How he did it

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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The "real" Barack Obama is hard to unearth.

The son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, Barack Obama lived in Indonesia, one of the world's poorest nations, and then attended some of the finest schools in the United States. A community organizer, law professor and relatively inexperienced politician, he had the audacity to hope that he could become America's first black president.

Acknowledging that "it is preposterously early for a definitive, scholarly biography," David Remnick, the editor of The New Yorker, draws on hundreds of interviews to explain how Obama did it.

Informative, artful and admiring, The Bridge sets Obama's political career in the context of the racially charged politics of Chicago, providing a richly detailed account of his work for the Developing Communities Project on the South Side; his tenure in the Illinois State Senate; his disastrous campaign to unseat Congressman (and former Black Panther) Bobby Rush in 2000; the sex scandals that destroyed his rivals for a seat in the US Senate four years later; and his stormy relationship with Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

Remnick portrays Obama as "a black without the torment." A member of the post-civil rights "Joshua generation," Obama clearly identifies himself as an African-American. And yet, Remnick points out, he rarely referred explicitly to race on the stump in 2008 and, whenever possible, avoided joint appearances with "radioactive blacks" like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton.

Willing and able to address racial issues with dispassion as well as commitment, Obama enhanced his appeal to white voters by suggesting that anger about past and present discrimination was counterproductive. And he deftly transformed the struggle for black rights into a struggle about the unfinished American quest for justice across racial, religious, class and generational lines.

Remnick's Obama, it is important to note, bears no relationship to the "socialist" demon (who "palled around with terrorists") conjured up by Republican politicians, right-wing talk show hosts, and Tea Party protesters. Obama voted with the Democratic Party more than 95 percent of the time, earning the rating of "most liberal" from the relatively nonpartisan National Journal. Nonetheless, Remnick demonstrates persuasively that Obama "was never remotely a radical." In domestic and foreign policy, he has been "a gradualist – liberal in spirit, cautious in nature." Skeptical about ideology, he has made "a rhetoric of common ground" and a liberalism of flexibility, conciliation and compromise "the dominant strains of his political personality."

Obama's pragmatism, Remnick agrees, albeit rather reluctantly, makes it hard to identify his fundamental principles – and what he's passionate about. And it frustrates many of his colleagues on the Left. Even Obama's mentor, Harvard Law professor Laurence Tribe, cannot specify "what his presuppositions are, other than that the country stands for ideals of fairness, decency, mutual concern and the frame of reference that is established by our founding and the critical turning points of the Civil War and the New Deal."
The “real” Obama is hard to find in his policy pronouncements and meager record of legislative accomplishments. Before he was sworn in as a US senator in 2004, Remnick writes, Michelle Obama, the “true voice of sustained humility” in Obama’s life, regarded the air of expectation that surrounded her husband, following his brilliant keynote address at the Democratic presidential convention, with “a bracingly astringent bemusement.” Perhaps one day, she observed, “he will do something to warrant all this attention.”

In his three years as an active senator, it’s clear, he didn’t. Obama was bored with the “torpid pace” of the Senate, his office in Washington “unlived in.” He told aides that he was frustrated by the limited time spent on creative and constructive policy debates. More importantly, Remnick suggests, he was getting ready to run for president and realized that crafting legislation, casting votes and defending them, as Robert Dole and John Kerry had, would actually make it harder “to present himself as a candidate for change.”

Throughout 2008, Remnick observes, shrewdly, it was hard for Obama – or any in his entourage – “to acknowledge that governing would be far different from campaigning, a switch from poetry to prose, from celebration and adulation to battle and compromise, even defeat.”

But, as they should have known, it has been a very rough ride for their administration. Thanks, in no small measure, to persistent unemployment, the restless impatience of the electorate, a Republican Party more interested in winning than in governing and his own unwillingness or inability to seize the initiative, substantively and rhetorically, President Obama’s popularity – and the nation’s “Yes We Can” optimism – have plummeted.

It’s premature, of course, to conclude that Obama will be a one-term president. After all, several of his predecessors, including Ronald Reagan, survived recessions early in their tenure and won reelection.

If he’s to stage a comeback, however, he’ll have to persuade the American people, who really aren’t all that ideological, that he is the man David Remnick believes he can be: an inspirational leader who can get things done. And he’ll have to be lucky. Damned lucky.

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