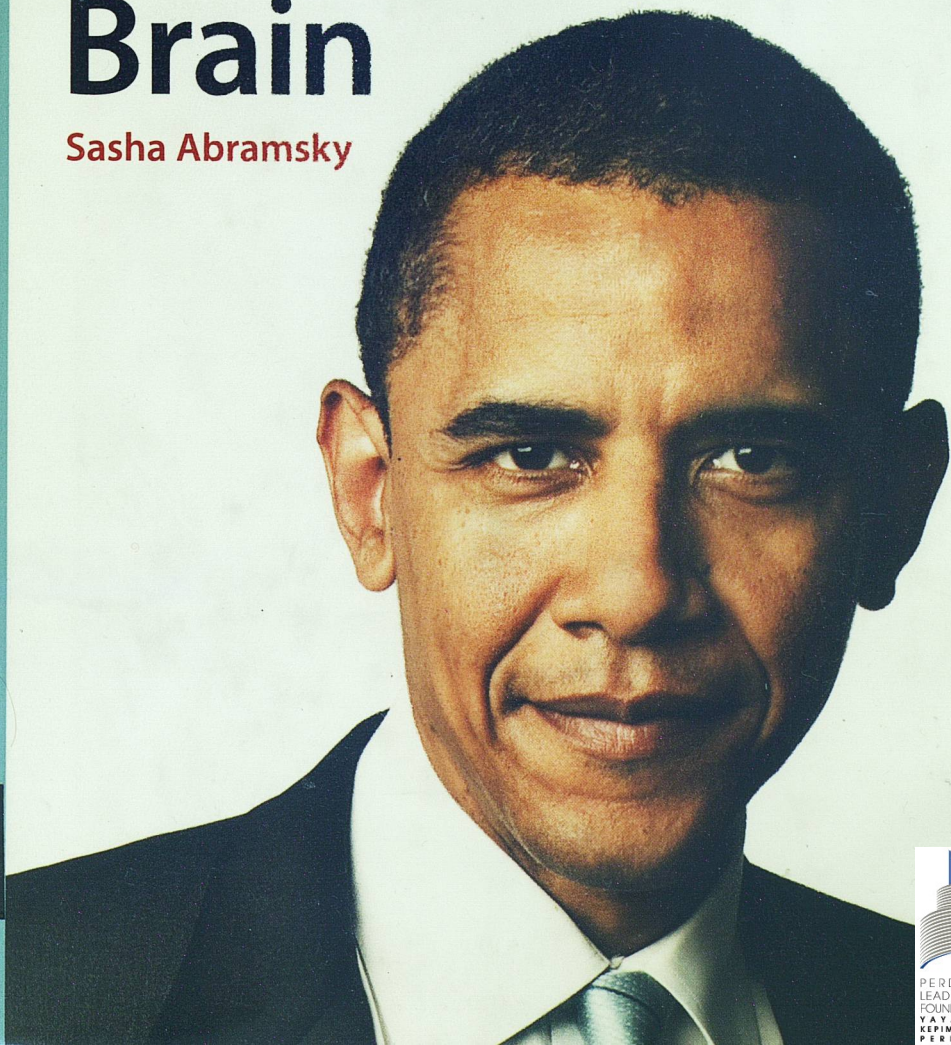


Inside Obama's Brain

Sasha Abramsky



"Never has the world needed strong and wise American leadership more than it does now. Abramsky's eminently readable description of Obama's personal gifts makes it clear that he is remarkably suited to be the president the moment requires."

**—Former New York Governor
Mario M. Cuomo**

From the moment he burst onto the national scene, Barack Obama has fascinated people more than any politician in decades. Many biographers have already retold his story, but no other book truly explains how his mind works, what passions drive him, or what makes him such an effective leader.

This concise profile explores the ideas, inspirations, and experiences that have shaped the president. It quotes a wide network of sources, including many who broke long-standing vows of silence to offer their candid and surprising observations.

Award-winning journalist Sasha Abramsky interviewed close to one hundred of Obama's current and former friends, colleagues, classmates, teachers, staff, mentors, basketball buddies, fellow Chicago activists, media consultants, editors, and even his next-door neighbors from Hyde Park. These people each know pieces of Obama's

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SASHA ABRAMSKY

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To Sofia and Leo
May every good dream come true.



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INSIDE OBAMA'S BRAIN



INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE STAGE

On a cold, windy, winter's day, Barack Obama looked down from his podium at the base of the Lincoln Memorial and surveyed the crowd. Even by Obama-mania standards, it was enormous. Hundreds of thousands of people were packed into the open spaces of the National Mall. They had traveled from all across the United States to be in the nation's capital. Many had journeyed from overseas. They had come, bundled up against the chill, to watch, and to listen to, history unfold.

This gathering, a star-studded musical extravaganza on the last Sunday of George W. Bush's presidency, was a prelude. Two days later Obama was going to be inaugurated as the country's forty-fourth president. Standing directly in front of the great stone statue of a seated Abraham Lincoln, three flags planted on either side of him, Obama, as he had done so many times during the election campaign, let his words soar skyward. "As I prepare to assume the presidency," he declared, his tone deep and



sonorous, “yours are the voices I will take with me every day I walk into that Oval Office—the voices of men and women who have different stories but hold common hopes; who ask only for what was promised us as Americans—that we might make of our lives what we will and see our children climb higher than we did. It is this thread that binds us together in common effort; that runs through every memorial on this mall; that connects us to all those who struggled and sacrificed and stood here before.”

Washington's monuments loom large in American pageantry. They bring the past to life, or rather our visions of the past. Thus was inauguration organizer Emmett Beliveau's decision to go beyond mere parades and brass bands and to put together a top-talent concert at the Lincoln Memorial two days before the swearing-in ceremony intended as a conscious nod to a noble heritage. It was designed to signify renewal—or, if you think more in marketing terms, a rebranding—of America; a reclaiming of destiny; a sense of the American ideal, contained within the original founding documents, finally within reach of being realized. It was meant to summon the ghosts of generations past to this new cause. Abolitionists. Suffragettes. Nineteen-thirties trade unionists. Second World War GIs. Civil rights protesters.

The concert was supposed to redefine who and what constituted America, from the opening piece, Aaron Copland's majestic “Lincoln Portrait,” through to the finale, eighty-nine-year-old Pete Seeger, backed by Bruce Springsteen, singing the full-length infused-with-radicalism version of “This Land Is Your I
There was the imagery, projected on huge screens above



podium and along the mall, and reproduced on millions of television screens around the world, of ordinary workers doing their jobs throughout the land. There was the visual tribute to the African American singer Marian Anderson, denied permission to sing in Washington in the late 1930s by the Daughters of the American Revolution, brought to perform on the Mall afterward at the invitation of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. *The America of the recent past, the program might have read, the country that lavished wealth and attention on the few while neglecting the needs and stories of the many, is being ushered out today. Welcome to the unveiling of a new-model America. Welcome to a new beginning.*

Something transformative had occurred in the national conversation through the long primary campaign and then the presidential election season leading up to November 4, through the long weeks preceding the inauguration, and then during the inauguration festivities themselves. Catalyzed by the person and words of Obama, America, collectively, engaged in a discourse, around race and around identity, around national visions of progress and community, that has likely forever altered the country's own self-image as well as the image of the United States seen by the rest of the world. The Sunday after the election, *New York Times* journalist Michael Sokolove, reporting on Levittown, Pennsylvania, voters' overwhelming support for Obama, wrote that "the nation was transformed on Tuesday but what had to occur first was the transformation of individual voters."¹

Over a period of months, millions of those voters had

confronted their own prejudices, their own sets of expectations as to what a “real” American was; and, come Election Day, they decided they could, after all, vote for a black man who had built a political career out of listening to ordinary people tell the stories of their lives. The excitement of crowds not just in America but around the world that night was, at least in part, an excitement born of the realization that what it meant to be an American had forever changed.

Such moments occur rarely in a nation’s history. And when they do, the people behind them inevitably become the focus of our intense attention. While we might not want to literally explore the contours of Barack Obama’s brain, we do very much, as a culture, want to understand how that brain works, what passions animate the forty-fourth president, what ideas and which individuals inhabit the mental recesses of this enigmatic figure. That’s why Obama’s every move is so obsessively scrutinized. *What sort of dog will he buy for his daughters? What kind of mental anguish did he go through before deciding to release the “torture memos” from the Bush era?* At the press conference commemorating his first one hundred days in office, an enterprising *New York Times* reporter even asked the president what experiences he had found “most enchanting” during his three-plus months as occupant of the White House.

In a very real way, we want answered the question “what makes Obama tick?” That core question is what *Inside Obama’s Brain* sets out to answer. To do so, one has to ask a host of smaller questions: How does he approach problems? What ideological theories make up his political credo? How c



communicate with friends and foes? How do his many skills play out in his chosen fields, the worlds of writing, organizing, law, and politics? And why is it that so many people not just in the United States but around the world are so seduced—and so willing to be seduced—by his words and his presence?

The responses, provided by relatives, friends, and colleagues from the many layers of Obama's extraordinary life, and by his own words—put forth in his books and essays, in media interviews spanning more than a decade, and in numerous campaign speeches and political meetings—reveal the complexity of a man who has become something of a mythical figure in his own lifetime.

In his place in the country's history, President Obama is, in many ways, a successor figure to Martin Luther King Jr. and his vision of a beloved community moving America away from its divided, segregated past; he is the lead member of what *New Yorker* editor David Remnick and others have termed the Joshua Generation—the generation of highly educated, professionally employed African Americans provided not only with a sense of possibility by those who came before (the so-called Moses Generation, who broke down the legal structures of segregation) but also with a powerful sense of mission and obligation.

To supporters and critics alike, Obama is seen as a once-in-a-lifetime charismatic leader. To his more extreme critics from the conservative fringe—die-hards convinced that he is a Manchurian candidate with a covert plan to undermine the American way of life—in seeking to claim the driver's seat within



the Joshua Generation, Obama has shown himself to be a man of messianic pretensions with a naive following almost religious in its fervor. To at least some of his supporters, he exhibits the rare power to shift the tectonic plates of history through the sheer force of his will—without apparent irony, Oprah Winfrey introduced him to huge crowds as “the One.” In an open letter to the victorious candidate written immediately after the election, the author Alice Walker wrote that he was “a balm for the weary warriors of hope, previously only sung about.” His position as one of American history’s most charismatic figures presents a great paradox, since for much of Obama’s early career, he warned against community movements built around the magnetic presence of individuals. An overreliance on charisma, he believed, was ultimately why Chicago’s first African American mayor, Harold Washington, a man whose photo hung on a wall of his office while he was a state senator, failed to create a movement capable of outliving him.

A messiah? A prophet? A redeemer? These are not labels to be worn—or rejected—lightly. Yet at least implicitly, however over-the-top such appellations are, they float around President Obama constantly.

And so in January 2009 Barack Obama arrived in the White House with almost impossibly high hopes surrounding him and his administration. In some ways, people expect of him what South Africans expected of Nelson Mandela in 1994: the ability to wave a wand and usher in a harmonious Golden Age. Behind Obama’s campaign, behind his rhetoric, behind his election



has always been both the burden and the promise of history; and it is a burden and promise that Obama himself is keenly aware of. “This is your victory,” Obama told a huge crowd in Chicago’s Grant Park minutes after the presidential race had been declared in his favor. Looking out on the crying, jubilant multitudes, with press reports flowing in from around the country of crowds spontaneously taking to the streets in cities large and small, it must have appeared to the president-elect as if he were watching America’s own velvet revolution unfold in front of his eyes. “I know you didn’t do this just to win an election, and I know you didn’t do it for me. You did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead. For even as we celebrate tonight, we know the challenges that tomorrow will bring are the greatest of our lifetime—two wars, a planet in peril, the worst financial crisis in a century.”²

Obama’s can be no ordinary presidency. Simply by virtue of who he is, simply by virtue of the historical legacy carved by his campaign and his election, he has changed America and created the expectations for more changes—both institutional restructuring in the face of economic collapse and also psychological shifts in how America understands itself.

How will Obama use this extraordinary appetite for change to reshape the United States? *Inside Obama’s Brain*, through exploring the basic motivating ideas, the central hopes and fears and dreams of America’s forty-fourth president, chronicles the likely road ahead.



In many ways, Obama's moment is a business story almost as much as it is a striking political drama. Jerry Kellman, Obama's first and most influential mentor in the world of Chicago community organizing, always viewed the writings of management guru Peter Drucker as being as applicable to the world of organizing and of grassroots politics as to business. When he was training Obama, he oftentimes carried Drucker's books into their meetings. Drucker believed that successful modern corporations were horizontal organizations, with knowledge widely distributed throughout the workforce. It was a vision not too different from that the community organizers had of effective, democratic political structures. For Kellman, Drucker's words were revelations. "Who's your market? What's of value to them?" he would ask his young organizers. "Those are universal questions when you're trying to get a job done."³

By 2007–8, America as an entity, a giant corporation, to use a company analogy, was failing: Its workforce was deeply unhappy, and its management was dysfunctional—incapable of analyzing hard information dispassionately and without an ideological lens, unable to communicate effectively to its workers and with other corporations (countries). Candidate Obama's challenge was to convince a majority of shareholders—*voters*—that his management model was better; and in doing so, he presented lessons not just to the world of politics, but, almost as important, to the world of business. President Obama's every decision, at least in the early years of his administration, will take place against the backdrop of a business climate bleaker than any since the Great Depression.



In explaining how President Obama thinks and communicates, this is a book not simply for policy buffs but for anyone interested in group cultures, be they political or corporate. In an era in which distrust of the excesses of big business and the greed of many executives runs rampant, Obama's methods and his techniques for rebuilding bonds of trust between citizens and government will likely be studied by CEOs as avidly as by politics junkies.

Inside Obama's Brain is not a biography—many have been written; many more will be in the years ahead. This book is not among them. Nor is it a political history—the story of the campaign has already been told, the story of Obama's administration cannot properly be told until he has had more time to govern. Writing in the winter and early spring of 2009, my words would likely be horribly dated by the time they reach the bookstores six months later. Moreover, while Barack Obama now walks the halls of power, and does so with tremendous ease, he did not grow up surrounded by powerful people; nor did he spend most of his adult life in such settings. "Most of my good friends are not in politics and are not in the political world," Obama told *Newsweek* reporter Daren Briscoe in May 2008.⁴ To understand Obama the man, rather than Obama the myth, I believe one has to step away from Washington, D.C., and talk to the men and women who knew him in his other environs: in Honolulu, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Cambridge.

And so, rather than an inside-the-Beltway scoop, a series of filtered interviews with today's Masters of the Universe, my boo



is intended as a psychological profile writ large, a peeling back of the veneer, a look into the mind of a man who now sits atop the peak of power. The first seven chapters are more about the interior workings of his mind; the last three about his public political persona and the ways in which that persona has been molded over the decades by his unique set of experiences and expectations. My attempt is to understand his motivations and his methods and in so doing to help my readers grasp the significance of Barack Obama's election to the presidency during a moment of profound national crisis and the likely changes that election presages for America's broader sense of self.

While I have covered campaign rallies at which Obama has spoken, I have not met the president one-on-one. During the reporting for this book, I contacted both the Transitional Team Press Office and then, after the inauguration, the White House Press Office repeatedly, requesting interviews with Barack and Michelle Obama, with members of the president's extended family, and with senior staffers. While the requests were never turned down, they were never approved, either. They were instead put into limbo, housed in what I can only assume to be a file marked "irritating: to be dealt with at an indeterminate time in the future." Each time I phoned back or e-mailed, I was told the requests were being processed or that they had been shunted up the chain of command. My guess is the president's handlers hoped the project would simply go away.

I do not minimize this omission. And yet Obama's li



in many ways, so publicly accessible—he has written so much, spoken in so many places, been interviewed so extensively—that most of the questions I would have posed to him directly were answerable, even without my meeting Obama, through referencing the president's own words.

Obama has been writing and speaking his own legacy into the history books since he was a young man. Of all the public figures of his generation, he is clearly the master communicator. He has also proven himself to be its dominant political strategist, a young man who seized the opportunities that presented themselves and rode them, at great speed, to the White House. His presence and his accomplishments invite historical comparisons, some made by third-party observers, to Franklin Roosevelt, to John Kennedy—others, in particular the Lincoln comparison, consciously cultivated by Barack Obama himself.

The nation's forty-fourth president invokes Abraham Lincoln so frequently not because the sixteenth president was a pure idealist—for much of his career, as he explicitly declared in his first inaugural address, he was willing to preserve the institution of slavery if such preservation would peaceably keep intact the Union—but because Lincoln's words, often soaring in their delivery, and actions cumulatively paved the way for a new imagining of America's innate possibilities. However pragmatic Lincoln's initial motivations, history conspired to make him the Great Emancipator; and in so doing it made him the nineteenth

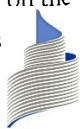


century's greatest spokesman for the American Dream, the man whose stone image would stand sentinel over King as he uttered the words of his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 and over Barack Obama as he addressed the audience at his preinauguration concert on January 18, 2009.

In recent years, the American Dream had seemed increasingly beleaguered. The gap between rich and poor had grown to levels not seen since the 1920s; millions of families had either lost their homes to foreclosures or depleted their life savings in desperate bids to keep their properties as variable interest rates kicked in and home values plummeted; and international goodwill toward America, long taken as a given by the American public, had all but evaporated.

In the two-year saga of the primary season and presidential campaign, Barack Obama had to convince an increasingly battered people first, that the system wasn't so rigged as to be impervious to the popular will; and second, that enough people *should* feel empowered to actually change things that, collectively, their votes *could* actually change things and kick-start a moribund dream once more.

That's where his community organizing skills and the language of self-help he perfected in Chicago in the 1980s came in handy. "How do you include the excluded in this country?" Obama asked his audience at a roundtable on community organizing held in the Windy City in 1990. "How do you get people who are on the outside of the mainstream into the mainstream? And als



do you get that mainstream to change through that process, to get rich and examine itself and remake itself?”⁵

These were questions the grand theorists of community organizing had been posing for decades. “Where do ordinary people . . . gain the courage, the self-confidence, and above all the hope to take action in their own behalf?” Harry Boyte, founder and codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, and his wife, Sara Evans, a history professor at the university, asked in their 1986 book *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America*.⁶ “What are the structures of support, the resources, and the experience that generate the capacity and the inspiration to challenge ‘the way things are’ and imagine a different world?” Free spaces, the authors declared, “are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue.”⁷

For Obama in 2008, the challenge—and the opportunity—was to re-create the United States itself as a Free Space writ large. “People need to be involved in shaping their own destinies. You don’t make change from inside the status quo,” remarked Marshall Ganz, a Harvard University Kennedy School lecturer in public policy and longtime grassroots organizer, who would serve as head of the Obama campaign’s Civic Engagement Subcommittee in 2008.⁸ “You have to build a new constituency with which to make change.” Doing so would involve not just an election win based around a series of smart strategies and a dose of



old-fashioned luck, but a profound shift in the American psyche, in the understanding of what good governance and civic engagement could make possible.

The Yale University political scientist Stephen Skowronek, author of *Politics Presidents Make: Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton*, has a theory about the preconditions needed for transformative presidents to emerge. The awful and the great seem to come in pairs in American history, Skowronek believes. Quite simply, Obama couldn't have emerged had not George Bush's discredited presidency made the country willing to take a great leap into the unknown to get out of the morass left by the forty-third president and his team.

Transformative presidencies emerge out of the ashes of a previous method of governance, out of the collapse of a set of governing principles and dominant economic ideas. "A transformational president is one who comes to power at a time when what has been for many years if not decades the received commitments of ideology and the interests of the federal government have been indicted and bankrupted and failed," Skowronek argues.⁹ Such men have always managed both to look forward and, in a nod to the disorganization and chaos of their moment, to cast a nostalgic glance backward to better days now gone, to mythic American values and first principles now threatened. "It's always a rediscovery of fundamental values."

Obama fits this mold. He is both a radical and, in some way true conservative; he talks both of reaffirming America's or



social compact—which, as a constitutional lawyer, he has studied in depth—and at the same time implementing sweeping changes to move the country into new territory both economically and socially.

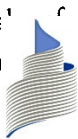
The day after the election, I posted a piece on the *Huffington Post* in which I put forward my opinion that Obama's election had, in a sense, taken the country forward in time through a wormhole—bringing political events that we might have expected in the distant future within reach of the present—that it represented a huge leap in the way in which the country approached both race relations and policy discussion. Many people responded to my essay, but the words of one blogger, in particular, caught my attention. In declaring the election a moment that moved us forward in time, I had missed half of the story, my anonymous correspondent argued. The other half was that it had also taken us backward just over forty years, back to the months before Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy were killed. Imagine what America might have looked like, what it might have become, the writer suggested, if King had lived to push his vision not just in the South but across the country, if RFK had become president and had used the full force of the government to really tackle the country's social problems. Imagine if the last third of the American century and the first eight years of the next had not been dominated by endless culture wars, scandals, political bickering, and an economic philosophy that ended up begging tens of millions of hardworking Americans.

In a profound way, the presidential election result of Nov-



ember 4, 2008, began the job of repairing a ripped historical fabric. When Obama stresses the dignity of work or reaches back to Lincoln through symbolic gestures such as swearing the oath of office on the Bible sworn on by the nation's sixteenth president, he is asking his audience to imagine they live in a country once again defined by basic, salt-of-the-earth, core values. Those values might always have been more mythic than real, or at least more complex than we paint them today as having been; but, as Obama, a bestselling memoirist, understands all too well, sometimes the stories we tell about ourselves, the narratives we weave out of the raw material of our experiences, are as important as the actual realities we live. "History's a funny muse," explains Rice University and CBS News historian Douglas Brinkley. "People can go shopping for what they want."¹⁰

Sure, Lincoln, for much of his career, reluctantly accepted the institution of slavery. Sure, unlike Obama—who by all indications has a picture-postcard family and near-seamless relationship with his wife, Michelle, and daughters, Malia and Sasha—Lincoln had a notoriously troubled personal life. Sure, Lincoln was emotionally unstable and prone to profound depressions, while Obama fashions himself as "No Drama Obama," but for all of that, the myth of a Lincoln resurrection, of a twenty-first-century reincarnation of the man who saved the Union, is too potent to willingly punch holes in. Thus while Obama, a keen student of history, is surely aware of the limits of the comparison, he also knows the value of that comparison and uses it to the full. "It is that fundan



belief, it is that fundamental belief—I am my brother’s keeper, I am my sister’s keeper—that makes this country work,” Obama told his spellbound audience at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, on July 27, 2004. “It’s what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, and yet still come together as one American family: ‘E pluribus unum,’ out of many, one.”

For Obama’s close friend and political confidant Cassandra Butts, Obama became during the election season something of a cultural Rorschach test.¹¹ People saw in him what they wanted to see in their broader community—they invested in his person hopes they had dared not even articulate in recent decades.

That’s why, in his inauguration speech, when talking of the “gathering clouds and raging storms” of our era, Obama can call on people to serve, to sacrifice, and not be either ignored, like Bush, or despised as a mealy-mouthed naysayer, like Jimmy Carter. *Do so*, he tells his audience, *and I’ll lead you, you’ll lead yourself to better times ahead*. No B.S., no cajoling. *We’re all adults*, he implies, *you can trust me because I’ll give it to you as I see it*. In a less gifted communicator, this would lead to bitterness, to recrimination; with Obama it leads to a sense of national camaraderie. Even many of his political opponents end up wanting him to succeed.

In an era in which America seemed to have been brought low by political partisanship and growing economic and cultural divides, Obama promised unity. His polyglot identity and his boundlessly self-confident rhetoric seemed to offer a way out of the dead ends old-school politicians had driven the country

