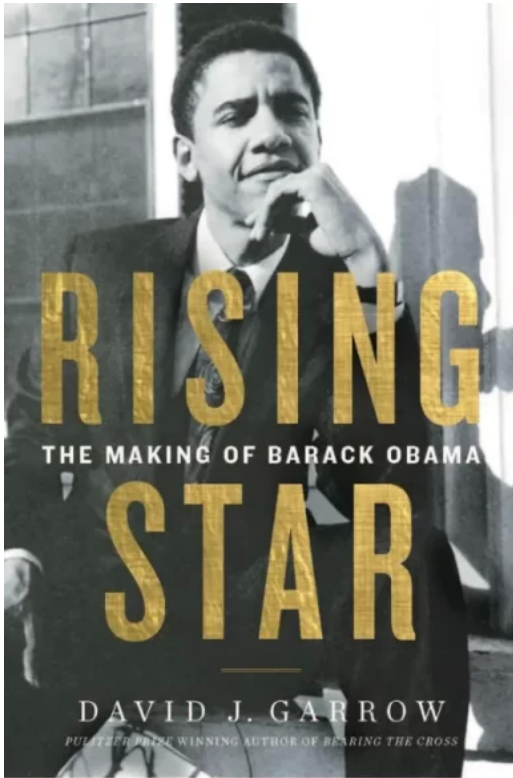


The Obama Factor



David Samuels interviews Obama biographer David Garrow in [Tablet](#):

There is a fascinating passage in *Rising Star*, David Garrow's comprehensive biography of Barack Obama's early years, in which the historian examines Obama's account in *Dreams from My Father* of his breakup with his longtime Chicago girlfriend, Sheila Miyoshi Jager. In *Dreams*, Obama describes a passionate disagreement following a play by African American playwright August Wilson, in which the young protagonist defends his incipient embrace of Black racial consciousness against his girlfriend's white-identified liberal universalism. As readers, we know that the stakes of this decision would become more than simply personal: The Black American man that Obama wills into being in this scene would go on to marry a Black woman from the South Side of Chicago named Michelle Robinson and, after a meteoric rise, win election as the first Black president of the United States.

Yet what Garrow documented, after tracking down and interviewing Sheila Miyoshi Jager, was an explosive fight over a very different subject. In Jager's telling, the quarrel that ended the couple's relationship was not about Obama's self-identification as a Black man. And the impetus was not a play about the American Black experience, but an exhibit at Chicago's Spertus Institute about the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann.

At the time that Obama and Sheila visited the Spertus Institute, Chicago politics was being roiled by a Black mayoral aide named Steve Cokely who, in a series of lectures organized by Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam, accused Jewish doctors in Chicago of infecting Black babies with AIDS as part of a genocidal plot against African Americans. The episode highlighted a deep rift within the city's power echelons, with some prominent Black officials supporting Cokely and others calling for his firing.

In Jager's recollection, what set off the quarrel that precipitated the end of the couple's relationship was Obama's stubborn refusal, after seeing the exhibit, and in the swirl of this Cokely affair, to condemn Black racism. While acknowledging that Obama's embrace of a Black identity had created some degree of distance between the couple, she insisted that what upset her that day was Obama's inability to condemn Cokely's comments. It was not Obama's Blackness that bothered her, but that he would not condemn antisemitism.

No doubt, Obama's evolving race-based self-consciousness did distance him from Jager; in the end, the couple broke up. Yet it is revealing to read Obama's account of the breakup in *Dreams* against the very different account that Jager offers. In Obama's account, he was the particularist, embracing a personal meaning for the Black experience that Jager, the universalist, refused to grant. In Jager's account, the poles of the argument are nearly, but not quite, reversed: It is Obama who appears to minimize Jewish anxiety about blood

libels coming from the Black community. His particularism mattered; hers didn't. While Obama defined himself as a realist or pragmatist, the episode reads like a textbook evasion of moral responsibility.

Whose version of the story is correct? Who knows. The bridge between the two accounts is Obama's emerging attachment to Blackness, which required him to fall in love with and marry a Black woman. In Obama's account, his attachment to Blackness is truthful and noble. In Jager's account, his claims are instrumental and selfish; he grants particularism to the experience and suffering of his own tribe while denying it to others.

In evaluating the truthfulness of these two competing accounts, it seems worth noting that Jager is something more than a woman scorned by a man who would later become president of the United States. Obama asked her to marry him twice; she refused him both times, before going on to achieve her own high-level professional successes. A student of the great University of Chicago anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, Jager is a professor of East Asian Studies at Oberlin College whose scholarship on great power politics in Southeast Asia and the U.S.-Korean relationship is known for its factual rigor. In contrast, *Dreams from My Father*, as Garrow shows throughout *Rising Star*, is as much a work of dreamy literary fiction as it is an attempt to document Obama's early life.

Scholarship aside, there is another reason to assume that Jager would be less likely to misremember an incident involving race and antisemitism than Obama. As it turns out, Jager's paternal grandparents, Hendrik and Geesje Jager, were members of the Dutch resistance, whose role sheltering a Jewish child named Greetje in their home for three years led to [their recognition](#) as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem. In that context, at least, it seems quite likely that Jager would remember the particulars of a fight with Obama related to antisemitism, and be turned off by his

response—while Obama’s version of the fight has the feel of an anecdote positioned, if not invented, to buttress the character arc of the protagonist of his memoir, which in turn positioned him for a career in public life.

Perhaps the most revealing thing about Jager’s account of her fight with Obama, though, is that not one reporter in America bothered to interview her before David Garrow found her, near the end of Obama’s presidency. As Obama’s live-in girlfriend and closest friend during the 1980s, Jager is probably the single most informed and credible source about the inner life of a young man whose election was accompanied by hopes of sweeping, peaceful social change in America—a hope that ended with the election of Donald Trump, or perhaps midway through Obama’s second term, as the president focused on the Iran deal while failing to address the concerns about rampant income inequality, racial inequality, and the growth of a monopoly tech complex that happened on his watch.

The idea that the celebrated journalists who wrote popular biographies of Obama and became enthusiastic members of his personal clique couldn’t locate Jager—or never knew who she was—defies belief. It seems more likely that the character Obama fashioned in *Dreams* had been defined—by Obama—as being beyond the reach of normal reportorial scrutiny. Indeed, Garrow’s biography of Obama’s early years is filled with such corrections of a historical record that Obama more or less invented himself. Based on years of careful record-searching and patient interviewing, *Rising Star* highlights a remarkable lack of curiosity on the part of mainstream reporters and institutions about a man who almost instantaneously was treated less like a politician and more like the idol of an inter-elite cult.

Yet when it came out six years ago, *Rising Star* was mostly ignored; as a result, its most scandalous and perhaps revelatory passages, such as Obama’s long letter to another girlfriend about his fantasies of having sex with men, read

today, to people who are more familiar with the Obama myth than the historical record, like partisan bigotry. But David Garrow is hardly a hack whose work can or should be dismissed on partisan grounds. He is among the country's most credible and celebrated civil rights historians—the author of *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.* and *Bearing the Cross* (which won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography) and one of the three historian-consultants who animated the monumental PBS documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, as well as the author of a landmark history of abortion rights, *Liberty and Sexuality*.

In part, Garrow's failure to gain a hearing for his revision of the Obama myth lay in his timing. *Rising Star* felt like old news the moment it was published in May 2017—as whatever insights the book contained were overtaken by the fury and chaos surrounding the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency. As Trump's incendiary carnival barker act took center stage, it was hard even for Republicans not to miss the contrast with Obama's cerebral mannerisms and sedate family life. The idea that Obama was simply another self-obsessed political knife-fighter who played fast and loose with the truth didn't resonate. In any case, Obama was now a footnote to history—a reminder of kinder, gentler times that the country seemed unlikely to see again anytime soon.

Yet there was also evidence to suggest that the idea Obama was no longer concerned with power or involved with power was itself part of a new set of myths being woven by and around the ex-president. First, the Obamas never left town. Instead, they bought a large brick mansion in the center of Washington's Kalorama neighborhood—violating a norm governing the transfer of presidential power which has been breached only once in post-Civil War American history, by Woodrow Wilson, who couldn't physically be moved after suffering a series of debilitating strokes. In the Obamas case, the reason for staying in D.C. was ostensibly that their youngest daughter, Sasha, wanted to finish high school with her class

at Sidwell Friends. In June 2019, Sasha went off to college, yet her parents remained in Washington.

By then, it was clear to any informed observer that the Obamas' continuing presence in the nation's capital was not purely a personal matter. To an extent that has never been meaningfully reported on, the Obamas served as both the symbolic and practical heads of the Democratic Party shadow government that "resisted" Trump—another phenomenon that defied prior norms. The fact that these were not normal times could be adduced by even a passing glance at the front pages of the country's daily newspapers, which were filled with claims that the 2016 election had been "stolen" by Russia and that Trump was a Russian agent.

Given the stakes, then, it seemed churlish to object to the Obamas' quiet family life in Kalorama—or to report on the comings and goings of Democratic political operatives and office-seekers from their mansion, or to the swift substitution of Obama as party leader for Hillary Clinton, who after all was the person who had supposedly been cheated out of the presidency. Why even mention the strangeness of the overall setup, which surely paled next to the raw menace of Donald Trump, who lurched from one crisis to the next while lashing out at his enemies and probably selling out the country to Vladimir Putin?

In a normal country, the exhaustive report issued in April 2019 by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, which uncovered no evidence that the 2016 election had been decided by Russian actions, let alone that Trump was a Russian agent, might have been a cue for the Obamas to go home, to Chicago, or Hawaii, or Martha's Vineyard. The moment of crisis was over. Russiagate turned out to have been a politically motivated hoax, just as Trump had long insisted.

But while the attention of Republicans in Washington turned to questioning the FBI, more careful observers could not fail to

notice that the FBI had hardly acted alone. After all, Russiagate had not originated with the Bureau, but with the Clinton campaign, which having failed to get even sympathetic mainstream media outlets like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* to bite on its fantastical allegations, was reduced to handing off the story to campaign press apparatchiks like [Slate's Franklin Foer](#) and [Mother Jones' David Corn](#). The fact that the story only got bigger after Clinton lost the election was due to Obama's CIA director, John Brennan, who in November and December of 2016 helped elevate Russiagate from a failed Clinton campaign ploy to a priority of the American national security apparatus, using a hand-picked team of CIA analysts under his direct control to validate his thesis. If Brennan was the instrument, the person who signed the executive order that turned Brennan's thesis into a time bomb under Trump's desk was Barack Obama.

The election of Joe Biden in 2020 gave the Obamas even more reasons to stay in town. The whispers about Biden's cognitive decline, which began during his bizarre COVID-sheltered basement campaign, were mostly dismissed as partisan attacks on a politician who had always been gaffe-ridden. Yet as President Biden continued to fall off bicycles, misremember basic names and facts, and mix long and increasingly weird passages of Dada-edque nonsense with autobiographical whoppers during his public appearances, it became hard not to wonder how poor the president's capacities really were and who was actually making decisions in a White House staffed top to bottom with core Obama loyalists. When Obama turned up at the White House, staffers and the press crowded around him, leaving President Biden talking to the drapes—which is not a metaphor but a [real thing that happened](#).

That Obama might enjoy serving as a third-term president in all but name, running the government from his iPhone, was a thought expressed in public by Obama himself, both before and after he left office. "I used to say if I can make an

arrangement where I had a stand-in or front man or front woman, and they had an earpiece in, and I was just in my basement in my sweats looking through the stuff, and I could sort of deliver the lines while someone was doing all the talking and ceremony,” he told Steven Colbert in 2015, “I’d be fine with that because I found the work fascinating.” Even with all these clues, the Washington press corps—fresh off their years of broadcasting fantasies about secret communications links between Trump Tower and the Kremlin—seemed unable to imagine, let alone report on, Obama’s role in government.

Instead, every few months a sanitized report appears on some aspect of the ex-president’s outside public advocacy, presented within limits that are clearly being set by Obama’s political operatives—which conveniently elide the problems that are inherent in having a person with no constitutional role or congressional oversight take an active role in executive decision-making. Near the end of June, for example, Politico ran a [long article](#) noting Biden’s cognitive decline, with the coy headline “Is Obama Ready to Reassert Himself?”—as if the ex-president hadn’t been living in the middle of Washington and playing politics since the day he left office. Indeed, in previous weeks Obama had continued his role as central advocate for [government censorship of the internet](#) while launching a [new campaign against gun ownership](#), claiming it is historically linked to racism. Surely, the spectacle of an ex-president simultaneously leading campaigns against both the First and Second Amendments might have led even a spectacularly incurious old-school D.C. reporter to file a story on the nuts and bolts of Obama’s political operation and on who was going in and out of his mansion. But the D.C. press was no longer in the business of maintaining transparency. Instead, they had become servants of power, whose job was to broadcast whatever myths helped advance the interests of the powerful.

There is another interpretation of Obama's post-presidency, of course—one shared by many Republicans and Democrats. In that interpretation, Obama was never the leader of much of anything, neither during the Trump years nor now. Instead, he was focused on [buying trophy properties](#), [hanging out with billionaires](#), and vacationing on [private yachts](#) while grifting large checks from marks like [Spotify](#) and [Netflix](#)—even if his now-stratospheric levels of personal vanity also demanded that every so often he show up President Biden for the sin of occupying his chair in the White House.

In the absence of what was once American journalism, it is hard to know which portrait of Obama's post-presidency is truer to life: Obama as a celebrity-obsessed would-be billionaire, or as a would-be American Castro, reshaping American society from his basement, in his sweats.

Yet the answer is, I believe, somewhere in David Garrow's book.

At bottom, *Rising Star* is a tragic story about a young man who was deeply wounded by the abandonment of both his white mother and his Black father—a wound that gifted him with political genius and at the same time made him the victim of a profound narcissism that first whispered to him in his mid-twenties that he was destined to be president. It is not hard to see how Garrow has come to believe that Obama's ambition proved to be toxic, both for the man and for the country. But why?

As a human being who was sentient for long stretches of time between 2008 and 2017, I was, in general, a fan of Barack Obama and his presidency. What I could never understand was Obama's contempt for the idea of American exceptionalism. Even as president, Obama insisted on poking exceptionalists in the eye, saying that he believed in American exceptionalism “just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism.” Why would the president of the United States feel the need to disabuse his

countrymen of the idea that they are special?

What made Obama's rejection of American exceptionalism seem particularly weird to me was his attachment to Abraham Lincoln, whose cadences and economy of language he urged his speechwriters to emulate. As a historian, one might plausibly argue that Lincoln was a saint who saved the Union or a monster who shed rivers of blood—or that he didn't go far enough. But there is no arguing with Lincoln's belief in the uniqueness of the American destiny, for which he sent hundreds of thousands of young men to die. Of all men, Abraham Lincoln would have been baffled by an American president who denied that America was exceptional. What did all those people die for, then? And what exactly did Obama think that Lincoln's speeches were about?

Obama's hostility to American exceptionalism also seemed linked to his hostility to Israel, or more specifically to America's identification with Israel, which finally resulted in his determination during his second term to reach his agreement with Iran—an agreement with the main objective of integrating that country into America's security architecture in the Middle East, while limiting Israel's power in the region. Again, why?

The sheer amount of political capital and focus Obama put into achieving the JCPOA during his second term, to the near-exclusion of other goals, suggests that the deal was central to his politics. It also carries more than a whiff of the kind of politics in which the American Empire is seen not just as unexceptional, but also, in some ways, as actively evil. It was a politics born out of the confluence of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement, which saw a racist war abroad being used to protect a racist power structure at home. That old alliance of civil rights, anti-imperialism, and identity politics made the Democratic Party that Obama positioned himself to lead—college-educated, corporate-controlled—seem cool, allowing it to use post-1960s radical ideology as a

language to sell stuff.

In a passage of *Dreams* that reeks of neo-liberal poser-ism, Obama recalls, "I chose my friends carefully. The more politically active Black students. The foreign students. The Chicanos. The Marxist professors and structural feminists and punk-rock performance poets. We smoked cigarettes and wore leather jackets. At night, in the dorms, we discussed neocolonialism, Franz Fanon, Eurocentrism, and patriarchy. When we ground out our cigarettes in the hallway carpet or set our stereos so loud that the walls began to shake, we were resisting bourgeois society's stifling constraints. We weren't indifferent or careless or insecure. We were alienated."

But was Obama truly guided by post-1970s dorm-room stoner politics (as Garrow shows, Obama's best friend at Harvard Law School was a white student named Rob Fisher who is now a senior special counsel at the Securities and Exchange Commission, that famed hotbed of punk-rock performance poets and structural feminists), or was he driven by some deeper radicalism?

My own read of Obama has always been that he was a skillful elite-pleaser with a radical streak that did in fact emerge from the anti-imperialist politics of the 1970s, the foundational claim of which was that equality trumps freedom. Which brings us back to Obama's breakup with Sheila Miyoshi Jager.

I have never seen any evidence that Barack Obama has the slightest personal animus toward Jews as individuals. But from his denial of American exceptionalism, and his sourness toward Israel, going all the way back to Sheila Miyoshi Jager's account of their breakup, there does seem to be an awareness of the underlying problem posed to his politics by Jews—that is, the problem posed by Jewish group survival and their continuing insistence on Jewish historical particularity.

Progressive theology is built on a mythic hierarchy of group victimhood which has endured throughout time, up until the present day; the injuries that the victims have suffered are so massive, so shocking, and so manifestly unjust that they dwarf the present. Such injuries must be remedied immediately, at nearly any cost. The people who do the work of remedying these injustices, by whatever means, are the heroes of history. Conversely, the sins of the chief oppressors of history, white men, are so dark that nothing short of abject humiliation and capitulation can begin to approach justice.

It goes to say that nothing about the terms of progressive theology is original. It is the theology of Soviet communism, with class struggle replaced by identity politics. In this system, Jews play a unique, double-edged role: They are both an identity group and a Trojan horse through which history can reenter the gates of utopia.

Ghettos were invented for Jews. Concentration camps, too. How can Jews be "privileged white people" if they are clearly among history's victims? And if Jews aren't white people, then perhaps lots of other white people are also victims and therefore aren't "white," in the theological sense in which that term gains its significance in progressive ideology. Maybe "Black people" aren't always or primarily Black. Maybe the whole progressive race-based theology is, historically and ideologically speaking, a load of crap. Which is why the Jews are and will remain a problem.

Obama didn't invent any of this stuff; he was just a wounded kid trying to figure out his own place in the world and get ahead. Still, looking back, it is hard to avoid the sense that Obama himself was exceptional. He was the guy chosen by history to put something in the American goldfish bowl that made all the fish go crazy and eat each other: America's emerging oligarchy cementing its grip instead of going bust. The rise of monopoly internet platforms. The normalization of government spying on Americans. Race relations going south.

Skyrocketing inequality. The rise of Donald Trump. The birth of Russiagate. It all happened with Obama in the White House.

To understand how we wound up here, it therefore seems necessary to start by understanding the man that so many of us refused to see outside of the myth that he created for himself. His problems are now our problems, as much as Donald Trump's are.

That is why I went to talk to David Garrow.

What follows is a condensed and edited version of two long interviews conducted recently with the historian at his home in Pittsburgh, centering around his 2017 biography of Barack Obama, *Rising Star*.

David Samuels: At this point, the number of people involved in America's civil rights struggle and politics you have interviewed must be in the thousands, right?

David Garrow: I would think it's close to 2,000. The Obama book alone was 1,000-plus.

[Continue reading here.](#)