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*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

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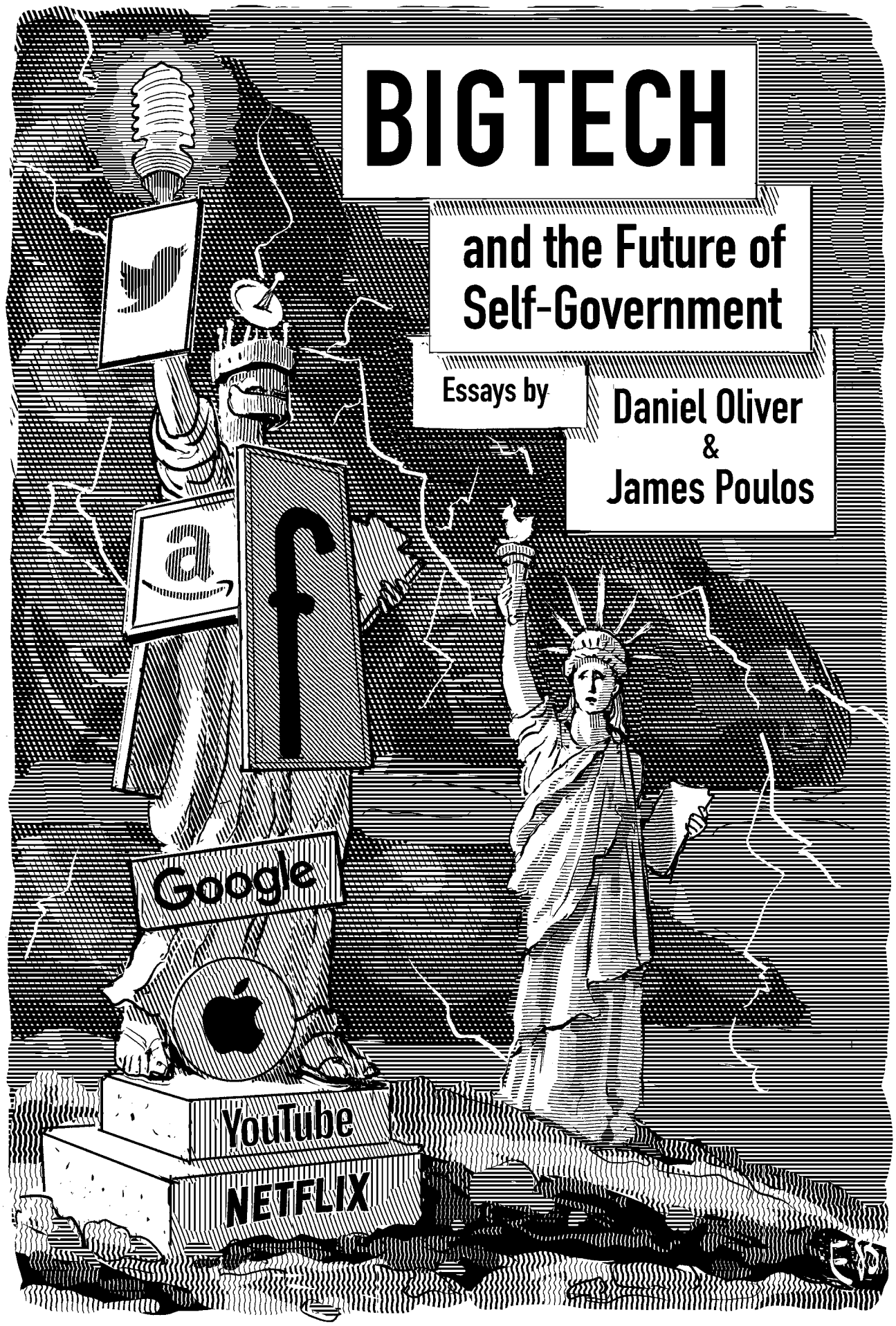


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Book Review by Joseph M. Bessette

# Dreams from My Presidency

*A Promised Land*, by Barack Obama.
Crown Publishing, 768 pages, $45

"Our democracy," Barack Obama writes in the first pages of his third autobiography, *A Promised Land*, "seems to be teetering on the brink of crisis—a crisis rooted in a fundamental contest between two opposing visions of what America is and what it should be." One vision "appeal[s] to what Lincoln called the better angels of our nature." It sees "a hopeful, generous, courageous America, an America that was open to everyone." The other vision is as base as this one is noble. At its core is anger, fear, nativism, and racism.

These two visions, not surprisingly, align with our political divisions. On the side of the angels stand Obama, Democrats, and the millions of voters in 2008 who made the first-term U.S. senator his party's nominee for the presidency and then elevated him to the nation's highest office. On the other side stand Republicans (leaders and followers), Fox News, talk radio, and the Koch brothers. Despite his vows "to move past the tired Washington partisan divide," "to change Washington and transcend partisan gridlock," and "to end constant partisan rancor," Obama's aim throughout this 700-page first installment of his presidential memoirs appears to be nothing less than to delegitimize Republican and conservative opposition to a vast and growing welfare state.

*A Promised Land* covers his early life—the focus of *Dreams from My Father* in 2004 and to a lesser extent *The Audacity of Hope* in 2007—but much more briskly. By page 80 he has declared his candidacy for the presidency and by page 200 he has been elected the first African-American president of the United States. The original plan was for a single 500-page volume on his two presidential terms, but "the book kept growing in length and scope," leading to a decision "to break it into two volumes."

Yet even this large tome makes it no farther than the middle of Obama's third year in office (2011), ending dramatically with the deadly raid on Osama bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan. In a moving account in the book's penultimate paragraph, the president meets with the SEAL team that carried out the raid. He "shook hands with everyone in the room and presented the team with the Presidential Unit Citation, the highest award a military unit could receive." In return the team members surprised the president with an American flag they had taken on the raid, with all their signatures on the back. Then, on the helicopter ride back to the White House from Andrews Air Force Base, Obama observes how the Washington Monument "suddenly materialized on one side" and on the other he "could see the seated figure of Lincoln, shrouded in shadow behind the memorial's curved marble columns." Abraham Lincoln shadows Obama throughout the book, beginning on the second page of the Preface.

As its ending might suggest, the volume is quite effectively written, fast-paced (despite its length), and interesting throughout. In parts it is deeply personal and even charming, as when he writes of life with Michelle and their two daughters. Perhaps ironically, the Obamas saw more of each other—and in some ways had a more normal family life—during the eight years in the White House than when he served in the Illinois and U.S. Senates. When he wasn't traveling

as president, Obama typically began his day with a workout session with Michelle and a trainer in the White House gym, and he had dinner with his family each evening before getting the girls ready for bed. During Sasha's fourth-grade basketball season, Obama and Michelle went every Saturday morning to root from the bleachers with the other families. Obama and his "body man," Reggie Love, who had starred in basketball at Duke, even drew up plays and ran some practices. Eventually, the parents of competing teams complained about the special attention Sasha's team was getting and Obama "went back to just being a fan."

Oddly, and despite other evidence that the president treated his staff with respect, he seems callously indifferent to the effect that White House service had on the family lives of those who worked for him. Everybody was "sleep-deprived"; senior staff worked twelve-hour days and part of the weekend; spouses of staff were "overburdened and lonely"; and staff "missed their children's soccer games and dance recitals." But, "[f]olks knew what they signed up for when joining an administration. 'Work-life balance' wasn't part of the deal."

A *promised land* is mostly about the "[b]ig, bold [domestic] policies" that the administration pushed in its first two years, as well as a series of major foreign policy challenges the nation faced, including the war in Afghanistan, the Arab Spring, the crisis in Libya, and the hunt for bin Laden. But the most pressing problem the new administration faced in January 2009 was the financial crisis caused by the proliferation and securitization of sub-prime mortgages, resulting in a deep recession and stubbornly high unemployment. It was on domestic matters that the partisan divisions were sharpest and where Obama was most confident that he had the right answers to what ailed the economy and the nation.

It is no surprise that in his own account Obama comes across as he appeared to his fellow citizens during his eight years in office: an unabashed advocate of big government and big spending. Clearly, his hero is Franklin Roosevelt whose New Deal, according to the 44th president, "saved capitalism from itself," built "a thriving middle class," and helped businesses to "prosper and grow" through consumer protection laws. Yet even Roosevelt did not spend enough: "New Deal spending actually proved too modest to fully counteract the Great Depression." Obama vowed not to make the same mistake with his own stimulus package, which grew from a pre-election promise of $175 billion to over $800 billion. In the end, Obama proudly concludes, he had achieved "a recovery effort comparable in size to FDR's New Deal."

For Obama, this example illustrates "the modern social contract" that the advanced democracies had created in the 20th century. "As our society grew more complex, more and more of the government's function took the form of social insurance." We pay taxes "to protect ourselves collectively." Examples include disaster relief, unemployment insurance, Social Security, Medicare, and public schools. In the ex-president's telling, this vast expansion of government's role in our lives resulted only in good things and never bad. In a single generation and for most Americans, "life got better, safer, more prosperous, and more just."

Near the end of the book, in reflecting on the media coverage of the Democratic loss of 63 seats in the House of Representatives in the 2010 midterm election, Obama notes that some criticized him for trying "to resurrect the kind of big-spending, big-government liberalism that even Bill Clinton had pronounced dead years ago." Yet he doesn't deny the truth of the charge. The problem wasn't that he tried to do too much, but that he had "failed to rally the nation." Early on, Obama writes that "while I admired Bill Clinton, I didn't think he'd transformed politics the way Ronald Reagan had in the 1980s." But even transforming politics doesn't quite capture the full breadth of Obama's ambition, for, as he tells us more than once, his purpose as president was nothing less than to "transform the country."

> One expects better in a book that promises "an honest rendering of my time in office."

Clinton had come to national attention as a "New Democrat" who, in his first address to Congress, called for "end[ing] welfare as we know it" because it "trapped" too many people in a cycle of dependency. Even FDR had warned in his 1935 State of the Union Address that

> [t]he lessons of history, confirmed by the evidence immediately before me, show conclusively that continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.

Nowhere in his 700 pages does Obama suggest that big government might not simply be a good thing for those it purports to help. Can government not be too big, too expensive, too intrusive?

Of course, there are those who have had, and continue to have, deep reservations about the growth of government and its impact on human freedom. In a healthy democracy, one would see a lively debate between the two sides on the nature and purpose of modern big government, but, alas, this is apparently not the kind of democracy that Barack Obama cherishes. And the reason is that "[m]aintaining this social compact…required trust. It required that we see ourselves as bound together, if not as a family then at least as a community, each member worthy of concern and able to make claims on the whole." Because doubts about the value of big government necessarily undermine this trust, criticism must be portrayed not as a serious intellectual challenge that deserves to be engaged, but rather as cruel disregard for the needs of our fellow citizens, likely reflecting resentment and often racism.

The story that "someone else was getting something we weren't" and that "government couldn't be trusted to be fair," Obama writes, "had come to define the modern Republican Party." GOP candidates adopted this as "their central theme" and

> [i]t became the template for Fox News and conservative radio, the foundational text for every think tank and PAC the Koch Brothers financed. The government was taking money, jobs, college spots, and status away from hardworking, deserving people like *us* and handling it all to people like *them*—those who didn't share our values, who didn't work as hard as we did, the kind of people whose problems were of their own making [emphasis in the original].

Later we learn that "a big chunk of American voters had bought into the Republican idea that government was the problem and that business always knew better, and had elected leaders who made it their mission to gut environmental regulations, starve agency budgets, denigrate civil servants, and allow industrial polluters [to] do whatever the hell they wanted to do." Here we are in full campaign mode, with all the exaggerations and straw-man arguments that we have come to expect when high office is at stake in American politics. But is there a single Republican elected official in the country who wants to return to

the days when chemical factories could dump untreated waste in the nation's rivers or when there were no restrictions on the pollutants that factories, power plants, and automobiles could spew into the atmosphere? One expects better in a book that promises "an honest rendering of my time in office."

And so it goes. Richard Nixon "had determined that a politics of white racial resentment was the surest path to Republican victory." In the presidential campaign of 2008, Obama was not so much "running against Hillary Clinton or John Edwards or even the Republicans [as against] the implacable weight of the past; the inertia, fatalism, and fear it produced." If his supporters could make him "an outsized symbol of hope, then the vague fears of detractors could just as readily congeal into hate." Sarah Palin's appeal to Republicans in 2008 "was a sign of things to come, a larger, darker reality in which partisan affiliation and political expedience would threaten to blot out everything." A month before the election, she was "enthusiastically gassing [big crowds] with nativist bile." Through her, "it seemed as if the dark spirits that had long been lurking on the edges of the modern Republican Party—xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, paranoid conspiracy theories, and antipathy toward Black and brown folks—were finding their way to center stage." Rick Santelli, whose "lengthy on-air rant [on CNBC] on our housing plan" helped to launch the Tea Party movement, together with Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell and House Republican leader John Boehner all understood "how easily that anger could be channeled, how useful fear could be in advancing their cause."

Obama wonders aloud whether the Tea Party member who supports "states' rights" does so "because he genuinely thought it was the best way to promote liberty, or because he continued to resent how federal intervention had led to an end to Jim Crow, desegregation, and rising Black political power." And he wonders whether the "conservative activist [who] oppose[d] any expansion of the social welfare state" did so "because she believed it sapped individual initiative, or because she was convinced that it would benefit only brown people who'd just crossed the border?" Although Obama generously concedes that "I saw no way to sort out people's motives," he concludes that "[w]hatever my instincts might tell me, whatever truths the history books might suggest, I knew I wasn't going to win over any voters labeling my opponents racist." Translation: My instincts (and the truths of history) tell me that my opponents' principled arguments are merely a cover for their racist attitudes, but it would be politically unwise to say so publicly.

And finally, though not exhaustively, on one occasion Obama sent Vice President Joe Biden to Capitol Hill to negotiate with McConnell about an extension of the George W. Bush tax cuts. Although the president could have negotiated directly, he was aware "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."

When a former president writes a memoir, it is interesting to see what he includes and what he excludes. Even a thick book like this one, with about 200 pages per year of his presidency, cannot cover everything. A memoir gives the author an opportunity to respond to his critics and to explain his mistakes. To his credit, Obama addresses perhaps his most embarrassing public statement. When asked at a San Francisco fundraiser in 2008 why "so many working-class voters in Pennsylvania continued to vote against their interests and elect Republicans," he responded that "they get bitter; they cling to their guns and religion or antipathy toward people who aren't like them, or anti-immigrant sentiment, or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." We tend to remember the "guns and religion" line but not the "antipathy toward people who aren't like them."

So, now more than a decade later, how does he view his "guns and religion" gaffe? He says that he would take that sentence "and make a few simple edits." Here's the new version:

> So it's not surprising then that they get frustrated…and they look to the traditions and way of life that have been constants in their lives, whether it's their faith, or hunting, or blue-collar work, or more traditional notions of family and community. And when Republicans tell them we Democrats despise these things—or when we give these folks reason to believe that we do—then the best policies in the world don't matter to them.

This reads like a reverse example from Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* or George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language": take the vivid and concrete—clinging to their guns and religion—and replace it with abstractions. The revised version surely would have caused less offense. But note also that "antipathy to-

ward people who aren't like them," "anti-immigrant sentiment," and "anti-trade sentiment" have disappeared. After all, those working-class voters in Pennsylvania continue to have an outsized influence in presidential elections.

Perhaps the most obvious omission in Obama's account is any mention of his often-stated promise that under the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), "if you like your health care plan, you can keep it." PolitiFact documented more than 30 times in 2009-10 when the president, or people high up in his administration, made this promise to the American people. Yet for millions of Americans this turned out not to be true. In 2013, as the Affordable Care Act came online, PolitiFact designated the promise "Lie of the Year." "Lie" is a strong term. It implies that the administration set out intentionally to deceive the American people about the effects of its signature domestic policy initiative. Does Barack Obama have any explanation for this? *A Promised Land* does not mention his vow and the controversy it engendered. Obviously, intentionally deceiving the American people—if that's what happened here—is not a recipe for building trust in government. Early in the book, Obama notes that "[w]hether I liked it or not, people were moved by emotions, not facts." He goes on to say that to elicit the best emotions, it was necessary "to perform while still speaking the truth—that was the bar I needed to clear." Does Obama believe he cleared that bar in his rhetorical campaign to sell the Affordable Care Act?

During the 2008 campaign, Obama made much of the fact that he was a professor of constitutional law and, if elected, he would rein in executive excesses. As he told a Pennsylvania townhall,

> I taught constitutional law for 10 years, and I take the Constitution very seriously. The biggest problems that we are facing right now have to do with George Bush's trying to bring more and more power into the executive branch and not go through Congress at all; and that is what I intend to reverse when I am President of the United States of America.

So, how did Obama understand the constitutional constraints on his powers while he served? Unfortunately, there is no such reflection in this volume. Perhaps he is saving such thoughts for the next book, which will cover the six years when he faced Republican majorities in at least one of the two congressional chambers, frustrating his legislative initiatives and thus encouraging him to undertake unilateral executive actions.

Yet, perhaps his most constitutionally controversial exercise of foreign affairs and national security powers occurred in 2011 and is covered at some length here: the bombing of Muammer Gaddhafi's military forces in Libya in order to support those seeking to depose him. Prodded by several NATO allies to support a no-fly zone, Obama was initially "profoundly wary of ordering any kind of military action against Libya." Even the imposition of a no-fly zone "would require us to first fire missiles into Tripoli to destroy Libya's air defenses—a clear act of war against a country that posed no threat to us." Though he doesn't mention it, he knew, of course, that the Constitution gives Congress the power "To declare War." Though the exact meaning and reach of these three words have been debated for centuries, even such a vigorous proponent of presidential power as Alexander Hamilton conceded that under the U.S. Constitution only Congress can "actually transfer the nation from a state of peace to a state of hostility." In 2010, the U.S. was at peace with Libya, and, according to the president, it "posed no threat to us." Bombing Gaddhafi's air defenses would amount to an act of war.

As it turns out, Obama rejected the limited option of imposing a no-fly zone in favor of a more aggressive bombing campaign against Gaddhafi's ground forces. In recounting his decision-making, Obama does not mention any constitutional concerns. He seems simply to have assumed that he held independent authority to initiate hostilities against a foreign nation with which the United States was at peace and which posed no threat to the nation. (Later, not mentioned here, executive branch officials would defend the legality of the president's actions in documents sent to Congress.) Obama dismisses the subsequent constitutional concerns of some members of Congress by noting that "I'd met with senior congressional leaders on the eve of the campaign"—as if such a meeting could vest war powers in the president that the Constitution placed in Congress.

Although one key constitutional issue in the American system is the division of powers between Congress and the presidency, another broader issue is whether there are any constitutional limits on the powers of the national government at all, apart from violations of rights specified in the Constitution, Bill of Rights, and subsequent amendments. A novice studying American government who began with *A Promised Land* wouldn't learn that the national government is limited to certain enumerated powers or that ours is a federal system which reserves certain powers to the states. In what is perhaps the most chilling line in the book, Obama, addressing the healthcare debate, writes, "Politically and emotionally, I would've found it a lot more satisfying to just go after the drug and insurance companies and see if we could beat them into submission." What is remarkable, perhaps, is not so much that Obama and his people entertained using the full force of the federal government to beat legal corporate entities into submission, but that he would say so without embarrassment. Is this a constitutional democracy devoted to individual rights and the rule of law, or something much more sinister?

On October 29, 2019, at the Obama Foundation Summit in Chicago, the former president criticized those who believe that "the way of…making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people." "That's not activism," he continued. "That's not bringing about change…. If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far." There was, then, reason to hope that Obama's memoirs would promote respect for one's political opponents and reasoned discourse as essential to American democracy. Instead, cancel culture warriors and those who view America as irredeemably racist will find much in *A Promised Land* to support their views and to fuel their passions to remake the nation.

Late in the book, Obama records his most disquieting reflections on human character and the problems it poses for self-government:

> 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 morality 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.

What is one to conclude from this? That ours is a Manichean world, and that if you are not standing with the Left, then you are on the side of violence, greed, corruption, nationalism, racism, and religious intolerance? One can only hope that the next volume will reflect the better angels of Barack Obama's nature.

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