

POLITICS

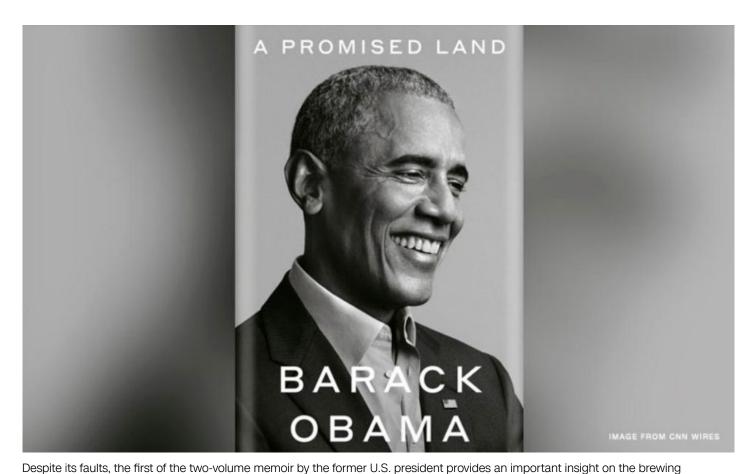
The useful warnings of Barack Obama's 'A Promised Land'

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establishment he promised to change.

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disillusion and disempowerment of the working class around the world.

In 2000, Barack Obama was invited by his friend to join the Democractic National Convention in Los Angeles. This was his friend's way of encouraging him to "get back on the horse" after losing a Congressional race that his wife Michelle advised against participating in.

When Obama landed in LAX and tried to rent a car, his credit card was declined. He somehow found a way to get himself to the Staples Center but the credentials his friend secured for him did not allow him to enter the stadium. He ended up watching the convention on mounted T.V. screens. Afterwards, he went back to the hotel to sleep on his

friend's couch, and then flew back to Chicago. He was nearing forty, broke, all his supply of energy and optimism drained, even his marriage strained. "I recognized that in running for Congress I'd been driven not by some selfless dream of changing the world, but rather by the need to justify the choices I had already made, or to satisfy my ego, or to quell my envy of those who had achieved what I had not," Obama writes in his best-selling memoir, "A Promised Land." The story arc of his prepresidential journey, as well as the hype and excitement that came along his road to the highest office in the land may

very well be the only truly compelling part of the book. As soon as he reached the White House, the spark of "hope

Obama ran on the promise of "hope and change" — a promise that Americans and even citizens across the globe, including me, vouched so hard for. I remember being in my dad's house, watching "Capitalism: A Love Story" when the filmmaker Michael Moore showed clips of Obama's presidential campaign, with Occupy movement activists holding Shepard Fairey's iconic "Hope" poster, and thinking, "I'm sure the world will be in good hands." I remember being in my senior year in high school, confused about my own future, but suddenly becoming energized after watching the first African-American president of the United States, the leader of the free world, talk in front of a camera as if he is talking to me: "YES, YOU CAN!"

far do our obligations reach? How do we transform mere power into justice, mere sentiment into love?") when I contend with my identity, my politics, my place in the Philippines, my place in the world. Like any writer worth their salt, his ability to string words helped me clear my head, his own thoughts served as my own refuge. His first book, "Dreams From My Father," became a seminal resource for my education not only on politics, power, and racism, but also on writing and introspection. It is a book about coming to terms with an absent father; about reconciling multiple identities that seem to pull him in different directions; and about finding a community that enabled him to locate his place and purpose in the world. In "A Promised Land," however, I found it hard to sense the tenderness and brooding that were essential to his previous work. His prose, of course, has always been limpid; one that is as clear, precise, and elegant as a geometric

Years later, I've found myself turning to his speeches ("The audacity of hope!"), his turns of phrases in his books ("How

proof. His wit and facility for language cannot be questioned. He knows when to inject a much-needed levity to cut through paragraphs heavily infused with political shoptalk. However, there was a detachment in his narrative of his presidency that stalled the storytelling's progress. "The bigger the politician gets, the harder the writer has to struggle to stay in command of the story," wrote George Packer about the memoir. Perhaps it's in the overly detailed justifications of Obama's presidential decisions, his triumphs and failures, that became tiring — why they chose a certain recovery stimulus during the economic crisis; why Republicans seemed hell-bent to block any progress Obama wanted to see; and why he sent more young Americans to war, among others. What may read as self-assessment often only look like a defense, or an apology. I've found myself turning to his speeches ("The audacity of hope!"), his

do we transform mere power into justice, mere sentiment into love?") when I contend with my identity, my politics, my place in the Philippines, my place in the world. It seemed as though he wrote the book to explain his motives to his critics, or to show that indeed he did everything he could to act on the promise that he campaigned on. He recalls how a group of college students were very persistent

turns of phrases in his books ("How far do our obligations reach? How

about getting AIDS funding for Africa. "Didn't we increase AIDS funding?" he asked his press secretary Gibbs. "We did. They're saying you didn't increase enough," Gibbs said. It's unnecessary anecdotes like this that put me off — as if the burden shouldn't be on him; that he's doing enough with his influence, his power. "I felt compelled to disregard overly broad claims about the need to tear things up and remake society from whole cloth," he writes, a sentiment that is central to his book, his presidency. It was indeed a presidency of appeasement and accommodation, but maybe that was what was needed for America to survive; for the world to maintain peace.

community organizer and even Barack Obama the senator; the spirit that once roused and inspired young people like me. It may be a function of power; once he had it, he would (inadvertently or not) want to preserve it, and with it, comes the tempering of idealism, of hope, of change. Obama essentially joined and continued the legacy of an

Nonetheless, Barack Obama the president seemed to have lost the revolutionary spirit of Barack Obama the

Even his thoughts on racism felt measured, seemingly careful of alienating white readers that could still prove useful for his political career. I expected, maybe naively, that his rumination on being the first Black president of America would be given more space in the book. Given what happened with George Floyd in May, it's surprising that he did not think it necessary to weigh in more on the racist rhetoric that has given rise to the white supremacists, the same types that stormed the U.S. Capitol on January 6.

For all its centrist posturing and its cautious retelling of America's story, "A Promised Land" still provides an important

insight on the brewing disillusion and disempowerment of the working class, the unemployed young people not only in the U.S. but around the world. The book tells of the Tea Party movement that fostered full-blown conspiracy theories about Obama: that he was born in Kenya, making him ineligible to be president, or that he was a Muslim socialist who was groomed to infiltrate the U.S. government. Obama also shares the eerie support that Sarah Palin got for her effective populist narrative and her ability in "drawing big crowds and enthusiastically gassing them up with nativist bile." Later, Trump's ascent to popularity via his embrace of birtherism, propped by media outlets that would attach news with entertainment, slowly but surely spilled into real-life households, communities, and ideologies. If anything, Obama's initial disregard for these bizarre accusations does warn us that these falsities should not be ignored; that a person with a platform, that a publication or a newsroom should and has the duty to correct lies — accurately and

New Zealand journalist called out a politician's incorrect statements on television on the spot, sending waves of online adulation for the reporter. In November, a local reporter was called out on Twitter for parroting President Duterte's lies, without context or clarification. Now it seems reporters are more conscious of the ramifications of a purely "he said/she said" narrative, more acutely aware of the importance of fact-checking, a process that should've been fundamental to journalists in the first place. Moreover, besides the book's useful warnings, Obama sought to tell the reader the reality of how democracies have

not been kind to the most vulnerable. How fruits of the free market only benefit a few. How it is not so much about Left

It is at least heartening that we are gradually seeing these lessons being learned, especially in the media. In October, a

versus Right, Democrat vs Republican, Sunni vs Shiite, (or if I may add, Dilawan vs DDS) — but top versus bottom. But that despite these realities, for all of man's power and privilege, there is only so much one man can do. His retelling of his presidency seemed to be generally marred by constant jousting with politicians and candidates of the Republican Party ("promoting a story that fed not trust but resentment had come to define the modern Republican party," he writes), world leaders of autocratic regimes (of Putin, he says: "I couldn't shake the fear that Putin's way of doing business had more force and momentum than I cared to admit, that in the world as it was, many ... activists might soon be marginalized and crushed by their own government — and there'd be very little I could do to protect them"), and a press that was not always fair and critical ("at no point did [the media] simply and forthrightly call Trump out for lying or state that the conspiracy theory he was promoting was racist ... the more oxygen the media gave [the conspiracy theories, the more newsworthy they appeared"). For all its centrist posturing and its cautious retelling of America's

While Obama did not exactly manifest the "hope and change" that many people were expecting, he held on to a value that many great leaders cannot sustain: empathy. His capacity for empathy was not without its critics, of course. Advisors would tell him it was a bad idea to visit injured soldiers when deciding if America should send more troops to the Middle East. But he argues that it is in knowing exactly the true cost of war, the lives lost, the families broken that he is able to make rational decisions. His habit of stepping back to imagine other people's lives, to provide perspective is peppered throughout the book. His ability to continuously harness his empathy despite being in the confines of an 18th century house and a full security detail may also be in part thanks to his daily practice of reading 10 random letters from constituents, and writing them back when he could. He writes, "I imagined them getting the official

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envelope from the White House and opening it up with a look of puzzlement, then a smile. They'd show it to their family, maybe even take it to work. Eventually, the letter would fall into a drawer somewhere, forgotten under the accumulation of the new joys and pains that make up a life. That was okay. I couldn't expect people to understand how much their voices actually meant to me — how they had sustained my spirit and beat back whispering doubts on those late, solitary nights." I imagine these human voices — sometimes bursting with happiness, oftentimes tinged with sorrow — are ones that hum in Obama's head for every economic legislation, for every young uniformed man sent to Afghanistan. Obama's empathy, his measured words and temperament, are a stark contrast to his successor Donald Trump, who often acted

inaugurated. There is again a promise of "hope and change," and while this promise may fall short of the ideals that young people like me believe to be necessary, for now, and as I often do, I still take comfort in Obama's words: there are more stars in the sky than grains of sand on the earth. Share Sign Up to see what your friends like. Like

On January 21, after a tumultuous four years under a president that consistently lied to Americans and disrespected the international rules based order for which the world has depended on, Obama's Vice President, Joe Biden, will be

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