

President	Barack H. Obama II
Chronological Order	44
Life Span	1961-present
Home State	Illinois
Elected	2008, 2012
Political Party	Democratic
Vice President	Joseph R. Biden Jr.
First Lady	Michelle Robinson Obama
Children	Two daughters
Physical Attributes	6'1" tall, thin, closely cropped black hair, brown eyes
Undergraduate Education	Columbia University (Political Science and English Literature)
Military Service	None
Profession	Community Organizer, Attorney, Law Professor
Other Political Offices	U.S. Senator
Nickname	No Drama Obama
Family Lineage	Kenyan, Scots-Irish
ReligiousAffiliation	Unspecified Protestant



Biographical Notes

1. Obama was the first African American president. He was also a significant president. He righted the economic ship during the Great Recession; brought home most of the troops from Iraq; enacted policies to stem climate change; imposed new regulations on Wall Street financial institutions; rescued the auto industry; negotiated a deal to limit Iran's nuclear program; and created a new healthcare system that has provided coverage to tens of millions Americans (twenty-two million were enrolled in 2019).

But the progressive, post-racial, bridge-building society he had envisioned never happened. Conservative Republicans – exemplified by the Tea Party movement – objected strongly to his policies and responded to his election with racial animus. Congressional Republicans took obstructionism to extreme levels, whose climax was their refusal to consider Obama's Supreme Court nominee even though a full year remained in the president's term. As a result, America became an angry, polarized nation led by a new president, Donald Trump, who relished reality show name-calling and condoned the behavior of white supremacy groups. Obama finished his presidency near the peak of his popularity, admired for his steady dignity in contrast to his volatile successor.

2. Obama did not have the hail-fellow-well-met kind of personality typical of American politicians. While many politicians loved to talk, like his famously unfiltered vice president, Joe Biden, Obama was reserved and circumspect when meeting new people. He did not dispense playful nicknames like Bush 43, spin out colorful Ozark yarns like Bill Clinton, or tell funny jokes like Ronald Reagan.

Not that he was necessarily cold. Although Maureen Dowd of the *New York Times* famously compared him to Mr. Spock, the hyper-logical Vulcan from *Star Trek*, Obama had a human side. He was a fierce, trash-talking competitor on the basketball court, enjoyed a wide range of music on his iPad, and sometimes stayed up late watching ESPN's *Sports Center*. He had a playful sense of humor with his close friends and colleagues and could deliver a one-liner with impeccable timing.

Obama was a devoted family man who usually left the Oval Office by 6:30 pm to have dinner with Michelle, Malia, and Sasha when he was not traveling. He loved attending his girls' basketball games. Obama identified so strongly with the parents of the school children murdered in Newtown, Connecticut, that tears came to his eyes while discussing the tragedy at a televised press conference in the White House briefing

room. Having grown up without a father and missed time with his girls while running for senator and president, he was determined to have as normal a family life as possible while in the White House.

During his first term, Obama's lack of the schmooze gene hurt him inside the Democratic Party, where donors, elected officials, and party activists made insularity their most frequent criticism of his presidency. Some Democratic senators who voted with Obama felt their support was taken for granted. Many would go two or three years between conversations with the president, which embarrassed them (constituents often asked about such interactions) and weakened his support on the Hill. The president had good relations with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, and a few other legislators. However, most other senators and House members were rarely invited to the White House for anything other than big parties.

During his second term, Obama made a concerted effort to talk to more people outside his immediate orbit. In January 2013, he said he would have more time for networking: "The nice thing is now that my girls are getting older, they don't want to spend that much time with me anyway." After the 2013 inauguration, Barack and Michelle regularly invited legislators to the White House for dinner.

3. Barack Hussein Obama II was born in Hawaii in 1961. His parents, who met at the University of Hawaii, were Ann Dunham, a white woman from Kansas, and Barack Hussein Obama, a Black Kenyan studying in the U.S. Obama's father left the family when Barack was two, enrolling in Harvard and earning an M.A. in economics. Obama Sr. then returned to Kenya and became a government economist. He saw his son just once more – on a brief visit to Hawaii when Barack was ten – and died in an automobile accident in 1982.

After his parents divorced, Obama's mother married another international student at the University of Hawaii, Lolo Soetoro of Indonesia. From age six to ten, Obama lived with his mother and stepfather in Indonesia, where he attended Catholic and Muslim schools. "I was raised as an Indonesian child and a Hawaiian child and as a black child and a white child," Obama later recalled. "And so what I benefitted from is a multiplicity of cultures that all fed me."

Concerned for his education, Obama's mother sent him back to Hawaii to live with her parents and attend Hawaii's prestigious Punahou School from fifth grade through high school graduation. While Obama was in school, his mother divorced Soetoro, returned to Hawaii to study cultural anthropology at the university, and then went back to Indonesia to do field research. Living with his grandparents, Obama was a good but not outstanding student at Punahou, where he played varsity basketball. As for religion, Obama later wrote, because his parents and grandparents were nonbelievers, "I was not raised in a religious household."

Hawaii was culturally diverse, but its African American population was minuscule. With no father or other family member to serve as a Black male role model, Obama later reflected, "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."

4. One of Obama's key personality traits is his ability to retain his composure during a crisis, which earned him the nickname "No Drama Obama." When asked about this, he replied, "In tough spots, I tend to channel my grandmother."

Obama's nickname for his maternal grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, was Toot, short for Tutu (Hawaiian for Grandma). Toot worked for the Bank of Hawaii, rising from an entry-level position to become one of its first female vice presidents. For twenty-five years, there would be no fuss, no mistakes, and no complaints, even when she saw younger men that she had trained promoted ahead of her. She told Barack, "Sometimes you just do what needs to be done." The financial stability provided by Toot's job allowed her daughter to pursue a career she enjoyed, despite its sporadic pay and overseas postings, and was why Barack and his stepsister Maya Soetoro had been able to go to a private school and good colleges. In his memoir, *A Promised Land*, Obama writes:

She taught me the value of working hard and doing your best even when the work was unpleasant and about fulfilling your responsibilities even when it was inconvenient. She taught me to marry passion with reason, to not get overly excited when life was going well, and to not get too down when it went badly.

Toot was what a banker should be: honest, prudent, exacting, and risk-averse. During the financial crisis, Obama wondered what she would make of the bankers he had to deal with, men who were okay with placing billion-dollar bets with other people's money on what they knew, or should have known, was a pile of bad loans.

5. Obama left Hawaii for college, enrolling first at Occidental College in Los Angeles for his freshman and sophomore years, and then at Columbia University in New York City. At Columbia, he majored in political science (with an emphasis on international relations) and English literature, graduating in 1983. After spending an additional year in New York as a researcher with Business International Group, a global business consulting firm, Obama accepted an offer to work as a community organizer in Chicago's mostly poor and Black South Side. As biographer David Mendell notes in his 2007 book, *Obama: From Promise to Power*, the job gave Obama "his first deep immersion into the African American community he had longed to both understand and belong to."

Obama's primary assignment as an organizer was to launch the church-funded Developing Communities Project and, in particular, to organize residents of Altgeld Gardens to pressure Chicago's city hall to improve conditions in the poorly maintained public housing project. His efforts met with some success, but he concluded that faced with a complex city bureaucracy, "I just can't get things done here without a law degree."

6. In 1988, Obama enrolled at Harvard Law School, where he excelled as a student, graduating magna cum laude and winning election as president of the prestigious Harvard Law Review for the academic year 1990-1991. Although Obama was a liberal, he won the election by persuading the journal's outnumbered conservative staffers that he would treat their views fairly, which he is widely acknowledged to have done. As the first African American president in the long history of the law review, Obama drew widespread media attention and a contract from Random House to write a book about race relations. The book, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995), turned out to be mostly a personal memoir, focusing mainly on his struggle to come to terms with his identity as a Black man raised by whites in the absence of his African father. The book was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller.

7. After directing Illinois Project Vote, a voter registration drive aimed at increasing black turnout in the 1992 election, Obama accepted positions as an attorney with the civil rights law firm of Miner, Barnhill, and Galland and as a lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School. He launched his first campaign for political office in 1996 after his district's state senator, Alice Palmer, decided to run for Congress. With Palmer's support, Obama announced his candidacy to replace her in the Illinois legislature. When Palmer's congressional campaign faltered, she decided to run for re-election instead. But Obama refused to withdraw from the race, successfully challenged the validity of Palmer's voter petitions, and was easily elected after her name was kept off the ballot.

Obama's time in the legislature initially was frustrating. Republicans controlled the state senate, and many of his Black Democratic colleagues resented the hardball tactics he had employed against Palmer. But he adapted, developing cordial personal relations with legislators of both parties and cultivating Senate Democratic leader Emil Jones Jr., another African American senator from Chicago, as a mentor. Obama was able to get campaign finance reform and crime legislation enacted even when his party was in the minority. After 2002, when the Democrats won control of the Senate, he became a leading legislator on a wide range of issues.

8. Michelle Robinson and her brother Craig grew up on the South Side of Chicago. Her father, Fraser, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in his early thirties but never missed a day's work at the city's water plant or any of his children's recitals or games. He was also a Democratic precinct captain. Her mother, Marian, was a homemaker until Michelle went to high school, then a secretary. Michelle graduated from Princeton University and Harvard Law School. Craig was a star basketball player for Princeton and, later, the head coach at Oregon State University and Brown University.

Michelle met Barack while she was an attorney at the Sidney Austin law firm in Chicago, and they married in 1992. She later worked for the Chicago mayor's office, the University of Chicago, and the University of Chicago Medical Center.

Michelle worked extensively on Obama's presidential campaign in 2007 and 2008 and gave a major speech at the 2008 Democratic Convention. She also spoke at the 2012, 2016, and 2020 conventions. As First Lady, she advocated against childhood obesity with her "Let's Move!" campaign and for military families with Jill Biden in their "Joining Forces" campaign. Her 2018 memoir, *Becoming*, was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller.

9. Obama taught constitutional law at the University of Chicago for twelve years, as a Lecturer for four years (1992-1996), and as a Senior Lecturer for eight years (1996-2004). He taught courses in due process and equal protection, voting rights, and racism and law.

10. While in the state senate, Obama began eyeing a 2004 race for the U.S. Senate seat held by Peter Fitzgerald, an unpopular first-term Republican who decided not to run for re-election. In October 2002, as Congress was considering a resolution authorizing President George W. Bush to launch a war to depose the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, Obama spoke at an antiwar rally in Chicago. "I don't oppose all wars," he declared. "What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war." By speaking out against Bush's war policies, he set himself apart from the other leading candidates for the Democratic Senate nomination and from most Senate Democrats with presidential ambitions, including Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York, John Kerry of Massachusetts, and John Edwards of North Carolina. Obama's initially unpopular antiwar stance eventually worked to his political advantage as the war became increasingly unpopular over time.

Advised by political consultant David Axelrod, who had a strong record of helping Black candidates succeed in majority-white constituencies, Obama assembled a coalition of African Americans and white liberals to win the Democratic Senate primary with 53 percent of the vote, more than all five of his opponents combined. He then moved toward the political center to wage his general election campaign against Republican nominee Jack Ryan, an attractive candidate who, after making hundreds of millions of dollars as an investor, had left the business world to teach in an inner-city Chicago school. But Ryan was forced to drop out of the race when scandalous details about his divorce were made public. Obama coasted to a comfortable victory against Ryan's replacement on the ballot, Black conservative Republican Alan Keyes. Obama won by the largest margin in the history of Senate elections in Illinois, 70 percent to 27 percent.

11. Obama's unexpected landslide victory in the March 2004 Illinois U.S. Senate Democratic primary made him a rising star in the national Democratic Party overnight. His memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, was reissued, and he was selected to give the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention. The speech was well-received and included a biographical sketch of Obama, his vision of America, and the reasons for his support of John Kerry for president. He told the audience: "There is not a Black America and a white America and a Latino America and an Asian America. There's the *United States* of America."

12. In 2006, Obama published his second book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, in order "to present my ideas about the current state of American politics in an interesting way." During his publicity tour for the book, especially after his appearance on *Meet the Press*, the media began asking him if he was going to run for president in 2008. The book became a #1 *New York Times* bestseller.

13. When Obama was considering running for president, he and Michelle attended the final staff meeting to determine whether or not he would run. After listening to how life would change for them if Barack did run, Michelle cut in with the essential question.

"You've said that there are a lot of other Democrats who are capable of winning an election and being president. You've told me that the only reason for you to run is if you could provide something that the others can't. Otherwise, it's not worth it. Right?"

Obama nodded.

"So, my question is why you, Barack? Why do *you* need to be president?"

Obama dissembled a bit, speaking in generalities, but then finally answered the question:

Here's one thing I know for sure, though. I know that the day I raise my right hand and take the oath to be president of the United States, the world will start looking at America differently. I know that kids all around this country – Black kids, Hispanic kids, kids that don't fit in – they'll see themselves differently, too, their horizons lifted, their possibilities expanded. And that alone ... that would be worth it.

The room was very quiet; some aides smiled; advisor Valerie Jarrett, a Black woman from Chicago, teared up. Michelle stared at Barack for what seemed like an eternity and then said, "Well, honey, that was a pretty good answer."

14. Although he had never been part of a national campaign, Obama built a state-of-the-art organization for the 2008 presidential race that included a digital program that was light-years ahead of other campaigns. He began the primary season with an unexpected win in the Iowa caucuses. The field for the Democratic nomination narrowed after the early primaries to just Obama and Senator Hillary Clinton of New York. The race remained close, but Obama maintained a steady lead in pledged delegates due to better long-range planning, superior fundraising, and effective organizing in caucus states. Once Obama had clinched the

nomination, Clinton initially refused to concede, but eventually, she did. Hillary and Bill Clinton gave speeches at the 2008 Democratic National Convention supporting Obama. Obama gave his acceptance speech at a football stadium filled with 84,000 people, and millions viewed it on television.

15. Obama's general election opponent was Senator John McCain of Arizona. Early campaigning focused heavily on the Iraq War and the unpopularity of George W. Bush. McCain supported the war and the troop surge of 2007, while Obama strongly opposed the war. Bush endorsed McCain, but they did not campaign together, and Bush did not appear in person at the 2008 Republican National Convention. Obama campaigned on the theme "Washington must change," while McCain emphasized his experience.

The race was affected by the onset of a major financial crisis – which included the Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy – in September 2008. McCain's decision to suspend his campaign during the height of the crisis (to return to Washington for consultations) backfired as voters viewed his response as erratic. (When hearing about this, Obama quipped, "Presidents are going to have to deal with more than one thing at a time.") McCain's judgment also came into question when his vice-presidential choice, conservative firebrand Sarah Palin, could not answer simple questions posed to her by the press.

Obama won a decisive victory 365 to 173 electoral votes. He flipped nine states that had voted Republican in 2004: Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia. Obama won the popular vote 52.9 to 45.7 percent.

16. On election night, a quarter of a million people crowded into Grant Park in Chicago to celebrate Obama's victory and hear him speak. He said, in part:

If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dreams of our founders are alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. ...

It's been a long time coming, but tonight, because of what we did on this day, in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America.

The joy in the African American community knew no bounds. John Lewis, the civil rights hero whose skull was fractured by an Alabama state trooper on the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma in 1965, said he "never imagined, never had any idea" that he would see this day. Jesse Jackson, one of Martin Luther King Jr.'s principal lieutenants – who was with him when he was shot in Memphis – was in the crowd at Grant Park. By the time Obama spoke, Jackson was in tears.

17. Obama inherited the worst economic situation since the Great Depression from George W. Bush – it became known as the Great Recession. During the time between the election and the inauguration, Obama's team worked on legislation to address this financial crisis. Shortly after the inauguration, Obama took the unprecedented step of traveling to Capitol Hill to meet with House Republicans. He wanted to strike a bipartisan tone and, hopefully, get their cooperation in dealing with the financial crisis. However, when he was in the limo en route to the meeting, he learned that Minority Leader John Boehner and Minority Whip Eric Cantor had instructed the Republican House members to listen politely and take no part in Obama's efforts to save the economy.

After just one month in office, the Obama administration passed the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to stimulate the economy. In the House, only one Republican voted for the ARRA, and in the Senate, only three did. By October 2016, the economy had added 15.5 million new jobs since early 2010 and set a record with seventy-three straight weeks of private-sector job growth. The unemployment rate, which hit a sustained peak of about 10 percent in 2009, dropped to 4.5 percent in November 2016.

18. After five presidents failed to create universal health insurance over the course of a century, Obama passed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010 after a grueling nine-month legislative battle. No Republican in the House or the Senate voted for the ACA.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates 22 million people gained health insurance coverage due to the ACA in 2019. The law provides subsidies for Americans to buy coverage, expands Medicaid eligibility, and prohibits insurers from denying coverage to people with preexisting conditions. The law also mandates free preventative care, allows young people to stay on their parent's policies until age twenty-six, and imposes a ban on annual and lifetime caps on benefits. The ACA is often referred to as "Obamacare."

19. While lining up votes for the ACA, aide Phil Schilliro told Obama that he thought there was still a path to passing a comprehensive law with only Democratic votes but that it was not a sure thing. He said to the president, "I guess the question for you, Mr. President, is: Do you feel lucky?"

Obama looked at him, smiled, and asked, "Where are we, Phil?"

Phil hesitated, wondering if it was a trick question, and replied, "The Oval Office?"

"And what is my name?"

"Barack Obama."

"Barack *Hussein* Obama. And I'm here with you in the *Oval Office*. Brother, I always feel lucky."

20. Obama was disheartened by the Republicans' near-unanimous vote against the ARRA and unanimous vote against the ACA. He said, "[It wasn't that] I thought my political outreach and charm would immediately end partisan politics. I just thought there would be enough of a sense of urgency that, at least for that first year, there would be an interest in governing. And you just didn't see that."

Shortly before the 2010 midterm elections, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell put the Republicans' obstructionism into perspective when he told the *National Journal*, "The single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president." Two days after the election, McConnell doubled down on this idea. He said that the GOP legislative goals were to repeal the ACA, end the bailouts, cut spending, and shrink the size of government. He said, "The only way to do all those things is to put someone in the White House who won't veto [them]."

A supporter who knew Obama well discerned that the opposition's intransigence had humbled the president. He had never failed to bring anyone important around before, and the failure changed him.

21. Beginning in 2009, the Obama administration injected \$62 billion into the ailing General Motors and Chrysler companies in return for equity stakes and agreements for massive restructuring. (This was in addition to the \$17.4 billion in loans from the Bush administration.) By December 2014, the car companies had repaid \$70.4 billion of the funds, and the Center for Automotive Research estimated that 2.5 million jobs had been saved.

22. Obama signed the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act in 2010 to re-regulate the financial sector after its practices caused the Great Recession. The law tightens capital requirements on large banks and other financial institutions, allows the government to take them into receivership if they pose a threat to the economy, and limits their ability to trade with customers' money for their own profit. Dodd-Frank also created the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) to crack down on abusive lending and financial services. By the end of 2016, the CFPB had handled nearly one million consumer complaints and taken actions that resulted in \$11.7 billion in relief for more than twenty-seven million consumers.

23. Obama played varsity basketball in high school and continued playing later in life. In the early 1990s, living in Chicago, he played regularly at the University of Chicago field house, often with Arne Duncan, his future secretary of education, who had played professional basketball in Australia. From the start – before Obama became famous – Duncan noticed his intelligence on the court. The future president was strong, agile, and especially good at anticipating the flow of the game. He was a left-handed guard with a decent jump shot and could be tricky to cover.

As president, Obama played on the indoor court at Ft. McNair or, weather permitting, on the hard-surface tennis court at the White House, where he had two baskets installed and lines painted. Obama regularly scheduled games with some of the four members of his cabinet who were good players, his body man Reggie Love (who played collegiately at Duke), and other good players from the D.C. area.

Duncan liked to compare Obama to Michael Jordan, obviously not in terms of his skill level but in terms of their attitudes on the court. "What they both possessed," said Duncan, "was this instinct of being a killer. Nice guys, great smiles, they seem relaxed – but the same mental toughness and relentless desire to win." Duncan noted that most players don't want the ball when the game is on the line. But Jordan and Obama did. "At the end of the game, Barack always wants the ball," commented Duncan. Like Jordan, he might not always make the last shot, but he was willing to take it or make the pass that led to the winning basket.

Obama thought of himself as a clutch performer in politics, too. When the preparations for his speech to declare his candidacy for president in 2007 went poorly, he kept rewriting it until 4 a.m. and barely had time to rehearse. After the speech scored big, David Axelrod turned to Robert Gibbs and said, "He's obviously a game player and not a practice player." Obama sometimes did similar things on speeches as president.

24. Obama made two contributions to LGBTQ rights. When he came into office, America's policy towards

gays and lesbians in the military was “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT). Specifically, a service member would not be asked about their sexual orientation, and they were not allowed to divulge it. The penalty for doing so was a court-martial. LGBTQ advocates lobbied Obama to issue an executive order overthrowing DADT, as Truman did for army segregation in 1948. However, Obama chose to go further and passed the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act in December 2010 to allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military.

The critical moment in the struggle to pass the bill arose when Admiral Michael Mullen testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He said, “No matter how I look at this issue, I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy [DADT] which forces young men and women to lie about who they are in order to defend their fellow citizens. For me personally, it comes down to integrity, theirs as individuals and ours as an institution.”

In 2011, Obama decided that the federal government would no longer defend the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which restricted federal marriage recognition to opposite-sex couples. During the 2012 presidential campaign, he said, in an interview with Robin Roberts on *Good Morning America*, “At a certain point, I’ve just concluded for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married.” He stressed that it was still a matter for the states to decide but that working with staff in same-sex relationships and listening to Malia and Sasha talk naturally about their friends with same-sex parents made it difficult “to explain to your child that some people should be treated differently.” In a *Newsweek* cover story, Andrew Sullivan said, “I was utterly unprepared for how psychologically transformative the moment would be. To have the President of the United States affirm my humanity – and the humanity of all gay Americans – was, unexpectedly, a watershed. He shifted the mainstream in one interview.”

In June 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down key portions of DOMA as unconstitutional, allowing married same-sex couples to finally receive federal protections like Social Security and veterans' benefits.

25. The Democrats experienced a stunning defeat in the 2010 midterm elections. They lost control of the House when the GOP gained 63 seats; there were now 242 Republicans and 193 Democrats in the chamber. The Democrats retained control of the Senate (51 to 47, with two Independents who caucused with the Democrats), but their majority was no longer filibuster-proof. Much of the Republican momentum was generated by the Tea Party, a conservative movement that disapproved of the ARRA, the ACA, the auto “bailout,” the Democrats’ attempt to pass the DREAM Act, and the fact that the president was Black. The Tea Party purported to be a grassroots organization that arose spontaneously, but it was organized by experienced political operatives and supported by deep-pocket donors like the Koch brothers. At Tea Party rallies, some “patriots” dressed up in blackface with a bone seeming to pass through their nose to look like a cannibal and mock Obama. Sarah Palin said, “The Tea Party wouldn’t exist without Barack Obama.”

Nationwide, the Democrats lost 680 seats in state legislatures and 19 legislative chambers. Since 2010 was a census year, control of the state legislatures allowed the Republicans to restructure congressional districts to their advantage. In the 70 congressional districts labeled as “competitive” in 2010, Republicans were able to gerrymander 46, compared to only 15 for Democrats, with the remainder redistricted on a nonpartisan basis. The result would be about 50 fewer competitive seats in the House of Representatives in 2012. It also meant more Republicans and fewer moderates in either party and, thus, fewer opportunities for compromise.

26. The lame-duck session of Congress that followed the 2010 midterms was highly productive. In exchange for extending the Bush tax cuts – the GOP’s true bottom line – Obama won approval of the START nuclear arms treaty with Russia, the repeal of DADT, the extension of unemployment benefits, the first expansion of the school lunch program in four decades, a continuation of the ARRA’s expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit (the most successful antipoverty program in a generation), and increased medical care for 9/11 rescue workers at Ground Zero. The result of the fiscal parts of the compromise was a “stealth stimulus” of nearly a trillion dollars – a much-needed boost to the economy.

27. According to historian Julian Zelizer, Obama’s long list of policy accomplishments during his first two years was due to his “keen sense of how the institutions of government work and the ways his team could design policy proposals.” The accomplishments occurred despite Obama’s aversion to the standard requirements of politics: dealing with legislators, building coalitions, selling relentlessly with a message repeated ad nauseam. The truth was that Obama did not love the “game” of politics or enjoy the company of politicians; in fact, he did not consider himself one, at least not at heart. Because the Democrats lost seats in Congress during Obama’s eight years, Zelizer feels that the consensus among historians is that Obama “turned out to be a very effective policymaker but not a tremendously effective party builder.”

28. After an initial troops surge in Afghanistan, Obama brought home ninety percent of the nearly 180,000 troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan when he took office, leaving only a small contingent of forces to assist the Iraqi and Afghani militaries against insurgents and the Taliban. The withdrawal from Iraq created a vacuum that was filled by ISIS. However, the U.S. has helped the Iraqi army in reversing ISIS's gains without redeploying ground troops.

29. In December 2010, CIA Director Leon Panetta informed Obama that he believed the agency had located Osama bin Laden. The terrorist never used electronic communications (phones or computers); instead, he relied on couriers. By tracking a suspected courier, the CIA was led to a large compound with high walls in Abbottabad, Pakistan, whose primary occupant was a very tall Arab man. (Bin Laden was known to be 6'4" or 6'5" tall.) The man frequently walked in circles in a small garden inside the compound, and the CIA nicknamed him "The Pacer." They estimated the probability that this was bin Laden at sixty to eighty percent; the National Counterterrorism Center rated it as forty to sixty percent.

The possibility of capturing or killing the Pacer was complicated because (a) Abbottabad was well inside Pakistan, and (b) the compound was just a mile from the Pakistani military academy (the equivalent of America's West Point). Also, since the CIA suspected that the Pakistani intelligence service was complicit in hiding bin Laden, the U.S. could not inform Pakistani authorities about any proposed operations.

Obama was given two options. One, kill the Pacer with a drone strike. Two, send in helicopters with Navy SEALs to capture or kill him. The downside of option one was that there would be no verification that The Pacer was bin Laden. The downside of option two was that the helicopters would have to avoid detection flying in and out of Pakistan, and the SEALs would have to finish their work before any local response was mounted. Obama chose option two.

In May 2011, two helicopters left from Jalalabad Airfield, Afghanistan, and entered Pakistan. Obama and members of his team, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Vice President Joe Biden, watched the assault of the compound on closed-circuit television. Initially, the operation hit a snag when one helicopter crashed inside the compound and had to be destroyed. But ultimately, the raid was successful: The Pacer was killed; the body was brought back to Jalalabad; no SEALs were lost; and an intelligence treasure trove of documents and computer files were confiscated from the compound.

Shortly after the choppers returned from the mission, its commander, Vice Admiral William McRaven, spoke with Obama over a video conference line. He told the president that he was looking at the body as they spoke and that, in his judgment, it was definitely bin Laden; the CIA's facial recognition software would soon indicate the same. To further confirm, McRaven had a 6'2" member of his team lie down next to the body to compare his height to bin Laden's purported 6'4" or 6'5" frame. Obama then teased, "Seriously, Bill? All that planning and you couldn't bring a tape measure?" Later, a DNA test confirmed that it was bin Laden. The body was buried at sea – strictly following Muslim traditions – because Obama did not want a grave to which jihadists could flock. Later, McRaven visited Obama in the Oval Office, and the president gave him a plaque with a tape measure mounted on it.

During the 2012 presidential campaign, Mitt Romney lambasted Obama for adopting a foreign policy of "appeasement" that "betrays a lack of faith in America." Obama replied, "Ask Osama bin Laden and the twenty-two out of thirty Al Qaeda leaders who have been taken off the field whether I engage in appeasement." Joe Biden's favorite line during the 2012 campaign was, "Bin Laden is dead; General Motors is alive."

30. At approximately 6 p.m. Monday, October 29, 2012, Hurricane Sandy, the largest hurricane on record (in diameter), hit the southern tip of New Jersey. Obama's response was strong and swift, in sharp contrast to President George W. Bush's bungled response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Obama canceled his 10 a.m. campaign rally in Orlando that day and hurried back to Washington. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had already positioned resources to respond quickly to the storm, and the president and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie discussed the preparations. From the Situation Room, Obama declared a pre-disaster state of emergency in several states and signed edicts that speeded aid to New Jersey and New York by foregoing the usual paperwork. He gave the governors and big-city mayors his cell phone number and insisted they call him directly anytime red tape held things up. He instructed his agency heads not to tell him why something could not be done but to figure out how it could.

The grim totals for the U.S. and the Caribbean – 138 dead, \$75 billion in property damages, and 81 million without power – were worse than expected. But Obama had prepared for this moment. As a U.S. senator, he won notice for carefully analyzing the Katrina fiasco and FEMA's poor response. After becoming president, he promptly hired a well-qualified emergency preparedness expert to run FEMA. When Republicans in Congress

tried to starve FEMA by drastically cutting its budget well before Hurricane Sandy, the Obama White House fought back hard and won.

Governor Christie was impressed by Obama's attentiveness. On Wednesday, October 31, he hosted the president on a tour of the hurricane damage in his state. The nationally televised image of a Democratic president and a Republican governor working well together to help the people of New Jersey sent a powerful bipartisan message. Christie went out of his way to praise Obama for three consecutive days. "The president has been outstanding on this," he told the *Today* show. "I have to give the president great credit."

In contrast, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney was on record denigrating FEMA as just another money-hungry big-government program. During a June 2011 CNN presidential primary debate, when asked whether disaster relief money should be on the chopping block, Romney said, "Absolutely. Every time you have an occasion to take something from the federal government and send it back to the states, that's the right direction. And if you can go further and send it back to the private sector, even better."

When Chris Christie was asked whether Romney would visit New Jersey, the governor replied, "I have no idea, nor am I the least bit concerned or interested." At a press conference on the day after the storm, reporters tried seven times to get Romney to talk about FEMA, but each time he refused. With his embrace of antigovernment ideology catching up to him, he looked like a man with something to hide.

31. Obama ran for president against Republican Mitt Romney in 2012. The campaigns focused heavily on domestic issues, and the debate centered mostly around Obama's response to the Great Recession. Other topics discussed included long-term federal budget issues, including the futures of Social Security and Medicare, and the ACA. Foreign policy issues discussed were the phase-out of the Iraq War, military spending, the Iran nuclear program, and counteractions to terrorism.

A pivotal moment in the campaign occurred when a bartender recorded Romney at a private \$50,000 per person fundraiser disparaging Obama's supporters. Romney dismissed the "forty-seven percent of the people who will vote for the president, no matter what" as freeloaders who pay no taxes, who don't accept responsibility for their own lives, and who think that the government should take care of them. These comments hurt Romney with undecided voters and motivated Democratic turnout. Obama won the election 332 to 206 electoral votes. He won the popular vote 51 to 47 percent. Approximately one million people attended Obama's inauguration in January 2013.

32. The highlight of the 2012 Democratic National Convention was Bill Clinton's nominating speech for Obama. He explained – better than Obama ever had – why the president should be re-elected. He began by criticizing the GOP's congressional obstruction tactics: "They think that government is always the enemy, that they are always right, and that compromise is always a weakness." He then lampooned the heart of their argument: "We left him a total mess, he hasn't cleaned it up fast enough, so fire him and put us back in." When Clinton said, "No president, not me, not any of my predecessors, could have fixed in four years the economy that Obama inherited," it was hard for any fair-minded American voter to disagree. The former president explained that Obama – not Romney – would make the kind of investments in the middle class that gave the country prosperity during the Clinton years. Later, in his stump speeches, Obama referred to Clinton as his "Secretary of Explaining Stuff."

Even before the convention, Clinton had undertaken a vigorous speaking schedule on Obama's behalf. He was a smash hit with Democratic audiences in the battleground states. After the third presidential debate, he agreed to campaign full-time for the last three weeks, which was like having another vice-presidential candidate, only better. Clinton thoroughly enjoyed his new role as a surrogate for Obama.

In contrast, the lowlight of the 2012 Republican National Convention was eighty-two-year-old Clint Eastwood's strange prime-time speech in which he talked – for twelve minutes – to an empty chair supposedly occupied by an invisible Obama. "What do you want me to tell Romney?" Eastwood asked the chair. He followed that with, "I can't tell him to do that to himself." The fiasco occurred because Romney's staff did not vet the speech – they were too intimidated by Eastwood's stardom. It did not take long for @BarackObama to tweet a picture of the president and his chair in the Cabinet Room with a caption that read, "This seat's taken."

33. One reason Obama won the 2012 election was the pioneering digital efforts of his campaign staff. His analytics team built a database in which 180 million potential voters were rated with a "support score" on a scale of 0 to 100 as to whether they would vote for Obama (100 being the most likely). They were also rated on a "persuasion" scale (0 to 10) as to how likely they were to change their mind. Software was developed to get this information to canvassers, which allowed them to efficiently skip many houses and only knock on

doors where a potential supporter lived.

Obama's email list had 16 million names. Obama for America contacted ninety-eight percent of America's Facebook users. In battleground states, 600,000 Facebook users contacted around half a dozen friends each for a total of 3.6 million contacts. Nearly one-third of them took some kind of action, e.g., registering to vote. One Romney staffer was contacted through this process and asked to contact his Facebook friend, Republican House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, and urge him to vote for Obama. Obama had 24 million Twitter followers – more than ten times as many as Romney. Michele Obama had ten times as many Twitter followers as Ann Romney.

Obama for America organized 2.2 million volunteers into a grassroots army during the campaign. Unlike many previous field campaigns that drew their power from staff, consultants, and paid canvassers, the Obama campaign's capacity came primarily from unpaid local citizens who took responsibility for organizing their neighborhoods months before Election Day.

34. On December 14, 2012, a young man armed with an assault rifle rampaged through Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, killing twenty children, all six or seven years old, and six adult staff members. Never before in American history had anyone shot and killed so many children in a school.

The massacre left Obama emotionally distraught, and during his nationally televised address from the White House Briefing Room, he could not mask his feelings. His face was ashen, and his eyes were ringed with grief. He noted that the dead were just children, then wiped a tear from his eye. He paused, staring down, trying to retain his composure. Twelve long seconds passed in silence before he spoke again, an eternity in the life of a televised presidential statement. "They had their entire lives ahead of them," he finally said, "birthdays, graduations, weddings, kids of their own." He paused again for another seven seconds and then said, "This evening, Michelle and I will do what every parent will do, which is hug our children a little tighter, and we'll tell them that we love them, and we'll remind each other how deeply we love one another. But there are families in Connecticut that cannot do that tonight."

Obama made gun control his number one issue at the beginning of his second term. He put forward a package of relatively modest initiatives. He called on Congress to reinstate the ban on assault rifles that had been on the books for a decade before expiring, and he pressed to outlaw armor-piercing bullets and magazines with more than ten rounds, like those used in Newtown and other mass shootings. He also proposed closing a longstanding loophole that allowed buyers to avoid criminal background checks by purchasing weapons from unlicensed sellers at gun shows or through private sales. Polls showed that a vast majority of Americans supported these proposals.

The National Rifle Association and Republicans in the Senate vociferously opposed these measures. Senator Marco Rubio said, "Nothing the president is proposing would have stopped the massacre at Sandy Hook. President Obama is targeting the Second Amendment rights of law-abiding citizens instead of addressing the real underlying causes of such violence." Wayne LaPierre, executive vice president of the NRA, proclaimed, "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." All but four Republicans in the Senate voted against the legislation, and a GOP filibuster killed it.

For Obama, it was a devastating blow. He had promised to put "everything I've got" behind the gun control legislation, and it had not been enough. A second-term president coming off re-election has one chance to use the mandate that comes with victory, and Obama had nothing to show for it. His enemies now knew they could beat him, even in a Democratic-controlled Senate and even though his proposals had the strong support of the voters.

35. In 2013, Obama flew to South Africa for Nelson Mandela's funeral. He delivered a eulogy in which he said:

We know that, like South Africa, the United States had to overcome centuries of racial subjugation. As was true here, it took sacrifice – the sacrifice of countless people, known and unknown, to see the dawn of a new day. Michelle and I are the beneficiaries of that struggle ... Over 30 years ago, while I was still a student, I learned of Nelson Mandela and the struggles taking place in this beautiful land, and it stirred something in me. It woke me up to my responsibilities to others and to myself, and it set me on an improbable journey that finds me here today. And while I will always fall short of Madiba's example, he makes me want to be a better man.

Afterward, he told Ben Rhodes, who had worked with him on the speech, "That was one of my favorite speeches we've ever done."

36. After Obama was re-elected, he met with a group of presidential historians: Doris Kearns Goodwin, David McCullough, Douglas Brinkley, and others. They pointed out that the most important thing a president can do in foreign policy is to avoid making a costly error. Later, in a conversation with aides, he ran through a list of presidents who had seen their tenures defined by such mistakes: Johnson in Vietnam, Carter with Desert One, and George W. Bush in Iraq. Obama told his aides the lesson was “Don’t do stupid shit.” Later, he repeated this phrase in an off-the-record conversation with the press corps on Air Force One and referred to it as the Obama Doctrine.

37. A week before Christmas 2014, Obama walked into the White House Cabinet Room to make a stunning announcement televised worldwide. Nearly fifty-four years after the United States broke off relations with Fidel Castro’s Cuba, Obama declared that he was ordering the restoration of ties and the reopening of an embassy in Havana in a dramatic act intended to sweep aside one of the last vestiges of the Cold War. The surprise decision capped eighteen months of secret negotiations between the two countries, talks in which Pope Francis had been a crucial intermediary. (The American president and the pontiff were so simpatico on social justice issues that some referred to him as “Obama’s Pope.”) Obama and his family visited Cuba for three days in March 2016, making him the first sitting president to visit the island since Calvin Coolidge in 1928.

38. Obama provided leadership to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate, which produced the 2015 Paris Agreement, a commitment by 197 nations to reduce global carbon emissions and limit the global rise in temperature to below two degrees Celsius. Also, Obama finalized a “Clean Power Plant Plan” in 2015 through new EPA regulations, setting the first-ever carbon pollution standards for existing power plants.

In 2017, President Donald Trump signed an executive order mandating that the EPA review the plan and withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Agreement. Trump appointed EPA administrator Scott Pruitt announced the formal process to repeal the Clean Power Plan would begin on October 10, 2017.

39. In 2015, Obama led six nations in reaching an agreement with Iran that required the country to end its nuclear weapons program and submit to rigorous International Atomic Energy Agency inspections in exchange for lifting global economic sanctions. The deal – which resulted from first toughening sanctions against Iran – also blocked Iran’s pathway to building a bomb, slowing down the development time for a weapon from three months to one year if Iran were to break its commitments. Donald Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Iran nuclear deal.

40. In Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, a young white supremacist armed with a .45-caliber Glock pistol murdered nine innocent people during a Bible study group at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Obama went to the church and eulogized the victims, saying, “For too long, we’ve been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present. Perhaps we see that now. ... Perhaps it causes us to examine what we’re doing to cause some of our children to hate.”

As Obama neared the end of his prepared text, he described the dignity of the victims, the grace in their lives that he believed could heal the hate in America. “If we can tap that grace,” he said, “everything can change. Amazing grace. Amazing grace.” Then, unexpectedly, Obama began to sing the old hymn, and the audience joined him:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

41. On March 16, 2016, Obama nominated Merrick Garland for Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court to succeed Antonin Scalia, who had died one month earlier. At the time of his nomination, Garland was the chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit. This vacancy arose during Obama’s final year as president. Hours after Scalia’s death was announced, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said he would consider any appointment by the sitting president to be null and void. He said the next Supreme Court justice should be chosen by the next president—to be elected later that year. Senate Democrats criticized the move as being unprecedented. They argued there was sufficient time to vote on a nominee before the election.

Scalia’s death brought about an unusual, but not unprecedented, situation in which a Democratic president had the opportunity to nominate a Supreme Court justice while the Republicans controlled the

Senate. Before 2016, such a situation had last arisen in 1895, when a Republican-led Senate confirmed Democrat Grover Cleveland's nomination of Rufus Wheeler Peckham to the Court in a voice vote; conversely, in 1988, a Democratic-led Senate had confirmed Republican Ronald Reagan's nomination of Anthony Kennedy, and in 1991, a Senate held 57–43 by Democrats nevertheless confirmed Clarence Thomas. Political commentators at the time widely recognized Scalia as one of the most conservative members of the Court and noted that—while many considered Merrick Garland, a centrist, and he had been called "essentially the model, neutral judge"—a replacement less conservative than Scalia could have shifted the Court's ideological balance for many years into the future. The confirmation of Garland would have given Democratic appointees a majority on the Supreme Court for the first time since the 1970 confirmation of Harry Blackmun.

The 11 members of the Senate Judiciary Committee's Republican majority refused to conduct the hearings necessary to advance the vote to the Senate at large, and Garland's nomination expired on January 3, 2017, with the end of the 114th Congress, 293 days after it had been submitted to the Senate. This snub marked the first time since the Civil War that a nominee whose nomination had not been withdrawn had failed to receive consideration for an open seat on the Court. Obama's successor, Donald Trump (a Republican), nominated Judge Neil Gorsuch to fill the vacancy on January 31, 2017, soon after taking office.

42. Like his predecessors, Obama noted that easy issues never made it to his desk, only hard ones. It reached the point that his first chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, joked that they should move to Hawaii and open a T-shirt shack that offered only one color (white) and one size (medium) so they would never have to make another decision. It became such a running joke that during meetings on especially thorny issues with no good options, Emanuel would turn to Obama and say, "White." Obama would reply, "Medium."

Obama loved to joke about Rahm's idiosyncrasies and aggressive personality. Emanuel was notoriously profane, and the president explained to a group of people that Rahm's teenage accident in which he had lost part of his middle finger "rendered him practically mute." At a dinner, Obama described Rahm's ride on a camel during their trip to Egypt: "This is a wild animal known to bite, kick, and spit. And who knows what the camel might do?"

43. Obama published the first volume of his memoirs, *A Promised Land*, in 2020. It was a #1 *New York Times* bestseller.

44. Obama has been greatly influenced by three strong women: his mother, grandmother Toot, and Michelle. In his book *Renegades: Born in the USA*, he made the following comment about his relationships with women:

Thinking back to my mother and grandmother again, maybe it was because they were who I relied on the most and respected the most that it was natural for me to see women as my equals, as my friends, as my partners in work or play. ... And the women I found most interesting, and most attractive, were women who interested me because of how they thought.

45. Barack Obama and Joe Biden were an unlikely pair: the cool, reserved, African American, Harvard-educated law school professor and the talkative, backslapping, Irish American, career politician nearly two decades older. Biden was chosen as Obama's running mate in 2008 because his experience in the Senate (thirty-six years) counterbalanced Obama's lack of experience on the national stage.

The partnership did not start well because Obama was put off by Biden's loquacious, gaffe-prone style during the 2008 general election campaign. However, once they were in office, Obama came to appreciate Biden's strengths: his ability to work with members of Congress, his willingness to "stir the pot" during internal discussions on foreign policy matters, and his fundamental decency. And Biden, who initially bristled at the idea of serving as junior partner to a newcomer nineteen years his junior, came to appreciate Obama's place at the top of the partnership. "It's the right order," Biden said later. By their second term together, the two men had forged a real bond, and the president, in an uncharacteristically emotional moment, told his vice president, "Joe, you are my brother." Just days before their tenure ended, Obama surprised Biden by bestowing on him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, with the additional honor of "with distinction," the only time he did so as president.

See the next page for a list of references.

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