What Makes Obama Run?

Lawyer, teacher, philanthropist, and author Barack Obama doesn’t need another career. But he’s entering politics to get back to his true passion—community organization.

When Barack Obama returned to Chicago in 1991 after three brilliant years at Harvard Law School, he didn’t like shabbier, the children edgier and less restrained, more middle-class families heading out to the suburbs, the jails bursting with decent future for those embittered youth. But when he met with some veteran politicians to tell them of his plans, the only jobs he says were open in city hall even by fellow progressives—that he might be too independent, that he should strike a few deals to assure his election. Another well-meaning whose suspected...

By Hank De Zutter
When Barack Obama returned to Chicago in 1991 after three brilliant years at Harvard Law School, he didn’t like what he saw.

The former community activist, then 30, had come fresh from a term as president of the prestigious Harvard Law Review, a position he was the first African-American to hold. Now he was ready to continue his battle to organize Chicago’s black neighborhoods. But the state of the city muted his exuberance.

"Upon my return to Chicago," he would write in the epilogue to his recently published memoir, Dreams From My Father, "I would find the signs of decay accelerated throughout the South Side—the neighborhoods shabbier, the children edgier and less restrained, more middle-class families heading out to the suburbs, the jails bursting with glowering youth, my brothers without prospects. All too rarely do I hear people asking just what it is that we’ve done to make so many children’s hearts so hard, or what collectively we might do to right their moral compass—what values we trust live by. Instead I see us doing what we’ve always done—pretending that these children are somehow not our own."

Today, after three years of law practice and civic activism, Obama has decided to dive into electoral politics. He is running for the Illinois Senate, he says, because he wants to help create jobs and a decent future for those embittered youth. But when he met with some veteran politicians to tell them of his plans, the only jobs he says they wanted to talk about were theirs and his. Obama got all sorts of advice. Some of it perplexed him; most of it annoyed him. One African-American elected official suggested that Obama change his name, which he’d inherited from his late Kenyan father. Another told him to put a picture of his light-bronze, boyish face on all his campaign materials, “so people don’t see your name and think you’re some big dark guy.”

Obama, running to be the Democratic candidate for the 13th District on the South Side, was also told—

even by fellow progressives—that he might be too independent, that he should strike a few deals to assure his election. Another well-meaning adviser suggested never posing for photos with a glass in his hand—even if he wasn’t drinking alcohol.

"Now all of this may be good political advice," Obama said, "but it’s all so superficial. I am surprised at how many elected officials—even the good ones—spend so much time talking about the mechanics of politics and not matters of substance. They have this poker chip mentality, this overriding interest in retaining their seats or in moving their careers forward, and the business..."
Obama on . . .

"I'm not black," Joyce said. "I'm muliracial." Then she started telling me about her father, who happened to be Italian and was the sweetest man in the world; and her mother, who happened to be part African and part French and part Native American and part something else. "Why should I have to choose between them?" she asked me. . . . "It's black people who always have to make everything racial. They're the ones making me choose. They're the ones who are telling me that I can't be who I am." . . . "They, they, they. That was the problem with people like Joyce. They talked about the richness of their multicultural heritage and it sounded real good, until you discovered that they avoided black people. It wasn't a matter of conscious choice, necessarily, just a matter of gravitation pull, the way integration always worked, a one-way street. The minority assimilated into the dominant culture, not the other way around. Only white culture could be neutral and objective. Only white culture could be nonracial, willing to accept the occasional exotic into its ranks. Only white culture had individuals. And we, the half-breeds and the college degree, take a survey of the situation and think to ourselves. Why should we get lumped in with the losers if we don't have to?"

the self-segregation of black students on campus: . . .

"There were enough of us on [Occidental College's] campus to constitute a tribe, and when it came to hanging out many of us chose to function like a tribe, staying close together, traveling in packs. . . . Our worries seemed indistinguishable from those of the white kids around us. Surviving classes. Finding a well-paying gig after graduation. Trying to get laid. I had stumbled upon one of the well-kept secrets of black people: that most of us weren't interested in tribe, that most of us tired of thinking about race all the time, that if we preferred to keep to ourselves it was mainly because that was the easiest way to stop thinking about it, easier than spending all your time mad or trying to guess whatever it was white folks were thinking about you."


While no political opposition to Obama has arisen yet, many have expressed doubts about the practicality of his ambitions. Obama himself says he's not certain that his experimental plunge into electoral politics can produce the kind of community empowerment and economic change he's after.
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"Three major doubts have been raised," he said. The first is whether in today's political environment—with its emphasis on media and money—a grass-roots movement can even be created. Will people still answer the call of participatory politics?

"Second," Obama said, "many believe that the country is too polarized to build the kind of multiplex coalition necessary to bring about massive economic change."

"Third, is it possible for those of us working through the Democratic Party to figure out ways to use the political process to create jobs for our communities?"

Obama's intriguing candidacy is the latest adventure in a fascinating life chronicled in Dreams From My Father, published this summer by Times Books. In Obama's words, the book is "a boy's search for his father, and through that search a workable meaning for his life as a black American."

In the book, which reads more like a novel than a memoir, Obama comes to terms with the legacy of the African father who left his mother and him when he was two years old, and died in an auto accident when he was finishing college. While doing so, Obama takes readers on a multicultural odyssey through three continents and several political philosophies. He casts a skeptical eye on white liberalism, black nationalism, integration, separatism, small-scale economic development and the transient effectiveness of charismatic black political leaders like the late mayor Washington. While Obama credits all these political movements with bringing some progress to middle-class blacks, he believes that none have built enduring institutions and none have halted the unraveling of black America.

Obama is the product of a brief early-60s college romance and short-lived marriage between a black African exchange student and a white liberal Kariain who met at the University of Hawai. His critical boyhood years—from two to ten—were spent neither in white nor black America but in the teeming streets and slums of post-war New York City. Obama's boyhood experiences in Indonesia—where his mother took him when she married another foreign exchange student—propelled him toward a worldview well beyond his mother's liberalism.

"The poverty, the corruption, the constant scramble for security...remained all around me and bred a relentless skepticism."

Obama moved back to his grandparents' home in Hawaii to attend the prestigious Punahou School, where he encountered a class prejudice that darkened his politics even more. At first embarrassed by his race and African name, he soon bonded with the few other African-American students. He quickly learned that integration was a one-way street, with blacks expected to assimilate into a white world that never gave ground. He participated in bitter school board meetings with his buddy on the theme of "how white folks will do it." Obama, who had to reconcile these sentiments with the loving support he had at home from his white mother and grandparents, discussed much of his buddies' analysis as "the same sloopy thinking" used by racist whites, but he found the racism of whites to be particularly stubborn and obstinate.

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up the leafy parks were empty. People began to spend more time inside; they invested in elaborate wrought-iron doors; they wondered if they could afford to sell at a loss and retire to a warmer climate, perhaps move back to the South.

"So despite the deserved sense of accomplishment these men and women felt, despite the irrefutable evidence of their own progress, our conversations were marked by another, more ominous strain. The boarded-up homes, the decaying storefronts, the aging church rolls, kids from unknown families who swaggered down the streets—loath congregations of teenage boys, teenage girls feeding potato chips to crying toddlers, the discarded wrappers tumbling down the block—all of it whispered painful truths, told them the progress they'd found was ephemeral, rooted in thin soil; that it might not even last their lifetimes..."
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ness in otherwise sane people that brought forth our bitter laughter. It was as if whites didn't know they were being cruel in the first place. Or at least thought you deserving of their scorn.”

Obama’s politics were tinged with nihilism during his undergraduate years at Occidental College outside Los Angeles. There he played it cool and detached, and began to confute partying and getting high with rebellion. After he and his buddies joked about the Mexican cleaning woman’s forlorn reaction to the mess they’d created as a party, Obama was jolted back to reality by the criticism of a fellow black student, a young Chicago woman. “You think that’s funny?” she told him. “That could have been my grandmother; you know. She had to clean up behind people for most of her life.” Obama later transferred to Columbia University, where he was shocked by the casual tolerance of whites and blacks alike for the wide disparity between New York City’s opulence and ghetto poverty. He graduated from Columbia with a double major in English literature and political science, and a determination to “organize black folks.” He wore scores of letters looking for the right job, and almost a year later got an offer to come to Chicago. He gave up a job as a financial writer with an international consulting firm and became a $1,000-a-month community organizer.

Here in Chicago, Obama worked as lead organizer for the Developing Communities Project, a campaign funded by south-side Catholic churches to counteract the dislocation and massive unemployment caused by the closing and downsizing of southeast Chicago steel plants.

From 1984 to ’88 Obama built an organization in Roseland and the nearby Algiers Gardens public housing complex that mobilized hundreds of citizens. Obama says the campaign experienced “modest success” in winning residents a place at the

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The appeal and limitations of black nationalism:

"Ever since the first time I'd picked up Malcolm X's autobiography, I had to understand the twin strands of black nationalism, arguing that nationalism's affirming message—of solidarity and self-reliance, discipline and communal responsibility—need not depend on hatred of whites any more than it depended on white mischief. In talking to self-professed nationalists...though, I came to see how the blanket indictment of everything white served a central function in their message of uplift; how, psychologically, at least, one depended on the other. For when the nationalist spoke of a reawakening of values as the only solution to black poverty, he was expressing an implicit, if not explicit, criticism to black listeners that we did not have to live as we did.

"A steady attack on the white race, the constant recitation of black people's brutal experience in this country, served as the ballast that could prevent the ideas of personal and communal responsibility from tipping into an ocean of despair. Yet, the nationalism I could say, whites are responsible for your sorry state, not any inherent flaws in you. In fact, whites are so heartless and diabolical that we can no longer expect anything from them. The self-loathing that you feel, what keeps you drinking or thieves, is planted by them. Rid them from your mind and find your true power liberated. "Rise up, ye mighty race...""

"So long as nationalism remained a cathartic curse on the white race, it could win the applause of the jobless teenager listening on the radio or the businesswoman watching late-night TV. But the descent from such unifying fervor to the practical choices blacks confronted every day was steep. Compromises were everywhere. The black accountant asked: How am I going to open an account at the black-owned bank if it charges me extra for checking and won't even give me a business loan because it says it can't afford the risk? The black nurse said: White folks I work with ain't so bad, and even if they were, I can't be quitting my job—who's going to pay my rent tomorrow or feed my children today?"

The rise of black race baiting...

"Black politicians less gifted than Harold [Washington] discovered what white politicians had known for a very long time: that race-baiting could make up for a host of limitations. Younger leaders, eager to make a name for themselves, upped the ante, peddling conspiracy theories all over town—the Koreans were funding the Klan, Jewish doctors were injecting black babies with the AIDS virus, it was a shortcut to fame, if not always fortune, like sex or violence on TV, black rage always found a ready market..."

"What concerned me wasn't just the damage loose talk caused efforts at coalition building, or the emotional pain it caused others. It was the distance between our talk and our action, the effect it was having on us as individuals and as a people. That gap corrupted both language and thought; it made us forgetful and encouraged fabrication, it eventually eroded our ability to hold either ourselves or each other accountable. And while none of this was unique to black politicians or to black nationalists...it was blacks who could least afford such make-believe. Black survival in this country had always been premised on a minimum of delusions; it was such an absence of delusions that continued to operate in the daily lives of most black people I met. Instead of adopting such unverifiable honesty in our public business, we seemed to be loosening our grip, letting our collective psyche go where it pleased, even as we sank into further despair..."

I received from Jones From My Father by Barack Obama (1995) by Barack Obama. Reprinted by permission of Times Books a division of Random House, Inc.
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the legacy of Harold Washington.

"There was no political organization in place, no clearly defined principles to follow. The entire black politics had centered on one man who radiated like a sun. Now that he was gone, no one could agree on what that presence had meant."

comparing the poverty of Altgeld Gardens with that of Indonesia:

"Everything about the Gardens seemed in a perpetual state of disrepair. Ceilings crumbled. Pipes burst. Tilted backed up. Muddy tire tracks traveled the small, brown lawns strewn with empty flower planters—broken, tilted, half buried. The CHA maintenance crews had stopped even pretending that repairs would happen any time soon. So that most children in Altgeld grew up without ever having seen a garden . . .

"I saw those Dikabla markets for what they were: fragile, precious things. The people who sold their goods there might have been poor, poorer even than folks out in Altgeld. They hadn't offered gifts of firewood on their backs every day, they ate little, they died young. And yet for all that poverty, there remained in their lives a discernible order, a hierarchy of trading routes and middlemen, bribe to pay and customs to observe, black churches. "All these churches and all these pastors are going it alone. And what do we have? These magnificent palatial churches in the midst of the ruins of some of the most run-down neighborhoods we'll ever see. All pastors go on thinking about about your own fate. Here the world was black, and so you were just you; you could discover all those things that were unique to your life without living a lie or committing betrayal."

practicing law and its limits:

"The study of law can be disheartening at times, a matter of applying narrow rules and arcane procedures to an uncooperative reality, a sort of glorified accounting that serves to regulate the affairs of those who have power—and that all too often seeks to explain, to those who do not, the ultimate wisdom and justice of their condition.

"But that's not all the law is. The law is also memory; the law also records a long-running conversation, a nation arguing with its conscience. . . . I hear all of these voices clamoring for recognition, all of them asking the same questions that have come to shape my life . . . What is our community, and how might that community be reconciled with our freedom? How far do our obligations reach? How do we transform power into justice, mere sentiment into love? . . . I find myself modestly encouraged, believing that so long as the questions are still being asked, what binds us together might somehow, ultimately prevail."

Two Great Gift Ideas
A Dickens Christmas Collection
No one better captures the warmth and sacredness of the spirit of Christmas than Charles Dickens. This collection features works such as A Christmas Carol, The Pickwick Papers and his classic Christmas books, The Cricket on the Hearth. Feel the real spirit of the season with this collection.
Christmas Readings to Recapture the Wonder of the Season

THIS WEEK AT BARBARA'S
FATHER ANDREW GREELY
Reading from and talking about his latest novel, Angel Light
Thursday, December 14, at 7:00 p.m.
700 E. Grand Avenue
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once the factors or forces that are destroying the neighborhoods. They start food pantries and community-service programs, but until they come together to build something bigger than an effective church all the community-service programs, all the food pantries they start will barely take care of even a fraction of the community's problems.

"In America," Obama says, "we have this strong bias toward individual action. You know, we idolize the John Wayne hero who comes in to correct things with both guns blazing. But individual actions, individual dreams, are not sufficient. We must unite in collective action, build collective institutions and organizations."

In an interview after the class, Obama again spoke of the need to organize and mobilize the economic power and moral fervor of black churches. He also argued that as a state senator he might help bring this about faster than as a community organizer or civil rights lawyer.

"What we need in America, especially in the African-American community, is a moral agenda that is tied to a concrete agenda for building and rebuilding our communities," he said. "We have moved beyond the classic call stage that was needed during the civil rights movement. Now, like Nelson Mandela in South Africa, we must move into a building stage. We must invest our energy and resources in a massive rebuilding effort and invent new mechanisms to strengthen and hasten this community-building effort.

"We have no shortage of moral fervor," said Obama. "We have some wonderful preachers in town—preachers who continue to inspire me—preachers who are magnificent at articulating a vision of the world as it should be. In every church on Sunday in the African-American community we have this moral fervor; we have energy to burn."

"But as soon as church lets out, the energy dissipates. We must find ways to channel all this energy into community building. The biggest failure of the civil rights movement was in failing to translate this energy, this moral fervor, into creating lasting institutions and organizational structures."

Obama added that as important and inspiring as it was, the Washington administration also let an opportunity go by. "Washington was the best of the classic politicians," Obama said. "He knew his constituency, he truly enjoyed people. That can't be said for a lot of politicians. He was not cynical about democracy and the democratic process—as so many of them are. But he, like all politicians, was primarily interested in maintaining his power and working the levers of power.

"He was a classic charismatic leader," Obama said, "and when he died all of that dissipated. This potentially powerful collective spirit that went into supporting him was never translated into clear principles, or into an articulate agenda for community change."

"The only principle that came through was 'getting our fair share,' and this runs itself out rather quickly if you don't make it concrete. How do we rebuild our schools? How do we rebuild our communities? How do we create safer streets? What concretely can we do together to achieve these goals? When Harold died, everyone claimed the mantle of his vision and went off in different directions. All that power dissipated."

"Now an agenda for getting our fair share is vital. But to work, it can't see voters or communities as consumers, as mere recipients of benefits. It's time for politicians and other leaders to take the next step and to see voters, residents, or citizens as producers of this change. The thrust of our organizing must be on how to make them productive, how to make them employable, how to build their human capital, how to create businesses, institutions, banks, safe public spaces—the whole agenda of creating productive communities. That is where our future lies."

The right wing talks about this but they
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keep appealing to that old individualistic bootstrap myth: get a job, get rich, and get out. Instead of investing in our neighborhoods, that's what has always happened. Our goal must be to help people get a sense of building something larger.

"The political debate is now so skewed, so limited, so distorted," said Obama. "People are hungry for community; they miss it. They are hungry for change."

"What if a politician were to see his job as that of an organizer," he wondered, "as part teacher and part advocate, one who does not sell voters short but who educates them about the real choices before them? As an elected public official, for instance, I could bring church and community leaders together rather than I could as a community organizer or lawyer. We would come together to form concrete economic development strategies, take advantage of existing laws and structures, and create bridges and bonds within all sectors of the community. We must form grass-root structures that would hold me and other elected officials more accountable for their actions.

"The right wing, the Christian right, has done a good job of building these organizations of accountability, much better than the left or progressive forces have. But it's always easier to organize around intolerance, narrow-mindedness, and false nostalgia. And they also have hijacked the higher moral ground with this language of family values and moral responsibility."

"Now we have to take this same language—these same values that are encouraged within our families—of looking out for one another, of sharing, of sacrificing for each other—and apply them to a larger society. Let's talk about creating a society, not just individual families, based on these values. Right now we have a society that talks about the irresponsibility of teens getting pregnant, not the irresponsibility of a society that fails to educate them to aspire for more."

Obama said he's not at all comfortable with the political game of getting and staying elected, of raising money in backroom deals and manipulating an electoral image. "I am also finding people equivocating on their support. I'm talking about progressive politicians who are on the same page with me on the issues but who warn me I may be too independent."

Although Obama has built strong relationships with people inside Mayor Daley's administration, he has not asked for their support in his campaign. Now he has sought the mayor's endorsement.

"I want to do this as much as I can from the grassroots level, raising as much money for the campaign as possible at coffee, connecting directly with voters," said Obama. "But to organize this district I must get known. And this comes money. I admit that in this transitional period, before I'm known in the district, I'm going to have to rely on some contributions from wealthy people—people who like my ideas but who won't attach strings. This is not ideal, but it is a problem encountered by everyone in their first campaign."

"Once elected, once I'm known, I won't need that kind of money, just as Harold Washington, once he was elected and known, didn't need to raise and spend money to get the black vote."

Obama took time off from attending campaign coffees to attend October's Million Man March in Washington, D.C. His experiences there only reinforced his reasons for jumping into politics. "What I saw was a powerful demonstration of an impulse and need for African-American men to come together to recognize each other and affirm our rightful place in the society," he said. "There was a profound sense that African-American men were ready to make a commitment to bring about change in our communities and lives."

"But what was lacking among march organizers was a positive agenda, a coherent agenda for change. Without this agenda a lot of this energy is going to dissipate. Just as holding hands and singing 'We shall overcome' is not going to do it, exhorting youth to have pride in their race, give up drugs and crime, is not going to do it if we can't find jobs and futures for the 50 percent of black youth who are unemployed, underemployed, and full of bitterness and rage."

"Exhortations are not enough, nor are the notions that create a black economy within America that is hermetically sealed from the rest of the economy and seriously tackle the major issues confronting us," Obama said.

"Any solution to our unemployment catastrophe must arise from us working creatively within a multicultural, interdependent, and international economy. Any African-Americans who are only talking about racism as a barrier to our success are seriously misled if they don't also come to grips with the larger economic forces that are creating economic insecurity for all workers—whites, Latinos, and Asians. We must deal with the forces that are depressing wages, lopping off people's benefits right and left, and creating an earnings gap between CEOs and the lowest-paid worker that has risen in the last 20 years from a ratio of 10 to 1 or one of better than 100 to 1."

"This doesn't suggest that the need to look inward emphasized by the march isn't important, and that these African-American tribal affinities aren't legitimate. These are mean, cruel times, exemplified by a 'lock 'em up, take no prisoners' mentality that dominates the Republican-led Congress. Historically, African-Americans have turned inward and towards black nationalism whenever they have a sense, as we do now, that the mainstream has betrayed us, and that white Americans couldn't care less about the profound problems African-Americans are facing."

"But cursing out white folks is not going to get the job done. Anti-Semitic and anti-Asian statements are not going to lift us up. We've got some hard nuts-and-bolts organizing and planning to do. We've got communities to build."