

**Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*
Crown Publishers: New York, 2006
384pp, \$55
Reviewed by Andrew Leigh**

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Political betting markets have a surprisingly good track record of predicting election results. Four months ago, Barack Obama was rated a 1 in 50 chance of winning the 2008 Democratic Presidential nomination. Only elected to the United States Senate in 2004, many talked about Obama as a potential presidential candidate in 2012 or 2016.

But with an October appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey show* and the cover of *Time Magazine*, Obama is rising at a positively meteoric rate. At the time of writing, the betting markets put his odds of winning the 2008 Democratic Presidential nomination at 1 in 5: ahead of heavyweights John Edwards and Al Gore, and second only to Hilary Clinton.

The chief reason for Obama's recent rise is almost as surprising as the rise itself. He has written a very good book. In a world where most politicians produce books the way recalcitrant university students write essays (with copious clichés, and help from invisible friends), a feisty political manuscript is a rare find.

What marks Obama's book is not only that the voice is so clearly his own. It is his lightness of touch with America's weightiest issues. He is at his best on race, pointing out his own diverse racial origins: "the child of a black man and a white woman ... with a sister who's half Indonesian... and a brother-in-law and niece of Chinese descent, with some blood relatives who resemble Margaret Thatcher", as the basis for his view that "There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America – there's the United States of America".

With a less deft touch, this appeal to inclusiveness could sound insipid. In a nation where blacks are three times as likely as whites to be living in poverty, politicians cannot simply deal with diversity by suggesting that we all ignore skin colour. As the only African-American in the 100-member US Senate, Obama reminds the reader of the "petty slights" that the average black American man endures: "security guards tailing me as I shop in department stores, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet, police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason". Describing a visit to Google's headquarters in Mountain View, California, he notes in passing that none of the new employees appeared to be black or Latino. Yet he recognises too that "white guilt has largely exhausted itself in America", and advocates replacing programs that help only minorities with a combination of universal social policies and better enforcement of civil rights laws.

Ultimately, what sets apart Obama's position on racial issues is his appeal to hope. Reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln's hope-filled appeal to "the better angels of our nature", Obama insists that: "What is remarkable is not the number of minorities who have failed to climb into the middle class but the number who succeeded against the odds; not the anger and bitterness that parents of colour have transmitted to their children but the degree to which such emotions have ebbed."

With optimism comes a strong streak of decency. Obama argues his political positions with passion, but also with a sense that his side has no monopoly on truth. Democratic audiences, he writes "are often surprised when I tell them that I don't consider George Bush a bad man, and that I assume he and members of his Administration are trying to do what they think is best for the country". He is sceptical of shills for the right (such as polemicist Ann Coulter) and the left (such as the Daily Kos blog). An opponent of intervention in Iraq from the beginning, Obama is honest about his own internal struggles about troop withdrawal, and troubled by the growing undercurrent of international isolationism building within the Democratic Party.

The section of the book that says most about Obama's perspective on partisanship is his account of an email he received from a doctor who opposed abortion. The doctor was troubled by a statement on Obama's campaign website which promised (in standard Democratic boilerplate) that he would fight "right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman's right to choose". The doctor congratulated Obama on winning the Democratic Party nomination for the Senate, and went on:

I also sense that you are a fair-minded person with a high regard for reason... Whatever your convictions, if you truly believe that those who oppose abortion are all ideologues driven by perverse desires to inflict suffering upon women, then you, in my judgment, are not fair-minded. ... I do not ask at this point that you oppose abortion, only that you speak about this issue in fair-minded words.

"The next day", Obama writes, "I circulated the email to my staff and had the language on my website changed to state in clear but simple terms my prochoice position. And that night, before I went to bed, I said a prayer of my own – that I might extend the same presumption of good faith to others that the doctor had extended to me."

As a former constitutional law lecturer at the University of Chicago, it is little wonder that Obama is at his best when discussing legal topics. On affirmative action, democratic deliberation, and the role of the Founding Fathers in perpetuating slavery, the prose skips effortlessly along. Elsewhere, dusty policy proposals are leavened with an anecdote – a visit to Dodge Elementary School accompanies his call for teacher merit pay; stories about working families end with a call to boost the Earned Income Tax Credit; a heart-rending account of a steelworker whose son needed a liver transplant leads into proposals for universal health insurance.

Obama also has an ability to discuss inequality in terms that sound neither dry nor confrontational. Inequality, he writes, "will mean a nation even more stratified

economically and socially than it currently is: one in which an increasingly prosperous knowledge class, living in exclusive enclaves, will be able to purchase whatever they want on the marketplace – private schools, private health care, private security, and private jets – while a growing number of their fellow citizens are consigned to low-paying service jobs, vulnerable to dislocation, pressed to work longer hours, dependent on an underfunded, overburdened, and underperforming public sector for their health care, their retirement, and their children’s educations.”

Like the mostly absent father who was the subject of his 1995 book (*Dreams from My Father*), Obama is a splendid storyteller. Even so, the book’s attempt to meld the personal and the political sometimes falls short. For example, an account of how he and his wife Michelle have taken occasional days off work to be with their children segues abruptly: “Fifty-seven percent of American workers don’t have that luxury.”

At times, electoral necessities elbow good arguments off the page. Any Democrat who wants to become President will find him or herself seeking the endorsement of protectionist trade unions. After several sensible pages discussing the problems of trade barriers, Obama admits he voted against the Central American Free Trade Agreement, though he acknowledges that the agreement would have helped poor nations export their way out of poverty. An impassioned section on the need to make America less dependent on foreign oil ends not with the simple, effective and politically suicidal proposal to raise the tax rate on gasoline, but with piecemeal suggestions on encouraging alternative energy production. But for an ambitious sitting politician, the book is remarkably candid.

If Obama hopes to be a serious contender for the Presidency, he will face a few challenges. One is his name. If it wasn’t enough that his surname is only a consonant away from the mastermind of the September 11 attacks, there is the fact that Obama’s middle name is Hussein. Will middle-America really vote for a man called Barack Hussein Obama to be the commander-in-chief of their armed forces?

Another challenge will be Obama’s candour about his past life. In *Dreams from My Father*, he wrote that in his youth, “Pot had helped, and booze; maybe a little blow when you could afford it” (“blow” is street slang for cocaine). How will US voters react to a man whose father was a Kenyan big man, and whose step-father is an Indonesian Muslim? What will they make of the suggestion that his grandparents left Texas in part because of their discomfort with small-town racism?

The rational part of me thinks that these kinks will probably derail the Obama train. When the barrage of attack ads begins (as it surely will), Obama is going to need more than appeals to decency and unity. But after you turn the last page of his book, it’s hard not to hope that Obama’s audacity will somehow inspire the best of America.

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