

'No. No. No.' Obama Said, But He Went On Anyway
Ambition, Expectations, Disappointment
By David J. Garrow
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A Promised Land. By Barack Obama. Crown.

Barack Obama's memoir *A Promised Land* was the most anticipated book in many a year, but since the significantly overpriced volume appeared, reaction to it has been noticeably muted. That could well be because of its length; it could more likely be because some sections of its narrative read like papers drawn directly from the *Journal of Policy History*. Initial reviews were surprisingly mixed, with a young Black poet sharply critiquing it in Obama's hometown *Chicago Tribune* and a highly knowledgeable progressive journalist slamming it forcefully in a long essay in *The Week*.

Yet no commentator to date has even attempted to take the measure of what this book tells us *about Obama himself* that we did not previously know. As the author of a book about Obama's pre-presidential life that is even longer than his new memoir, I find this is an easier task than most might imagine: *A Promised Land* does not tell us all that much new about the most widely recognized person on the globe. Yet there are a trio of themes that Obama repeatedly touches on, themes that do shed new light on a supremely guarded public figure. They are his deep, long-standing ambition to be president, his post-election fear that outsized public expectations had inescapably set him up for an underwhelming performance in office, and his painful realization that his administration's acknowledged failures illuminated how neither he nor his deeply devoted wife Michelle had *enjoyed* the lives the presidency bestowed upon them.

Obama cops early on to possessing "a deep self-consciousness," or what the Nigerian American novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in by far the longest book review in the history of *The New York Times*, characterized as "a man watching himself watch himself." He tells readers nothing new about his childhood, college experiences, or his young adulthood as a community organizer on Chicago's Far South Side in the mid-1980s, but he does expressly confirm how Harold Washington, the city's first African American mayor, whom Obama once met only briefly, served as a profound inspiration for him. "Above all, Harold gave people hope," and "For me, this planted a seed. It made me think for the first time that I wanted to someday run for public office."

After less than three years as an organizer, "I left for Harvard Law School ... with my motives open to interpretation" and "my own ambitions" very much in mind. By early in his second year, Obama admits "knowing even then that the practice of law would

be no more than a way station for me.” Just before his 1991 graduation, he told his then-fiancée, Michelle, “I could even see myself running for office.” Michelle’s brother Craig has long told of how Barack volunteered to him that those aspirations included the presidency.

Back in Chicago, Obama began his political career within less than five years by winning election almost unopposed to a seat in the Illinois state Senate. “The first two years in the legislature were fine,” notwithstanding his wife’s intense distaste for how often the job took him away from home, but “by the end of my second session, I could feel the atmosphere of the capitol weighing on me,” particularly as a junior member of the minority party. In addition, Michelle was increasingly unhappy, for they now had a newborn baby in their young family. “This isn’t what I signed up for, Barack. I feel like I’m doing it all by myself.”

Obama acknowledges that “I knew I was falling short,” but his response to this conundrum was to run for Congress, challenging the well-known incumbent and onetime Black Panther Rep. Bobby Rush. “Almost from the start, the race was a disaster,” and the result was “a humiliating defeat” in which Obama won barely 30 percent of the vote. In its wake, “I recognized ... I’d been driven ... by the need to justify the choices I had already made” in pursuing a political career and “to satisfy my ego, or to quell my envy” of others. “In other words, I had become the very thing that, as a younger man, I had warned myself against. I had become a politician.”

This is an unforgettable self-critique and confession, as Obama admits that even in the face of his wife’s intensifying opposition to his life in politics, he was simply unable to quell his ambition for electoral success. Oddly, he then quickly narrates his decision to undertake a statewide race for a U.S. Senate seat without any similar self-revelation as to how he justified this initially long-shot undertaking in the face of such a daunting self-portrait. In the end, Obama triumphed thanks to self-inflicted wounds on the part of two top-tier opponents and a superb last-minute television advertising campaign. At age 43, following a breakout address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, he found himself a widely heralded U.S. senator, much to his wife’s amazement.

Ensclosed in his new office, “I figured I had all the time in the world” to ponder a subsequent race for Illinois’s governorship or the presidency some years in the future. Yet within just a year’s time, Obama’s ambition once again surged to the fore. Rather unconvincingly, Obama asserts that a disastrous hurricane and a brief early-2006 trip to an American military quagmire altered his relaxed timetable. “Katrina and my Iraq visit put a stop to all that. Change needed to come faster,” and so “by the spring of 2006,

the idea of me running for president in the next election ... no longer felt outside the realm of possibility.”

When Obama first broached the idea with his wife, Michelle was unsurprisingly furious. “When is it going to be enough?” she asked, and her anger echoed something she had told him years earlier: “It’s like you have a hole to fill ... That’s why you can’t slow down.” Obama concedes the point. “Was I still trying to prove myself worthy to a father who had abandoned me” and was now long dead? “Whatever it was in me that needed healing, whatever kept me reaching for more” was the root of his unquenchable ambition, but Obama plumbs the question no further.

Eight months later, on the night of November 6, 2006, Obama returned home after the last of countless campaign appearances on behalf of other Democrats, appearances at which crowds responded far more to him than to the actual candidates. In what is without question the most notable passage in *A Promised Land*, Obama recounts what he says is a dream that awoke him late that night. “I imagined myself stepping toward a portal of some sort ... And behind me, out of the darkness, I heard a voice, sharp and clear ... uttering the same word again and again. *No. No. No.* I jolted out of bed, my heart racing, and went downstairs to pour myself a drink. I sat alone in the dark, sipping vodka, my nerves jangled, my brain in sudden overdrive. My deepest fear, it turned out, was no longer of irrelevance ... The fear came from my realization that I could win” the Democratic nomination and then the presidency, should he indeed declare his candidacy.

This is an indelible admission for a world-famous figure, yet to date not a single English-language commentator on Obama’s memoir has highlighted and quoted this passage, a comprehensive web search confirms. Yet it seems beyond doubt that some part of Obama’s brain was attempting to rein in his snowballing ambition, warning him—“*No. No. No.*”—not to pursue the chalice of which he had long dreamed. But as clearly as Obama remembered that late-night vision, he cast the warning aside and pursued the presidency just as he had long planned.

The experience of the 2007–2008 campaign weighed heavily on Obama the more popular he became. By the fall of 2008, facing off against the stolid, older Republican nominee, John McCain, Obama’s worries mounted. “The continuing elevation of me as a symbol ran contrary to my organizer’s instincts,” and he understood “the distance between the airbrushed image and the flawed, often uncertain person I was.” Even before his actual electoral triumph, he feared “the likelihood that ... it would be impossible to meet the outsized expectations now attached to me.”

In retrospect, looking back at the scenes of mass ecstasy that reached from his election night rally to the day of his inauguration, Obama recognizes that “we should have done more to tamp down this collective postelection high.” He questions whether he erred in the momentous initial decisions he made to confront the calamitous economic crisis he inherited, asking “whether I should have been bolder in those early months, willing to exact more economic pain in the short term in pursuit of a permanently altered and more just economic order.”

Obama opines that “the Senate filibuster,” which required a supermajority of 60 votes rather than just 51, “would prove to be the most chronic political headache of my presidency,” and he at least half-seriously rues how “on my very first day in office, I hadn’t had the foresight to tell” Senate Democrats “to revise the chamber rules and get rid of the filibuster.” Obama also samples a modest roster of additional regrets, writing that while in 2009 he believed it possible that China would “challenge U.S. preeminence on the world stage ... I was convinced that any such challenge was still decades away.” How wrong that was!

Obama appears to acknowledge that he knew that the Affordable Care Act, his signature legislative achievement, would entail “windfall profits that a new flood of insured customers would bring to hospitals, drug companies, and insurers” while doing nothing to halt or reverse “the skyrocketing costs charged by doctors and hospitals.” He likewise concedes that as of the summer of 2009, “the economy had gotten steadily worse with me in charge” and that programs “set up to help homeowners refinance or modify their mortgages fell woefully short of expectations.” In an especially painful reminiscence, “my administration was still deporting undocumented workers and separating families at the border” and was doing so “at an accelerating rate.”

By October 2009, Obama was all too aware of “the widening gap between the expectations and the realities of my presidency,” and when to everyone’s utter amazement he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—“For what?” he immediately asked—he understood on his celebratory trip to Oslo that “on some level, the crowds below were cheering an illusion.” One evening at the White House, hearing a musical act practicing downstairs in preparation for a next-day performance, Obama snuck a discreet peek at them and was struck by “the pure, unambiguous joy of their endeavors, such a contrast to the political path I had chosen.”

Was Obama at least in part coming to regret how he had made pursuing and attaining the presidency his life’s work? He realized too how painfully lonely his wife found life in the White House, and “whether in my seeming calm ... I was really just protecting myself—and contributing to her loneliness.” He likewise recounts what he says

became “a recurring dream” in which he is walking in “some unnamed city ... when suddenly I realize that no one recognizes me” and in response “I feel like I’ve won the lottery.”

For most politicians, winning the presidency is their dream, but for Obama, the voice that had warned “*No. No. No.*” had not gone away. Instead, success could taste sour. His supporters “had expected my election to transform our country,” yet “we’d neglected our promise to change Washington.” Even after the successful killing of terror lord Osama bin Laden—which he recounts in this volume’s taut, finely honed final chapter—Obama could not escape the painful realization of “how far my presidency still fell short of what I wanted it to be.”

David J. Garrow’s books include ‘Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama’ and ‘Bearing the Cross,’ a Pulitzer Prize–winning biography of Martin Luther King Jr.