

SUMMARY

THE AUDACITY OF HOPE

BARACK OBAMA



Summary of The Audacity of Hope by Barack Obama

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Part autobiography, part political manifesto, *The Audacity of Hope* is about Barack Obama's views on how we can heal America's political divide.

Introduction	5
Politicians Are Unwilling To Compromise	6
Money In Politics Prevents Politicians From Doing Their Job	9
Globalization	11
A Fair Distribution	12
The Role of Religion	13
Government and Equality	14
Poverty and the Inner City	16
Education and Childcare	17
Wars of Ideas	18
Final Summary	19



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Introduction

The Audacity of Hope isn't your usual politician autobiography, written by some nameless ghost writer with no actual substance. It's Obama's genuine account of his life, from his early experiences as a mixed race child raised by a single mother, to his education and early political career, The Audacity of Hope uses his life story as a vehicle to discuss the political issues of the time, many of which are still prevalent issues today.

For Obama the goal seems to be to find commonality among diametrically opposed political movements. To find the modern positions and middle grounds on issues like military spending, foreign policy, abortion, and health care. He also focuses heavily on the need to get money out of politics and how ultimately regardless of their preferred political party Americans have more in common than they do differences.

The biggest thing we all have in common is a love and desire for freedom. And freedom, Obama argues, can only be secured and guaranteed if power is decentralized, and if we all stand united by upholding shared values in equal opportunity, community, and equal treatment regardless of race, gender, or religion.

Politicians Are Unwilling To Compromise

In this chapter, Obama alternates an account of the unusual campaign that ultimately resulted in his election as the junior Illinois senator with a discussion of the factors that have fostered an atmosphere of severe partisan division in Washington. He notes that according to his own observations, as well as the accounts offered by veteran lawmakers, Congress was not always as intractably divided as it is today. Obama contends that in the past, lawmakers were more willing to overlook their differences in the service of compromise and the public good, and that intra-party working relationships were more apt to be characterized by decorum, collegiality, and genuine fellow-feeling. As such, Obama disagrees with the conventional wisdom that Democrats need to develop a more coherent stance against their Republican opponents. Rather, he contends that the public has long grown weary of partisan rancor. In order to begin to win back the trust and admiration of the American people, Obama exhorts his Democratic colleagues to focus on a strategy of reconciliation and cooperation with their Republican counterparts, while remaining true to the core ideals of the party.

Obama begins the book by recounting his election as a junior senator and his experience with the intensely divisive culture in Congress. He describes how older longtime politicians told him that in the past cooperation and compromise were much more highly valued, and that there was much more emphasis placed on treating one another with respect and maintaining a professional decorum. He argues that today the public has gotten sick of the petty fighting among senators and representatives and that the way to move forward isn't for Democrats to stand in united opposition to Republicans but to focus on finding common ground and learning to compromise without giving up their core political ideals.

He also argues however that the Republican Party is currently cultivating a culture devoid of empathy. That as a country we don't care about the weakest among us and conservatives don't practice their supposedly

Christian values. For Republicans everyone should just be out for themselves, interested only in their own selfish pursuits and not in working together as a country to create a better collective future.

He asks what kind of country would you want to live in, if you didn't know who you'd be born to. If you knew you might be born in the poverty stricken inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago, or the dirt poor rural Appalachians.

“I believe a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society. After all if they are like us, then their struggles are our own. If we fail to help we diminish ourselves.”

This plays into his first point, that Republicans and Democrats might work together more if they just considered the possibility that their opponents weren't evil or stupid. That maybe they have valid views. And that we'd all be better off if we took more time to try and put ourselves in other people's shoes and treat others how we wish to be treated.

“Mainly, though, the Democratic Party has become the party of reaction. In reaction to a war that is ill conceived, we appear suspicious of all military action. In reaction to those who proclaim the market can cure all ills, we resist efforts to use market principles to tackle pressing problems. In reaction to religious overreach, we equate tolerance with secularism, and forfeit the moral language that would help infuse our policies with a larger meaning. We lose elections and hope for the courts to foil Republican plans. We lost the courts and wait for a White House scandal.

And increasingly we feel the need to match the Republican right in stridency and hardball tactics. The accepted wisdom that drives many advocacy groups and Democratic activists these days goes like this: The Republican Party has been able to consistently win elections not by expanding its base but by vilifying Democrats, driving wedges into the electorate, energizing its right wing, and disciplining those who stray from

the party line. If the Democrats ever want to get back into power, then they will have to take up the same approach.

...Ultimately, though, I believe any attempt by Democrats to pursue a more sharply partisan and ideological strategy misapprehends the moment we're in. I am convinced that whenever we exaggerate or demonize, oversimplify or overstate our case, we lose. Whenever we dumb down the political debate, we lose. For it's precisely the pursuit of ideological purity, the rigid orthodoxy and the sheer predictability of our current political debate, that keeps us from finding new ways to meet the challenges we face as a country. It's what keeps us locked in "either/or" thinking: the notion that we can have only big government or no government; the assumption that we must either tolerate forty-six million without health insurance or embrace "socialized medicine". It is such doctrinaire thinking and stark partisanship that have turned Americans off of politics. ”

Money In Politics Prevents Politicians From Doing Their Job

Obama argues that even though far too many politicians do engage in bribery, corruption, and basic selfish greed, the reason politicians don't remain faithful to their values and their constituents is bigger than that. That because of 24 hour cable news and the internet, politicians are under unprecedented scrutiny in which even the slightest gaffe or most innocuous action can be turned into a controversy. For instance in the 2004 presidential primary Democratic candidate Howard Dean had his whole campaign thrown off course because news channels decided to focus on an odd sounding excited yell he made at a rally. Portraying him as a fool and a joke simply for having a moment of enthusiasm and effectively ending his chances.

He argues that this is one of the big reasons for the absurd divisiveness between the parties and that a government can't function without collaboration.

The other issue that hampers the ability of politicians to effectively do their jobs is the issue of money in politics, particularly in election campaigns.

Campaigns are expensive, getting elected and reelected are expensive. Because of this politicians find themselves in a position where they need to take money from wealthy donors just to compete with the other politicians that take money from healthy donors. When you spend all your time around wealthy business leaders and high paid lobbyists though you lose perspective about what the lives and needs of ordinary citizens are like.

And you become beholden to the interests of those wealthy donors. They won't give your campaign money if you don't do what they want, so you have to do what they want in order to get elected.

Obama's solution is to have publicly funded elections and campaigns along with free TV time.

Globalization

From NAFTA to TPP globalism has completely transformed the economic landscape. While it has allowed for cheap goods and resources to travel across borders it has also devastated the working class.

While the US is still dominant in the tech, aerospace, and finance industries, traditional blue collar jobs have disappeared and as a country we haven't done anything to help retrain the dispossessed workers.

It's impossible for American manufacturers to compete with countries like China that can pay their workers literal pennies, so American corporations have been all too happy to outsource jobs, and reduce wages and benefits for American workers in exchange for huge profits.

And while the wealth of the top 1% has ballooned to the highest levels it's ever been, real wages for middle and working class Americans haven't risen in 40 years, despite the cost of living always going up.

Workers produce the goods and services that companies are getting rich off of thanks to globalism, but the rewards aren't being distributed among the actual workers.

A Fair Distribution

The underlying ethos of the US is that of The American Dream. The idea that purely through hard work and ability anyone can become affluent and successful.

Maybe this was once true, but today our country has not upheld it's promise, the American Dream for most people simply isn't possible anymore. The rich have become obscenely wealthy, with the overwhelming majority of gains in the economy going to the top 1%, whilst everyone else has actively become poorer.

This is aided by the Republican Party, who have become the party of the rich, seeking only to lower taxes for the wealthy, and move regulations on corporations, while also trying to cut the few social security nets Americans have, namely Social Security and Medicare/Medicaid.

They believe that those who do the most work deserve the least benefit, whereas those who benefit the most are those who do very little work but become disgustingly wealthy simply by owning stock or real estate. Money makes them more money, while they themselves create nothing.

The Role of Religion

“We think of faith as a source of comfort and understanding but find our expressions of faith sowing division; we believe ourselves to be a tolerant people even as racial, religious, and cultural tensions roil the landscape. And instead of resolving these tensions or mediating these conflicts, our politics fans them, exploits them, and drives us further apart.”

Obama moves away from the topic of inequality and back towards the topic of division. He notes that the Republican Party has become inextricably linked to Christianity, whereas the Democratic Party has become increasingly and openly hostile to religion. Obama considered himself an atheist in his youth, and describes his path to becoming a religious man, and how he believes religious faith strengthens moral convictions. He argues that many issues he sees in his hometown of Chicago, such as gang violence, are the result of a lack of strong moral guidance that religion provides.

He argues that the Democratic Party is losing touch with the average voter, because while affluent urban progressives may be irreligious, polls show that a large majority of Americans consider themselves religious, with most of them being some sort of Christian. And so the Democrats must reconnect with religious traditions if they want to stay relevant with the average voter.

However he cautions against the sort of government endorsement of Christianity that Republicans champion, Obama being a strong believer in the constitution and the separation of church and state established in the First Amendment. And so while it's necessary for Democratic politicians to be connected to the beliefs of the average American, they must also champion and respect the secular nature of our government, and the right of all religions, as well as irreligion, to exist and be respected in the US.

Government and Equality

One of the main sources of America's strength is that it is a melting pot. Inviting the poor and huddled masses of the world to come here and breathe free, and embracing the different ways of thinking and living that they bring with them.

So much of American culture is the result of the confluence of immigrants from all over the world. The mashing of cultures from Italy, England, Africa, Sweden, Germany, Ireland, China, Mexico, and more.

And it's for this reason that Obama advises people to remember where they came from and not feel anger or fear or suspicion about immigrants from Mexico or Central and South America, nor immigrants from the Middle East. If we truly believe in America then we also must believe that everyone is created equally, no matter where they are from or what they look like.

“Moreover, I believe that part of America's genius has always been its ability to absorb newcomers, to forge a national identity out of the disparate lot that arrived on our shores. In this we've been aided by a Constitution that--despite being marred by the original sin of slavery--has at its very core the ideas of equal citizenship under the laws; and an economic system that, more than any other, has offered opportunity to all comers, regardless of status or title or rank.”

However minorities still don't always get a fair deal in the US. The black community, as well as the hispanic community, both only make about 3/4ths of what white Americans are paid. And so despite the suspicion and unpopularity often associated with things like “affirmative action”, Obama argues that we need laws to protect minorities from negative biases when it comes to jobs, mortgages, and business loans. Not because he believes in equality of outcome, but because the US isn't currently providing equality of opportunity.

So scholarships, diversity hires, and so on are necessary to right the historic wrongs that still affect us all. He also points out the benefits these provide to the rest of us. How many Einstein's are there in the inner city whose genius we never benefit from because they were never given the opportunity to thrive?

Poverty and the Inner City

The crime and despair of the American inner city may seem unsolvable, but ultimately they are socio-economic issues. Poverty creates desperation and a lack of support structures. A lack of support structures lead to poorly adjusted adults, desperation leads to crime. Crime and poorly adjusted adults like to violence.

People in the US tend to respond to the issue emotionally. They demand tougher policing, they demand cutting social spending, these are emotional reactions, not logical ones.

Logical reactions would be to fix the underlying causes of these issues. To properly fund schools, to provide cheap or free professional childcare, to provide access to universities, to introduce more job opportunities, to make contraceptives free and easily accessible.

It's a myth that people are out on street corners selling drugs because they want to be, most drug dealers make below minimum wage. They are out there because they have no other opportunities.

With the same support structures and opportunities as affluent parts of the country, inner cities could have their violent crime problem eliminated within a generation. People are the same all over, they just want security, the opportunity to thrive, and to be treated with respect and human dignity.

Education and Childcare

Polls have consistently shown that one of the greatest concerns in the US is the breakdown of the family. People are very worried about divorce rates and children being raised without both of their parents.

And with many single parents, or households where both parents work, children are forced to spend more and more time alone, and parents often can't afford adequate childcare.

Inner city neighborhoods in particular are disproportionately full of single-parent households. We can't claim to be a country that values the family unit if we're not willing to help parents raise their children effectively.

Crime and poverty will only reproduce themselves if we don't offer poor kids from single parent households the same opportunities and resources as kids from wealthy households with both parents. Thus if we're actually going to be the country we pretend to be, we need to offer cheap or free childcare and higher education.

Wars of Ideas

We call it the war on terrorism without understanding the absurdity of the phrase. Terrorism is a tactic, it's not a country or a singular organization. How can you fight and "defeat" a military tactic? What would that even mean?

After 9/11 we as a country did no self-reflection. We never took a minute to try and ask why this group of a few hundred people would want to attack us. We just blindly ramped up military spending and invaded two countries, one of which didn't even have anything to do with the attacks.

And in doing so we only increased the level of hatred towards the United States. We guaranteed more terrorism would occur as we killed hundreds of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani civilians.

We're trying to fight ideas and ideologies as though they're countries, using 20th century notions of nation-states and wars. But you can't fight ideas with bullets. You can't accuse other groups of crimes against humanity while you also kill scores of innocent people.

Much like crime, the only way to genuinely address the issue of terrorism is to address it's causes, and those causes are much more nuanced and complicated that "they hate us for our freedom".

Final Summary

“the broader question of shared values—the standards and principles that the majority of Americans deem important in their lives, and in the life of the country—should be the heart of our politics,”

Ultimately *The Audacity of Hope* was the opening of Obama’s 2008 presidential run, but it underscores his broader core belief that the biggest problems America faces are due to Americans not being willing to see humanity in one another.



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