'Obama on the Couch,' by Justin A. Frank: review
Glenn C. Altschuler, Special to The Chronicle
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Obama on the couch
Inside the mind of the president

By justin a. frank, m.d.

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Just about every American, psychiatrist Justin Frank reminds us, "has his or her own personal Obama." The president is - or was - an agent of change, a healer of political and racial divisions, a dove. He is an anti-American monster, who cavorts with terrorists, wasn't even born here, and hates whites. He is "no-drama Obama." He has enacted a radical socialist agenda. He has betrayed the progressive values of the people who elected him. He is too aggressive. He is too passive.

In "Obama on the Couch," Frank argues that the president's performance in office has been shaped "not only by political preferences but by idiosyncratic unconscious factors that he himself does not recognize," especially the challenges of growing up as the mixed-race child of a nurturing (and perhaps naively idealistic) white mother and an absent black father.

According to Frank, Obama's "pathological accommodation" to right-wing Republicans has its roots in his failure "to allow himself to feel his rage" at Barack Obama Sr. or to "own his aggression" against the beloved Stanley Ann Dunham for abandoning him as well. Caught in an "unconscious repetition compulsion," a need to relive "the conflict and pain he felt as a child," he transfers his anger onto his followers, "putting them in the role of little Barry," in the hope of a different outcome.

An Obama supporter whose ardor has cooled, Frank is not the president's therapist. Since he cannot use the fundamental tools of his clinical practice - transference (the patient's thoughts and feelings about the analyst) and countertransference (the analyst's thoughts and feelings about the patient) - Frank employs applied psychoanalysis, based on his reading of Obama's political speeches and his elegant and emotion-laden memoir, "Dreams From My Father."

"Obama on the Couch" is, to put it mildly, highly speculative. Insufficiently attentive to the evolving political realities Obama confronts, including the rise of the Tea Party and Republican control of the House of Representatives, Frank does not really help us understand his smart, complex and often frustratingly elusive subject.
Awash in cocksure and at times cockamamie diagnoses, "Obama on the Couch" does not do credit to applied psychoanalysis. Obama certainly has engaged in the "preemptive appeasement" of political rivals on health care, the debt ceiling and tax cuts. But it is a stretch - a big stretch - to claim that the president has an "obsessive bipartisan disorder," repeated compulsively, that is "a reaction formation against murderous desires."

It is an even greater stretch to conclude that Obama was able to force himself to order Navy SEALs to take out Osama bin Laden by driving out the worldview of his mother, who was able to see the good in everyone, and responding, albeit subconsciously, to a terrorist mastermind who embodied some of his father's "most hateful attributes": Osama was exotic, dark and seductive; "made surprise, unexpected, but destructive visits; was impossible to find, get hold of, or track down; he didn't listen; he didn't care whom he hurt."

The "biggest question" in Obama's life, Frank proclaims, may well be what makes the white in him "so afraid of, detached from, and even hateful toward the black." In putting together his economic team, Frank asserts, Obama aligned himself with "less compelling father figures" - Paul Volcker, Timothy Geithner and Ben Bernanke - because they share the confidence and narcissism of Barack Sr. and because, like Lolo Soetoro, Obama's stepfather, they ended up (in a sense) "working for the oil companies rather than for the people he had once championed." And Frank even tells us, for no particular reason, that John Edwards' speeches about two Americas during his unsuccessful campaigns in 2004 and 2008 revealed that "he was unconsciously far more concerned about protecting his own double life than lamenting his nation's."

Childhood experiences, for Barack Obama and everyone else, surely are formative and foundational. Frank may be right, for example, that the president learned as a kid to affect a calm exterior to hide from himself and from others.

Nonetheless, Obama's behavior in office and his public persona, it seems to me, should not be divorced from their situation-specific, tactical and strategic contexts. The bin Laden mission, which occurred when "Obama on the Couch" was just about finished, it is worth noting, sent Frank back to the drawing board. And if the president spends the next 13 months running against a "Just say no" Republican Congress, I predict that Frank will revisit, revise and retreat.

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