

A Promised Land (Barack Obama)

A Promised Land by Barack Obama is a memoir reflecting on his political journey, presidency, and vision for America.

PREFACE

After leaving the presidency, Obama and Michelle embarked on a well-deserved rest, reflecting on the eight turbulent but fulfilling years in office. Obama started writing this book with the intent to provide an honest account of his presidency, not merely to document events but to delve into the political, economic, and cultural dynamics that defined his tenure. He aspired to grant readers a glimpse behind the presidential veil, presenting the office as a job filled with both triumphs and challenges, aiming to demystify the role and the governmental apparatus. Through this narrative, Obama also sought to inspire future generations by sharing the personal journey that led him to a life of public service, one that began with a quest for identity and belonging and culminated in finding a purpose larger than himself.

Initially planned as a single volume, the complexity of his experiences and the depth of explanation required for the context of his decisions led to a much longer manuscript, eventually necessitating a division into two volumes. This expansion was partly due to Obama's refusal to reduce the richness of his presidency to footnotes or to simplify the narrative at the expense of nuance. Instead, he wanted to convey the texture of presidential life, from consequential policy discussions to intimate moments and the impact of historical events and personal encounters on his decisions.

As Obama worked on the book, the unfolding of significant national crises such as a global pandemic, economic turmoil, and social unrest over racial injustice underscored the continued relevance of the themes he explored, particularly the enduring contest over America's identity and democratic values. This context of division and crisis further heightened the importance of his narrative, aiming to contribute to the national discourse on democracy, governance, and the collective journey towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

CHAPTER 1

reading in my bare-bones apartment—felt like luxury compared to the grind of organizing. While others were easily distracted by pickup basketball games or pub crawls, I had gotten the carousing out of my system, and could afford the discipline of spurning social engagements for an evening spent poring over case law. And after three years of confronting bosses and bureaucrats and irate citizens who cared little for nuance or complexity, the Socratic method held no fears for me; stand in a classroom and explain why a seminal case should have been decided differently? No problem. I found myself gravitating toward constitutional law, relishing the debates over judicial philosophy, federalism, civil liberties. It was a way to engage with the foundational issues of the Republic without getting my hands dirty or compromising my ideals. It suited the part of me that was a thinker rather than a doer. But I also had an ulterior motive. I noticed that wherever I went—restaurants, classrooms, parties—whenever somebody learned that I'd been an organizer in Chicago, I got a respectful nod. And whenever they learned that I had decided to go to law

school, I got an approving nod. That's smart, they'd say, as if to suggest that whatever role I ultimately chose for myself, I would be equipped to handle it. That I would be a force to be reckoned with.

Not that going to law school made me any less restless. Beyond my formal studies, I spent a lot of time thinking about how the law interfaces with real life—how legal outcomes, even when technically correct, could nonetheless leave people feeling the system was rigged; how what seemed fair in abstract principles could be experienced as oppressive by those it affected. I joined a law firm one summer to help with a voting rights case, and although the work we did was valuable, the rhythms and rewards of corporate life felt stifling. My second summer, I worked at a small civil rights firm, but even there the male partners all wore braces and Ferragamo shoes, seeming to mirror the habits of their corporate counterparts.

Toward the end of law school, misgivings about choosing public life over organizing kept worming their way into my head. They buzzed loudest the spring of my first year, when I attended a series of symposiums on public interest law. Panel after panel, seasoned practitioners spoke about their efforts to improve the legal system, protect the environment, advance social justice. It should have been inspiring; instead it depressed me. Despite their determination, most were able to point to few lasting victories. It seemed like they were always playing defense, preserving the gains of the past rather than charting bold new courses. And when I looked around the auditorium, I realized that I was one of the few Black people there.

Which raised the question of whether I was further distancing myself from the community I cared most about.

It was about that time that I received a small inheritance from an aunt who had passed away in Kenya, someone I'd never met. Seizing the opportunity to clear my head, I took the money and traveled to Europe for the summer, landing on impulse in Spain, where I knew no one and could pretend to be just another tourist. For weeks, I wandered through Barcelona, then along the Costa Brava and into the Pyrenees, carrying a backpack and a dog-eared copy of Don Quixote, soaking in the beauty and the history and the late-night meals, letting everything wash over me like the end of a fever dream.

I took roadside buses to small villages, watching the old men gather in the town square each evening, as if in a ritual dating back to the Middle Ages. I stood in courtyards outside of cathedrals, listening to the laughter of children playing as their parents spoke in animated tones, a reminder of a time before America, before the frontier or the telegraph or the automobile, when life was lived in one place, a community's rhythms dictated by the seasons and the sense of belonging conferred by ancient walls.

I wondered whether such depth of history brought comfort, or whether it wore on the citizens like a weight. I was too shy to ask; instead I watched, and read, and lost myself in the sweep of someone else's narrative, marveling at a world that had existed long before I was born and would go on long after I was gone.

But despite my efforts to blend into the scenery, sooner or later someone invariably recognized that I was foreign, and upon learning I was American, would express opinions: about NATO or the death penalty or, invariably, race. "It is true—

Colonel Gaddafi is popular among your Blacks?" "I have heard that the KKK is very powerful in America, yes?" Often there was genuine curiosity behind the questions, but I sensed a gulf between us, a skepticism of my responses or perhaps of America's place in the world. It was less judgmental than it was a tad patronizing, and I found myself getting irritated, then defensive. I couldn't bring myself to deny the truth of the critiques, but I also found myself wanting to explain the other side of the story, the

possibility and dynamism and real freedom I had experienced back home.

I realized that despite my best efforts, no real distance existed between me and my country. I had finally come to understand what it meant to be patriot, to love a place not because it was perfect but because it was yours.

I came back from Europe more determined than ever to do something meaningful, to apply the lessons I'd learned as an organizer but on a broader stage. What form that would take—the law, politics, some combination thereof—I still didn't know. And to my surprise, a public performance of sorts would end up lending a hand.

Sometime during my second year at law school, on a lark, I had applied to be president of the Harvard Law Review. The position was considered prestigious, the top student job, although to be honest it struck me as a bit of an anachronism, a nod to the cachet of yesterday's elite. More than a century old and said to be the most cited law journal in the world, the Harvard Law Review had always been edited by a student president and an elected board of editors, all chosen through a process that emphasized grades and the production of a publishable "note"—a piece of legal scholarship.

The election of the president was an especially elaborate affair, the candidates subjected to a full day of interviews, culminating in a big meeting where each living editor (a few hundred in all) got to vote. It was, quite literally, white shoe: evidence of a time when most of the candidates—indeed most lawyers of any note—would have come from the same narrow class background. Caucus rooms would be filled with smoke as rival factions hashed out their support. Deals would be cut, and loyalties would be tested.

The process had evolved somewhat by the late 1980s—the smoke was gone, and the girls were allowed to run—but it remained a deeply politicized, secretive, bare-knuckled business. Nobody expected a Black guy named Barack Obama to end up in the mix.

But over the course of my first two years, I had earned good grades, and my intellectual curiosity, along with a certain diplomatic bent, had allowed me to build bridges between the various cliques that made up the social landscape at Harvard: the Alpha Dogs who'd gone to the best prep schools and expected to run the world; the Grind Crew, the students who felt out of their element, less affluent than their peers and who therefore refused to play the glad-handing game, choosing instead to bust their hump; the Wonky Woke, the public interest types who envisioned themselves defending indigent clients or saving the northern spotted owl; and the Mean Reds, mostly women, some of color, determined to call out any vestige of patriarchy or racism or general stupidity—and to make the faculty and administration just a little bit miserable for the fact of their being mostly white, male, and presumed to be complacent.

The fact that I had friends in each camp continued to surprise me. And when I was nominated for president, what began as a lark turned serious. For two weeks, I went through the ringer—interviews that lasted hours, candidate forums that verged on attack ads, days when I didn't bother going to class or even eating much because I was so consumed by the process.

The long day of voting came and went. I got back to my apartment late, cooked some spaghetti, and waited as a couple of my closest supporters tested the joint I had bought for the occasion. They had been holed up in the caucus room and now lay exhausted on my bed while I paced the floor; we expected results to be called in to my landline any minute. The phone rang.

"Barack?" a voice said. "Congratulations, man. It's over... You're the new president of the Harvard Law Review."

Over the course of the subsequent year, I'd learn more about politics—the art of

managing egos, the almost-endless meetings, the delicate ballet of courting contributors—than from any classroom or textbook. I became a public figure, at least in the world of legal education, interviewed by national papers and news programs, recognized by strangers on the street. I received multiple job offers from prestigious law firms as well as letters from across the country, some of them looking for legal advice, others asking me to run for public office—the presidency included—as if I were already a full-fledged political commodity.

I had arrived. A star was born.

Except...when I look back at it all now, at the excitement and the attention and the fact that I had put my name forward in the first place, I see clearly that I was motivated by something more than just the chance to guide a student publication. I liked the idea of being on stage, of being seen. Deep down, I suppose I found the idea alluring—being a somebody. For a Black kid who never felt like he quite belonged, the opportunity felt intoxicating, a validation of all my outsider hopes, a counter to all my inherited fears.

Steve Jobs would reportedly ask job candidates whether they wanted to be a sidekick or if they wanted to make their own distinctive dent in the universe. If he'd asked me back when I was running for the law review presidency, I would have pretended I didn't care that much. But the truth? I wanted to make a dent.

Maybe that's true for anyone with ambition, anyone who senses the sweep of history and wonders if they might have a place in it. Maybe a certain megalomania is a prerequisite, just as it takes a certain delusion to sit down and start writing a book, or to stand under blinding lights and ask for people's votes, or to think that despite our smallness in the universe, God has a plan for us, individually.

Of course, most of the time we disguise these grand ambitions, if not from others then from ourselves. We clothe them in gauzy

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CHAPTER 22

Protection Bureau, we'd created an agency with the express mission of shielding folks from the predatory loans, hidden fees, and deceptive practices that had become all too common among certain lenders and pushers of financial products.

Perhaps most satisfying of all, we'd managed to get Dodd-Frank passed in the face of unanimous, or near-unanimous, opposition from Wall Street's most powerful institutions and the lobbying groups that represented them—a reminder that, no matter how formidable an opponent might seem, it was possible to stand up to entrenched interests and win.

I felt a swell of pride as I joined Chris and Barney, Elizabeth Warren, and members of my economic team for the bill-signing. According to the press, though, the victory came with an asterisk. The weeks of negotiations had stripped the reform of its most potent provisions, the critics said; the banks had gotten off easy. Others warned that our new regs would hamper America's competitiveness, implying that we had somehow undermined the dynamism of the world's largest economy.

Never mind that Dodd-Frank was a significant step in our steady efforts to clean up the mess we'd inherited and protect the country from future abuse. Or that, having stabilized the economy, expanded healthcare to millions who didn't have it, and now enacted Wall Street reforms, my administration was amassing a record of progressive achievement unmatched in recent memory.

Instead, with the economy still stuck in low gear, an unemployment rate hovering above 9 percent, and a midterm election looming, the prevailing narrative in the summer of 2010 was simple:

Obama was in over his head.

CHAPTER 13

The chapter features President Obama's reflections on the eve of his inauguration, focusing first on the seemingly minor yet symbolically significant preparation for his role as commander in chief, emphasizing the importance of properly executing a military salute. This detail underscores the gravity and nuances of assuming presidential responsibilities, particularly in national security. Denis McDonough, a loyal and hardworking staff member, emerges as a pivotal figure in not only preparing Obama for the presidency but also representing the dedication and intricate challenges that define the administration's internal dynamics and the complex geopolitical landscape.

Obama delves into the philosophical and practical dimensions of safeguarding American security, discussing the diverse array of threats and predicaments facing the United States. He reflects on the historical context of American defense strategy, the Cold War's enduring impact, and the nuanced view he brought to the presidency, influenced by his unique background and global perspective. This is juxtaposed with the expectations and responsibilities imposed on him, highlighting the internal debates and decision-making processes surrounding military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Particular attention is given to the nuanced details of foreign policy and national security deliberations, notably the considered approach to troop deployments in Afghanistan and the strategic recalibration required due to shifting global dynamics. Obama's narrative weaves through the intricate realities of war, the sacrifices of military personnel, and the profound personal impact of visiting wounded soldiers, presenting a somber reflection on the costs of conflict and the ethical burdens of leadership.

The latter portion of the chapter shifts towards international relations, detailing Obama's efforts to manage the global financial crisis. It outlines the strategic imperatives and challenges of galvanizing international cooperation, emphasizing the importance of U.S. leadership in navigating complex global economic dynamics. Through his interactions with world leaders and the symbolism of presidential travel, Obama underscores America's pivotal role in shaping the post-World War II international order, reflecting on both the achievements and limitations of U.S. influence.

Overall, the chapter presents a multifaceted narrative, combining personal reflections, political insights, and strategic considerations to elucidate the profound complexities and ethical dilemmas inherent in presidential leadership, particularly in the realms of national security and global diplomacy.

CHAPTER 11

and Specter had led to a watered-down package that wouldn't sufficiently stimulate the economy. Inside the White House, we knew both claims were bunk: We had done everything possible to accommodate reasonable GOP proposals, and the final bill, while not perfect, contained plenty of firepower to spur economic activity. But perceptions mattered, and the early negative framing put us in a hole from which we'd struggle to emerge.

Moreover, having expended so much energy on the Recovery Act, we now had precious little room to maneuver on other pressing items on our agenda. Rahm and my policy teams were already flagging issues that needed immediate attention: the auto industry was teetering on the brink of collapse, millions were still

losing their homes to foreclosure, the crisis in banking was far from resolved, and that was to say nothing of non-economic priorities like healthcare reform, immigration, and climate change.

All of this made the Recovery Act feel less like a victory and more like the end of the beginning. There was so much more work to do, not just to pull the country back from the brink, but to rebuild it stronger than before. And already, it was clear that almost every step of the way, we'd be fighting against a relentless tide of obstruction, misinformation, and outright hostility.

Despite these concerns, though, I clung to a fundamental faith in our strategy and in the American people. The Recovery Act was a bold first step toward addressing the immediate crisis while laying the groundwork for a more robust, equitable economy. We had the right team in place, and although the political headwinds were fierce, I believed that results—jobs created, families helped, industries saved—would eventually speak for themselves.

Still, as the Beast rolled towards the airport and I gazed out the window at the passing Rockies, I couldn't shake off a sense of unease. This was only the beginning, and the road ahead was fraught with challenges I could barely begin to imagine. But for better or worse, there was no turning back now. The die was cast, and the fate of my presidency, and potentially the country, rested on what we did next.

CHAPTER 18

Chapter 18 delves into the author's evolving comfort and proficiency in his role as commander in chief, particularly as it relates to foreign policy, national security, and military responsibilities. The chapter begins with reflections on the author's acclimatization to the daily Presidential Daily Briefing (PDB), interactions with military personnel, and the somber routine of signing condolence letters to families of fallen service members. The narrative then shifts to explore the author's working relationship with Secretary of Defense Bob Gates, highlighting their shared commitment to the troops and national security, despite differences in approach and background.

A significant portion of the chapter centers on the complex challenges and policy debates surrounding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The author provides a detailed account of the decision-making process that led to the surge of troops in Afghanistan, underscored by continuous consultations with military and defense advisors, including Generals Stanley McChrystal and David Petraeus, as well as internal debates among the administration's key figures. This section underscores the inherent tensions between military strategies, political considerations, and the overarching goal of achieving stability and peace in conflict zones.

The chapter further discusses an unexpected personal highlight — receiving the Nobel Peace Prize — juxtaposed against the backdrop of ongoing military conflicts. This award prompts the author to meditate on the paradoxes of war and peace, the sacrifices of service members, and the broader implications for American foreign policy.

Overall, Chapter 18 offers a nuanced insight into the burdens and complexities of presidential leadership in times of war, the painstaking process of strategic decision-making in national security, and the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by a commander in chief. The narrative is punctuated with personal reflections on duty, the weight of decisions affecting military personnel, and the quest for a balance between military engagement and the pursuit of peace.

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This condensed chapter follows Barack Obama's personal and political journey, woven with rich anecdotes and pivotal moments. It starts with Obama's family background, highlighting his grandparents' roots and activities during World War II, and his parents' multicultural backgrounds. His mother, Ann Dunham, a woman of curiosity and skepticism about absolutes, profoundly influenced him with her understanding of the world's complexity. The narrative then transitions to Barack Obama's life experiences, ranging from personal milestones, such as his marriage to Michelle Obama and the joy of raising their daughters, to professional achievements, including his early political rallies and successful campaign for the U.S. Senate in 2004.

Obama's electoral journey captures the essence of grassroots campaigning, the significance of his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, and the family's adaptation to his political life. Notably, his Senate work, marked by notable collaborations and legislative endeavors, transitions smoothly into his Presidential campaign launched in 2007. Throughout, Obama reflects on the weight of the hopes placed upon him and the challenges of living up to his supporters' expectations.

The narrative escalates with Obama's historic presidency, highlighting key foreign and domestic policy initiatives, significant legislation like the Affordable Care Act, and intimate moments within the White House. His reflections on leadership, personal anecdotes with global leaders, and the challenges faced, such as the Deepwater Horizon disaster, illustrate the breadth of his presidency. Particularly moving are his interactions with military personnel and families, underscoring the personal toll of warfare and the duty of acknowledgment by a Commander in Chief.

Obama's story is not merely a political chronicle but a personal recount of family, laughter, and the occasional solitude amidst a tumultuous political landscape. It ends on a reflective note, with Obama contemplating his legacy, the impact of his presidency on young people worldwide, and the ongoing responsibility embedded in his Nobel Peace Prize. Throughout this chapter, Obama's narrative is one of introspection, responsibility, and a relentless quest for impactful leadership, against the backdrop of an ever-evolving personal and political journey.

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7 recounts the significant upswing in Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign following key endorsements from Caroline and Ted Kennedy, which appeared to symbolize a passing of the liberal torch and injected the campaign with a composition of optimism akin to the Kennedy era. Moreover, despite formidable challenges, particularly on Super Tuesday, strategic grassroots efforts in less populated caucus states, such as Idaho, resulted in a series of wins that bolstered delegate counts substantially against Hillary Clinton. Technology's growing role in the campaign signified a new era of political engagement, though Obama also reflects on its double-edged nature in politics.

Obama's recounting moves into a deeper, reflective narration on race in America, invoked by citing W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness." The personal challenge of navigating his identity amidst national scrutiny becomes evident with the controversies around his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, and charged accusations casting doubts on his patriotism and "American-ness." The backlash against his and Michelle's perceived identities underscores the campaign's recurrent theme of battling and bridging deeply entrenched racial and social divides.

His narrative further unfolds the complexities of running a large-scale, historic campaign. Evolving from intimate connections with staff and volunteers to accommodate the demanding security protocols that isolated him from spontaneous public engagement, Obama details the literal and metaphorical barriers that shape a presidential candidate's world. Despite the security, the enthusiastic public receptions energized his resolve, even as he grappled with the weight of their expectations against the backdrop of political stratagems

and personal sacrifices.

Obama's recount of internal campaign reflections and decisions reveals a potent mixture of strategy, idealism, and pragmatic politics. The chapter masterfully intertwines tales of political victories, personal anecdotes illustrating the racial dynamics of his candidacy, and the novel challenges of campaigning in the digital age. It concludes with the contemplative moments before the final primaries, balancing the tension of an uncertain future with the camaraderie and hope that propelled his groundbreaking campaign forward.

CHAPTER 17

By the end of July 2009, the healthcare bill had passed through all relevant House committees, with the Senate Health and Education Committee also completing its work. The challenge remained to get the bill through Senate Finance Committee chaired by Max Baucus. Despite efforts to expedite, Baucus sought a bipartisan bill, delaying progress amid increasing Republican opposition and strategic narratives of a government healthcare takeover. Significant conservative opposition, notably from Senator Jim DeMint, spotlighted the bill's potential to significantly impact Obama's presidency. Efforts to court moderate Senate Republicans like Grassley and Snowe through compromises met with limited success. Tensions over strategy and delays were palpable, leading to a direct confrontation over the need to expedite the bill's passage.

With the Senate and House recess, Obama utilized the time for public engagements, blending his healthcare advocacy with family trips. Despite the attempts at public engagement, the healthcare initiative faced intense scrutiny and opposition, notably during the "Tea Party summer," with protests and widespread media coverage painting the healthcare efforts negatively.

The passage of healthcare legislation through various committees and intense negotiations underscored the political and strategic complexities of achieving significant healthcare reform. Opposition from Republicans was staunch, with strategic communications aiming to derail the initiative by leveraging public fear and skepticism. Despite these challenges, the commitment to healthcare reforms remained unwavering, with strategic and personal efforts directed towards navigating the political landscape to realize healthcare reform.

CHAPTER 15

Elie, he barely spoke of his war experiences, let alone his part in the liberation of Buchenwald, though Elie also told me that he hugged him the first time they met, and that Charlie had tears in his eyes as he thanked him for helping to keep his story alive. I shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the numerous genteel, white-haired ladies and gentlemen, and as I did, it struck me how much of the twentieth century's history they embodied, how many cataclysms and triumphs had been compressed into their lifetimes. They had survived the Depression and won the biggest of all wars; rebuilt Europe and contained Soviet expansions; put a man on the moon; witnessed Vietnam and Watergate, the Berlin Wall's rise and fall; seen the emergence of a digital age that had transformed every aspect of life. Through it all, despite all the arguments and mistakes, the miscalculations and corruptions and heartbreaking failures that constituted the folly of human endeavor, these men and women had managed to maintain a faith in the idea of America—a faith that we could, imperfectly but steadily, make ourselves new, that the future was ours to imagine and to build. President Sarkozy introduced me, and taking the podium, I tried to capture that sense of relentless optimism. I spoke of how at each juncture, despite unimaginable losses, America's promise had somehow prevailed, sustained by the sacrifices the people in that audience and their fellow countrymen had made, and how it fell to my

generation, and to Tess and me, to ensure we were worthy of that inheritance. After the speech, I made my way down to Omaha Beach, the bishop's hat-shaped landmark where American soldiers had spilled out of landing craft into a hail of machine gun and artillery fire. The tide was out now, the beach deserted except for a small contingent of Secret Service and military personnel skylining themselves against the bluff above. I stopped to pick up a handful of the coarse sand, letting it filter through my fingers. Then I walked a good distance, finding a quiet spot where I could kneel and say a prayer. A prayer for all who had fought and died on those beaches and in the surrounding fields and towns. A prayer for their families back home. A prayer for a broke and weary world.

As I stood back up, Reggie took a picture, one that captures perhaps as well as anything my feelings during my time in office. The look on my face is not one of triumph. I'm not smiling. Instead, the photo shows a man humbled by history's scope, who feels eagerly aware of his own small place in it. A man who's thinking that in spite of all the immediate challenges—the policy battles and political uproar that had come to define my presidency and that would undoubtedly continue to do so—this was always the privilege of the job: bearing witness to the sweep of human progress and taking up my own small part in that saga, the work of striving to align what was with what might be.

CHAPTER 8

nothing to say—besides the catchphrases and slanders ginned up by the McCain campaign. Her ignorance, irresponsibility, and meanness would have been freshly disqualifying in any previous election cycle. Not in 2008.

Conservatives embraced her with an ardor that bordered on the religious. Liberals treated her with a combination of fascination and horror. More than anything, it seemed as if both sides had decided she was less a political figure than a cultural one—a symbol of working-class authenticity or small-town narrow-mindedness, feminism's promise or its demise, depending on where you stood.

Neither interpretation captured the complexities of Sarah Palin's character or explained the puzzle of her ascendancy. Beneath her charm and youthful energy, I saw someone who embodied the most basest tendencies in our politics: a kind of blind

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confidence that masqueraded as competence, the desire to win at all costs despite the societal damage, and an utter lack of interest or capacity for self-reflection. More to the point, her nomination wasn't really about her. It was driven by the same passions that would later fuel the Tea Party and the Trump presidency: a politics grounded not in logic, evidence, or even the always fungible tenets of conservative ideology, but in resentment — resentment of cultural and economic change, immigrant hordes, and liberal elites who suggested that white Americans acknowledge their country's sins and make amends.

McCain's selection of Palin as his running mate was a Hail Mary pass, one that would have long-term consequences for the Republican Party and the country. It accelerated its embrace of conspiracy theories, science denial, and dog-whistle racism. These trends would reach their nadir in Trump's presidency, but they had begun long before—a deep and widening chasm fed by social media, partisan news, and the multiplier effect of grievance.

I remembered the voters I'd met throughout the campaign—struggling families in

towns upended by globalization, young people looking for a toehold in a tough job market, parents terrified that one medical emergency could mean financial ruin. Their worries were real, even if the solutions offered by Palin and, later, by others like her were not. That so many Americans felt unseen or unheard—that they would choose a politics of spectacle and confrontation, of us vs. them, to have their say—was as much an indictment of each of us, of the institutions we represent, and of the ways we did business, as it was of any political figure.

The stakes of the election crystallized in those weeks after the conventions. Despite the theatrics, or perhaps because of them, it was clear that what we were fighting for was not just a set of policies, but a vision of what America could be: inclusive, forward-looking, resilient.

It was this vision that drew hundreds of thousands of volunteers to our campaign, that allowed us to raise record-setting sums from small donors, that filled stadiums with supporters in every corner of the country. It was why people of every race, religion, and economic status queued for hours to cast their vote, why I believed we were on the right side of history.

So despite the noise, the distractions, and the occasional doubts, I remained focused on the work at hand, on the people we aimed to serve, and on the future we still could make—together.

CHAPTER 12

more equitable and just. For now, it was enough to know that we'd averted disaster. That I could look in the mirror each evening and honestly say I'd done my best. That I was ready for whatever came next.

CHAPTER 3

After experiencing a political defeat, Barack Obama took time to reevaluate his priorities, benefitting both his personal life and career. He dedicated himself more to his family, celebrating the arrival of his second daughter, Sasha, and achieving a work-life balance that momentarily shifted him away from the political limelight. This period allowed him to cherish fatherhood and consider alternative career paths outside politics.

However, Obama couldn't detach himself from the political arena, spurred by the opportunity to influence redistricting in Illinois and by insights gained from engaging with communities across the state. These experiences reinforced his belief in a politics that could bridge America's diverse divides, leading him to decide against exiting the political scene. He recognized a statewide office, specifically the U.S. Senate, as a more suitable platform for his aspirations to foster unity and address broader issues.

Launching a U.S. Senate campaign amid skepticism, Obama embarked on a journey marked by meticulous planning, substantial financial requirements, and significant personal sacrifices. Despite doubts, including from his wife, Michelle, his campaign gained momentum, culminating in a decisive victory that thrust him into the national spotlight and reshaped their family life.

Obama's first year in the Senate was a period of learning and adjustment, characterized by his focus on diligent service and commitment to bipartisan cooperation, exemplified by his work with Dick Lugar on nuclear nonproliferation. However, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and a visit to Iraq profoundly impacted him, highlighting the limitations of legislative power in addressing immediate crises and systemic issues. This realization fueled his growing impatience with the Senate's pace and the magnitude of change he could effect within its confines.

CHAPTER 9

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CHAPTER 23

November 2, 2010—I knew we were headed for a bad night. I watched the returns come in from the Treaty Room, my usual election-night perch, Valerie and Axe and Gibbs with me. It was not the bloodbath that some had predicted—thank you, consistency!—but as the evening wore on, it was clear that we were losing the House of Representatives. By the time I went to bed, Republicans had picked up at least sixty-three seats, more than enough for a majority.

To say I was discouraged would be an understatement. Yes, we had managed to hold on to the Senate, but just barely, losing six seats to end up with a slim fifty-three-to-forty-seven majority. And while we'd picked up a few governorships in key states, the Republicans' gains were widespread and deep, giving them full control of at least twenty-one state legislatures.

As I lay awake in the early hours of November 3, running through what I could have done differently, what my administration might have accomplished if we'd had two more years with Democrats in control of Congress—how much more difficult it was going to be to move any part of our agenda forward—I couldn't shake the feeling that I had let down millions of Americans who had invested their hopes in me. And there was no getting around the harsh truth: With Republicans now running the House, and their leaders apparently determined to oppose and obstruct our ideas at every turn, it was going to be a long, tough slog to the end of my first term.

The next day, I stood before the cameras in the East Room to address the election results. Reporters seemed to take satisfaction in pointing out that we'd experienced a "shellacking." I didn't blame them; that's how it felt to me too. I acknowledged the anger and frustration that voters had expressed, and I took responsibility for not doing a good enough job in delivering the changes they had hoped for. I spoke about the need for both parties to find common ground, to work together in the best interests of the American people.

It all sounded reasonable enough. Yet as I fielded questions, I had to work not to let my frustration show. Not just with the inane premise of so many questions being hurled at me—that somehow this election had been a referendum on Big Government, when it was clear to anyone who had followed these past two years closely that our biggest problem hadn't been an overabundance of government activism but rather our inability to do more to directly help ordinary people—but also with myself, for all the opportunities I felt I had squandered and all the political capital I had let slip away in the afterglow of our election, for how slow I had been to adjust to the pace of change in this hyperconnected, hyperpolarized climate. I felt as if I had reached a dead end, without a clear sense of how to move forward.

"No drama Obama," Axe would remind me whenever he saw me brooding following a setback. True to form, by the time I'd retreated to the Oval after the press conference, I had started to regain my equilibrium. Maybe we'd lost the House, but we still had the Senate; maybe progress would be slower than I would have liked, but there was still plenty that could get done—an immigration bill, perhaps, or a modest infrastructure program. Who knew? Maybe there were enough Republicans who, now that they shared governing responsibilities, would be more willing to bargain. More than anything, though, looking out the Oval's windows onto the sunlit South

Lawn, what consoled me was something Michelle had said to me not long after the election results had come in. It was what I always tell myself whenever life around the White House starts feeling a bit too heavy.

“For better or worse,” she’d said, taking my hand, her eyes bright and teasing, “we still have each other.”

Michelle always knows just what to say.

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The section concludes with an acknowledgment of the supportive roles played by Penguin Random House, particularly Markus Dohle's enthusiasm and Gina Centrello's leadership. It mentions the strategic and creative efforts of David Drake and Tina Constable at Crown for overseeing the publication's complex process with respect for the author's vision.

This chapter serves as a heartfelt tribute to the community of colleagues, collaborators, and publishing professionals whose collective endeavor brought the book to fruition, especially during the uncertain times of a pandemic.

CHAPTER 26

CHAPTER 26 SUMMARY

In Chapter 26, the narrative centers around the crucial and strategic decisions made in the Situation Room regarding the intervention in Libya. The author outlines a meticulous approach to halting Gaddafi's advances, emphasizing the importance of minimizing risks to U.S. personnel while striving to prevent a massacre in Libya. The plan involves an international collaboration, articulating a division of labor among allies, where the U.S. would take the lead in dismantling Gaddafi's air defenses, then pass the baton to European and Arab allies for the continuation of the military campaign. This strategic positioning aims not only to protect Libyan civilians but also to uphold the principle of shared responsibility in international conflicts.

In parallel with these high-stakes geopolitical manoeuvres, the author expresses personal reflections and concerns. There's a contemplation on the nature of presidency intertwined with the gravity of military decisions, highlighted by an incident involving a U.S. fighter jet crash in Libya. The contrasting scenes between managing a burgeoning international crisis and engaging in a personal, family trip to Brazil depict the multifaceted role of a leader.

The chapter also delves into domestic challenges, notably the fiscal disputes with Congress and the rise of Tea Party influence. The narrative criticizes the GOP's fiscal austerity stance as potentially disastrous given the fragile economic recovery. Furthermore, it critically assesses the political landscape, including the birther conspiracy championed by Donald Trump, and its implications on national discourse. This conspiracy is depicted not just as a political ploy but as a racially charged narrative that underscores a deep national divide. The author's reflection on reelection prospects, accompanied by an analysis of the political and economic environment, sets up a complex tableau of leadership under pressure.

The intertwining of personal, domestic, and international challenges paints a portrait of a presidency at a crossroads, navigating through crises with a blend of strategic foresight, diplomatic finesse, and personal resilience.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 begins with the author recounting frequent encounters with people convinced of his destiny to become president, both before and after contemplating a presidential run. Despite others' confidence and sometimes prophetic assurances, he harbors skepticism about destiny and divine plans, attributing more to chance and individual effort in navigating life's uncertainties.

As 2006 progresses, signs that a presidential run is feasible accumulate. Requested to keep his options open, he wavers but eventually entertains the notion, spurred by unprecedented attention and support. Various political insiders and colleagues offer encouragement and advise consideration, highlighting his unique appeal and potential to inspire a broad coalition of voters.

In conversations with senior senators and political advisors, the feasibility of a campaign is debated, with strategic and existential considerations coming to the fore. Despite other capable Democratic contenders, the author's perceived ability to energize and unite different segments of the American electorate sets him apart.

However, considerations extend beyond political strategy to personal sacrifices. His wife, Michelle, initially resistant due to the invasive nature of politics and its impact on family, becomes a crucial voice. The narrative reveals her evolution from skeptic to a cautious supporter, highlighting the complex interplay between personal relationships and political ambitions.

A pivotal moment arises during a team meeting where Michelle asks why he specifically needs to be president, prompting a reflection on the historical and symbolic significance of his potential presidency, especially for minorities and the disenfranchised. His response captures a sense of mission transcending political objectives — to inspire and transform perceptions both domestically and globally.

This chapter intertwines introspective contemplation with practical political maneuvering, illustrating the author's cautious yet deliberate journey towards embracing a path filled with both historic opportunity and personal risk. Through candid reflections and pivotal conversations, it encapsulates the weight of deciding to pursue the American presidency.

CHAPTER 10

Washington for a protest against apartheid. After a long bus ride from New York City, I had anchored outside the executive mansion's gates, marveling at its facade, the symbol of power it represented, and reflecting on how distant it seemed from the world I inhabited. Yet here I was, decades later, standing alone as its newest occupant, surrounded by the trappings of history, entrusted with the responsibility of leading the most powerful nation on Earth.

I thought about my journey—the improbable path that had led me to this place, from my unsettled youth, my time as a community organizer, my early days in politics, the hard-fought campaign trail, and all the individuals who had supported, challenged, and believed in me along the way. I considered the immense tasks that lay ahead, the decisions I would face that could alter lives and shape the world's fate. It was a moment of profound introspection, humbled by the office's weight, inspired by the trust bestowed upon me by the American people, and acutely aware of the challenges and difficult decisions that lay ahead.

As I moved through the quiet halls of the White House, readying myself for the first night in my new home, I felt a deep sense of obligation to not just the present but also the past and the future—to the countless people who had fought for justice and equal rights, those who paved the way for this very moment. The history that surrounded me was a stark reminder of the responsibilities that come with the presidency, a beacon guiding my resolve to lead with dignity, integrity, and a profound respect for the sacred trust that had been placed in my hands.

Finally, as I made my way to the private residence, I paused one last time, taking in a deep breath, bracing myself for the journey ahead. The challenges would be great, but in that moment, I felt prepared to face them with courage, guided by the wisdom of those who had walked this path before me, committed to serving my country with all the strength, empathy, and humility I could muster.

CHAPTER 14

Chapter 14 of the book opens with a behind-the-scenes look at the routine of international summits, highlighting the choreographed entrances of world leaders, the setup of the conference room, and the long hours spent listening and discussing global matters. The narrative quickly transitions to the author's personal experience at his first G20 summit in London, emphasizing his sensations of being the new participant on the global stage and his interactions with key global figures, including British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Their distinct personalities and political predilections are detailed, with Brown described as thoughtful but lackluster compared to his predecessor Tony Blair, Merkel as methodical and skeptical of emotional outbursts, and Sarkozy as driven by charm and impulse.

The discussions at the G20 summit encompass topics like the fight against protectionism, fiscal stimulus, and tackling economic crises, revealing the intricacies of international diplomacy and the challenges of reaching a consensus among diverse nations. The author acknowledges the strategic importance of BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and shares his impressions of their leaders, casting a light on the geopolitical dynamics and their bearing on global economic policies.

The narrative also delves into the author's efforts to foster cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament, specifically with Russia, underlining the complexities of U.S.-Russia relations and the strategic

considerations surrounding missile defense in Europe.

The author reflects on broader trends affecting global democracy and the rise of nationalism, highlighting his concerns about the durability of democratic values in various regions, including Europe and Turkey. An encounter with Czech dissident and former President Václav Havel provides a sobering reminder of the ongoing struggle for maintaining democratic principles and freedoms in the face of rising autocracy and nationalism.

Finally, the chapter concludes on an unexpected note, with the author learning about a contemporary piracy issue off the coast of Somalia, indicating the wide range of challenges faced by world leaders.

This chapter offers an insightful glimpse into the world of international politics, the personal dynamics among global leaders, and the myriad challenges encountered on the world stage, from economic crises to the foundational struggle for democracy and rule of law.

CHAPTER 21

agreement mixed reviews. Many environmentalists and progressive activists were disappointed, criticizing it for lacking the binding targets of the Kyoto Protocol and for not going far enough to combat climate change. European leaders were pragmatic but clearly wished for more. Developing nations were wary but somewhat mollified by the promise of financial aid for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Nonetheless, as I debriefed with my team, I knew that we'd achieved a genuine breakthrough, however imperfect. For the first time, all major emitters, including China and India, had committed to concrete, albeit voluntary, actions to cut greenhouse gases. They agreed to a mechanism for transparency that, while not as robust as I'd hoped, laid the groundwork for future negotiations. And the pledge to help poorer nations adapt to climate change was a significant step toward addressing the global nature of the problem, recognizing that those who contributed least to the problem often faced the most severe consequences.

The Copenhagen Accord was not the comprehensive solution many had hoped for. But it represented a pivotal shift in international climate politics, moving beyond the binary of developed versus developing nations and recognizing the shared, but differentiated, responsibility of all nations to address the climate crisis. It was a foundation we could build on.

Arriving back in Washington, I reflected on the whirlwind negotiations and the complex tapestry of global politics, economics, and environmental science that had underpinned them. The experience reinforced my belief in the necessity of diplomacy, patience, and, when needed, the willingness to seize the moment with a mix of boldness and pragmatism. Climate change was a relentless foe, indifferent to our political squabbles and delays. The Copenhagen Accord might not have been the victory everyone wanted, but it was a step—an imperfect but forward-moving step—toward confronting one of the most daunting challenges of our time.

CHAPTER 19

as a joke. In Putin, I recognized the same sort of men who once dominated Chicago's political machine—smart and hardworking guys who felt they'd made their way up through not just toughness but also a keen understanding of their environment and the people with whom they were dealing. Men who'd been shaped by their battles, whose worldview was grounded in a calculating realism, seeing life as a zero-sum game and politics as a series of transactions in which the end justified the means. Their knowledge of human nature in the raw—human nature as it expressed itself when money or status or power was on the line—was impressive. Yet they possessed scant

belief in any larger purpose, other than accumulating more power or enjoying the perks that power brought. As a result, there was always something a little empty about them—a sentiment that, in their more reflective moments, they recognized in themselves.

That was what I felt sitting across from Putin as he complained about not getting his respect. I felt myself growing impatient. It wasn't just that I believed his grievances were overblown or his zero-sum view of the international order was outdated. It was that I imagined how different Russia might be if he applied his obvious talent, discipline, and energy to the task of actually leading, guiding his country toward a better future, harnessing its proud history and culture, its vast territory and natural resources, the talents of its people, toward improving their lives. I couldn't help but feel a sense of waste. I found myself wondering how much the confines of our experiences and the rigidity of our ideologies prevented all of us—leaders and citizens alike—from imagining what's possible.

The good news, in the course of my travels, was that I always ended up meeting people who imagined more. The young men and women before me in that room, the activists and organizers who'd come to hear me speak—they were an example of this. Despite facing challenges that were no different in scale and sometimes even more daunting than those faced by their government counterparts, they worked day after day, often against the odds, because they envisioned a better world. In their efforts, in their ambition, in their refusal to give up hope, they reminded me why I'd gone into politics in the first place. And as I looked out into their eager, youthful faces, the fatigue from the long day's meetings seemed to fall away. Here, finally, was my crowd.

CHAPTER 2

CHAPTER 2 SUMMARY

Chapter 2 delves into Barack Obama's early relationship with Michelle LaVaughn Robinson, highlighting their initial interactions, the growth of their relationship, and eventual marriage. It portrays Michelle as a highly accomplished, caring, and supportive partner, juxtaposed against Barack's political ambitions and the ensuing challenges.

Their story begins at Sidley & Austin, where Michelle was assigned to mentor Barack, sparking a bond that deepened over shared values and aspirations. Michelle's impact is profound, guiding Barack's understanding of personal and community resilience, even as they navigate personal losses together.

As their relationship solidifies, Barack's contemplation of marriage reveals his uncertainties, stemming from his background, contrasting with Michelle's clarity about their future. Despite differing views on formalizing their relationship, their bond strengthens, underscored by Michelle's influence on Barack's community engagement and political ambitions.

Michelle's background, embodying Chicago's ethos through her family's values and her own professional achievements, brings a grounding balance to Barack's life. Their partnership evolves amidst Barack's political ascent, with Michelle's insights and criticism sharpening his focus on societal change and personal responsibility.

The narrative transitions to Barack's decision to enter politics, supported by Michelle's cautious optimism. Despite facing a challenging political landscape in Chicago, Michelle's unwavering support and candid feedback play a crucial role in Barack's initial political endeavors.

Their marriage, set against the backdrop of Barack's community organizing and legal work, signifies a commitment to their shared values and vision for societal improvement. However, as Barack's political career demands escalate, the toll on their family life becomes apparent.

Michelle's transition from corporate law to public service aligns with the couple's dedication to community empowerment, yet Barack's escalating political ambitions strain their relationship. Despite these challenges, Michelle's support remains pivotal as Barack navigates political contests, showcasing their partnership's resilience amid personal and professional turmoil.

In summary, Chapter 2 encapsulates Barack and Michelle Obama's journey from their early relationship through the evolving challenges of balancing personal aspirations with public service. It portrays a partnership founded on mutual respect, shared values, and a steadfast commitment to effecting change, despite the personal sacrifices required along the way.

CHAPTER 24

You are being provided with a book chapter by chapter. I will request you to read the book for me after each chapter. After reading the chapter, 1. shorten the chapter to no less than 300 words and no more than 400 words. 2. Do not change the name, address, or any important nouns in the chapter. 3. Do not translate the original language. 4. Keep the same style as the original chapter, keep it consistent throughout the chapter. Your reply must comply with all four requirements, or it's invalid. I will provide the chapter now.

CHAPTER 24

“WHOSE BID IS IT?”

Pete Souza and I sat opposite Marvin and Reggie at the Air Force One conference room table, all of us a bit bleary-eyed as we sorted through our cards. We were on our way to Mumbai—the first leg of a nine-day trip to Asia that would include not only my first visit to India but also a stop in Jakarta, a G20 meeting in Seoul, and an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in Yokohama, Japan. The plane had been humming with activity earlier in the flight, with staffers working on laptops and policy advisors huddling over the schedule. After ten hours in the air, with a refueling stop at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, almost everybody on board (including Michelle, in the forward cabin; Valerie, on the couch outside the conference room; and several senior staffers stretched out at odd angles on the floor) had gone to sleep. Unable to wind down, I'd enlisted our regular foursome for a game of Spades, and I was trying to read through my briefing book and signing a stack of correspondence between plays. My divided attention—along with Reggie's second gin and tonic—may have accounted for the fact that Marvin and Pete were up six games to two on us, at ten dollars a pop.

“It's your bid, sir,” Marvin said.

“What you got, Reg?” I asked.

“Maybe one,” Reggie said.

“We'll go board,” I said.

“We're going eight,” Pete said.

Reggie shook his head in disgust. “We're switching decks after the next hand,” he muttered, taking another sip of his drink. “These cards are cursed.”

ONLY THREE DAYS had passed since the midterm elections, and I was grateful for the chance to get out of Washington. The results had left Democrats shell-shocked and Republicans exuberant, and I'd woken up the next morning with a mix of weariness,

hurt, anger, and shame, the way a boxer must feel after coming out on the wrong end of a heavyweight bout. The dominant story line in the postelection coverage suggested that the conventional wisdom had been right all along: that I'd attempted to do too much and hadn't stayed focused on the economy; that Obamacare was a fatal error; that I'd tried to resurrect the kind of big-spending, big-government liberalism that even Bill Clinton had pronounced dead years ago. The fact that in my press conference the day after the election I refused to admit as much, that I seemed to cling to the idea that my administration had pursued the right policies—even if we clearly hadn't managed to sell them effectively—struck pundits as arrogant and delusional, the sign of a sinner who wasn't contrite.

The truth was, I didn't regret paving the way for twenty million people to get health insurance. Nor did I regret the Recovery Act—the hard evidence showed that austerity in response to a recession would have been disastrous. I didn't regret how we'd handled the financial crisis, given the choices we'd faced (although I did regret not having come up with a better plan to help stem the tide of foreclosures). And I sure as hell wasn't sorry I'd proposed a climate change bill and pushed for immigration reform. I was just mad that I hadn't yet gotten either item through Congress—mainly because, on my very first day in office, I hadn't had the foresight to tell Harry Reid and the rest of the Senate Democrats to revise the chamber rules and get rid of the filibuster once and for all.

As far as I was concerned, the election didn't prove that our agenda had been wrong. It just proved that—whether for lack of talent, cunning, charm, or good fortune—I'd failed to rally the nation, as FDR had once done, behind what I knew to be right. Which to me was just as damning.

Much to the relief of Gibbs and my press shop, I'd ended the press conference before baring my stubborn, tortured soul. I realized that justifying the past mattered less than planning what to do next.

I was going to have to find a way to reconnect with the American people—not just to strengthen my hand in negotiations with Republicans but to get reelected. A better economy would help, but even that was hardly assured. I needed to get out of the White House bubble, to engage more frequently with voters. Meanwhile, Axe offered his own assessment of what had gone wrong, saying that in the rush to get things done, we'd neglected our promise to change Washington—by sidelining special interests, and increasing transparency and fiscal responsibility across the federal government. If we wanted to win back the voters who'd left us, he argued, we had to reclaim those themes.

But was that right? I wasn't so sure. Yes, we'd been hurt by the sausage-making around the ACA, and fairly or not, we'd been tarnished by the bank bailouts. On the other hand, I could point to scores of “good government” initiatives we'd introduced, whether it was placing limits on the hiring of former lobbyists, or giving the public access to data from federal agencies, or scouring agency budgets to eliminate waste. All these actions were worthy on their merits, and I was glad we'd taken them; it was one of the reasons we hadn't had a whiff of scandal around my administration.

Politically, though, no one seemed to care about our work to clean up the government—any more than they credited us for having bent over backward to solicit Republican ideas on every single one of our legislative initiatives. One of our biggest promises had been to end partisan bickering and focus on practical efforts to address citizen demands. Our problem, as Mitch McConnell had calculated from the start, was that so long as Republicans uniformly resisted our overtures and raised hell over even the most moderate of proposals, anything we did could be portrayed as partisan, controversial, radical—even illegitimate. In fact, many of our progressive allies believed that we hadn't been partisan enough. In their view, we'd compromised too much, and by continually chasing the false promise of bipartisanship, we'd not only

empowered McConnell and squandered big Democratic majorities; we'd thrown a giant wet blanket over our base—as evidenced by the decision of so many Democrats to not bother to vote in the midterms.

Along with having to figure out a message and policy reboot, I was now facing significant turnover in White House personnel. On the foreign policy team, Jim Jones—who, despite his many strengths, had never felt fully comfortable in a staff role after years of command—had resigned in October. Luckily, Tom Donilon was proving to be a real workhorse and had ably assumed the national security advisor role, with Denis McDonough moving up to deputy national security advisor and Ben Rhodes assuming many of Denis's old duties. On economic policy, Peter Orszag and Christy Romer had returned to the private sector, replaced by Jack Lew, a seasoned budget expert who'd managed OMB under Bill Clinton, and Austan Goolsbee, who'd been working with us on the recovery. Then there was Larry Summers, who had stopped by the Oval one day in September to tell me that with the financial crisis behind us, it was time for him to exit. He'd be leaving at year's end.

“What am I going to do without you around to explain why I'm wrong?” I asked, only half-joking. Larry smiled.

“Mr. President,” he said, “you were actually less wrong than most.”

I'd grown genuinely fond of those who were leaving. Not only had they served me well, but despite their various idiosyncrasies, they'd each brought a seriousness of purpose—a commitment to policy making based on reason and evidence—that was born of a desire to do right by the American people. It was, however, the impending loss of my two closest political advisors, as well as the need to find a new chief of staff, that unsettled me most.

Axe had always planned to leave after the midterms. Having lived apart from his family for two years, he badly needed a break before joining my reelection campaign. Gibbs, who'd been in the foxhole with me continuously since I'd won my Senate primary race, was just as worn down. Although he remained as well prepared and fearless a press secretary as ever, the strain of standing at a podium day after day, taking all the hits that had been coming our way, had made his relationship with the White House press corps combative enough that the rest of the team worried that it was negatively affecting our coverage.

I was still getting used to the prospect of fighting the political battles ahead without Axe and Gibbs at my side, though I took heart in the continuity provided by our young and skillful communications director, Dan Pfeiffer, who had worked closely with them on messaging since the start of our 2007 campaign. As for Rahm, I considered it a minor miracle that he'd lasted as long as he had without either killing somebody or dropping dead from a stroke. We'd made a habit of conducting our end-of-day meetings outside when the weather allowed, strolling two or three times around the driveway that encircled the South Lawn as we tried to figure out what to do about the latest crisis or controversy. More than once we'd asked ourselves why we'd chosen such stressful lives.

“After we're finished, we should try something simpler,” I said to him one day. “We could move our families to Hawaii and open a smoothie stand on the beach.”

“Smoothies are too complicated,” Rahm said. “We'll sell T-shirts. But just white T-shirts. In medium. That's it—no other colors or patterns or sizes. We don't want to have to make any decisions. If customers want something different, they can go someplace else.”

I had recognized the signs that Rahm was close to burnout, but I'd assumed he'd wait for the new year to leave. Instead, he'd used one of our evening walks in early September to tell me that longtime Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley had just announced that he wouldn't be seeking a seventh consecutive term. Rahm wanted to run—it was a job he'd dreamed of since entering politics—and with the election

happening in February, he needed to leave the White House by the first of October if he hoped to have a go at it.

He looked genuinely distraught. “I know I’m putting you in a bind,” he said, “but with only five and a half months to run a race—”

I stopped him before he could finish and said he’d have my full support.

A week or so later, at a private farewell ceremony in the residence, I presented him with a framed copy of a to-do list that I’d handwritten on a legal pad and passed to him during my first week in office. Almost every item had been checked off, I told the assembled staff, a measure of how effective he’d been. Rahm teared up—a blemish on his tough-guy image for which he later cursed me.

None of this turnover was unusual for an administration, and I saw the potential benefits to shaking things up. More than once we’d been accused of being too insular and tightly controlled, in need of fresh perspectives. Rahm’s skill set would be less relevant without a Democratic House to help advance legislation. With Pete Rouse serving as interim chief of staff, I was leaning toward hiring Bill Daley, who’d been commerce secretary in the Clinton administration and was the brother of Chicago’s outgoing mayor, to replace Rahm. Balding and about a decade older than me, with a distinctive South Side accent that evoked his Irish working-class roots, Bill had a reputation as an effective, pragmatic dealmaker with strong relationships with both labor and the business community; and while I didn’t know him the way I knew Rahm, I thought his affable, nonideological style might be well suited for what I expected to be a less frantic phase of my administration. And along with some new faces, I was thrilled that I’d be getting one back starting in January when David Plouffe, fresh from a two-year sabbatical with his family, would return as a senior advisor and provide our White House operation with the same strategic thinking, intense focus, and lack of ego that had benefited us so much during the campaign.

Still, I couldn’t help feeling a little melancholy over the changes the new year would bring: I’d be surrounded by even fewer people who’d known me before I was president, and by fewer colleagues who were also friends, who’d seen me tired, confused, angry, or defeated and yet had never stopped having my back. It was a lonely thought at a lonely time. Which probably explains why I was still playing cards with Marvin, Reggie, and Pete when I had a full day of meetings and appearances scheduled to start in less than seven hours.

“Did you guys just win again?” I asked Pete after we finished the hand.

Pete nodded, prompting Reggie to gather up all the cards, rise from his chair, and toss them into the trash bin.

“Hey, Reg, that’s still a good deck!” Pete said, not bothering to disguise his pleasure at the beatdown he and Marvin had just administered. “Everybody loses sometimes.” Reggie flashed a hard look at Pete. “Show me someone who’s okay with losing,” he said, “and I’ll show you a loser.”

I’D NEVER BEEN to India before, but the country had always held a special place in my imagination. Maybe it was its sheer size, with one-sixth of the world’s population, an estimated two thousand distinct ethnic groups, and more than seven hundred languages spoken. Maybe it was because I’d spent a part of my childhood in Indonesia listening to the epic Hindu tales of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, or because of my interest in Eastern religions, or because of a group of Pakistani and Indian college friends who’d taught to me to cook dahl and keema and turned me on to Bollywood movies.

More than anything, though, my fascination with India had to do with Mahatma Gandhi. Along with Lincoln, King, and Mandela, Gandhi had profoundly influenced my thinking. As a young man, I’d studied his writings and found him giving voice to some of my deepest instincts. His notion of satyagraha, or devotion to truth, and the

power of nonviolent resistance to stir the conscience; his insistence on our common humanity and the essential oneness of all religions; and his belief in every society's obligation, through its political, economic, and social arrangements, to recognize the equal worth and dignity of all people—each of these ideas resonated with me.

Gandhi's actions had stirred me even more than his words; he'd put his beliefs to the test by risking his life, going to prison, and throwing himself fully into the struggles of his people. His nonviolent campaign for Indian independence from Britain, which began in 1915 and continued for more than thirty years, hadn't just helped overcome an empire and liberate much of the subcontinent, it had set off a moral charge that pulsed around the globe. It became a beacon for other dispossessed, marginalized groups—including Black Americans in the Jim Crow South—intent on securing their freedom.

Michelle and I had a chance early in the trip to visit Mani Bhavan, the modest two-story building tucked into a quiet Mumbai neighborhood that had been Gandhi's home base for many years. Before the start of our tour, our guide, a gracious woman in a blue sari, showed us the guestbook Dr. King had signed in 1959, when he'd traveled to India to draw international attention to the struggle for racial justice in the United States and pay homage to the man whose teachings had inspired him.

The guide then invited us upstairs to see Gandhi's private quarters. Taking off our shoes, we entered a simple room with a floor of smooth, patterned tile, its terrace doors open to admit a slight breeze and a pale, hazy light. I stared at the spartan floor bed and pillow, the collection of spinning wheels, the old-fashioned phone and low wooden writing desk, trying to imagine Gandhi present in the room, a slight, brown-skinned man in a plain cotton dhoti, his legs folded under him, composing a letter to the British viceroy or charting the next phase of the Salt March. And in that moment, I had the strongest wish to sit beside him and talk. To ask him where he'd found the strength and imagination to do so much with so very little. To ask how he'd recovered from disappointment.

He'd had more than his share. For all his extraordinary gifts, Gandhi hadn't been able to heal the subcontinent's deep religious schisms or prevent its partitioning into a predominantly Hindu India and an overwhelmingly Muslim Pakistan, a seismic event in which untold numbers died in sectarian violence and millions of families were forced to pack up what they could carry and migrate across newly established borders. Despite his labors, he hadn't undone India's stifling caste system. Somehow, though, he'd marched, fasted, and preached well into his seventies—until that final day in 1948, when on his way to prayer, he was shot at point-blank range by a young Hindu extremist who viewed his ecumenism as a betrayal of the faith.

IN MANY RESPECTS, modern-day India counted as a success story, having survived repeated changeovers in government, bitter feuds within political parties, various armed separatist movements, and all manner of corruption scandals. The transition to a more market-based economy in the 1990s had unleashed the extraordinary entrepreneurial talents of the Indian people—leading to soaring growth rates, a thriving high-tech sector, and a steadily expanding middle class. As a chief architect of India's economic transformation, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh seemed like a fitting emblem of this progress: a member of the tiny, often persecuted Sikh religious minority who'd risen to the highest office in the land, and a self-effacing technocrat who'd won people's trust not by appealing to their passions but by bringing about higher living standards and maintaining a well-earned reputation for not being corrupt. Singh and I had developed a warm and productive relationship. While he could be cautious in foreign policy, unwilling to get out too far ahead of an Indian bureaucracy that was historically suspicious of U.S. intentions, our time together confirmed my initial impression of him as a man of uncommon wisdom and decency; and during my

visit to the capital city of New Delhi, we reached agreements to strengthen U.S. cooperation on counterterrorism, global health, nuclear security, and trade.

What I couldn't tell was whether Singh's rise to power represented the future of India's democracy or merely an aberration. Our first evening in Delhi, he and his wife, Gursharan Kaur, hosted a dinner party for me and Michelle at their residence, and before joining the other guests in a candlelit courtyard, Singh and I had a few minutes to chat alone. Without the usual flock of minders and notetakers hovering over our shoulders, the prime minister spoke more openly about the clouds he saw on the horizon. The economy worried him, he said. Although India had fared better than many other countries in the wake of the financial crisis, the global slowdown would inevitably make it harder to generate jobs for India's young and rapidly growing population. Then there was the problem of Pakistan: Its continuing failure to work with India to investigate the 2008 terrorist attacks on hotels and other sites in Mumbai had significantly increased tensions between the two countries, in part because Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, the terrorist organization responsible, was believed to have links to Pakistan's intelligence service. Singh had resisted calls to retaliate against Pakistan after the attacks, but his restraint had cost him politically. He feared that rising anti-Muslim sentiment had strengthened the influence of India's main opposition party, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

"In uncertain times, Mr. President," the prime minister said, "the call of religious and ethnic solidarity can be intoxicating. And it's not so hard for politicians to exploit that, in India or anywhere else."

I nodded, recalling the conversation I'd had with Václav Havel during my visit to Prague and his warning about the rising tide of illiberalism in Europe. If globalization and a historic economic crisis were fueling these trends in relatively wealthy nations—if I was seeing it even in the United States with the Tea Party—how could India be immune? For the truth was that despite the resilience of its democracy and its impressive recent economic performance, India still bore little resemblance to the egalitarian, peaceful, and sustainable society Gandhi had envisioned. Across the country, millions continued to live in squalor, trapped in sunbaked villages or labyrinthine slums, even as the titans of Indian industry enjoyed lifestyles that the rajas and moguls of old would have envied. Violence, both public and private, remained an all-too-pervasive part of Indian life. Expressing hostility toward Pakistan was still the quickest route to national unity, with many Indians taking great pride in the knowledge that their country had developed a nuclear weapons program to match Pakistan's, untroubled by the fact that a single miscalculation by either side could risk regional annihilation.

Most of all, India's politics still revolved around religion, clan, and caste. In that sense, Singh's elevation as prime minister, sometimes heralded as a hallmark of the country's progress in overcoming sectarian divides, was somewhat deceiving. He hadn't originally become prime minister as a result of his own popularity. In fact, he owed his position to Sonia Gandhi—the Italian-born widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and the head of the Congress Party, who'd declined to take the job herself after leading her party coalition to victory and had instead anointed Singh. More than one political observer believed that she'd chosen Singh precisely because as an elderly Sikh with no national political base, he posed no threat to her forty-year-old son, Rahul, whom she was grooming to take over the Congress Party.

Both Sonia and Rahul Gandhi sat at our dinner table that night. She was a striking woman in her sixties, dressed in a traditional sari, with dark, probing eyes and a quiet, regal presence. That she—a former stay-at-home mother of European descent—had emerged from her grief after her husband was killed by a Sri Lankan separatist's suicide bomb in 1991 to become a leading national politician testified to the enduring power of the family dynasty. Rajiv was the grandson of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first

prime minister and an icon in the independence movement. His mother, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, had spent a total of sixteen years as prime minister herself, relying on a more ruthless brand of politics than her father had practiced, until 1984 when she, too, was assassinated.

At dinner that night, Sonia Gandhi listened more than she spoke, careful to defer to Singh when policy matters came up, and often steered the conversation toward her son. It became clear to me, though, that her power was attributable to a shrewd and forceful intelligence. As for Rahul, he seemed smart and earnest, his good looks resembling his mother's. He offered up his thoughts on the future of progressive politics, occasionally pausing to probe me on the details of my 2008 campaign. But there was a nervous, unformed quality about him, as if he were a student who'd done the coursework and was eager to impress the teacher but deep down lacked either the aptitude or the passion to master the subject.

As it was getting late, I noticed Singh fighting off sleep, lifting his glass every so often to wake himself up with a sip of water. I signaled to Michelle that it was time to say our goodbyes. The prime minister and his wife walked us to our car. In the dim light, he looked frail, older than his seventy-eight years, and as we drove off I wondered what would happen when he left office. Would the baton be successfully passed to Rahul, fulfilling the destiny laid out by his mother and preserving the Congress Party's dominance over the divisive nationalism touted by the BJP? Somehow, I was doubtful. It wasn't Singh's fault. He had done his part, following the playbook of liberal democracies across the post-Cold War world: upholding the constitutional order; attending to the quotidian, often technical work of boosting the GDP; and expanding the social safety net. Like me, he had come to believe that this was all any of us could expect from democracy, especially in big, multiethnic, multireligious societies like India and the United States. Not revolutionary leaps or major cultural overhauls; not a fix for every social pathology or lasting answers for those in search of purpose and meaning in their lives. Just the observance of rules that allowed us to sort out or at least tolerate our differences, and government policies that raised living standards and improved education enough to temper humanity's baser impulses.

Except now I found myself asking whether those impulses—of violence, greed, corruption, nationalism, racism, and religious intolerance, the all-too-human desire to beat back our own uncertainty and mortality and sense of insignificance by subordinating others—were too strong for any democracy to permanently contain. For they seemed to lie in wait everywhere, ready to resurface whenever growth rates stalled or demographics changed or a charismatic leader chose to ride the wave of people's fears and resentments. And as much as I might have wished otherwise, there was no Mahatma Gandhi around to tell me what I might do to hold such impulses back.

HISTORICALLY, CONGRESSIONAL ambitions tend to be low during the six- or seven-week stretch between Election Day and the Christmas recess, especially with a shift in party control about to happen. The dispirited losers just want to go home; the winners want to run out the clock until the new Congress gets sworn in. On January 5, 2011, we'd be seating the most Republican House of Representatives since 1947, which meant I'd be unable to get any legislation called for a vote, much less passed, without the assent of the incoming Speaker of the House, John Boehner. And if there was any question about his agenda, Boehner had already announced that the first bill he'd be calling to a vote was a total repeal of the ACA.

We did, however, have a window of opportunity during the coming lame-duck session. Having returned from my visit to Asia, I was intent on getting several key initiatives across the finish line before Congress adjourned for the holidays:

ratification of the New START on nuclear nonproliferation that we'd negotiated with the Russians; repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," the law that barred gays, lesbians, and bisexuals from openly serving in the military; and passage of the DREAM Act, which would establish a path to citizenship for a large swath of children of undocumented immigrants. Pete Rouse and Phil Schiliro, who between them had nearly seventy years of Capitol Hill experience, looked dubious when I ran through my lame-duck to-do list. Axe actually chortled.

"Is that it?" he asked sarcastically.

Actually, it wasn't. I'd forgotten to mention that we needed to pass a child nutrition bill that Michelle had made a central plank in her fight against childhood obesity. "It's good policy," I said, "and Michelle's team's done a great job lining up support from children's health advocates. Plus, if we don't get it passed, I won't be able to go home."

I understood some of my staff's skepticism about trying to move such an ambitious agenda. Even if we could muster the sixty votes needed for each of those controversial bills, it wasn't clear that Harry Reid could get enough cooperation from Mitch McConnell to schedule so many votes in such a short time. Still, I didn't think I was being entirely delusional. Almost every item on my list already had some legislative traction and had either cleared or seemed likely to clear the House. And while we hadn't had much luck overcoming GOP-led Senate filibusters previously, I knew that McConnell had a big-ticket item of his own that he desperately wanted to get done: passing a law to extend the so-called Bush tax cuts, which would otherwise automatically expire at the end of the year.

This gave us leverage.

I'd long opposed my predecessor's signature domestic legislation, laws passed in 2001 and 2003 that changed the U.S. tax code in ways that disproportionately benefited high-net-worth individuals while accelerating the trend of wealth and income inequality. Warren Buffett liked to point out that the law enabled him to pay taxes at a significantly lower rate—proportionate to his income, which came almost entirely from capital gains and dividends—than his secretary did on her salary. The laws' changes to the estate tax alone had reduced the tax burden for the top 2 percent of America's richest families by more than \$130 billion. Not only that, but by taking roughly \$1.3 trillion in projected revenue out of the U.S. Treasury, the laws had helped turn a federal budget surplus under Bill Clinton into a burgeoning deficit—a deficit that many Republicans were now using to justify their calls for cuts to Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the rest of America's social safety net.

The Bush tax cuts might have been bad policy, but they had also modestly lowered the tax bill of most Americans, which made rolling them back politically tricky. Polls consistently showed a strong majority of Americans favoring higher taxes on the rich. But even well-to-do lawyers and doctors didn't consider themselves rich, especially if they lived in high-cost areas; and after a decade in which the bottom 90 percent of earners had seen stagnant wages, very few people thought their own taxes should go up. During the campaign, my team and I had settled on what we considered a policy sweet spot, proposing that the Bush tax cuts be repealed selectively, affecting only those families with income greater than \$250,000 a year (or individuals earning more than \$200,000). This approach had almost universal support from congressional Democrats, would affect only the richest 2 percent of Americans, and would still yield roughly \$680 billion over the next decade, funds we could use to expand childcare, healthcare, job training, and education programs for the less well-off.

I hadn't changed my mind on any of this—getting the rich to pay more in taxes was not only a matter of fairness but also the only way to fund new initiatives. But as had been true with so many of my campaign proposals, the financial crisis had forced me to rethink when we should try to do it. Early in my term, when it looked like the

country might careen into a depression, my economic team had persuasively argued that any increase in taxes—even those targeting rich people and Fortune 500 companies—would be counterproductive, since it would take money out of the economy precisely at a time when we wanted individuals and businesses to get out there and spend. With the economy barely on the mend, the prospect of tax hikes still made the team nervous.

And as it was, Mitch McConnell had threatened to block anything less than a full extension of the Bush tax cuts. Which meant that our only option for getting rid of them right away—an option many progressive commentators urged us to take—involved doing nothing and simply letting everybody's tax rates automatically revert to higher, Clinton-era levels on the first of January. Democrats could then return in the new year and propose replacement legislation that would reduce tax rates for Americans making less than \$250,000 a year, essentially daring Republicans to vote no.

It was a strategy we strongly considered. But Joe Biden and our legislative team worried that given how badly we'd lost in the midterms, centrist Democrats might break ranks on the issue and then Republicans would use those defections to marshal a vote that made the tax cuts permanent. Politics aside, the problem with playing chicken with the GOP, I decided, was the immediate impact it would have on a still-fragile economy. Even if we could hold our Democrats in line and Republicans ultimately buckled under the pressure, it still could take months to get any tax legislation through a divided Congress. In the meantime, middle- and working-class Americans would have smaller paychecks, businesses would rein in their investments even further, the stock market would tank again, and the economy would almost certainly end up back in a recession.

After gaming out various scenarios, I sent Joe up to Capitol Hill to negotiate with McConnell. We would support a two-year extension of all the Bush tax cuts—but only if Republicans agreed to extend emergency unemployment benefits, the Recovery Act's lower- to middle-class tax credit (Making Work Pay), and another package of refundable tax credits benefiting the working poor for an equivalent period. McConnell immediately balked. Having previously declared that "the single most important thing we want to achieve is for President Obama to be a one-term president," he was apparently loath to let me claim that I'd cut taxes for the majority of Americans without Republicans having forced me to do it. I couldn't say I was surprised; one of the reasons I'd chosen Joe to act as an intermediary—in addition to his Senate experience and legislative acumen—was my awareness that in McConnell's mind, negotiations with the vice president didn't inflame the Republican base in quite the same way that any appearance of cooperating with (Black, Muslim socialist) Obama was bound to do.

After a lot of back-and-forth, and after we'd agreed to swap the Making Work Pay tax credit for a payroll tax cut, McConnell finally relented and, on December 6, 2010, I was able to announce that a comprehensive agreement had been reached.

From a policy perspective, we were pleased with the outcome. While it was painful to keep the tax cuts for the wealthy in place for another two years, we'd managed to extend tax relief for middle-class families while leveraging an additional \$212 billion worth of economic stimulus specifically targeted at those Americans most in need—the kind of package we'd have no chance of passing through a Republican-controlled House as a stand-alone bill. As for the politics behind the deal, I explained to Valerie that the two-year time frame represented a high-stakes wager between the Republicans and me. I was betting that in November 2012, I'd be coming off a successful reelection campaign, allowing me to end the tax cuts for the wealthy from a position of strength. They were betting that they'd beat me—and that a new Republican president would help them make the Bush tax cuts permanent.

The fact that the deal left so much riding on the next presidential election might explain why it immediately provoked outrage from left-leaning commentators. They accused me of caving to McConnell and Boehner and of being compromised by my buddies on Wall Street and advisors like Larry and Tim. They warned that the payroll tax cut would weaken the Social Security Trust Funds; that the refundable tax credits benefiting the working poor would prove ephemeral; and that in two years' time, the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy would be made permanent, just like the Republicans had always wanted.

In other words, they, too, expected me to lose.

As it so happened, the same mid-December week we announced the deal with McConnell, Bill Clinton joined me in the Oval Office dining room for a visit.

Whatever tensions had existed between us during the campaign had largely dissipated by then, and I found it useful to hear the lessons he'd learned after suffering a similar midterm shellacking at the hands of Newt Gingrich in 1994. At some point, we got into the nitty-gritty of the tax agreement I'd just made, and Clinton couldn't have been more enthusiastic.

"You need to tell that to some of our friends," I said, noting the blowback we were getting from certain Democratic circles.

"If I have the chance, I will," Clinton said.

That gave me an idea. "How about you get the chance right now?" Before he could answer, I walked over to Katie's desk and asked her to have the press team rustle up any correspondents who were in the building. Fifteen minutes later, Bill Clinton and I stepped into the White House briefing room.

Explaining to the startled reporters that they might like to get some perspective on our tax deal from the person who'd overseen just about the best U.S. economy we'd experienced in recent history, I turned the podium over to Clinton. It didn't take long for the former president to own the room, mustering all of his raspy-voiced, lip-biting Arkansas charm to make the case for our deal with McConnell. In fact, shortly after the impromptu press conference began, I realized I had another commitment to get to, but Clinton was clearly enjoying himself so much that I didn't want to cut him off.

Instead, I leaned into the microphone to say that I had to leave but that President Clinton could stick around. Later, I asked Gibbs how the whole thing had played.

"The coverage was great," Gibbs said. "Though a few of the talking heads said that you diminished yourself by giving Clinton the platform."

I wasn't too worried about that. I knew that Clinton's poll numbers were a whole lot higher than mine at the time, partly because the conservative press that had once vilified him now found it useful to offer him up as a contrast to me, the kind of reasonable, centrist Democrat, they said, that Republicans could work with. His endorsement would help us sell the deal to the broader public and tamp down any potential rebellion among congressional Democrats. It was an irony that I—like many modern leaders—eventually learned to live with: You never looked as smart as the ex-president did on the sidelines.

Our temporary *détente* with McConnell on taxes allowed us to focus on the rest of my lame-duck to-do list. Michelle's child nutrition bill had already received enough Republican support to pass in early December with relatively little fuss, despite accusations from Sarah Palin (now a Fox News commentator) that Michelle was intent on taking away the freedom of American parents to feed their children as they saw fit. Meanwhile, the House was working through the details of a food safety bill that would pass later in the month.

Ratifying New START in the Senate proved more challenging—not only because, as a treaty, it required 67 rather than 60 votes but because domestically there was no strong constituency clamoring to get it done. I had to nag Harry Reid to prioritize the issue during the lame-duck sessions, explaining that U.S. credibility—not to mention

my own standing with other world leaders—was at stake, and that a failure to ratify the treaty would undermine our efforts to enforce sanctions against Iran and get other countries to tighten up their own nuclear security. Once I got Harry’s grudging commitment to bring the treaty up for a vote (“I don’t know how I’ll find the floor time, Mr. President,” he grumbled over the phone, “but if you tell me it’s important I’ll do my best, okay?”), we went to work lining up Republican votes. The Joint Chiefs’ endorsement of the treaty helped; so did strong support from my old friend Dick Lugar, who remained the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and rightly viewed New START as an extension of his earlier work on nuclear nonproliferation.

Even so, closing the deal required me to commit to a multiyear, multibillion-dollar modernization of the infrastructure around the United States’ nuclear stockpile, at the insistence of conservative Arizona senator Jon Kyl. Given my long-term goal of eliminating nuclear weapons, not to mention all the better ways I could think of to use billions of federal dollars, this concession felt like a devil’s bargain, though our in-house experts, many of whom were dedicated to nuclear disarmament, assured me that our aging nuclear weapons systems did need upgrades in order to reduce the risk of a catastrophic miscalculation or accident. And when New START finally cleared the Senate by a 71–26 vote, I breathed a big sigh of relief.

THE WHITE HOUSE never looked more beautiful than during the holiday season. Huge pine wreaths with red velvet bows lined the walls along the colonnade and the main corridor of the East Wing, and the oaks and magnolias in the Rose Garden were strewn with lights. The official White House Christmas tree, a majestic fir delivered by horse-drawn carriage, occupied most of the Blue Room, but trees almost as spectacular filled nearly every public space in the residence. Over the course of three days, an army of volunteers organized by the Social Office decorated the trees, halls, and Grand Foyer with a dazzling array of ornaments, while the White House pastry chefs prepared an elaborate gingerbread replica of the residence, complete with furniture, curtains, and—during my presidency—a miniature version of Bo.

The holiday season also meant we hosted parties practically every afternoon and evening for three and a half weeks straight. These were big, festive affairs, with three to four hundred guests at a time, laughing and chomping on lamb chops and crab cakes and drinking eggnog and wine while members of the United States Marine Band, spiffy in their red coats, played all the holiday standards. For me and Michelle, the afternoon parties were easy—we just dropped by for a few minutes to wish everyone well from behind a rope line. But the evening events called for us to position ourselves in the Diplomatic Reception Room for two hours or more, posing for photos with nearly every guest. Michelle didn’t mind doing this at the parties we hosted for the families of Secret Service personnel and the residence staff, despite what standing in heels for that long did to her feet. Her holiday spirits dimmed, however, when it came to feting members of Congress and the political media. Maybe it was because they demanded more attention (“Stop making so much small talk!” she’d whisper to me during momentary breaks in the action); or because some of the same people who regularly appeared on TV calling for her husband’s head on a spike somehow had the nerve to put their arms around her and smile for the camera as if they were her best high school chums.

Back in the West Wing, much of my team’s energy in the weeks before Christmas went toward pushing through the two most controversial bills left on my docket: “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) and the DREAM Act. Alongside abortion, guns, and just about anything to do with race, the issues of LGBTQ rights and immigration had occupied center stage in America’s culture wars for decades, in part because they raised the most basic question in our democracy—namely, who do we consider a true

member of the American family, deserving of the same rights, respect, and concern that we expect for ourselves? I believed in defining that family broadly—it included gay people as well as straight, and it included immigrant families that had put down roots and raised kids here, even if they hadn't come through the front door. How could I believe otherwise, when some of the same arguments for their exclusion had so often been used to exclude those who looked like me?

That's not to say that I dismissed those with different views on LGBTQ and immigration rights as heartless bigots. For one thing, I had enough self-awareness—or at least a good enough memory—to know that my own attitudes toward gays, lesbians, and transgender people hadn't always been particularly enlightened. I grew up in the 1970s, a time when LGBTQ life was far less visible to those outside the community, so that Toot's sister (and one of my favorite relatives), Aunt Arlene, felt obliged to introduce her partner of twenty years as “my close friend Marge” whenever she visited us in Hawaii.

And like many teenage boys in those years, my friends and I sometimes threw around words like “fag” or “gay” at each other as casual put-downs—callow attempts to fortify our masculinity and hide our insecurities. Once I got to college and became friends with fellow students and professors who were openly gay, though, I realized the overt discrimination and hate they were subject to, as well as the loneliness and self-doubt that the dominant culture imposed on them. I felt ashamed of my past behavior—and learned to do better.

As for immigration, during my youth I'd given the issue little thought beyond the vague mythology of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty transmitted through popular culture. The progression of my thinking came later, when my organizing work in Chicago introduced me to the predominantly Mexican communities of Pilsen and Little Village—neighborhoods where the usual categories of native-born Americans, naturalized citizens, green-card holders, and undocumented immigrants all but dissolved, since many, if not most, families included all four. Over time, people shared with me what it was like to have to hide your background, always afraid that the life you'd worked so hard to build might be upended in an instant. They talked about the sheer exhaustion and expense of dealing with an often heartless or arbitrary immigration system, the sense of helplessness that came with having to work for employers who took advantage of your immigration status to pay you subminimum wages. The friendships I made and the stories I heard in those Chicago neighborhoods, and from LGBTQ people during college and my early career, had opened my heart to the human dimensions of issues that I'd once thought of in mainly abstract terms. For me, the “Don't Ask, Don't Tell” situation was straightforward: I considered a policy that prevented LGBTQ persons from openly serving in our military to be both offensive to American ideals and corrosive to the armed forces. DADT was the result of a flawed compromise between Bill Clinton—who'd campaigned on the idea of ending the outright ban on LGBTQ people serving in the military—and his Joint Chiefs, who'd insisted that such a change would damage morale and retention. Since going into effect in 1994, DADT had done little to protect or dignify anyone and, in fact, had led to the discharge of more than thirteen thousand service members solely due to their sexual orientation. Those who remained had to hide who they were and who they loved, unable to safely put up family pictures in their work spaces or attend social functions on base with their partners. As the first African American commander in chief, I felt a special responsibility to end the policy, mindful that Blacks in the military had traditionally faced institutional prejudice and been barred from leadership roles and for decades had been forced to serve in segregated units—a policy Harry Truman had finally ended with an executive order in 1948.

The question was how best to accomplish the change. From the outset, LGBTQ advocates urged me to follow Truman's example and simply issue an order to reverse

the policy—particularly since I’d already used executive orders and memoranda to address other regulations adversely affecting LGBTQ people, including the granting of hospital visitation rights and the extension of benefits to domestic partners of federal employees. But in short-circuiting the consensus building involved in passing legislation, an executive order increased the likelihood of resistance to the new policy inside the military, and foot-dragging in its implementation. And, of course, a future president could always reverse an executive order with the mere stroke of a pen. I’d concluded that the optimal solution was to get Congress to act. To do that, I needed the military’s top leaders as active and willing partners—which, in the middle of two wars, I knew wouldn’t be easy. Previous Joint Chiefs had opposed repealing DADT, reasoning that the integration of openly gay service members might adversely impact unit cohesion and discipline. (Congressional opponents of repeal, including John McCain, claimed that introducing such a disruptive new policy during wartime amounted to a betrayal of our troops.) To their credit, though, Bob Gates and Mike Mullen didn’t flinch when I told them, early in my term, that I intended to reverse DADT. Gates said that he’d already asked his staff to quietly begin internal planning on the issue, less out of any personal enthusiasm for the policy change than out of a practical concern that federal courts might ultimately find DADT unconstitutional and force a change on the military overnight. Rather than try to talk me out of my position, he and Mullen asked that I let them set up a task force to evaluate the implications of the proposed change on military operations—which would ultimately conduct a comprehensive survey of troops’ attitudes toward having openly gay members in their ranks. The objective, Gates said, was to minimize disruption and division. “If you’re going to do this, Mr. President,” Gates added, “we should at least be able to tell you how to do it right.”

I warned Gates and Mullen that I didn’t consider discrimination against LGBTQ people to be an issue subject to plebiscite. Nevertheless, I agreed to their request, partly because I trusted them to set up an honest evaluation process but mainly because I suspected that the survey would show our troops—most of whom were decades younger than the high-ranking generals—to be more open-minded toward gays and lesbians than people expected. Appearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on February 2, 2010, Gates further validated my trust when he said, “I fully support the president’s decision” to reexamine DADT. But it was Mike Mullen’s testimony before the committee that same day that really made news, as he became the first sitting senior U.S. military leader in history to publicly argue that LGBTQ persons should be allowed to openly serve: “Mr. Chairman, speaking for myself and myself only, it is my personal belief that allowing gays and lesbians to serve openly would be the right thing to do. No matter how I look at this issue, I cannot escape being troubled by the fact that we have in place a policy 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.” Nobody in the White House had coordinated with Mullen on the statement; I’m not even sure that Gates had known ahead of time what Mullen planned to say. But his unequivocal statement immediately shifted the public debate and created important political cover for fence-sitting senators, who could then feel justified in embracing the repeal.

Mullen’s testimony came months before the evaluation process he and Gates had requested was completed, which caused some political headaches. Proponents of repeal started coming hard at us, both privately and in the press, unable to understand why I wouldn’t simply issue an executive order when the chairman of the Joint Chiefs supported a policy change—especially because, while we took our sweet time with a survey, LGBTQ service members were still being discharged. Valerie and her team bore the brunt of the friendly fire, particularly Brian Bond, a highly regarded gay

activist who served as our principal liaison to the community. For months, Brian had to defend my decision-making, as skeptical friends, former colleagues, and members of the press suggested that he'd been co-opted, questioning his commitment to the cause. I can only imagine the toll this took on him personally.

The criticism grew louder in September 2010 when, as Gates had predicted, a federal district court in California ruled that DADT was unconstitutional. I asked Gates to formally suspend all discharges while the case was appealed. But no matter how hard I pressed, he repeatedly refused my request, arguing that as long as DADT was in place, he was obligated to enforce it; and I knew that ordering him to do something he considered inappropriate might force me to have to find a new defense secretary. It was perhaps the only time I came close to yelling at Gates, and not just because I considered his legal analysis faulty. He seemed to consider the frustrations we were hearing from LGBTQ advocates—not to mention the anguished stories of gay and lesbian service members who were under his charge—as one more bit of “politics” from which I should shield him and the Pentagon, rather than a central consideration in his own decision-making. (Ultimately he did at least modify DADT’s administrative procedures in such a way that nearly all actual discharges were halted while we awaited resolution on the issue.)

Mercifully, toward the end of that same month, the results from the troop study finally came in. They confirmed what I’d suspected: Two-thirds of those surveyed thought that allowing those gay, lesbian, and bisexual colleagues to serve openly would have little or no impact on—or might actually improve—the military’s ability to execute its missions. In fact, most troops believed that they were either already working or had worked with LGBTQ service members and had experienced no difference in their ability to perform their duties.

Get exposed to other people’s truths, I thought, and attitudes change.

With the survey in hand, Gates and Mullen officially endorsed the repeal of DADT. Meeting with me in the Oval Office, the other Joint Chiefs pledged to implement the policy without undue delay. In fact, General James Amos, the Marine commandant and a firm opponent of repeal, drew smiles when he said, “I can promise you, Mr. President, that none of these other branches are going to do it faster or better than the U.S. Marine Corps.” And on December 18, the Senate passed the bill 65–31, with eight Republican votes.

A few days later, former and current LGBTQ service members filled an auditorium at the Department of the Interior as I signed the bill. Many were in dress uniform, their faces expressing a medley of joy, pride, relief, and tears. As I addressed the crowd, I saw a number of the advocates who’d been some of our fiercest critics just a few weeks earlier now smiling in appreciation. Spotting Brian Bond, I gave him a nod. But the biggest applause that day was reserved for Mike Mullen—a long, heartfelt standing ovation. As I watched the admiral standing on the stage, visibly moved despite the awkward grin on his face, I couldn’t have been happier for him. It wasn’t often, I thought, that a true act of conscience is recognized that way.

WHEN IT CAME to immigration, everyone agreed that the system was broken. The process of immigrating legally to the United States could take a decade or longer, often depending on what country you were coming from and how much money you had. Meanwhile, the economic gulf between us and our southern neighbors drove hundreds of thousands of people to illegally cross the 1,933-mile U.S.-Mexico border each year, searching for work and a better life. Congress had spent billions to harden the border, with fencing, cameras, drones, and an expanded and increasingly militarized border patrol. But rather than stop the flow of immigrants, these steps had spurred an industry of smugglers—coyotes—who made big money transporting human cargo in barbaric and sometimes deadly fashion. And although border crossings by poor Mexican and

Central American migrants received most of the attention from politicians and the press, about 40 percent of America's unauthorized immigrants arrived through airports or other legal ports of entry and then overstayed their visas.

By 2010, an estimated eleven million undocumented persons were living in the United States, in large part thoroughly woven into the fabric of American life. Many were longtime residents, with children who either were U.S. citizens by virtue of having been born on American soil or had been brought to the United States at such an early age that they were American in every respect except for a piece of paper. Entire sectors of the U.S. economy relied on their labor, as undocumented immigrants were often willing to do the toughest, dirtiest work for meager pay—picking the fruits and vegetables that stocked our grocery stores, mopping the floors of offices, washing dishes at restaurants, and providing care to the elderly. But although American consumers benefited from this invisible workforce, many feared that immigrants were taking jobs from citizens, burdening social services programs, and changing the nation's racial and cultural makeup, which led to demands for the government to crack down on illegal immigration. This sentiment was strongest among Republican constituencies, egged on by an increasingly nativist right-wing press. However, the politics didn't fall neatly along partisan lines: The traditionally Democratic trade union rank and file, for example, saw the growing presence of undocumented workers on construction sites as threatening their livelihoods, while Republican-leaning business groups interested in maintaining a steady supply of cheap labor (or, in the case of Silicon Valley, foreign-born computer programmers and engineers) often took pro-immigration positions.

Back in 2007, the maverick version of John McCain, along with his sidekick Lindsey Graham, had actually joined Ted Kennedy to put together a comprehensive reform bill that offered citizenship to millions of undocumented immigrants while more tightly securing our borders. Despite strong support from President Bush, it had failed to clear the Senate. The bill did, however, receive twelve Republican votes, indicating the real possibility of a future bipartisan accord. I'd pledged during the campaign to resurrect similar legislation once elected, and I'd appointed former Arizona governor Janet Napolitano as head of the Department of Homeland Security—the agency that oversaw U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection—partly because of her knowledge of border issues and her reputation for having previously managed immigration in a way that was both compassionate and tough.

My hopes for a bill had thus far been dashed. With the economy in crisis and Americans losing jobs, few in Congress had any appetite to take on a hot-button issue like immigration. Kennedy was gone. McCain, having been criticized by the right flank for his relatively moderate immigration stance, showed little interest in taking up the banner again. Worse yet, my administration was deporting undocumented workers at an accelerating rate. This wasn't a result of any directive from me, but rather it stemmed from a 2008 congressional mandate that both expanded ICE's budget and increased collaboration between ICE and local law enforcement departments in an effort to deport more undocumented immigrants with criminal records. My team and I had made a strategic choice not to immediately try to reverse the policies we'd inherited in large part because we didn't want to provide ammunition to critics who claimed that Democrats weren't willing to enforce existing immigration laws—a perception that we thought could torpedo our chances of passing a future reform bill. But by 2010, immigrant-rights and Latino advocacy groups were criticizing our lack of progress, much the same way LGBTQ activists had gone after us on DADT. And although I continued to urge Congress to pass immigration reform, I had no realistic path for delivering a new comprehensive law before the midterms. Enter the DREAM Act. The idea that young, undocumented immigrants who'd been

brought to the United States as children could be given some sort of relief had been floating around for years, and at least ten versions of the DREAM Act had been introduced in Congress since 2001, each time failing to garner the needed votes. Advocates often presented it as a partial but meaningful step on the road to wider reform. The act would grant “Dreamers”—as these young people had come to be called—temporary legal residence and a pathway to citizenship, so long as they met certain criteria. According to the most recent bill, they had to have entered the United States before the age of sixteen, lived here for five continuous years, graduated from high school or obtained a GED, and attended college for two years or joined the military—and they could have no serious criminal record. Individual states could make Dreamers legally eligible for reduced tuition rates at public colleges and universities—the only realistic way many of them could afford higher education.

Dreamers had grown up going to American schools, playing American sports, watching American TV, and hanging out at American malls. In some cases, their parents had never even told them they weren’t citizens; they learned of their undocumented status only when they tried to get a driver’s license or submitted an application for college financial aid. I’d had a chance to meet many Dreamers, both before and after I entered the White House. They were smart, poised, and resilient—as full of potential as my own daughters. If anything, I found the Dreamers to be less cynical about America than many of their native-born contemporaries—precisely because their circumstances had taught them not to take life in this country for granted. The case for allowing such young people to stay in the United States, the only country many of them had ever known, was so morally compelling that Kennedy and McCain had incorporated the DREAM Act into their 2007 immigration bill. And without the prospect of passing a more comprehensive rewrite of U.S. immigration laws in the immediate future, Harry Reid—who, in the months leading up to the midterms, had been locked in a tight reelection contest in his home state of Nevada and needed a strong Hispanic turnout to put him over the top—had promised to call the DREAM Act for a vote during the lame-duck session.

Unfortunately, Harry made this last-minute announcement on the campaign trail without giving us, his Senate colleagues, or immigration reform groups any notice. Though not thrilled with Harry’s lack of coordination with her (“You’d think he could have picked up the phone”), Nancy Pelosi did her part, quickly pushing the legislation through the House. But in the Senate, McCain and Graham denounced Harry’s decision as a campaign stunt and said they wouldn’t vote for the DREAM Act as a stand-alone bill since it was no longer linked to increased enforcement. The five Republican senators who’d voted for the 2007 McCain-Kennedy bill and were still in office were less declarative about their intentions, but all sounded wobbly. And since we couldn’t count on every Democrat to support the bill—especially after the disastrous midterms—all of us in the White House found ourselves scrambling to drum up the sixty votes needed to overcome a filibuster during the waning days before the Senate wrapped up business for the year.

Cecilia Muñoz, the White House director of intergovernmental affairs, was our point person on the effort. When I was a senator, she’d been the senior vice president of policy and legislative affairs at the National Council of La Raza, the nation’s largest Latino advocacy organization, and ever since she’d advised me on immigration and other issues. Born and raised in Michigan and the daughter of Bolivian immigrants, Cecilia was measured, modest, and—as I used to joke with her—“just plain nice,” bringing to mind everyone’s favorite young elementary or middle school teacher. She was also tough and tenacious (and a fanatical Michigan football fan). Within a matter of weeks, she and her team had launched an all-out media blitz in support of the DREAM Act, pitching stories, marshaling statistics, and enlisting practically every cabinet member and agency (including the Defense Department) to host some kind of

event. Most important, Cecilia helped bring together a crew of young Dreamers who were willing to disclose their undocumented status in order to share their personal stories with undecided senators and media outlets. Several times, Cecilia and I talked about the courage of these young people, agreeing that at their age we could never have managed such pressure.

“I just want to win so bad for them,” she told me.

And yet, despite the countless hours we spent in meetings and on the phone, the likelihood of getting sixty votes for the DREAM Act began to look increasingly bleak. One of our best prospects was Claire McCaskill, the Democratic senator from Missouri. Claire was one of my early supporters and best friends in the Senate, a gifted politician with a razor-sharp wit, a big heart, and not an ounce of hypocrisy or pretension. But she also came from a conservative, Republican-leaning state and was a juicy target for the GOP in its effort to wrest back control of the Senate.

“You know I want to help those kids, Mr. President,” Claire said when I reached her by phone, “but the polling in Missouri is just terrible on anything related to immigration. If I vote for this, there’s a good chance I lose my seat.”

I knew she wasn’t wrong. And if she lost, we might lose the Senate, along with any possibility of ever getting the DREAM Act or comprehensive immigration reform or anything else passed. How was I to weigh that risk against the urgent fates of the young people I’d met—the uncertainty and fear they were forced to live with every single day, the possibility that with no notice any one of them might be rounded up in an ICE raid, detained in a cell, and shipped off to a land that was as foreign to them as it would be to me?

Before hanging up, Claire and I made a deal to help square the circle. “If your vote’s the one that gets us to sixty,” I said, “then those kids are going to need you, Claire. But

PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

The provided text is a list of photograph credits, likely from a book or a publication, detailing various significant moments in Barack Obama's life, from his familial roots to his presidency and beyond. This compilation includes intimate snapshots with family members, pivotal points in his political career, and major public and private moments that define his journey from early life to the White House.

Starting with images of Barack Obama’s maternal grandparents, Stanley Armour Dunham and Madelyn Lee Payne Dunham, the list chronicles visual representations of Obama’s personal history, including photographs with his mother, Ann Dunham, and his father, Barack Hussein Obama, Sr., encapsulating his diverse familial background. The list also captures lighter moments, like Barack Obama and his mother on the beach, and significant relational milestones, such as Obama's marriage to Michelle Robinson.

Transitioning from personal life to political ascendancy, the credits detail Barack Obama’s path through the political landscape, from his campaign for the U.S. Senate to the momentous occasion of his announcement as a Democratic candidate for president. Key political events are highlighted through photos, such as his delivery of the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004, his senate victory celebration, and various moments from his presidential campaign, including significant speeches in Berlin, Germany, and rallies across the United States.

As the narrative progresses, it delineates Obama's presidency through powerful images capturing both the gravitas and the everyday responsibilities of his role—from international diplomacy engagements and meetings with world leaders at summits to intimate moments with his family and interactions with American citizens. Images of Obama at various stages of his presidency include his inaugural address, economic meetings, and legislative accomplishments like the signing of the Affordable Care Act.

Significantly, the collection doesn't just focus on his political and public life but also includes snapshots of personal moments, such as coaching his daughter Sasha's basketball team and family time on the swing set, showing the multifaceted nature of his life as president.

Together, these photograph credits paint a detailed portrait of Barack Obama's journey, capturing the essence of his legacy through images that range from the personal to the political, reflecting major milestones and everyday moments alike.

CHAPTER 25

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CHAPTER 27

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CHAPTER 16

American community. Afterward, we posed for a photo op, each of us holding a beer, and as we made forced banter for the cameras, I couldn't help but reflect on how quickly the ideals and agendas could get swallowed up by the soap opera of politics.

As summer turned to fall, I found myself regularly engaging in a similar balancing act—trying to keep the American people focused on long-term goals while managing the daily theater of Washington, the cable news cycles, and the relentless torrent of criticism that constituted my new normal. Despite the distractions, we continued to push forward on healthcare reform. In September, I addressed a joint session of Congress, hoping to regain the initiative. I offered a detailed defense of the legislation, spelling out the benefits for the insured, the uninsured, and seniors; the ways we'd reduce healthcare costs; and the mechanisms for paying for reform—all without adding a dime to the deficit. I called out the most egregious myths being peddled by opponents of reform, including the absurd charge that we planned to set up "death panels" to decide which seniors lived or died. I acknowledged honest differences of opinion between Democrats and Republicans but criticized those who were spreading outright lies in the service of partisan gain.

The speech was well received, providing our efforts with a much-needed boost. More importantly, it marked the beginning of a more aggressive stretch of work on healthcare, with every part of our administration and our congressional allies moving full-bore to get legislation passed. On the legislative front, the biggest challenge remained the Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Max Baucus. Despite his best efforts, Baucus had failed to persuade a single Republican on the committee to support a watered-down version of our plan. Nevertheless, with the help of his Democratic colleagues, he managed to shepherd a bill out of committee by the slimmest of margins.

Over in the House, Nancy Pelosi marshaled her troops with equal determination, consolidating various committee bills into a single piece of legislation that she

maneuvered through to passage despite fierce Republican opposition, as well as skittishness from some in her own caucus over abortion coverage and the public option—a government-run insurance plan proposed as a way to keep private insurers honest.

In November, with vice presidential encouragement, Harry Reid managed to cajole, wheedle, and horse-trade his way to getting every last Democratic senator—and two independents—to support bringing our version of healthcare reform to the Senate floor. It was a herculean feat, given the ideological breadth of the Democratic caucus and the unyielding opposition from the other side, but it set the stage for the chamber's first serious debate on healthcare reform in nearly two decades.

Still, for all our legislative maneuvering, what I remember most from that period were the stories that kept pouring into the White House: letters from America, voices that served as a constant reminder of what was at stake. There was the young woman with breast cancer whose insurance company had canceled her policy when she got sick, on the pretext that she hadn't reported a case of acne on her initial application. The middle-aged man who couldn't get coverage because he'd once had back surgery for a herniated disk. The parents struggling to pay for their son's insulin. These stories, more than anything, kept me going, a counterbalance to the cynicism and demagoguery and sometimes soul-crushing complexity of trying to bring about change in Washington.

As the year wound down, I found a moment one evening to walk alone through the empty halls of the West Wing, reflecting on the journey thus far. I thought about my campaign promises, the expectations of those who had voted for me, and the skepticism of those who hadn't. I considered the economic crisis we faced upon assuming office, the decisions we had made that had pulled us back from the brink but left many Americans still hurting. I thought about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the efforts to close Guantanamo, the challenges of climate change, and the ongoing scourge of terrorism. I thought about the lessons of that summer: the furor over my comments on the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr., the orchestrated panic over "death panels," the balancing act between idealism and pragmatism.

Standing there in the quiet, I felt the weight of the presidency, the relentless pressure of constant decisions, the knowledge that every action taken or not taken had real consequences for real people. Yet despite the weight, or perhaps because of it, I felt a resolute sense of purpose. The fight for healthcare reform, like every battle we engaged in, was not just political; it was a moral imperative, a testament to our belief that in America, no one should have to choose between medicine and mortgage payments, that no one should be one illness away from financial ruin, that in the wealthiest nation on earth, healthcare should be a right, not a privilege.

As I returned to the Oval Office, I knew the road ahead would be arduous. But I also knew we had come too far to turn back. Our resolve had only hardened, fortified by every story of struggle and hope and perseverance. And so, with a renewed sense of determination, we pressed on, into the battles that lay ahead, knowing that the cause was just and the time was now.

CHAPTER 20

Chapter 20 recounts the author's intense and multifaceted engagement with global diplomacy during a United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) week, providing a vivid depiction of the logistical and political

whirlwind that characterizes such international gatherings. The narrative begins with a detailed overview of the bustling activity and strategic interactions that occur against the backdrop of New York's heightened security and congested traffic, highlighting the author's personal investment and the broader U.S. foreign policy team's involvement in this annual diplomatic marathon.

A significant part of the chapter delves into the author's reflections on the United Nations' history, purposes, and evolving challenges. The narrative portrays the U.N. as a beacon of hope for peaceful resolution and international cooperation, rooted in the author's personal history and intellectual engagement with the institution. However, it does not shy away from critiquing the U.N.'s shortcomings, acknowledging the inherent limitations posed by the geopolitical interests of its most powerful members and the organization's struggles with achieving its lofty ideals amidst global conflicts and structural inefficiencies.

The author then shifts focus to a series of strategic discussions and developments involving U.S. relations with Russia and China, particularly concerning Iran's nuclear program and the broader quest for security and economic stability. The narrative provides an insider's account of diplomatic negotiations, leveraging intelligence revelations, and employing a blend of pressure and partnership to navigate the complexities of global nuclear non-proliferation efforts and sanctions diplomacy.

Throughout the chapter, the author interweaves personal observations and diplomatic insights, offering a nuanced perspective on the conduct of international relations and the United States' role therein. The discussions with Russian and Chinese leaders underscore the pragmatic, sometimes transactional nature of diplomacy, where mutual interests, strategic leverage, and long-term goals intersect in a constantly shifting global landscape.

By the chapter's close, the reader is left with a sense of the intricate, often painstaking work of diplomacy and the incremental progress that can result from sustained engagement, careful strategy, and a deep commitment to addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges.

CHAPTER 5

than an hour before Iowans gathered to make their choices. The school was packed, the hallways jammed with people trying to find their precinct rooms, friends and neighbors greeting each other, children in tow looking bewildered or bored, volunteers for various campaigns handing out last-minute literature. The energy was palpable, a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation.

Inside the designated room for one of the precinct caucuses, I was struck by the sheer ordinariness of the setting for such a consequential event. Folding chairs had been set up in rows, a small table at the front for the precinct captain and volunteers. No high-tech polling machines or voting booths—just neighbors ready to stand up for their candidate, literally, in a public display of democracy.

The process began with a brief explanation of the rules. Participants would have a chance to make their case for their preferred candidate and then, at the appointed time, gather into groups according to their choice. Those candidates not receiving at least 15% support in the initial alignment would be considered non-viable, and their supporters would have the opportunity to realign with their second choice.

As the caucus got underway, I watched our organizers at work, calmly answering questions, guiding first-timers through the process, their confidence and preparedness a testament to the months of groundwork laid across the state. When it came time for the initial alignment, I held my breath, hoping that our emphasis on hope and change,

on a different kind of politics, had resonated.

The room shifted and sorted itself into clusters, the air filled with a polite but determined buzz. When the numbers were tallied, it was clear: we had achieved viability in this precinct—a small but significant victory replicated in many others across the state that night.

After the final realignment, our group had not only held but grown, supporters of non-viable candidates having been persuaded to join us, moved by the arguments of their friends and neighbors or perhaps by the spirit of what our campaign represented. I thanked everyone for their participation, regardless of whom they supported, grateful for this unique expression of civic engagement.

By the time Michelle and I, along with Plouffe, Valerie, Reggie, and Marvin, made it back to our headquarters, early results were coming in. We gathered around televisions, laptops open, tracking returns precinct by precinct, the mood oscillating between cautious optimism and nerve-wracking tension.

And then, finally, the call: We had won Iowa. The staff erupted in cheers, hugs shared all around, tears of joy and relief mingling with disbelief. This victory, against all odds, against the machinery of more seasoned opponents, seemed to vindicate every hope, every sacrifice, every mile traveled and door knocked. It was more than a political win; it felt like a personal affirmation for everyone involved—a reaffirmation that, despite its flaws, America was capable of coming together, of choosing unity and progress.

The road ahead would be long, the campaign trail stretching out with pitfalls and challenges we couldn't yet imagine. But on that cold January night in Iowa, surrounded by what had become an extended family, I allowed myself to believe that maybe, just maybe, we could change the country.

CHAPTER 6

In Chapter 6, Barack Obama recounts the seismic victory in Iowa, propelling him into the limelight as the Democratic frontrunner and challenging traditional expectations, notably upsetting Hillary Clinton who finished third. With only a short period until the New Hampshire primary, Obama's team grapples with managing surging expectations amid contrary predictions and strategic considerations in a state known for its independent voters.

The narrative sharply pivots to detail the complexities of campaigning—highlighting a debate mishap where Obama's attempt at humor aimed at diffusing a pointed question to Clinton about her likability backfires, casting him unfavorably in the media. Meanwhile, an emotional moment from Clinton, displaying vulnerability, shifts the campaign's tone and sets the stage for a surprising loss for Obama in New Hampshire, upending presumed forecasts.

Despite the setback, the defeat galvanizes Obama's campaign, illustrating an essential truth about resilience and the unpredictable nature of political campaigns. As Obama navigates the intricacies of public perception and media narratives, the chapter delves into the broader themes of race, gender, and political strategy, underlining Obama's deep contemplation on leadership and the nuances of voter engagement.

Reflected through personal anecdotes and strategic campaign analysis, Obama introspectively considers his evolution as a candidate and the profound lessons learned from the campaign trail, including the significance of humility and the unyielding quest for change—a narrative that culminates in a reaffirmation of his

commitment to uniting diverse voices under a common banner of hope and progress.

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Yes.