

Réussir
l'agrégation
d'anglais

The Obama Presidency (2009-2017)

Alix Meyer



The Obama Presidency (2009-2017)

The Obama Presidency (2009–2017)

Alix Meyer



Belin:
ÉDUCATION

www.cned.fr
www.belin-education.com

ISBN: 979-10-358-0883-9

ISSN: 4100-1258

Dépôt légal – 1^{re} édition : 2019, octobre

© Éditions Belin/Humensis, 2019

170 bis, boulevard du Montparnasse 75680 Paris cedex 14

CONTENTS

Introduction	9
---------------------------	---

PART ONE HOPE

1. OBAMA: THE ORIGIN STORY	17
2. 2008	26
A The Democratic primary	26
B The message.....	29
C The strategy	31
D Obama for America	36
E The General Election	37

PART TWO CHANGE

1. SETTING THE TONE: THE FINANCIAL CRISIS	45
2. LEGISLATIVE ACHIEVEMENTS	51
A Stimulus	51
B The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.....	53

C Dodd-Frank	68
D Beyond.....	72

3. CHANGE IN FOREIGN POLICY 75

A Dealing with the Bush legacy	76
B From war on terror to war on al Qaeda	78

PART THREE

REALITY CHECKS—AND BALANCES

1. FOREIGN RESISTANCE 83

A Afghanistan (and Pakistan)	83
B Responding to the Arab Spring	86
C From Egypt to Libya	87
D Syria and ISIS	89
E From Russia with boxing gloves	93
F Humbled?.....	96

2. THE UNITED STATES OF GRIDLOCK 98

A Democratic failures	98
B Tea Party!	106
C 2010 midterm shellacking	111
D Budget wars	113
E Dealing with another Bush legacy	114
F Congressional leverage and brinksmanship	116
G Deal(s)	119
H Shut it down!.....	122
I Appetite for obstruction	125

3. GOING IT ALONE 128

A The 2012 campaign	129
B Executive (re)actions.....	131
C Immigration.....	134
D Global warming.....	138
E Black Lives Matter and criminal justice reform.....	140

F Imperial presidency 2.0.....	143
G Leading the executive branch.....	143
H Commander-in-Chief.....	144
I Diplomat-in-Chief.....	145
Conclusion	149
Index	153
Bibliography	155

Introduction

This book is meant to help the candidates prepare for the *agrégation d'anglais*. Every question for the *concours* is a challenge to candidates and to specialists to concentrate a lot of information in a very limited amount of space. The two dangers that beckon are thus the temptation of overwhelming the reader with all the things that need to be said to cover a broad topic and the danger of overlooking a potentially key point in an attempt to hurry towards the endpoint. In regards to the presidency of Barack Obama, we are confronted with the specific constraints of dealing with extremely recent history with limited bibliographical resources and the risk of lacking in the required critical distance made easier by the passage of time.

These challenges must be faced head on and not simply ignored. As far as this book is concerned, the emphasis will be on brevity. While trying to cover most of the issues that dominated these eight years, there was necessarily a lot that had to be only alluded to so the reader would look for additional reference. The ambition is to provide a roadmap to help candidates (and curious readers) on their journey to get a more complete look at an extraordinary presidency.

Barack Obama was the first African-American president. This is an inescapable fact that obviously should not be ignored. Obama's racial identity was key to his electoral appeal. It was also an essential factor in the resistance that he had to face. As such, given the centrality of race to American politics, it would be self-defeating to attempt to restrict that aspect to one chapter of our story. Race infuses the presidency of Barack Obama, it will thus be there in the forefront or in the backdrop of everything that follows. Race is the beating heart that pumps meaning into every action and reaction during his presidency. It doesn't mean that race explains everything (or anything) though. As Barack Obama himself explored in his autobiography¹, he struggled to

1. B. Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. 1st ed. New York: Times Books, 1995.

recognize the centrality of race to his identity without reducing his identity to it. His presidency is shaped by similar tensions. Because race is thus both ubiquitous and elusive in American society, I chose to treat it as a given. Even when I don't mention it explicitly, its shadow will loom over the following developments.

Before we go any further, it is necessary to clarify certain notions. The focus of this work is on the presidency of Barack Obama, not the president himself. While the two are often confused, it is necessary to always remember that they are intertwined but nevertheless different.

The president is the American citizen who receives the votes of more than 270 members of the Electoral College following the presidential election. After swearing an oath to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution” he or she can exercise the power of the office. As any individual, that person has all the qualities and foibles that they bring to their work along with all the prejudices, interests, projects, dreams, insecurities and hubris that make up their personality. To a large extent, these things are *not* what we will be focusing on. Whether the president himself is a sinner or a saint is irrelevant. We will leave the inner life of the president to the paparazzi, the biographer, the artist or the pundit. Our focus will be on his presidency.

The presidency is the institution that is animated by the officeholder. Its perimeter was originally set by the framers in 1787. Article 2 of the US Constitution provides a few pithy paragraphs on the powers of the office of president. In charge of the executive power, the president must make sure that the “laws are faithfully executed”¹. As Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces he leads the US military. This, alongside his ability to sign treaties and appoint ambassadors—under the control of the US Senate which must ratify said treaties and confirm nominations—makes him the dominant force in foreign policy. Beyond the US border, the president can enjoy what the Supreme Court has famously called “plenary power”². According to Arthur Schlesinger’s famous theory³, it is from that constitutional position of strength, that the presidency grew to become imperial. The “Emperor in the White House”⁴ can choose to deploy troops, hide his actions under the cloak of national security, manipulate the media and

1. United States Constitution, 1787. Article 2.

2. In *US v Curtis-Wright* (1936).

3. A. Schlesinger, *The Imperial Presidency*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.

4. V. Michelot, *L'Empereur de la Maison-Blanche*. Armand Colin, 2004.

the people and largely escape from the clutches of the checks and balances system.

On the domestic front, the constitutional grants of authority to the president are not as impressive. Congress is in charge of legislation. The president can propose new bills—proposals that Congress can (and typically does) promptly ignore without fear of retribution since, in this presidential regime of separation of power, the president has no means to punish them by removing them from office. The constitution does provide the president with a veto power. While this may seem like a purely negative power, it must be understood as a bargaining tool¹ that allows the presidency to leverage the threat of his refusal to sign the end result into an active participation in the legislative process. From the Civil War to the Great Depression, from Pearl Harbor to 9/11, emergencies, crises and the overall growth of the federal government itself has contributed to the dramatic expansion of presidential power. The growth of the federal bureaucracy in the 20th century has quite logically redounded to the leader of the administration. The president is now at the helm of a vast administration that is working under his direct leadership. As executive capacity expanded², so did the ability of the person in whom those powers were vested to circumvent congressional opposition or inertia through direct action. The power of the presidency has thus grown along with its institutional influence, reach and scope. When Barack Obama took the oath of office on January 20th, 2009, he was walking in the footsteps of every previous president from George Washington to George W. Bush.

What follows is thus a history of how Barack Obama wielded the power of the office over his two terms to achieve certain goals. Yet it is also about the efforts of other political actors and institutions that either assisted or resisted his efforts. A history of the presidency is, necessarily, a history of the interaction of the occupant of the White House with the other branches of government. Thus, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* or the congressional maneuvers around the filibuster that were instrumental in the adoption of the Affordable Care Act, should not be ignored. Conversely, one cannot treat the question as an invitation to give a full and detailed political

1. C. M. Cameron, *Veto bargaining: presidents and the politics of negative power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

2. A. Rudalevige, *The New Imperial Presidency: Renewing Presidential Power after Watergate*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

history of the US government from 2009 to 2017. It is to this balancing act that candidates, and the author, must try to commit.

One implicit question that is always asked is: was this president successful? What does presidential success mean? How can success be measured, and success for whom? Should presidential success be measured by the ability to pass legislation? To effect change through executive action? To win elections? To have a legacy? (And what is a legacy?) To create jobs and help bring about a robust economy? To restore fiscal balance? To heal social and partisan divides? To be popular? To promote peace? To defeat enemies? To promote the rule of law? To expand the power of his office? The list is potentially endless but since we are tasked with trying to assess the presidency of Barack Obama and not simply describe it, it is necessary to keep in my mind these questions.

As students of history know, politics cannot be reduced to a morality play where the heroes triumph over the villains. The mundane tasks of aggregating votes and moving the levers of administrative power to induce the US government to achieve certain ends is wrapped up in narratives that can warp our understanding. It is by breaking down the subject matter into its core components that we can better assess the end results. In a specific policy area, such as immigration, one can try to see how the presidential campaign defined the issue; what legislative fixes were then proposed or supported by the White House; how they fared in Congress; how they were implemented through executive action; what results can be measured. Such a policy-centered approach will nonetheless prove insufficient since it cannot tell us about the people, groups, think-tanks and lobbies that shaped the parameters for the discussion, tugged at the various actors, from the president himself to his advisers, from the bureaucracy to the members of Congress, from the lawyers' offices to the Supreme Court justices. The president is part of a political ecosystem that he helps to shape but also defines him. The presidency is the meeting point of an individual with a set of rules and organizations (i.e. institutions) in a certain political context.

In an attempt to provide candidates with a convenient first look at the Obama presidency, I opted to proceed in a—broadly—chronological order. This approach has many drawbacks, the main one being that it can give the impression of a teleological narrative and an unduly simplified version of what was a noisy, disputed history. Unfortunately, that scientific weakness is what makes it pedagogically desirable. Meanwhile, since this book is trying to be more than a chronicle of all the

policy actions undertaken by President Obama, this history will be sorted into parts and chapters that try to undergird the various events with a modicum of thematic coherence. I will start with a first part that focuses on Barack Obama's rise to power which was a central part of the political brand that catapulted him towards an unlikely victory in 2008. Then, a second part will tackle the dramatic achievements that were accomplished under his presidential leadership. The third part takes the counterpoint to this argument by shining a light on all the issues for which resistance led to stalemate, and describing how President Obama responded to this opposition by falling back on an executive-centered policymaking.

PART ONE

HOPE

OBAMA: THE ORIGIN STORY

Every president likes to use his biography as some sort of parable for his political appeal, but rarely can the individual claim to embody the ideals that he or she wishes to advance as Barack Hussein Obama II did. To say that his rise was unlikely would be more than an understatement. Indeed, for most of his life, it should have been unfathomable. Born on August 4th, 1961, in Honolulu, he became the first president from Hawaii. More importantly of course, as the son of Barack H. Obama, Sr., a Kenyan exchange student at the University of Hawaii and Ann Dunham, a white American from Kansas, the skinny guy with a funny name—as he liked to present himself on the stump—became the first African-American president in US history.

Even though he is the subject of a number of biographies,¹ the story of Obama's life before entering politics is mostly known through his own writings². In *Dreams from My Father*, the autobiography he published in 1995, he narrated how his parents met and married while in college before his father left his mother when he was two years old. Even though he barely knew him, his father was a somewhat looming presence, not just through his genetics, but also through the stories told by his mother and maternal grandparents of this charismatic man who was extremely bright and possessed a drive and self-confidence that always made him stand out. Barack Obama described how his distant and complicated relationship with his mostly absent father contributed to complexifying the construction of his identity as a black kid raised by a white mother.

His mother played a major role in shaping his worldview. As an idealistic 1960s liberal, she taught him about the heroes of the civil rights

1. D. Remnick, *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2011D. J. Garrow, *Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama*. First edition. New York, NY: William Morrow, An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2017F. Durpaire, O. Richomme, *L'Amérique de Barack Obama*. Paris: Demopolis, 2007.

2. B. Obama, *Dreams from My Father*, *op. cit.*

movement and the necessity of always acting for the downtrodden. As she moved to Indonesia with her second husband, Lolo Soetoro, she took her son with her and, along with his sister Maya who was born in 1970, they lived there until Barack turned 10. She then sent him back to Hawaii to live with her parents, Stanley and Madelyn Dunham, to pursue his education at the prestigious Punahou School. He thus entered his teenage years in the home of his two white grandparents, a biracial child just back from years on another continent, to live on an island where there were very few African-Americans. It is little wonder that his quest for self could fill a whole autobiography.

Since we are supposed to focus on Obama's presidency, why linger on these early years? First of all, because his atypical story is part and parcel of his political identity. He emphasized at every turn that he was the very personification of the post-racial cosmopolitan country that he believed was the true face of America. Second, because he always went back to his roots to explain his own behavior as president, especially around the issue of race. To understand President Obama we should understand how he saw his own life's story, how it fed his vision for who he was and what we thought he could bring to the country. It is through this prism that *Dreams from My Father* should be used.

Upon finishing high school in 1980, Obama chose to enroll in Occidental College in Los Angeles, CA, where he spent two formative years. He mingled with politically engaged African-American students, dropped the nickname Barry and got involved in the divestment campaign of protest against South African apartheid, before he transferred to Columbia to major in political science. After two years in New York, he graduated in 1983 and took a corporate job in the city, but only after having failed to secure a spot as a community organizer.

The idealistic visions nurtured by his mother had left their mark. Barack Obama badly wanted to work to help his fellow man and walk in the footsteps of his civil rights elders. This is what led him to community organizing, a line of work that was developed by another Chicagoan, the legendary activist, Saul Alinsky¹. In 1985, he saw a job posting that caught his attention. The Developing Communities Project, a nonprofit based in the South Side of Chicago was hiring a community organizer. One of the prerequisites was that the candidate had to be black, since DCP's white staff was facing a lot of resistance

1. S. D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals*. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.