

THE ROOTS OF
OBAMA'S
RAGE

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CHAPTER 1

A TALE OF THREE DREAMS

Dreams are powerful things. Sometimes they have motivational power, as with Martin Luther King's dream. King aspired to a color-blind society, and this guided his difficult striving. Dreams can also provide artistic inspiration, as when the Muse of the mind supplies ideas and images to the creative imagination. Here I think of Blake's sketches, Shakespeare's comedies, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. For Freud, dreams were clues to repressed desires, wishes that could not be expressed, not only to society but even to the self. There are sweet dreams and whimsical dreams, but there are also dark dreams. Think of the war veteran who has nightmares of being tied up in a hut, or being starved and beaten by his captors. That's a man who can wake up screaming. And there have been cases of men who are so preoccupied with their dark dreams that they have difficulty adjusting to contemporary reality. The dream, as it were, becomes a time machine. They live in the time machine, continuing to quixotically charge imaginary windmills and slay fictitious evil knights. The windmills and knights were real enough, but they belonged to another world, a world that is long gone, but a world etched into the fabric of human memory. Men who

have dreams like that can be great visionaries, or leaders with a dangerous obsession. This book is about one such man, who happens to be the president of the United States.

Barack Obama is an enigmatic figure, a puzzle both to his adversaries and to his supporters. Somehow the Obama of the 2008 election campaign seems to have metamorphosed into a very different President Obama. The two men are not merely politically different—different in their policy agenda—but also psychologically different. The centrist, reassuring Obama is gone and has been replaced by a more detached, unreadable and, to some, even menacing Obama. It's hard for Americans to respond to Obama because we aren't sure where he is coming from, what motivates him.

“Who is Barack Obama?” Richard Cohen titled a recent article in the *Washington Post*. Cohen's answer: no one really knows. “He led no movement, was spokesman for no ideology . . . he casts no shadow.” Cohen contrasts Obama with Reagan. He notes that unlike Reagan, who connected so intimately with his supporters and so effectively with the country, Obama has left his own backers and indeed the nation at large guessing. “Americans know Obama's smart, but we still don't know him.”¹

Come to think of it, what did we ever really know about Obama? He is certainly the least-known figure ever to reach the presidency. The political mystery of his agenda is compounded by the psychological mystery of the man.

Since he is our president, however, we had better try and figure out who he is and what he intends to do to America and the world. This book supplies the key.

This is not the book I set out to write. In fact, it represents my third take on Obama. If it took me, who shares so much in common with the man, three times to get this guy, I can see why he has eluded so many others. Despite our differences, I'm a lot like Obama. I'm a native of Mumbai, India, so I grew up in a different part of the world, as Obama did. I'm nonwhite, as he is. He had a white mom and grew up in an interracial family; I have a white wife and we have a mixed-race daughter. Like Obama, I see America both from the inside and from the outside. We were born in the same year, 1961, so we're the same age. Obama and I attended Ivy League colleges, graduating in the same year, 1983; we also got married in the same year, 1992. He went into elective politics, while I have spent my life writing about politics and once served in the White House as a policy adviser. In sum, both of us have cosmopolitan backgrounds, grew up in the same era, and have made our careers in American politics.

I'm a conservative, and I didn't vote for Obama. During the 2008 presidential campaign, I read an interesting article in the London *Telegraph* titled "Barack Obama's Lost Brother Found in Kenya." The article featured a picture of a 26-year-old man standing inside a ramshackle hut on the outskirts of Nairobi. CNN confirmed the story, reporting, "We found Barack Obama's half-brother living in a Nairobi

slum.” He was George Hussein Obama, the product of a liaison between Barack Obama Sr. and an African woman. “I live here on less than a dollar a month,” George said. Humiliated by his poverty, he confessed he never mentioned his famous half-brother. “I say we are not related. I am ashamed.” In 2006, George briefly met Barack Obama, who was then a United States senator from Illinois, but felt as though he was talking to a “total stranger.” I found it remarkable that Barack Obama, who had a net worth of several million dollars and who was within striking distance of the world’s highest office, hadn’t lifted a finger to help a destitute close relative.

Seeing from the article that George Obama aspired to be a mechanic, I started the “George Obama Compassion Fund.” On a daily blog I wrote for AOL at the time, I invited people to make small contributions to help George move out of his hut and get some training to realize his dreams. We raised a couple thousand dollars, and a Christian missionary promised he would deliver the money in person to George. Then I was contacted by a reporter for a large newspaper in Kenya who told me that the Obama family had refused the money. Evidently they had consulted with the Obama campaign and been told to go into hiding. My attempts to locate George proved unavailing. So I tore up the checks, figuring that perhaps I had jostled Obama into doing something for George, if only to save himself political embarrassment.²

While I was puzzled by Obama’s indifference to George, I

did not join the conservative chorus bashing Obama. On the contrary, when Obama was elected I wrote a column for Townhall.com on "Obama and Post-Racist America." In it I confessed I was moved by the sight of him taking the oath of office. To me, Obama wasn't just America's first African American president; he also represented the promise of "the end of racism." *The End of Racism* was the title of a controversial book I published in 1995. In it I contended that racism was no longer systemic; it was now episodic. It existed, but it no longer controlled the lives of blacks and other minorities. Racism could no longer explain why some people in America succeeded and others didn't.

That book might have been ahead of its time, but Obama's election seemed to show that I was basically right. Consider the oceans of ink that have been spilled in the past several decades about how America is a racist society, how bigotry runs in the veins of white America, how little real progress has been made, how far we still have to go, and so on. Would anyone who had been drinking this intellectual Kool-Aid for the past several years have been prepared for Obama's election? True, Obama was no Jesse Jackson. But precisely the difference between the two showed that individual conduct and demeanor, not skin color, was decisive. Obama didn't come across as a race hustler. He didn't seek to turn victimization into profit. Rather, he made his claims on their merits and appealed to shared American ideals. To borrow a line from Martin Luther King, he sought to be judged not by the color of his

skin but by the content of his character. So Obama's election, I wrote, means that we are living in post-racist America. And that's something we could all celebrate.³

Since Obama's inauguration, I have written virtually nothing about him, because I didn't want to judge him too early. Personally, I liked Obama, a nice man with a nice family. What a refreshing contrast from the previous Democratic occupants of the White House, the Clintons! I felt confident Obama would not entertain interns under his desk or leave with the White House china. The man had class, not to mention an undeniable gravitas. Besides, he had inherited a huge financial mess. He deserved a chance to clean it up. I recall saying in one of my campus speeches, "We have to give this guy a year to see what he is going to do."

As Obama launched his spending spree—a bailout plan followed by a stimulus plan followed by an automobile industry rescue plan followed by a national health care plan and then new environmental and financial regulations—I became alarmed. Obama insisted that his policies were aimed at rescuing America's economy from the precipice, but many of them, notably in energy, the environment, education, and health care, had nothing to do with the financial crisis. The proposed solutions were unconnected to the original problems. Moreover, by piling on public debt and driving up costs to business, they threatened to worsen the economic crisis.

I didn't fear only the economic repercussions, but also the degree of government control over the economy and over the lives of free citizens. I talked to my publishers and proposed a book called "Obama's Leviathan." I planned to contrast two types of liberalism, one with its roots in Locke and the other in Hobbes. Both were liberals, yet Lockean liberalism implies limited government, while Hobbes argued that in order to enjoy security we should concede all our rights to an all-powerful state. Hobbes called this state "Leviathan," a reference to the massive sea beast in the Bible. I set out to document how Obama and his team were moving America further away from the Lockean liberalism of the founders toward a more menacing Leviathan.

But even as I worked on the book I felt I was missing something, and that something was Obama himself. Somehow the Hobbesian explanation was too philosophical; it didn't capture what motivated Obama. That's when I got my second idea. I intended to contrast Martin Luther King's dream with Obama's ongoing scheme of taking advantage of the civil rights movement. My basic premise was that Obama had to be understood as a product of that movement. That was the milieu in which he grew up; those were the ideals that shaped him. In one sense, Obama had embraced King's color-blind aspiration. He was a nonracial candidate, and as president he did not appeal to race. At the same time, my thesis held that Obama got his Big Government philosophy from the civil rights era.

Here a bit of explanation is necessary. For the American founders, rights were seen as a limitation on government. That's why the Bill of Rights typically begins its specifications of rights with the phrase, "Congress shall make no law. . . ." Congress can pass no laws regulating freedom of speech, or the press, or assembly, and so on. In the founders' view, the rights of citizens are protected by restricting the power of the federal government. For American blacks, however, the federal government was the indispensable securer and guarantor of rights. The federal government ended slavery and Jim Crow. It took federal troops to enable black kids to attend public schools in the segregated South. Through its Great Society programs, the federal government was the biggest employer of African Americans and is largely responsible for the creation of a black middle class. Surveys have consistently shown that blacks are much more sympathetic toward Big Government than any other group; many blacks believe that because of their history America owes them, and therefore they are entitled to jobs, benefits, health insurance, and retirement income at society's expense.⁴ I sought to show that Obama had adopted the viewpoint of black America but removed the black label. Essentially he was applying black remedies to all of America, and the danger—I intended to argue—was that if he succeeded, all of us as citizens would become more dependent on the state and consequently less free as individuals.

But I found that this theory is also wrong—or at least

seriously inadequate. A couple of things tipped me off. The first is the chorus of complaint by black activists and scholars that Obama doesn't care about their agenda. Obama's indifference to black issues was the central theme of a 2010 summit organized by the African American TV host Tavis Smiley. Smiley echoed the sentiments of many of the speakers when he said, "The time has come for . . . the president to be more aggressive about an African American agenda." The black literary scholar Michael Eric Dyson put the point even more bluntly in an MSNBC television interview: "This president runs from race like a black man runs from a cop."⁵

At first I thought that this approach represented a tactical decision by Obama to eschew race-specific issues. After all, the man does have to convince the country that he represents the national interest, not just the black interest. But as the political philosopher Cornel West—an adviser to Obama's presidential campaign—recently pointed out, this does not require Obama to avoid black issues altogether. West noted that Obama certainly pays attention to environmentalists' concerns about oil spills, and union concerns about contracts. "But when it comes to black people . . . we don't have an agenda? He must be losing his mind. . . . We've got a black president who needs to be saved from himself." Saved from himself! I pondered the arresting phrase as well as why, in West's view, Obama steadfastly refuses to attend to the African American agenda, focused as it is on affirmative action and inner-city

poverty programs. Then a startling thought hit me. Maybe Obama pays no attention to race because he doesn't care about race. Maybe race is not what drives this guy after all.⁶

This got me to my second reason for doubting my race theory: it does not jibe with Obama's actual life story. I realized I had been placing Obama the whole time in the civil rights movement, thinking of him as African American, when in reality he has a very different history. Obama is not the descendant of slaves as African Americans typically are. Obama never sat at a segregated lunch counter, and neither did any of his ancestors. Obama's father was an immigrant from Africa who studied at Harvard and returned to Africa. His mother was white. Moreover, Obama grew up in Hawaii and Indonesia and lived a life of relative privilege, attending private school before enrolling at Columbia and then Harvard. So what did Obama have in common with black America? Virtually nothing.

Of course Obama went through a phase of growing up in which he thought of himself as an American black. And it is a political necessity for him to identify as an African American. This is not only because such identification brings near-universal black support and white support from many quarters, but also because it guarantees Obama's place in history. Obama isn't going down in history as the first child of an immigrant to become president, but rather as the first black president. So Obama has carefully cultivated a racial identity for himself, one that seeks to bind him to black America. But a little scrutiny shows that

Obama's effort is contrived. This isn't so hard to figure out: all you need to do is read Obama's writings and speeches with some good knowledge of black history and the civil rights tradition. The reason we haven't figured out Obama's tenuous relationship to black America is because so many people—especially in the press—are so eager to see an African American president who looks and sounds like Obama that they have suspended their critical faculties.

My critical antennae were alerted when I came across a passage in Obama's self-revealing autobiography *Dreams from My Father*. While waiting for his mother in the lobby of the American embassy in Indonesia, Obama recalls picking up a copy of *Life* magazine. Thumbing through the articles, he came across a story about a black man who underwent chemical treatments to lighten his skin. Obama notes that the man looked sickly, like "a radiation victim or an albino." His reaction was one of horror. "I felt my face and neck get hot. My stomach knotted; the type began to blur on the page . . . I had the desperate urge to jump out of my seat . . . to demand some explanation or assurance." Then his white mother entered the room and, with heroic effort, Obama suppressed his anger. The incident is a dramatic revelation to Obama that blackness stands condemned in America to such a degree that black people have to attempt to make themselves white.⁷

Obama's story was reported in *Newsweek* and many other places before journalists at the *Chicago Tribune* decided to locate the original story and, well, it turns out

there wasn't one. *Life* never published such an article. When Obama was asked about this, he suggested that maybe *Ebony* or some other magazine carried this particular article. Actually, no. The search for the article has been sufficiently thorough that we can say with confidence that it does not exist. Now a book published in the early 1960s, *Black Like Me*, does describe a fellow who took skin treatments to change his color. But the author, John Howard Griffin, was a white guy from Dallas who was trying to make himself look black. Griffin's purpose was to masquerade as a black man so he could personally experience and then expose racism in the South. It seems doubtful that Griffin was Obama's source, but if he was, then Obama not only distorted but completely inverted the facts. In any event Obama's intense emotional response now seems bogus and contrived. Obama's defenders have suggested that "Obama was after an emotional truth here."⁸ Quite obviously he was searching for a morality tale to dramatize the impact that American racism had on him in his formative years. Still, he could easily have found some other true incident to make the same point. Instead he seems to have engaged in some very creative writing. Yet if the whole episode was fantasy, why this particular fantasy?

I was about to despair in my attempt to figure out Obama when I heard Obama make his now-famous remark about whether America is an exceptional country. The notion that in many respects America is unique in the world is called American "exceptionalism." Now in one sense I knew that

obviously Obama believed in American exceptionalism. In his 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention Obama said, "I stand here knowing that . . . in no other country on earth is my story even possible," a refrain he repeated many times during the campaign.⁹ Obama was acknowledging that no other country allows outsiders like him (or me, for that matter) full entry and full acceptance in society. But here in America, foreigners of all races can "become American" and rise to the very top of the political and social ladder.

Yet when Obama was asked at a 2009 press conference in Europe whether he believed in American exceptionalism, he replied, "I believe in American exceptionalism just as I suspect the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks in Greek exceptionalism."¹⁰ What did Obama mean by this? In a banal sense, every country is unique, with its own distinctive history, mores, and cuisine. We all know that Americans eat hot dogs, Greeks eat souvlaki, and the British eat horrible British food. But this is not what exceptionalism means. It refers to the claim that the rest of the world does things in one way and we do things in a different way. Our ideals distinguish us from those of other cultures or, as I put it in one of my earlier books, America offers a new and original way to be human. If this is true, then it's wrong to say that American exceptionalism is no different than British or Greek exceptionalism. Obama seems to be insisting, in effect, that there is nothing especially unique about America. Why would Obama, of all

people, make such a remarkable statement? Something seemed terribly wrong here, not with Obama, but with my understanding of Obama.

So I went back and re-read Obama's two books, *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. Both are autobiographical, but the first tells us far more about Obama because it is not couched in political language. It was written in 1995, shortly before Obama was a state senator and a decade before he was a U.S. senator. Earlier I had read these books to discover Obama's positions on various issues. This time I read them to find Obama. In the process I found myself plunged into Obama's world, a world not of segregated lunch counters or separate water fountains, but rather a world much like the one that I grew up in: the Third World. As I read about Obama in Hawaii, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Africa, I remembered growing up as a boy in the suburbs of Mumbai, surrounded by the helter-skelter of poverty and chaos, naked children running around, rickshaws and beggars, cows crossing the road. Sometimes I wondered how I made the long journey from the world of my childhood, growing up without television or telephone or even hot showers in the bathroom, to the world I live in now. How, I ask myself, did I go from the periphery of the modern world to its epicenter? Others, like the novelist V. S. Naipaul, who grew up in Trinidad and moved to London, have written about this.

This is Obama's story, a story of a little boy who emerged

from the hinterlands and somehow was elected to the highest office in the land. Obama's formative history, I realized, was crucial to understanding who Obama is now. And suddenly it hit me that all along I had been looking for Obama in the wrong place. I had been trying to fit Obama into some version of American history, and in the process I had ignored Obama's own history. How absurd of me, since Obama's history in important respects resembled my own history. What made this discovery especially fascinating is that Obama interpreted this history in a way radically different from how I see it.

Obama's story is both enthralling and incredibly revealing of his current motivation and outlook, but I don't want to get too far ahead of myself. Let me just say here that Obama's books are about three dreams. The first one is the American dream, and this refers to what the American founders termed the "novus ordo seclorum," the new order for the ages. The founders sought to build a society not before seen in Europe or anywhere else in the world. They were, in this sense, the original champions of American exceptionalism. The American dream has been very good for Obama, making his success possible. But it is not what he cares most about; as we have seen, he explicitly rejects the idea that America is somehow unique. Perhaps for him the American dream is not very different from the British dream or the Greek dream.

Second, there is Martin Luther King's dream. Less obviously, this is also not Obama's dream. Again, he

depends on it. He campaigned as a non-racial candidate, and he counted on whites to vote for him or against him, not on the basis of his skin color, but on who he was as a politician and as a man. Without a realization of King's dream within the soul of the body politic, Obama would not be president today. Even so, Obama is not fundamentally guided by Martin Luther King's dream. The best evidence of this is that he rarely talks about that dream, and he does not seem to be moved or motivated by it. When is the last time you heard Obama speak with conviction about the importance of a color-blind society? If you go back and read Obama's speeches, including his famous Philadelphia address on race, King's dream gets short shrift. In this area, Obama's actions are equally important. As president, Obama has done nothing to alter race-conscious policies or even urge that Americans get beyond race. Even as he benefits from King's dream, he treats it with benign neglect.

Finally there is Obama's dream, and if you want to know what that is, all you have to do is look at the title of Obama's book: *Dreams from My Father*. So there it is: according to Obama himself, his dream comes from his father. And who was his father and what were the ideals and values that moved him? I withhold the answer to these questions until the next chapter, but let's just say that Obama's dream, as derived from Barack Obama Sr., is very different from the one espoused by George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Abraham Lincoln. It is just as distant from the dream of

Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King. In fact, to discover Obama's dream we have to leave the American mainland and join Obama on his lifelong quest to discover his father and, through that experience, himself.

When we go abroad, leaving behind familiar shores and signposts, we encounter a rich *mélange* of political and intellectual figures from all over the globe. We discover names like Jomo Kenyatta, Tom Mboya, Oginga Odinga, Kwame Nkrumah, Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Edward Said, Amílcar Cabral, Wole Soyinka, and Aimé Césaire. Many of these names appear in Obama's books, although—for reasons that will become clear—some of them are deliberately omitted. Fortunately for me, this is intellectual terrain that I know well. Steeped as I am in the politics and history of the Third World, these are figures whom I have studied. This is also the world of Barack Obama Sr., and it is in this mental and moral universe that his son found his ideals and his place. Obama's policies are incomprehensible without this intellectual landscape.

This book will clearly establish the relevance of this body of ideas to Obama's worldview—and a little detail here will set us on the right track. In *Dreams from My Father*, Obama writes about being influenced by Frantz Fanon. Born in Martinique, Fanon became a psychiatrist who joined the Algerian liberation movement, the Front de Liberation Nationale, or FLN. I'd like to quote an interesting passage from Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks*, a

book first published in 1952 in French, and then widely reprinted in translation in America. "For some years now, certain laboratories have been researching for a 'denegrification' serum. In all seriousness they have been rinsing out their test tubes and adjusting their scales and have begun research on how the wretched black man could whiten himself and thus rid himself of the burden of his bodily curse."¹¹ Fanon is writing about the North African Negro who is desperately eager to alter his skin color and become white like the French rulers of his country. Here, I believe, is where Obama got his skin treatment story. He found it in Fanon and altered the setting and the facts to invent a personal experience instructive about American racism.

Clearly in Barack Obama we are dealing with a strange, complex man. Ironically we have ironed out that strangeness by making Obama the embodiment of American multiculturalism. Somehow we have taken this lonely, driven figure and turned him into an image of diversity. He is our Kumbayah man, our post-ideological president, an ultra-modern leader with a twenty-first century agenda. Obama recognizes this; he has himself commented that "I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views."¹² As we will see, Obama is happy to accommodate these projections, which are vital to his transcendent image and political success. But whatever Obama is, he is not diverse or multicultural, at least not in his thinking or his fundamental

values. Moreover, as we will soon discover, Obama is not even a twenty- first century man. He is fighting a private war that started far away and goes back to the middle of the last century, with roots that are even earlier. If we want to understand his actions in America and in the world, we have to understand Obama as he really is, not as we want him to be.