



THEMES FROM A PROMISED LAND

PART ONE | THE BET

“I had made a bet a long time ago, and this was the point of reckoning.”

While remembering his open-air walks along the West Colonnade of the White House, Barack Obama takes us back to an earlier time, recalling the influences of his maternal grandparents and mother; his upbringing and education, from “lackadaisical student” to Harvard standout; his awakening to his mixed-race identity, “the very strangeness of my heritage”; and the power of social movements, where ordinary people joined together to make change. Where would Obama make his mark in the world? Then he meets and falls in love with Michelle Robinson, and asks her the most important question of his life. There are challenges for him and Michelle. Driven to help better his community, Obama decides to enter politics and wins a hard-fought campaign to become an Illinois state senator while struggling to balance marriage and new fatherhood. Does the difference he is making justify the sacrifice? After a disastrous run for Congress, Obama sets his sights on a more audacious target: the U.S. Senate. His victory, along with his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech, raises Obama’s profile to the stratosphere, and inspires some to wonder what’s next for the young senator. After receiving insight from two Democratic heavyweights—and conferring with his most trusted advisor, Michelle—Barack Obama rolls the dice and makes a fateful decision, “one that would inexorably change my life.”

PART TWO | YES WE CAN

“For all our differences, we remained bound as one people . . . together, men and women of goodwill could find a way to a better future.”

On a February morning in 2007, Obama announces his candidacy for president, beginning a whirlwind campaign that over the course of two years will feel like “catching lightning in a bottle.” But nothing is certain. There are missteps, uneven debate performances, clumsy gaffes, the initial reticence of Black supporters, a seasoned opponent in Hillary Clinton, the advent of “birtherism,” and a pastor who cursed the United States of America. In time, Obama realizes his biggest adversary is that he is “running against the implacable weight of the past”—while the two Davids (Axelrod and Plouffe) build a campaign operation that becomes a force of nature, navigating Iowa (a seismic eight-point margin of victory), New Hampshire (a galvanizing loss), and the gauntlet of states that followed. Michelle overrides her reticence about politics to become effective and fearless on the stump. After the seemingly never ending primary, and moving to unify the Democratic Party, the Obama team pivots to the general election—with an overseas trip to meet with world leaders, the careful selection of his running mate (Joe Biden!), and the pageantry of party conventions. John McCain makes an unconventional choice for VP, a “potent disrupter” whose “incoherence didn’t matter to the vast majority of Republicans.” Then comes the sobering call from Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson about the looming financial crisis, and, in October’s waning days, Obama’s urgent flight to Hawaii to say goodbye to his beloved grandmother Toot, who dies on the eve of the election. The next night, after Pennsylvania is called for Obama, Malia turns to her father and asks, “Daddy, did you win?” Obama responds: “I think so, sweetie.”

PART THREE | RENEGADE

“Suck it up, I told myself. Tighten your laces. Cut your rations. Keep moving.”

President-elect Obama's first visit to the Oval Office takes place just days after the election, when, following tradition, the Bushes invite Obama and Michelle for a tour of their soon-to-be home. The Bush daughters, Barbara and Jenna, rearrange their schedules to give Malia and Sasha their own tour of the “fun” parts of the White House. Back in Chicago Obama sets out to fill key positions, most important, an economic team. Despite the passage of TARP, the financial markets remained paralyzed. Meanwhile, Michelle works to make the kids' move to the White House as smooth as possible. The inauguration is “like our wedding,” Obama tells Michelle, “but with a bigger guest list.” After the swearing in, the real work begins. Obama signs an executive order banning torture, launches what he hopes will be a year-long process to close Guantánamo Bay, and tightens restrictions on lobbyists. On his ninth day in office, Obama signs his first bill into law: the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. The biggest challenge remains the economy, which continues its free fall. A major stimulus package must be passed quickly but Republicans, no matter the consequences for the country, begin their strategy of intransigence. But three GOP senators cross the aisle and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is signed into law. When Obama launches modest programs to help shore up the housing market, a CNBC business commentator's on-air rant goes viral. To stabilize the foundering banks, Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner devises a “stress test” approach for financial institutions, and in late April the economy begins to turn a corner. Obama describes his national security team and the single most important job of the president: to keep the American people safe. At the start of each day, Obama pours over the President's Daily Brief. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates presents a plan to withdraw troops from Iraq, but ending the war in Afghanistan proves more challenging, with friction growing between the White House and the Pentagon. Obama finds inspiration from his visits to wounded soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and the letters from constituents, “an everyday reminder of the covenant I now had with the American people.”

PART FOUR | THE GOOD FIGHT

“Our history has always been the sum total of the choices made and the actions taken by each individual man and woman. . . . It has always been up to us.”

President Obama steps onto the world stage—attending his first G20 summit in London, meeting with Russian president Dmitry Medvedev, giving his famous counterterrorism speech in Cairo, attending the 65th anniversary of D-Day. “You've been cursed with people's high expectations,” former president of the Czech Republic Václav Havel warns him, “because it means they are also easily disappointed.” As his global tour wraps up, the president must also deal with a band of pirates who have captured a cargo ship off the coast of Somalia, holding American captain Richard Phillips and his crew hostage. And there are important issues closer to home needing his attention, including the arrival of the H1N1 virus that threatens to spread if not contained and the famous “beer summit” between professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Sergeant James Crowley, which furthers necessary discussions on race. When Supreme Court Justice David Souter announces his retirement, President Obama sees it as an opportunity to help shape the diversity of the Court, appointing Sonia Sotomayor, the nation's first Latina justice and the Court's third woman. But perhaps his biggest post-Recovery Act fight is making good on his promise to offer healthcare to every American—an effort that will face many hurdles and critics before its passage as the Affordable Care Act.

PART FIVE | THE WORLD AS IT IS

“Whatever you do won’t be enough, I heard their voices say. Try anyway.”

As the president becomes more familiar with the job, he must also confront one of its hardest, most humbling tasks: writing and sending condolence letters to the families of fallen service members. He forms a strong working relationship with Secretary of Defense Robert Gates. But General Stanley McChrystal proposes a full-blown counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan, testing the president’s promise to draw down troops in the region. Amid these tensions between the White House and the Pentagon, President Obama wins the Nobel Peace Prize—an irony not lost on him. To keep Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the administration looks for allies—and adversaries—to support sanctions on the regime. This is one of the reasons Obama takes his first official trip to Russia, where he finally comes face-to-face with Vladimir Putin. Obama and his team then travel to Asia, where they must walk a fine line between understanding the world’s dependence on a healthy Chinese economy and holding that nation accountable for its production practices. On the home front, the administration enters a tough fight to push climate change legislation through Congress. An economy based on coal, gas, and oil makes it that much harder to invest in clean energy alternatives, and some of the Recovery Act’s environmental investments aren’t panning out as hoped. With the Kyoto Protocol due to expire, the president travels to Copenhagen to negotiate climate standards with world leaders. That is, until Chinese premiere Wen Jiabao and his ministers hide in a conference room in an attempt to blame the U.S. for failing to reach an agreement. When Obama hears their plan, he turns to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and asks, “When’s the last time you crashed a party?”

PART SIX | IN THE BARREL

“It’s in the nature of politics, and certainly the presidency,
to go through rough patches.”

For most of Obama’s second year, the administration finds itself facing more scrutiny. The GOP—with its newly emerging Tea Party—seizes on any misstep, perceived or real, and amplifies it; the media casts an unfounded somber narrative on the president; and Americans are growing frustrated with the slow pace of the economic upturn. Just as the jobs numbers show improvement and the team turns its message to a “Recovery Summer,” Greece’s economy implodes and Obama and Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner work on a plan to keep it viable—one they hope that the austerity-focused E.U. and the IMF can support. Another political headache comes when, after speaking a little too candidly in front of a reporter, General Stanley McChrystal hands in his resignation and the president appoints General David Petraeus to command the coalition forces in Afghanistan. Around the same time, Obama looks at options for how to handle prosecuting the 242 detainees at Guantánamo Bay. Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, wanting to restart momentum, suggests Wall Street reform. Harvard law professor and bankruptcy expert Elizabeth Warren weighs in and proposes a new consumer finance protection agency. By the time the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act is passed—the most sweeping change to the financial rules since the New Deal—the nation has turned its eyes to the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion and the tons of oil leaking into the ocean. The Democrats are underdogs as they head into the 2010 midterms. Despite all of the administration’s accomplishments, and the president barnstorming the country in the weeks prior to the election, Republicans win big and take control of Congress. Yet President Obama follows up with the most productive lame-duck session in history, which includes the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and bringing the DREAM Act to a vote.

PART SEVEN | ON THE HIGH WIRE

“In the conduct of foreign policy, I had to constantly balance competing interests . . . just because I couldn’t in every instance elevate our human rights agenda over other considerations didn’t mean that I shouldn’t try to do what I could, when I could, to advance what I considered to be America’s highest values.”

President Obama turns his focus to the long-term challenges in the Middle East and North Africa. He attempts to restart peace talks between Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Palestinian counterpart Mahmoud Abbas. Around the same time, in the small North African country of Tunisia, an impoverished fruit vendor sets himself on fire in an act of desperation and protest against his government. The incident inspires massive demonstrations throughout the region—called the Arab Spring—which leads to the end of Hosni Mubarak’s reign in Egypt. Less than a week after Mubarak leaves office, Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi’s security forces shoot into a crowd of citizens, sparking protests, and anti-Gaddafi forces take control of Libya’s second-largest city, Benghazi. President Obama must weigh the nation’s moral obligations with the dire risks of intervening. With a plan approved by NATO and Middle Eastern allies, he orders air strikes. On the home front, Obama experiences more condemnation from Republicans, no matter what decisions he makes, and “birtherism” enters mainstream discussion in an attempt to undermine the legitimacy and legacy of America’s first Black president. While finally addressing the manufactured controversy by releasing his birth certificate, Obama has more pressing issues at hand. Having made the capture of Osama bin Laden a priority two years earlier, reports come in that the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks may be living on a compound in Pakistan. A secret operation is planned and—after careful consideration and discussion—the president gives the order to raid bin Laden’s compound. After several tense hours, the news arrives: “Geronimo ID’d . . . Geronimo EKIA.” *Enemy killed in action*. After addressing the nation, Obama hears the raucous, rhythmic chants of “USA! USA! USA!” coming from Pennsylvania Avenue—a sound that echoes far and wide into the night.