

The Early Evolution of Obama's Personal American Dream

By Arnold August, October 2011

As the title *Dreams from My Father* suggests, Obama uses his African heritage. At the same time, he goes beyond the importance of recognizing race by rejecting its importance, as expounded by African-American thinkers, whose life and work he had come across in the course of his evolution. Earlier in his life, Obama read Malcolm X's autobiography. He appeared to be influenced in a positive, yet ambivalent manner, as expressed in Obama's book: "[Malcolm X] seemed to offer something different... [He] spoke to me."¹ Referring to later on in his life, Obama writes that "ever since I picked up Malcolm X's autobiography, I had tried to untangle the twin strands of black nationalism ... [solidarity without hatred of whites]."² Obama wonders whether "nationalism could deliver" and sees the need for "effectiveness and 'action' as opposed to 'talk.'"³ At one point in his development, Obama makes a negative reference to Malcolm X's well-known theme distinguishing between "house Negroes and field Negroes." The former were those African-American slaves who worked in the house of the master to whom the slaves showed the utmost respect and gratitude in exchange for the relative comfort compared to the slave "field Negroes." They had to work fully as slaves to their death. Obama ridiculed this dichotomy as "one of Malcolm X's old saws" (saws meaning banality, platitude, trivia).⁴ On another occasion, also later on in his life, he went to a meeting to listen to Stokely Carmichael speak at Columbia University. Carmichael, later known as Kwame Touré, was a well-known, charismatic and revolutionary African-American leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and of the Black Panther Party. Obama left the meeting calling it a "bad dream" while also taking a swipe at Marxists who attended the event, selling literature.⁵ In his introduction to the second edition of the book, he ridicules those who are "wedded to lost hopes, like the Communists who peddle their newspapers."⁶ Regarding Obama's contact and response to the African-American heritage, there are several issues. At one point, he writes how his father was quite privileged taking into account the poor Kenyan village in which he was born. Obama's grandfather

had been a prominent farmer, an elder of the tribe,... [and Obama's father] grew up herding goats [and ... eventually] won a scholarship to study in Nairobi [and later] ... had been selected by Kenyan leaders and U.S. sponsors to

attend a university in the United States [University of Hawaii].⁷

However, later on in life when he was heading for the White House (and currently as well), he often refers to his father as a “goat-herder” and his grandfather as a “cook, a domestic servant to the British.”⁸ Regarding his experience with Malcolm X, an academic specialist points out that the

initial appreciation and eventual dismissal of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* makes sense because they allow him to claim the text as part of his literary ancestry while simultaneously providing him with a foil against which he can establish his post-black nationalist position on race.⁹

The same applies to his rejection of Stokely Carmichael. If one adds to this his opposition to left-wing trends of thought (a key series of buzzwords required in order to be accepted by the U.S. establishment), one can see how his initial orientation has been evolving right from the beginning. Regarding Obama’s father and grandfather, one important issue is that he later gives the impression that his family heritage in Africa is poverty, while he himself writes that his grandfather was relatively privileged and had ties to the colonial regime. Stein notices that, by describing his grandfather as a “cook, a domestic servant to the British,”¹⁰ this “allows him to claim a family history of servitude even though he has no slave ancestors.”¹¹ Obama in his book also points out that his grandfather was a fervent believer in the American Dream. In his book, he narrates the story that he had heard about his father at a local bar in Hawaii. His father was insulted by a customer who said out loud for everyone to hear that he would not have a drink sitting

next to a nigger. The room fell quiet [Obama continues in his book] and people turned to my father, expecting a fight. Instead, my father stood up, walked over to the man, smiled, and proceeded to lecture him about the folly of bigotry, the promise of the American dream, and the universal rights of man.¹²

Right from the beginning, as an old friend of Obama's father told Obama and as narrated in his book, rather than "romanticize Africa ... when your father and I were young, it was just the opposite — we expected to find all answers in America."¹³ Obama's upbringing and his relatively superior socio-economic situation (compared to the vast majority of African-Americans) saved him, even though he admittedly violated the U.S. drug laws and was a consumer. However, as Alexander pointed out,

no doubt if Obama had been arrested and treated like a common criminal, he could have served years in prison and been labelled a drug felon for life. What are the chances he would have gone to Harvard Law School, much less become president of the United States, if that had happened?¹⁴

"What if he hadn't been insulated by growing up in Hawaii and attending a predominantly white university — where would he be now?"¹⁵

Obama's relationship to the Reverend Jeremiah Wright began soon after Obama decided that he wanted to be a community organizer in Chicago as he sought out contacts that could help him. Two people suggested Reverend Wright.¹⁶ He then attended his church service and was impressed by the Reverend's sermon "The Audacity of Hope." Obama concluded that "in that single note — hope — I heard something else.... I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath.... Those stories — of survival and freedom, and hope — became our story, my story."¹⁷ As interpreted by Stein, it represents "this audacity of hope for a better future against the odds and the belief in America's arc of history."¹⁸ This author would add that, by interpreting the sermon as "my story," Obama sees the audacity of hope in the arc of the American Dream for an individual — and not the collective liberation of African-Americans. His own individual interests clashed with the collective when, mid-stream into the electoral campaign for president, he decided to disown and publicly renounce Reverend Wright. This occurred once a video clip was made public in which Wright replaced "God Bless America" with "God Damn America" because of what the Reverend felt about U.S. injustices carried out both domestically and internationally through wars. Once Wright had served Obama's purpose in beginning his Chicago career, he was unceremoniously discarded. Regarding Obama's interpretation of his sermon as being very much "my story," Alexander, in

referring to Obama's success in becoming president, asks "Have we unwittingly exaggerated the importance of individuals succeeding within pre-existing structures of power, and thus undermining [Martin Luther] King's call for a 'complete restructuring' of our society?"¹⁹ The civil rights lawyer brings this to a further conclusion by bringing to the attention of African-Americans and others that "all eyes are fixed on people like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey who have defied the odds and achieved great power, fame and fortune."²⁰

As far as other influences in Obama's life, there is Martin Luther King Jr. However, Obama's complete distortion of this important figure for his own individual political ambitions is one of the most repulsive acts of self-serving disinformation. Suffice it to take one example that tells it all. In his book, Obama mentions King on many occasions, but never his position on the war in Vietnam. King took a courageous stand on April 4, 1967, and publicly declared his position against the U.S. war in that country. He (prophetically, looking at it from the perspective of 2011) gave many reasons. It is enough for the moment to cite very briefly three of the seven reasons he gives:

[Firstly] It seems as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor — both black and white — through the poverty program.... Then came the buildup in Vietnam.... [Secondly, the war] was sending their [poor] sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and die in extraordinary high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem. So we watch them [black and white boys] in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they will never live in the same block in Detroit. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor. [Thirdly, he referred to the U.S. government as] ... the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.²¹

Martin Luther King was never co-opted during his lifetime. Since his assassination, the "military-industrial complex" and U.S. presidents before President Obama have co-opted King as one of "theirs." King always put the collective first, not only African-Americans, but all poor people, before his own personal interests.

Pure individual presidential opportunism rears its head in the most grotesque form by the manner in which Obama completely converts the King legacy into its very opposite for his own advancement and agenda. The author has read virtually all of the Obama speeches and writings, and not once has he expressed any sympathy at all for the Vietnamese people resulting from the war. On the contrary, as will be shown below, every occasion is used to send the “Vietnam” buzzword as a code to the “military–industrial complex” that he is fully faithful to the global ambitions of the ruling circle. In U.S. politics (and elsewhere in the world), the war in Vietnam represents the line that has been drawn in the sand between, on the one hand, progress and peace and, on the other hand, war and atrocities. Obama’s re-creation of Martin Luther King to serve his own ambitions constitutes one of the most vulgar applications of co-optation in the history of U.S. presidential politics. This recuperation of King, combined with individual personal presidential aspirations, is at the very heart of the U.S.-type of multi-party democracy. To be blinded by illusions about this political system derives from Eurocentric prejudices regarding the U.S. political format’s superiority. These delusions also draw from the Eurocentric predisposition to accept the system as the only option available. Instead of looking at the reality regarding what Obama had written and said from the earliest moments in his career and later, his declarations are either purposely or innocently overlooked. To act in this manner betrays a desire (intentional or not) to justify the inclination that the two-party competitive system is, in fact, competitive between opposing programs and can actually bring about change in favour of the majority. These are, unfortunately, fantasies not succeeding in bursting through the cobwebs of confusion to the extent that one would prefer.

Obama’s second book, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, was requested by the same publisher as his first book, Crown Publishers, and released in 2006, once again with a book promotion by appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. This launching took place a year after he was elected to the U.S. Senate from Illinois; it thus came right after the eight years in the Illinois State Legislature where, as he wrote in the foreword to this book, “I had gotten some taste of how the game had come to be played.”²² A civil rights organizer and contributor to *Black News*, Kevin Alexander Gray, writes, “It comes as no surprise that [the book] is a *New York Times* bestseller. The book arrives amidst the hype of an upcoming and wide-open presidential race [and] the collective angst over the country moving in the wrong direction.” The former president of the South Carolina American Civil Liberties Union, Gray goes on to write that he vowed to read the book in an open mind without

the “Oprah-tainted, media-hyped preconception of Barack Obama.” The book, he writes, “plays on the creation of a Kennedy-like mystique.”²³ The second Obama book is a continuation of the first in that it exposed his personal political ambitions and further refined the co-optation strategy so necessary for success in presidential political races. In this book, he more directly addresses the “military–industrial” complex (even though he does not mention it as such) indicating that he is the person to “reclaim the American Dream” for this elite and thus one can conclude, capable of thwarting any revolt by the people. He answers to Brzezinski’s concern about credibility in the world, writing that U.S. foreign policies “undermine our credibility.”²⁴ Obama writes about the “disastrous consequences” of Vietnam “for our credibility.”²⁵ The Bush administration with its Iraq policy was “missing an opportunity to build broad-based support for its policies.”²⁶ For the same reason, he “could not support” the Iraq war because (quoting from his own speech on the Iraq war) it was a “dumb war” carried out “without strong international support,” and resulting in “anti-American sentiment” on the rise.²⁷ Obama writes that he is in favour, unlike the Bush Iraq war policy, of the need for “a well-articulated strategy that the public supports and the world understands,” without which “America will lack the legitimacy.”²⁸ The Bush policy has “produced a much bigger backlash” at home against the war.²⁹ It “fans anti-American sentiment among Muslims.”³⁰ There is a need for “legitimacy” to obtain “global buy-in,” that is “legitimacy” in order to bring in other powers, thus allowing a “lighter load” for the U.S.³¹ Obama then deals with the concern also expressed by Brzezinski regarding Latin America, especially Venezuela and Cuba. Obama pleads for the need to reduce poverty abroad, otherwise “as the argument goes, other countries should resist America’s efforts to expand its hegemony; instead they should follow their own path to development, taking the lead of left-leaning populists like Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez.”³² “To win the hearts and minds of people in Caracas ... we’ll have to make sure the international rules we’re promoting enhance, rather than impede people’s sense of material and personal security,”³³ giving as an example some newspapers in Indonesia reporting that, as a result of aid, this gave the majority “a more favorable view of the United States.”³⁴ Obama states, “I believe critics are wrong to think that the world’s poor will benefit by rejecting the ideals of free markets and liberal democracy.” He then offers his view whereby “many in Cuba wouldn’t mind giving Miami a try [for free markets and liberal democracy].”³⁵ One of Obama’s approaches to foster credibility is the challenge that he puts to himself: “I often wonder what makes it so difficult for politicians to talk about values in ways that don’t *appear* calculated or

phony”³⁶ (emphasis added). However, is the issue really appearing calculated or phony or being calculated or phony?

While Obama is pledging his ambition to pursue the same U.S. policy but adorning it with some credibility, he attempts to put himself forward as someone being progressive and against foreign aggression. He recognizes that, at the very beginning of U.S. history, the Thirteen Colonies were involved in expansion toward the West and further beyond its shores with the suppression of the Indigenous peoples. He also reserves some words to say against slavery, declaring that all of this “tended to be justified in racist terms.” However, he claims that these events and policies “have contradicted America’s founding principles.”³⁷ It should be taken into account that (as shown in Chapter 2) slavery, expansion and suppression of the Indigenous peoples were at the very basis and *raison d’être* of the Declaration of Independence, the Founding Fathers and the Constitution. Obama then goes on to provide presidents Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delanor Roosevelt and others as examples of “an acceptance of America’s power with a humility regarding America’s ability to control events around the world.”³⁸ These illusions about U.S. foreign policy are covered with a very thin disguise, as Obama leaves the door wide open for the type of policy that he says “contradicts” the “principles” of the Founding Fathers. This emerges when he writes that (concerning the current era) “there will be times when we [U.S.] must again play the role of the world’s reluctant sheriff. This will not change nor should it.” He adds that the U.S. “will need a somewhat higher budget in the immediate future ... growing the size of our armed forces ... boots on the ground.”³⁹ Even in his previous comments cited above with regard to forming coalitions with other countries in order to recover credibility internationally, he writes that, while it is

preferable to have support of our allies ... [and] international consensus ... the United States, like all sovereign nations, has the unilateral right to defend itself against attack.... And [in reference to Afghanistan] ... if we have to go it alone, then the American people will pay any price and bear any burden to protect our country.⁴⁰

In Obama’s first book, he pledges to the U.S. ruling circles that he is against the left or really being progressive. This is further developed in the second book when he dangles the ruse to the progressive and left votes that he felt himself having “a curious relationship to the sixties ... from his own investigation [seeing

that he did not live through it because of his age and that] if I had no immediate reasons to pursue revolution, I decided nevertheless that in style and attitude I, too, could be a rebel.”⁴¹ He appears to be appealing, on the one hand, to the liberals, progressives and the left while, on the other hand, assuring the ruling elite that this plea only serves as a façade. What he means by “style and attitude” seems to be more “for appearance’s sake” as he later compares some of the 1960s “New Left’s leaders ... with the new vanguard of the right [both of whom] viewed politics as a contest not just between competing policy visions, but between good and evil.”⁴² Obama seeks in this way the support of the “liberals ... who see in Iraq a repeat of the mistakes America made in Vietnam.” Yet, he advertises his fidelity to traditional U.S. foreign policy when he declares on the very next page that “the objectives favored by liberals have merit. But they hardly constitute a coherent national security policy.”⁴³

As Obama was in contact with different political forces, his barely veiled opposition to the progressive, or what he calls “liberal forces,” is consolidated by his assurance that he has a lot in common with the Republicans. For example, he reveals that, after work in the Illinois Senate, he would “partner up with even my most conservative colleagues to work on a piece of legislation, and after a poker game or a beer we might conclude that we had more in common than we publicly cared to admit.” He added that, once elected as a Senator to the Congress in Washington (2004), he was impressed by the potential “cordiality” between conservatives and liberals, between Republicans and Democrats. He also noticed approvingly that the anticommunism of the Republicans was matched by that of John F. Kennedy “whenever an election rolled around.” Obama advocated the need for “serious debate ... with Republicans.”⁴⁴

There is no need to provide any more examples because this compassion for placing Democrats and Republicans on a virtual even level is revealed even in a more stark fashion with regard to other influences in his life, for example President Ronald Reagan’s 1980 election: “I understood his appeal... Reagan spoke to America’s longing for order, our belief that we are not simply subject to blind, impersonal forces ... so long as we rediscover the traditional virtues of hard work, patriotism.”⁴⁵ Obama’s days at Columbia and in Chicago as a community organizer provide an indication of an important contradiction: on the one hand, there was a growing cleavage between Obama and the left — and even the liberals and progressives — and, on the other hand, how he related quite comfortably to Ronald Reagan. This is illustrated in the following:

Like many Democrats in those days I bemoaned the effect of Reagan's policies towards the Third World [Obama lists support for South Africa's apartheid regime, funding of El Salvador's death squads, invasion of Grenada].... But at times, in arguments with some of my friends on the left, I would find myself in the curious position of defending aspects of Reagan's world view.... I might have arguments with the size of Reagan's military buildup,... but ... staying ahead of the Soviets' military seemed the sensible thing to do. Pride in our country, respect for our armed services.... I had no quarrel with Reagan.⁴⁶

The subtitle of the book, "Reclaiming the American Dream," and Obama's many references to Martin Luther King Jr. and his most well-known speech, "I Have a Dream," merit a comment. King also spoke about the American Dream. However, what did King say about this concept? Is it in any way similar to that of Obama? Just as both Obama and King exhibit diametrically opposite positions on war in Vietnam, so it is in this case regarding the Dream. For example, in a 1961 speech relatively early in his political life as he was still developing his ideas, King said in "The American Dream" address "America is a dream, a dream as yet unfulfilled.... We have proudly professed the principles of democracy and, on the other hand, we have sadly practiced the very antithesis of those principles."⁴⁷ He said later on: "The Declaration of Independence was always a declaration of intent rather than reality."⁴⁸ In the "I Have a Dream" address in the August 28, 1963, March on Washington for civil rights, while King enunciated his dream for a new America without racism, a movement to be spearheaded by people of all origins, he said that in order to arrive at this point, to realize this dream, one should not rely on the "tranquilizing drug of gradualism.... [While, on the other hand, by favouring non-violence,] the whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation."⁴⁹ As King evolved and became increasingly radical, his views enunciated in his 1967 seminal address against the war in Vietnam are worthy of note. Referring to what a U.S. official had said, King responded

it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution ... and that I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.⁵⁰

The point is that King was first and foremost involved in struggle, albeit peaceful. His views and actions in the 1960s are diametrically opposite to how Obama argued against his leftist friends — and in favour of Reagan — as quoted from Obama’s book above.

Obama claims his convenient version of King’s heritage for himself in both of his books. After his election, he continues along the same lines. For example, in his acceptance speech for winning the Nobel Peace Prize, he refers to himself being elected as the first African-American president as “someone who stands here as a direct consequence of Dr. King’s life’s work.”⁵¹

¹ Obama, Barack. 2004. *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. NY: Three Rivers Press, p. 86.

² Ibid., p. 197–98.

³ Ibid., p. 197–203.

⁴ Ibid., p. 117.

⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

⁶ Ibid., p. xv.

⁷ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸ Washington Post. 2004. “Keynote Address to the Democratic National Convention.” (July 27). At <<http://washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A19751-2004Jul27?language=printer>>.

⁹ Stein, Daniel. 2011. “Barack Obama’s Dreams From My Father and African American Literature.” *European Journal of American Studies*, 1:2011, p. 5.

¹⁰ Washington Post, op. cit.

¹¹ Stein, op. cit., p. 4.

¹² Obama. 2004, op. cit., p. 11.

¹³ Ibid., p. 433.

¹⁴ Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. NY: The New Press, 6, 9, p. 239.

¹⁵ ———. 2010. “The New Jim Crow.” LA Progressive (February 17). At <<http://laprogressive.com/rankism/jim-crow/>>.

¹⁶ Obama. 2004, op. cit., p. 274, 278.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 292–94.

¹⁸ Stein, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁹ Alexander, op. cit., p. 241.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 175.

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- ²¹ King, Martin Luther, Jr. 1991a. "A Time to Break Silence." In James M. Washington (ed.), *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* NY: Harper Collins, p. 232–34.
- ²² Obama. 2006. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. NY: Vintage, p. 2.
- ²³ Gray, Kevin Alexander. 2008. "Waiting for Lightning to Strike: The Fundamentals of Black Politics." *CounterPunch*. Petrolia, California, p. 185–86, 189.
- ²⁴ Obama. 2006, op. cit., p. 31.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 339.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 347.
- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 348–59.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 357.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 358.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 364.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 366.
- ³² Ibid., p. 372.
- ³³ Ibid., p. 375.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 382.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 373.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 77.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 331–32.
- ³⁸ Ibid., p. 333–36.
- ³⁹ Ibid., p. 362–63.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 364.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 38–39.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 41.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 358–59.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 22, 93, 31–32, 34.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 38–39.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 341–42.
- ⁴⁷ King Jr. 1991b. "The American Dream." Address on June 6, 1961, James M. Washington (ed.), p. 208.
- ⁴⁸ ———. 1991c. "A Testament of Hope." Address on August 28, 1963, James M. Washington (ed.), p. 315.
- ⁴⁹ ———. 1991d. "I Have a Dream." Address on August 28, 1963, James M. Washington (ed.), p. 218.
- ⁵⁰ ———. 1991a, op. cit., p. 240.

⁵¹ Obama. 2009. "Remarks by the President at the Acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize." Oslo, Norway. White House (December 10). At <<http://whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-acceptance-nobel-peace-prize>>.