago on the far South Side living with Sheila, when Barack arrives at Harvard Law School in 1988, every classmate who meets him, without exception, thinks that this is someone who will be a public star. So, to my mind, the humongous contrast between what people who knew Barack before Chicago thought of him and what people at Harvard see in 1988, that is what really documents the self-transformation he experienced between 1985 and 1988. The Barack from the community years, Barack as a student and then editor of the law review at Harvard, a young lawyer, a law teacher, a state legislator in Illinois across the 1990s, I think he is a wonderful, compelling, impressive political figure.

One of my favorite moments comes on the floor of the Illinois State Senate [where he served from 1997 to 2004]. . . . Barack is recounting how at their condominium in Hyde Park, he's not allowed to smoke indoors. Michelle sends him out to the back porch. He's out there after midnight smoking a cigar, he says, and he watches an immigrant family



In 1995, Barack Obama embarked on his first political campaign, successfully vying for an Illinois Senate seat. Here, he gathers signatures in Chicago for his nominating petition.

Credit: Marc Pokempner

coming down the alley collecting bottles and cans with their children in tow. He's telling this spontaneously on the Senate floor and the impact that it has on him of the challenges that this family is facing. That's a politician whom I thought was incredibly impressive.

This was on the Senate floor in Illinois in the aftermath of losing his year 2000 congressional challenge . . . [against] incumbent Democratic representative Bobby Rush. This would have been the [typical] Harold Washington career trajectory, to go from being a state legislator to then being a congressman. In the wake of that loss, Barack, in my judgment, makes the choice that he has to figure out how to win, that being victorious is essential.

You start seeing a series of changes. I'll give you two quick examples: when Barack first announces to run for the state senate back in the mid-1990s, he, by hand, fills out a questionnaire saying he supports gay marriage. It's relatively well known that that is something he backed off of very quickly, and very significantly. Similarly, early on, he was a very outspoken proponent of gun control. There was some significant backing away from that, too. So, in my very detailed chapter recounting

his US Senate candidacy, 2002 to 2004, what my book presents in quite extensively documented detail is someone who is changing themselves in order to be a successful statewide politician.

Emil Jones Jr. was a longtime Chicago politician, who by 1997, when Barack enters the Illinois State Senate, is the Democratic leader of the then-minority caucus. Come November 2002, Democrats take control of the Illinois Senate. And now Senator Jones, a very traditional Chicago African American politician, is one of the three most powerful people in Illinois, has control of the Illinois State Senate, and has a pretty conflictual relationship with the speaker of the Illinois House, Mike Madigan. When Barack is first talking about running for the US Senate in the 2004 cycle in the spring of 2002, he goes to Senator Jones, now his majority leader, to ask for his support. This is really a defining moment in Barack's political rise because of Senator Jones's decision to support Barack. One of Barack's competitors is supported by Jones's rival, Speaker Madigan. So, Jones's decision to put all of his political weight and influence behind championing Barack as the Democratic nominee for US Senate, that is what makes Barack Obama a serious statewide contender in Illinois.

[My book ends with Barack Obama's successful run for the US Senate in 2004. In an epilogue I offer my observations about Obama's White House years. Its final sentence is this:] "But it was essential to appreciate while the crucible of self-creation had produced an ironclad will, the vessel was hollow at its core." [In other words,] the Barack Obama whom we saw as president was a very different person. The person we see today giving \$400,000 speeches, hanging out with billionaires and Hollywood celebrities, is a radically different person than who Barack was from the 1980s up through 2004.

All of his life in Illinois with [Michelle], his daughters, during the 1990s up through his election to the US Senate, they were leading a very modest, financially challenging, middle-class life. Barack as an Illinois legislator is a very outspoken progressive, very tough critic of the Patriot Act, of the US intelligence community, a very tough voice calling for single-payer universal healthcare coverage. He was someone who did a superb job in Springfield in the state legislature, actively reaching across the aisle to deal productively with very conservative

Republicans—state Republican politicians more conservative than Mitch McConnell or Paul Ryan. The Barack who was so successful in Illinois in a Republican-controlled legislative situation for most of his time, and who was a very outspoken progressive voice, that's not the man who we ended up having as president.

What most surprised me was the extent of his transformation with regard to the intelligence community: that someone who had been so critical of the Patriot Act starting right in 2001 after 9/11, ended up instead as both a champion of the intelligence community and someone who, again and again, as has been very widely reported in our top newspapers, authorized more investigations and prosecutions of journalists than any president in American history. That was not who Barack Obama was prior to the presidency. And, even during the presidency, I was deeply puzzled by the extent of his social interaction with Hollywood celebrities. You don't see anything in Barack's life up through 2004 where he's aspiring to hang out with musicians or movie stars, nor is there any evidence of him seeking great personal wealth. Even the *New York Times* has criticized him pretty outspokenly for now going this route of \$400,000 per appearance speeches. I find this very hard to square with whom he was up through 2004.

... I think the point to emphasize here is that over the course of Barack's presidency, there were scores and scores of people in Illinois who had known him in years earlier who were deeply disappointed with the trajectory of the Obama presidency and disappointed in two ways: number one, disappointed that Barack forgot many of the people, most of the people, who were essential to his political rise; I'm speaking of primarily African Americans, not white people. During the final six months of the Obama presidency, there was a retroactive effort to invite people to the White House to make up something that would have changed the feelings of [his old Chicago allies]—had it been done in 2009 or 2010. ... The world in which Barack grew up politically in Chicago during the 1990s was a very progressive world. And so, a lot of the people who knew Barack well back then were disappointed with him as president; they have policy disagreements with him. They were not upset that they didn't get invited to the White House Christmas party, they were upset that someone who was a very outspoken critic of the Patriot Act ends up as a champion of the CIA and of Justice Department prosecutions of journalists.

People ask me nowadays, what do I think the Obama presidential legacy will be? I'm afraid that most of that legacy lies overseas in foreign policy—Syria, number one, then North Korea and Iran. When we look at President Obama's domestic legacy, there are two things that are very important that will have long-lasting good consequences for the United States that can be summarized in four words: Sonia Sotomayor and Elena Kagan, his two nominees to the Supreme Court. Both great justices; both justices who've done better than some professional critics expected when he nominated them. So, [I have written] a critical epilogue, but it's not a hostile one.