

The Making of a President

By STEVEN MENZIES

Barack Obama was elected president in 2008 after a campaign that was long on image and short on substance. Much of that missing substance concerned the candidate's core beliefs and character. Tellingly, the crises of the Obama campaign came from revelations that behind his polished veneer as a mainstream Democrat whose mixed heritage made him the perfect racial healer lurked hardcore leftist attitudes and a one-sided commitment to a black racial agenda. Yet thanks in good measure to the complaisant mainstream media, and the Republicans' deferential candidate John McCain, Obama was able to finesse his way out of his long and intimate association with his antiwhite pastor, Jeremiah Wright, and to shrug off his arch dismissal, delivered at a private fundraiser before wealthy San Francisco Democrats, of jobless Middle American whites as clinging to their guns, religion, and "anti-immigrant sentiment." Free from media scrutiny, and aided by the near financial collapse that September, Obama won the election handily.

After four years in office, Obama's leftist affinities have become plainer, but much about his background and his self-identity has remained unclear. As in the presidential campaign, the responsibility lies in Obama's own reticence and the complicity of much of the media. Witness the extraordinary sluggishness with which the president produced his own birth certificate, and his great care in embargoing his writings from his college years.

As a result, for many of his opponents, issues of Obama's actual identity, beliefs, and character continue to weigh at least as heavily as does his record as president. For them his present policies are to be reckoned to his closet Marxism, or his Kenyan birth, or his secret fealty to Islam, and other suppositions. To be sure, these are the beliefs of a fringe, but an uncommonly influential fringe that has included the mediagenic Donald Trump

Steven Menzies, a freelance writer and editor, is the nom de guerre of a long-time observer of politics, culture, and history.

and probably millions of other Americans, and the hunt for hidden influences and grows.

A Communist?

One of the more recent contributions to the search for the real Obama is Paul Kengor's *The Communist*. Subtitled *Frank Marshall Davis: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mentor*, the book is a biography of Frank Marshall Davis, a black journalist who for several decades was active in the Soviet-directed American

The Communist

Frank Marshall Davis: The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mentor

By Paul Kengor, New York: Threshold Editions/
Mercury Ink (Simon & Schuster), 2012
\$27, 398pp.



Barack Obama: The Story

By David Maraniss,
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012
\$32.50, 664pp.

The Other Barack: The Bold and Reckless Life of President Obama's Father

By Sally Jacobs, New York: Public Affairs, 2011
\$27.99, 311pp.

A Singular Woman

The Untold Story of Barack Obama's Mother

by Janny Scott
New York: Riverhead (Penguin), 2011
\$26.95, 384pp.

communist movement. While most of the book deals with Davis's long-forgotten New Deal and Cold War communist polemics, Kengor makes no bones about his main point, that his subject was not only Obama's "mentor" during the president's youth in Hawaii but has exercised a posthumous inspiration on the president's policies to this day.

The discovery under the swaying palms of Honolulu of a “card-carrying” member of the CPUSA who churned out the Stalinist line in an influential black newspaper for two decades, and in later years schooled a future president, will strike hardcore Obama foes as serendipitous. And there’s no question that it is to Frank Marshall Davis that Obama refers as “Frank” in his memoir *Dreams from My Father*, or that he was a good friend of Obama’s grandfather, Stanley Dunham.

Yet a careful reading of the 17 pages (out of nearly 300 in the book) that Kengor devotes to the youthful Obama’s visits with Davis reveals little hard evidence to substantiate Kengor’s claims of an overriding communist influence on Obama.



Professor Paul Kengor, author *The Communist*, speaking to an audience at the National Press Club, July 19, 2012.

Virtually the only information on the content of the visits comes from Obama’s (to be sure often untrustworthy) 1995 memoir, on which Kengor relies for Davis’s impact on Obama (Davis is mentioned twenty-two times in the book). In *Dreams* Davis is described not as a communist but as a rather embittered black militant. Doubtless Obama has softened and distorted Davis’s leftism, but there is very little in *Dreams* or anywhere else to indicate that Davis drilled the young Obama in Marxism-Leninism or, if he did, that he had much of an effect on his young pupil (according to Kengor Obama was only nine or ten years old when he met Davis, and last saw him when he was still a teenager).

Obama himself has represented Obama’s visits to Davis as attempts by Obama’s maternal grandfather, Stanley Dunham, to provide him with a racially conscious black male role model, given the absence of Barack’s African father since his infancy. Like the older Obama, too, Davis had married a white woman and was the father of mixed-race children.

In his efforts to account for the paucity of evidence that Davis trained Obama in communism, Kengor downplays the effects of age and events. He notes that Davis publicly condemned the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, but does not link that with Davis’s evident withdrawal from communist activity soon thereafter (at a time that coincided with active federal intervention to promote racial integration). Age (he was at least 65 when he met the 9- or 10-year-old Obama), disappointment at the failure of his literary career, and a burgeoning interest in sex that included writing pornography and “swinging,” as well as the rise of radical trends, from black power to the New Left, that competed with the geriatric CPUSA, likely explain the missing signs of a communist tutelage of Barack Obama by Frank Davis.

Despite the book’s value in reminding of the effects of a Soviet-loyal party and its agents on all too many American institutions during the 1930s and ’40s, *The Communist* often cloys through repetition and hyperbole. Kengor’s anticommunism has a gee-whiz component that includes frequent hosannas to Ronald Reagan, Winston Churchill, and Harry Truman (although the indulgence of the latter two to Stalin at Teheran, Yalta, and Potsdam arguably far exceeded any of Frank Marshall Davis’s services to the Red dictator). His vision of America seems to have strong affinities with the neo-conservative concept of America as a proposition nation, that is, a nation that is basically defined by a creed and should be open to anyone who subscribes to that creed, and invokes several times the neocon shibboleths of American “exceptionalism” and America as a “shining city on a hill.”

Home truths

Surprisingly enough, since 2008 it is mainstream journalists who have done the most to pierce the veil of silence and deception that has shrouded Obama’s early years. Last year former *New York Times* reporter Janny Scott (*A Singular Woman*) and the *Boston Globe*’s Sally Jacobs (*The Other Barack*) produced probing biographies of Obama’s mother and father that delve far beyond the earlier pieties. Bill Clinton biographer and *Washington Post* editor David Maraniss’s *Barack Obama: The Story*, the latest of these, offers a compre-

hensive account of Barack Obama's forebears, family, and life from birth to his matriculation at Harvard Law School in his mid-twenties.

Two things make Maraniss's book in particular of interest to critics of Obama's policies, including his unprecedented openness to uncontrolled immigration from the Third World: first, its detailed information on the formation and development of Obama's attitudes and character, and second, its critical review of key aspects of Obama's own account of his life, above all in his autobiographical *Dreams from My Father*, Kengor's source for the influence of Frank Marshall Davis.

All in the family

Clearly the central figure in Obama's familial mystique is his father, also named Barack Obama, the Kenyan who journeyed to Hawaii to study in 1959, married the teenaged Stanley Ann Dunham, fathered young Barack, and departed his family for Harvard. Maraniss, relying partly on Sally Jacobs's more detailed account, shows that the marriage between Ann and her African husband, rather than slowly unraveling due to the elder Obama's academic aspirations, collapsed in all but name weeks after their son's birth, evidently when she learned that Barack had another wife back in Kenya. A couple of years later the senior Obama had to leave Harvard and the country when the Immigration and Naturalization Service, exhibiting a zeal all but unimaginable today, refused to renew his visa after learning of his bigamy and general sexual licentiousness.

Maraniss's and Jacobs's accounts contradict President Obama's version of the senior Obama's diminished career as an economist in Kenya. Rather than the intrigues of his tribal enemies in the Kenyan government, the two journalists offer lurid but well-sourced descriptions of the president's father's womanizing and drinking. While polygamy was an accepted practice in Obama's Luo tribe, his infidelities and abuse, which according to several of his wives included beatings, a death threat, and infection with sexually transmitted diseases, fall well below East African, let alone American, norms. And, while President Obama did acknowledge his father's drinking in *Dreams*, Jacobs and Maraniss demonstrate its centrality in stunting the undeniably talented elder Obama's career as a government economist, and in costing more than one life, including his own, in auto accidents.

What impresses, based on Maraniss and Jacobs, is how little Barack Obama II, for all his youthful hero worship, seems to have learned or inherited from his father, with the exception of his evident high intelligence.

If anything, in his calmness, calculation, and temperance (after a good deal of youthful marijuana smoking), Barack II seems his father's antithesis. But Barack I bequeathed his son his blackness, and that has proved, by choice as well as nature, the determinative part of Barack II's makeup.

As noted above, it was Obama II's maternal grandfather, Stanley Dunham, who introduced his grandson to Frank Marshall Davis. A frequently out of work salesman, Stan Dunham has generally been eclipsed in the Obama story by his wife Madelyn, a bank executive who long supported the family. But Maraniss, and Janny Scott in *A Singular Woman*, have done a fine job in showing in depth how Dunham's influence was formative for the future president. They make a well-documented and plausible case that Stan's free-floating leftism (at least by the standards of the 1950s and early '60s) affected both daughter and grandson. Dunham's affinity for blacks went beyond a support for their civil rights: according to his grandson, quoted by Scott, "the condition of the black race, their pain, their wounds, would in his mind become merged with his own." As the two biographers make clear, without the receptivity of both Stan and Madelyn to their interracial grandson, Barack Obama II's might never have been born, or have afterwards been given up for adoption, in which case his formative years would surely have been very different.

Maraniss and Scott show that Obama's mother, Ann Dunham, exercised a distinctive influence as well. They argue that the attitudes that disposed her to submit to the advances of an African exchange student when she was seventeen and to continue a history of interracial liaisons with Indonesian men, including her second husband, Lolo Soetero, clearly reflect her openness, influenced by her father, to liberal ideas in politics and religion in high school. After the end of her marriage, she unfailingly lionized Barack I to Barack II. Ann Dunham earned a doctorate in anthropology and had a long career as a field anthropologist and executive for international nonprofits until her death from cancer in 1995. From Scott's biography it is clear that the left-liberal internationalism, including an opposition to U.S. "neocolonialism," touched on Obama's *Dreams*, was an authentic influence on her son.

An education in leftism and privilege

Maraniss and Scott both emphasize Ann's insistence on her son's education, both in Indonesia, where she would rise at 4 a.m. to prepare him for the day's lessons in his Indonesian elementary school, and Hawaii, where his mother's diligence gained her 10-year-old son

a scholarship to Punahou, the most elite private school in the Islands.

What is most notable from Maraniss's lengthy account of Barack Obama's eight years at Punahou is how well the young half-African boy, fresh from several years in Indonesia, fit in scholastically and socially. Like both his parents, Barack was highly intelligent and upwardly mobile; casual and laidback as well, he seems to have meshed with his racially mixed and melded classmates easily. Though no grind, he performed well enough to be accepted at Occidental, an unheralded but academically outstanding college in the Los Angeles area.

As with Obama's time at Punahou, Maraniss devotes scores of pages, largely based on interviews with his college friends and classmates, to his subject's undergraduate years at Occidental and Columbia. From his account it is evident that Obama gravitated to leftist, socialist, and internationalist students and causes, including efforts to pressure the colleges to disinvest in South African securities. Among his closest friends were a number of Pakistani and Indian students from wealthy families who dabbled in Marxist and other schemes for world, especially Third World, betterment, several of whom Obama visited in Pakistan. But Maraniss finds no evidence that either he or they had sympathies with militant Islam, or that Obama so much as dabbled in Marxism-Leninism.

Evidence from an autobiography

The most important source for Barack Obama's early years has been his autobiographical *Dreams from My Father*. Maraniss has shown that numerous incidents in *Dreams* that were calculated to reveal Barack Obama's inner turmoil over his racial identification are disproved by the recollections of his contemporaries, including his black friends. Their memories directly contradict nearly all his tales of discrimination or resentment. He experienced little difficulty due to his black blood in Hawaii (but according to both Maraniss and Jacobs omitted frequent instances of racial mockery he endured as a child in nonwhite Indonesia). It wasn't his "black game" but his mediocre ability that kept him a substitute on the Punahou basketball team. His radical black friend at Punahou proves to have been a mellow Afro-Asian. Obama inflated his importance and radical stance at his first job, copy editor for an international business news service, misrepresented his time as a community organizer in

various ways, and invented, conflated, and left out girlfriends white and black to simulate a long quest for the perfect black partner.

Yet, as independent journalist Steve Sailer first showed in his 2008 *Half-Blood Prince*, whatever the distortions of *Dreams from My Father*, one thing seems undeniable: its author's dedication to his search for his African roots, and to embracing his own blackness. In an America that was already drifting toward "postracial" attitudes, the choice of the biracial Barack Obama to identify as black and to serve above all black causes offers perhaps a powerful gauge of racial commitment.

This commitment emerges fully at the end of Maraniss's *Barack Obama*, which portrays not only Obama's zeal for serving poor blacks in a South Chicago neighborhood, but his laborious efforts to shed his largely white middle class manners in exchange for black ones.

A question of allegiance

All in all, "liberal" writers like Maraniss have been more open to broaching questions of Obama's racial identity than have conservatives. Unfortunately, such writers and the mainstream media in general were quick to buy Obama's claim in 2008 to be the first postracial candidate—and since then, despite the evidence from his life, from *Dreams*, his presidential policies, and his virtually unanimous support from black voters, the MSM has clung to its postracial thesis even more tenaciously than white Middle Americans cling to their guns, religion, and "xenophobia."

Conservative writers have tended to ignore Obama's black identity as a factor affecting his ideology and policies. In their efforts to unearth hidden ideological or religious commitments, writers such as Kengor and D'Souza (who sees an Obama chiefly driven by anticolonialism), they ignore Obama's readily discernible racial allegiance.

Maraniss, Jacobs, and Scott make a strong case that the initial impetus for Obama's political and racial ideas and loyalties came from his family, from his Hawaiian milieu, and from his American education. On due reflection, that is even more sobering than is the specter of a covert communist or closet Islamist Obama.

Whatever his influences, Barack Obama's record in office establishes that rather than America's first "postracial" chief executive, he is its first postwhite president. ■