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Prison Area, Independence Valley

Rob Kroes

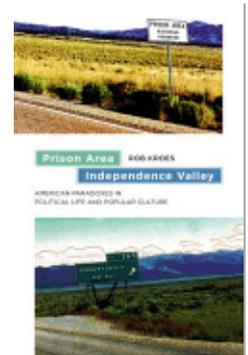
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BARACK HUSSEIN OBAMA:
TWO PORTRAIT SKETCHES

*Barack Hussein Obama: His Powers
of Language, His Language of Power*

OF BILL CLINTON it has been said that he was America's first black president because of his apparent affinity with America's black population. Of Barack Obama it might be said that he is America's first "white president of color." From the first moment he entered public life, none of the templates that Americans use to handle the racial and ethnic diversity of their compatriots seemed to apply. Obama seemed equally at ease presenting himself as a person of white origin or as the son of an immigrant from Kenya. His life history and formative experiences allowed him to affiliate with black and white, with poor and rich, with the world of Christianity and Islam. He had spent part of his life growing up in those different worlds. A leading black intellectual in America, Harvard sociologist Orlando Patterson, recognized these qualities in the early days of Obama's rise as a political phenomenon: "Most whites don't feel threatened by him. Even moderate racists—not the hard core, obviously—can say 'I like this guy.' For the first time they feel at ease with a black man: he gives them the feeling that they are not racists."¹ Patterson himself, an immigrant from the Caribbean, like so many black immigrants

feels difference from and distance toward America's native black population. Although perceived and treated as just another black person by America's white population, black immigrants elude such profiling. They are more socially mobile than the average American-born blacks and have more often reached positions of leadership—such as Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, Stokely Carmichael in the 1960s, or Colin Powell in the late twentieth century.

Obama resembles such immigrant blacks in the greater freedom of affiliation he may have felt was open to him. His time as a community developer on Chicago's South Side where he worked for poor whites and blacks helped him give sense and purpose to his life. Yet at the same time he moved in leading intellectual circles at the University of Chicago. His sense of affiliation with America's black population may be reflected in his choice of a marriage partner, Michelle Obama. Unlike her husband she stems from what Dutch historian Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt once called "the people that walk in darkness," the title to his history of America's black population.² It is a fitting image for a population group that in its collective memory of slavery, repression, and the struggle for emancipation and civil rights has indeed come to resemble a nation unto itself. But to the extent that this shared recollection of white racism, of exploitation and discrimination, still feeds a reservoir of hatred and anger among America's blacks, Obama forms no part of it. The test came when in the run-up to the presidential election, at the height of the campaign, Obama's trusted friend and confidant, black preacher Jeremiah Wright, raged against America's sustained racism, domestically and internationally. Obama felt forced to respond in an impressive public address in Philadelphia, reminding all Americans of the high ideals that from its inception had inspired the American republic.³ At the same time Obama reminded Americans of the long history of compromise between these ideals and the practice of slavery. Obama used his oratorical mastery to call on Americans not to use their history as a source of division, inspiring the sort of "incendiary language

to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation; that rightly offend white and black alike.” This, like many other of Obama’s public addresses, is still accessible on the Internet. It is this use of the Internet as a medium of mass communication that is typical of Obama’s political style. He has radically broken with the mindless reduction of political debate to the mere sound and fury of inane “sound bites.” He takes his time to develop his thoughts, thus inviting his audience to take its time for reflecting on them.

An illustrious precursor like President Abraham Lincoln, past master in America’s rhetorical tradition, had experienced the problem of slavery as posing the central dilemma in his political life. He famously found the rhetorical language to express this dilemma, as in his “House Divided” speech (a “house,” that is to say the Union, the United States, will not stand if it is divided against itself, half slave, and half free). Lincoln, as a statesman who found himself caught on the horns of this dilemma, felt forced to find a compromise solution between two ideals, of emancipating the slave population and of preserving the Union. Tragically torn between the two, he reached the conclusion that preserving the Union, in order to save America’s Great Experiment in democratic self-government, must weigh in more heavily than the emancipation of the slaves. As he put it: “If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that.”⁴ Addressing his democratic audience Lincoln offered no easy answers. Rather than use the power of public speech to delude his audience with rousing visions of a beckoning future, he invited it to ponder the complexities of the present. While evoking the inspirational history of American ideals, in the grand manner of the American Jeremiad, as Sacvan Bercovitch called it, he publicly shared his inner torment in the face of the ethical dilemmas that confronted him.⁵

Like Lincoln, Obama has proved a master of public speech.

In his relatively short public career, he has used the power of rhetoric to bring messages of hope and new beginnings, inspiring people to follow and support him. But like Lincoln, he also used his rhetorical mastery, during the campaign as well as in his presidency, publicly to account for the dilemmas he confronted and the conscientious choices he saw had to be made. Yet, in politics, as Lincoln was well aware, rhetorical visions in the end always have to face the test of reality, of practical action. Rhetoric at some point must translate into action if it is not to lose its power of persuasion. This clear and present danger became manifest shortly after Obama's accession to the presidency. Soon it appeared that the enthusiasm he had inspired among his followers turned into disillusionment, a sense that he was no more than a "faux liberal." At the time of his Cairo speech, in June 2009, before a student audience but addressed at the larger world of Islam, this was the general response among the audience: the words were fine, but where were the actions?⁶ When Obama first entered the fray of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, demanding radical change in the way Israel behaved in the occupied Palestinian territories, the general impression prevailed that Israel had quickly called Obama's bluff. Ever since, Obama has appeared unable to face up to the entrenched lobbies and veto groups, at home or abroad, preventing even minimal progress toward a future so eloquently evoked in speech. More generally, when held up against the daring visions outlined in speech after speech, in areas of foreign or domestic policy, Obama's actions were deemed wanting. Rather than riding the groundswell of support that carried him into the White House, he has seemed to be leading from behind, leaving it to entrenched power balances in Washington politics or in the international arena to work out compromise solutions for him to endorse. Too rarely, it seemed, did he choose to rise above the din of partisan votes and voices to speak in his own voice, addressing the nation to rekindle the enthusiasms among the larger populace that had carried him into the White House. Too often did he seem to leave the field

where public opinion plays itself out to the demolition crews spurred on by right-wing media and an obstructionist opposition, in Congress and in the country.

There is an enigmatic side to Obama in all this. While patiently riding out storms, he has managed to build a solid record of legislative achievement. If patience is one of Obama's strengths, he nonetheless may have neglected to exert his talents in setting the terms of public debate, in constructing a winning narrative to present and explain his achievements. Patience is a quality direly lacking among the larger population, whose mood is set by frenzy and urgency better served, it seems, by sloganeering Tea Party populists, promising to "take America back." This rampant anti-intellectualism leaves little room for Obama to keep his Olympian cool. Spurred into rhetorical action by the 2010 midterm elections, his rather lame contribution to public discourse was his call that having worked hard to change the guard, now was the time to guard the change.⁷ It didn't do much to change the terms of public debate.

Yet when the occasion presents itself, Obama can rise to it and eloquently address the dilemmas of power as he perceives them. An impressive example is his speech in Oslo on his acceptance of the Nobel Peace Prize. The Oslo Nobel Committee's decision had met with widespread cynical glee. Here was a man receiving a peace prize who shortly before had decided in favor of a military surge in Afghanistan. Obama did not share in the cynicism when accepting the prize. In a characteristic, conscientious speech he accounted for the path he had chosen to follow between the goal of peace and understanding in the world and the rival goal of national security in a world where good and evil are locked in combat. There were those who heard echoes of George W. Bush, who had turned "evil" into a facile sound bite and used it as a sufficient explanation of what moves the terrorists of this world. Obama, on the other hand, invites further reflection and intellectual struggle with the problem of evil. One may of course beg to differ and not quite see Obama's strategic decisions as serving

America's security interests in the long run. Yet, simply looking at the time for deliberation Obama had taken for reaching his decision, weighing a great number of policy options against each other, shows that he is a different political animal than his predecessor, in the latter's unseemly rush to invade Iraq. It would be hard to see Obama as a pliable puppet in the hands of entrenched power groups in Washington.

At the top of his rhetorical mastery, in speeches concerning racism as a divisive force in American society, or the use of military power in foreign policy, Obama finds his place in America's great tradition of the statesman as public orator and master of rhetoric. In that role he explains, renders account, and invites the public to reflect. Obama is keenly aware of this long line of history, using it to place himself squarely in an American political tradition.⁸ Repeatedly he takes his cue from inspiring predecessors. Taking this inspirational role Obama not only addresses his fellow Americans, inciting them to political participation. He also speaks to the world, rekindling an enthusiasm for American leadership after the damage done to it during eight long years of the Bush presidency. When still a candidate vying for the presidency, Obama gave a speech in Berlin, on July 24, 2008, before a crowd of thousands whose lost hopes for the United States Obama seemed to restore and personify.⁹ In fine rhetorical balance he brought together a reference to the Berlin Wall with Lincoln's metaphor of the house divided. It brought the audience in mind of Kennedy's famous "Ich bin ein Berliner" speech, delivered during his visit to Berlin in the days of the Cold War. Obama wanted to present himself as the embodiment of an America with which Europeans could once again feel affiliated: "The walls between old allies on either side of the Atlantic cannot stand." Thus in a city not long before divided by a wall—"divided against itself"—Lincoln's words assumed a poignant resonance, and called forth an association with his "half slave, half free." When words like these come from the mouths of Americans, the danger is always of an implied missionary zeal, of interventionist inten-

tions even, particularly today after the cynical misuse of similar language to justify military adventurism by the Bush administration. Obama is too much like Lincoln in his awareness of the tragic tension between politics and ethics, between idealism and realism. When confronting such hard choices he is rather a man of steel, not the weed that waves with the tides. He does not hesitate to speak his mind on matters of great concern to him, whether it is bankers and their obscene remunerations, or the failing security apparatus in America. The Homeland Security bureaucracy was in for a hiding, when Obama publicly argued that it is incapable of connecting the dots on a map of imminent threats and simply reproduces the intelligence failures of pre-9/11 days. Bush has never been willing to own up to such failures. His response was simply to pile on new bureaucratic layers, compounding the problem.¹⁰

Even his most fervent supporters must have felt for Obama when he acceded to the presidency in view of the shambles, domestically and internationally, that the Bush administration had left in its wake. The discomfiture of an economic system, wars without end, the continuing threat of terrorism, an unprecedented level of partisan division, were the dish that was set before the new president. No way could he hope to start with a clean slate. Probably the greatest paradox that Obama had to face up to was the deeply ingrained antistatistism among Americans. According to opinion polls majorities among them wish for better health care, better education, better infrastructure, yet are opposed to concerted government efforts to tackle such problems, rallying against them with hysterical cries of “socialism.” This intuitive distrust had received official blessing since the Reagan years and its view of government as “not the solution, but part of the problem.” But the paradox goes back further in time and can be discerned from the early opposition to Roosevelt’s New Deal project. Ever since, the pattern of support for and opposition to a view of government as the collective instrument for pursuing the public interest has hardened into the partisan mold

of Democrats versus Republicans. The New Deal, supported by a coalition of forces known as the Roosevelt coalition, constituting the Democratic Party that for decades assumed the role of the natural party of government, gave rise to the slow and contested early formation of a welfare state on American soil. Incrementally, step by step, its further development took place under Democratic Party auspices well into the 1960s. Obama wishes to continue in that tradition, albeit in a political climate more resistant than ever before. The solid Democratic Party majority in both houses of Congress since the 2008 elections may have seemed to open a window of opportunity, yet the hardening of political support and opposition, if not obstruction, along strictly partisan lines, in addition to the loud-mouthed populism in the media and among the population at large, never boded well.

In view of the forbidding pile of problems that Obama has had to confront, it was clear that he needed time. Yet time has been running out fast. If Obama manages to ride out the storm of populist and right-wing obstruction, he may in the end effect a change in the political climate, if not the political culture of the country, not unlike the late 1930s. Then, the continuing Depression had offered Roosevelt the opportunity to bring about a culture that gave central place to a sense of solidarity and collective endeavor. The period might be referred to as a populist moment in American history, in the sense that Lawrence Goodwyn used those words for an earlier period in American history, describing functioning political institutions constructed in terms of an inclusive populist paradigm but only for a historical "moment."¹¹ The late 1930s and early 1940s may have been another such moment of inclusiveness, centering on "the people" and "the common man" not only as rhetorical figures of speech but also as central subjects of collective action, brought together around government as the collective body in charge of seeing to the common interest, the "res publica." In this role government had not only sponsored many employment programs but also, for the first time in American history, had seen fit to sponsor the

arts. Thus it promoted a range of artistic projects that aimed at the common people as its audience. In literature, in music and the theater, in photography and painting, artists went through a vernacular, or folk, period in their careers. They chose to descend from their elitist, ivory towers and opened themselves up to the common American as their public, which, in government-sponsored projects, they set out to serve.

A prime example of this trend is the work of American composer Aaron Copland. Orienting himself in the 1920s upon the international musical avant-garde, in the late 1930s he turned to the use of American folk repertoire to find his vernacular voice. A typical composition in this vein is his *Fanfare for the Common Man*, an ode to the common man seen as the central support of American democracy. Another composition from this period—the *Lincoln Portrait* of 1944—is an ode to Lincoln, or rather to his inspired use of language. At precisely the time that Roosevelt himself powerfully availed himself of America's hallowed rhetorical tradition, Copland reconnected to Lincoln's inspirational language. At the dramatic culmination of the piece Lincoln's urgent call, in the concluding words to his *Gettysburg Address*, words spoken on a Civil War battlefield, soar above the music: "that we here solemnly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain, that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth." There is a memorable television recording of a performance of the *Lincoln Portrait*, with the composer reciting and his former student Leonard Bernstein conducting. Visually Copland was no Lincoln. He was a shy and slightly awkward man, not the type expected of a public orator. Yet he managed to rise above himself when in his thin voice he took the text to its climax. In his modest way he brought an ode to Lincoln, or rather an ode to the high ideals of democracy.

There are many enlightening studies, by Garry Wills among others, of Lincoln's use of public speech, of his rhetorical mastery.¹²

But rarely does this mastery affect us as strongly as in Copland's musical tribute. Something like that same mastery we may recognize in Obama's political appeal. It already is his solid claim to fame. At the time of this writing he has been in power for more than two years and has a solid record of legislative achievement. It is to be hoped that he has many more years to translate his inspired and inspirational visions in speech as well as in action. Perhaps he will prove able to revive the broad alliance of enthused voters that, like a virtual Internet community, carried him to the presidency and to turn it into a lasting support of his political power. To that end he must remain what he had been for so many during the campaign, a man holding high the hopes of a new beginning. Tied up as he is now in the imbroglia of Washington politics, he must at the same time, much like Roosevelt, rise above it and reach out to his nationwide constituency. He must keep alive a sense of closeness and inclusion among his supporters, rather than leave them mired in alienation. If successful, Obama may well lead Americans on the way to overcoming their internal divisions and once again inspire, as under Roosevelt, a sense of common effort and collective destiny. And who knows, a new Copland may arise to give musical expression to such a new political and cultural climate.

Barack Hussein Obama: American President

Barack Hussein Obama: American president. Do we need to make the point when the Obama administration is well on the way to the next presidential election? For sizable segments of the electorate the answer would have to be "yes." According to a CNN/Opinion Research Corporation survey, more than a quarter of the public have doubts about Obama's citizenship, with 11 percent saying that Obama was definitely not born in the United States and another 16 percent saying that the president was probably not born in the country.¹³ These doubters are called birthers. Their numbers are swelled by those who call Obama fascist or

communist, anything to make him and his policies sound anti-American, or un-American. They all speak in the voice of a white nationalism that lives by the myth of a “real America,” as evoked by Sarah Palin on the campaign trail.¹⁴ Ironically, at the same time, a debate was going on among America’s black population over whether Obama, given his biography, could ever affiliate with the sense of history and identity of blacks born and raised in the United States. “Black nativism” was what Orlando Patterson, himself an immigrant from the Caribbean rather than a native-born black, called this exclusionary attitude.¹⁵

From his early days as a public figure Obama made it a point of placing himself squarely in an American intellectual and political tradition as he chose to define it. In his writings, particularly his two published books, as well as in his public addresses, beginning with his memorable keynote address at the Democratic Convention in 2004, he evokes an inspirational America, whose past should serve as a guide to its future.¹⁶ In the speech Obama weaves his own story into that of the American republic, presenting himself as emblematic of a larger American promise fulfilled. In his meteoric rise to the presidency, Obama has been his own best advocate. Yet now, caught in the thicket of politics, it seems on occasion as if he can use all the help he can get in affirming the Americanness of his ideas and his political action. Many of his early enthusiastic supporters have turned away in disgust at what they see as a political practice of compromise and sell-out; many on the right have found their voice in Tea Party calls for “taking America back.”

Among the more Olympian voices to be heard in Obama’s defense is that of James T. Kloppenberg. He is the most prominent among those who set out to establish connections between their “reading” of Obama and their reading of America’s intellectual and political history.¹⁷ One crucial connection is with arguably the most American style of philosophy: pragmatism. It inspired Obama’s perspective on America’s constitutional history as one continuing intellectual debate, centered on commonly held val-

ues, in what he calls a “deliberative democracy.” Whereas many activists on both the left and the right proclaim their incommensurable principles with the fervor of true believers, Obama sees things differently. In his speech marking the end of U.S. military engagement in Iraq, on August 31, 2010, Obama declared, “The greatness of our democracy is grounded in our ability to move beyond our differences, and to learn from our experience as we confront the many challenges ahead.” As Kloppenberg points out: “That single sentence encapsulates Obama’s commitments to deliberative democracy and pragmatism, the signature features of the approach to American history and politics he adopts in his writings and his speeches.”¹⁸

Reading Kloppenberg put me in mind of an earlier episode in the writing of political history-in-the-making. President Obama is not the first president who sees himself confronted with suspicions concerning the Americanness of his motives and actions. Before him, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had similar aspersions to contend with. In the post-World War II years historians of a Democratic bent took it upon themselves to defend the Roosevelt heritage by arguing the basic Americanness of the Roosevelt approach to politics. There were many occasions for this moment in American historiography, commonly known as the Consensus School. Domestically, there was the pent-up resentment of the Republican Party, out to roll back as many of the gains as possible achieved under Roosevelt, gains benefiting organized labor, gains giving rise to social security and welfare state provisions, gains finally in setting up the state itself as an agent for the Common Weal. How very un-American indeed. Internationally, there was the Cold War, a confrontation with a closed ideological system—communism—following on the heels of the war against fascism and National Socialism. If Roosevelt, throughout his years in office, had always had to confront the dilemma of not being sufficiently to the left in the eyes of his left-wing supporters, or way too much on the left in the eyes of conservatives, the consensus historians chose to see Roosevelt as typically the pragmatist,

averse from ideological closure and doctrinaire thinking. He was presented as inhabiting what Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., called “the vital center,” the pragmatic place halfway between the two opposed ideological extremes. Other consensus historians, such as Daniel Boorstin, Richard Hofstadter, Louis Hartz, in their evocation of an American liberal tradition and a liberal consensus, saw ideology—as Boorstin had it in his analysis of the genius of American politics—as never more than a self-evident “given.” According to this collective apologia for Roosevelt’s political practice, it had stood squarely within an American political tradition, seen as nonideological, pragmatic, and deliberative.¹⁹ The consensus historians have done for Roosevelt what Kloppenberg and others are now doing in behalf of Obama.

Yet there are more ways in which to cast Obama’s policies and actions as typical of an American president. Kloppenberg’s way is the high-minded road to establishing Obama’s presidency as rooted in American traditions, focusing on the American ideas and ideals that have inspired Obama as a political man. Another way would be to look at Obama as a political actor and to ask ourselves whether his leadership in the thicket of politics is representative of a longer history of American political practice.