

Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race

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In his speech, “A More Perfect Union,” Barack Obama quoted William Faulkner (“The past is not dead. In fact, it’s not even past.”) to embody the idea that even though leaders no longer need to list the racial injustices of the past, they must remember that many of the problems in the African-American community today are rooted in past injustices. Similarly, Obama’s place in American history is rooted in the Civil Rights movement. This book explores the parts of history that Obama embraces and the ones he rejects in his evolving search for self-identity and political position.

Obama grew up in Hawaii, a place where no one race dominated and where multiculturalism was prized. Then in 1981, he moved to New York City to study at Columbia, experiencing that crumbling and splintered inner city during the worst years of its disinvestment. From there, he moved on to Chicago’s South Side to work as a community activist, and spent three years steeped in the issues of a community grappling with massive job loss. He made another cultural leap to the halls of Harvard Law School, landing smack in the middle of racial tensions and tribal warfare between liberals and conservatives on campus. All of these experiences set him up to see the pitfalls of black power nationalism and community self-determination. It was at Harvard that he developed and put into practice his belief in building coalitions and finding ways to meld divergent points of view.

Sugrue, a professor of history and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, seeks to “make sense of the still-significant reality of race in modern America” through the lens of Obama’s life and place in history. He acknowledges the dangers of writing about the recent past, and asserts that his goals are not to praise or discredit Obama, extol his opinions on Obama’s politics, or write a policy paper. Indeed, he remains focused on his thesis throughout the book and presents an objective view of Obama’s evolving political identity. This book will be of value to those studying current events, politics, and especially race issues in the United States.

“Racial ideas and practices, especially on the individual level, are contested and evolving, perhaps more rapidly now than at any time since World War II,” Sugrue explains. The future cannot be predicted, he posits, but the state of race in America depends not only on Obama’s policies, but on how the American people respond.

CHRISTINE CANFIELD (July / August 2010)

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