**Barack Obama**

President of the United States (2009–)

- **Born**: August 4, 1961
- **Birthplace**: Honolulu, Hawaii, United States

The first African American elected president of the United States, Obama has also worked as a US Senator from Illinois, a lawyer, community organizer, author, and law school professor. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009.

**Early Life**

Barack Hussein Obama (bah-RAHK hoo-SAYN oh-BAH-mah) was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, on August 4, 1961. His mother was Stanley Ann Dunham, an American born and raised in Kansas, and his father was Barack Obama Sr., a Kenyan of the Luo-speaking people. Obama’s parents were married on February 2, 1961, while students at the University of Hawaii, but they divorced in 1964. His mother subsequently married Lolo Soetero, an Indonesian, and went with him and her son to live in Jakarta, Indonesia, in 1967. After completing a graduate degree at Harvard University, the elder Obama returned to Kenya and saw his son only one more time, in 1971. He died in a road accident in 1982. From the remarriages of his parents, Obama has several half brothers and half sisters.

From 1967 to 1971, Obama studied at public and parochial grade schools in Jakarta. He returned to Honolulu for the rest of his primary education and graduated from high school in 1979. His favorite sport became basketball. He lived with his maternal grandparents, who had moved to Hawaii from their home in Kansas. His mother lived with him from 1972 to 1977, then she returned to Indonesia to pursue her anthropological research. She died of cancer in 1995 in Hawaii.

The individuals most influential in forming Obama’s character were his mother and grandmother, both of whom were born and raised in small-town Kansas and valued family, work, and plain speaking. As a youth, he experimented with drugs, a decision for which he later expressed regret.

Obama began his college career at Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1979 before transferring two years later to Columbia University in New York. At Columbia, he earned a degree in political science and international relations in 1983. He remained in New York until 1985, when he moved to Chicago to work as a community organizer on the city’s South Side. After a two-month tour of Europe and Africa in mid-1988, he entered Harvard Law School and became the first African American to serve as president of the Harvard Law Review.

After graduating from Harvard, Obama returned to Chicago to practice civil rights law and teach constitutional law at the University of Chicago Law School. He emerged as not only a community organizer but also a community leader. In 1992, he married fellow Harvard Law graduate Michelle Robinson. They had two daughters, Malia in 1998 and Natasha (better known as Sasha) in 2001. Obama’s introspective memoir, Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance (1995), became a best seller. He began to contemplate a political career.

**Life’s Work**

Although Obama considered running for mayor of Chicago, his strongest community roots were in the area of south Chicago that formed the Thirteenth District of the Illinois state senate. In March of 1996, he won the Democratic Party nomination for the district unopposed. He carried the November 5 election with more than 80 percent of the vote. Obama won reelection in 1998, this time for a four-year term.
obtaining just under 90 percent of the vote. In 2002, he won another four-year term, running unopposed. Obama was defeated in a 2000 bid for the Illinois First Congressional District seat, losing the Democratic primary by a wide margin to the incumbent congressman, Bobby Rush.

In the Illinois senate, Obama introduced or supported legislation that reformed the state’s welfare system, provided tax relief for low-income families, and supported labor interests. Democrats won control of the senate in 2003, and Obama was named chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee. With more power to shape and pass legislation, he moved to improve health care for children, standardize access to health care statewide, and monitor hospital quality. He also responded to labor demands related to equal pay, overtime, and protection of whistleblowers. He addressed police issues related to domestic violence, racial profiling, and evidence-gathering in potential capital punishment cases. He was noted for his bipartisan approach to writing and supporting legislation.

In 2002, Obama began considering a future run for a US Senate seat and engaged Chicago political strategist David Axelrod for his campaign. Sweeping through the 2004 spring primary, he won a solid majority for the nomination. He further enhanced his rising political profile by giving a charismatic address that summer to the Democratic National Convention. In the November election, Obama trounced his conservative Republican opponent, Alan Keyes, a last-minute substitute for a previous Republican candidate who had resigned amid a marriage scandal.

Obama's position in the US Senate provided him a national and international stage on which to act. With Republican senator Richard Lugar, he sponsored the Lugar-Obama Nuclear Proliferation Act of 2007 to reduce conventional weapons of warfare. He also teamed with Republican senator Tom Coburn to produce the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act of 2006 that created a website, USAspending.gov, to enhance transparency in government finance. Obama also supported legislation for campaign finance reform, energy efficiency, and children's health insurance. A member of the Committee on Foreign Relations, he traveled to Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

Obama next set his sights on the Democratic presidential nomination, announcing his candidacy at the beginning of 2007. His opposition to the Iraq War and support of health care reform, as well as his charismatic skills as an orator, quickly placed him among the front-runners. His main opponent became Senator Hillary Clinton of New York, who emphasized Obama's lack of experience and expressed doubts that his rhetoric could be turned into tangible action. By June, after a protracted primary campaign, Obama had edged past Clinton to achieve the necessary majority of delegates for the nomination. At the Democratic National Convention in August, Obama selected Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware as his running mate.

Obama’s Democratic ticket ran against a Republican duo of Senator John McCain of Arizona and Alaska governor Sarah Palin. McCain and Palin presented themselves as “mavericks,” while Obama and Biden championed “change you can believe in.” Obama continued his highly successful fund-raising campaign, rejecting both official public funding and lobbyist support. Opting for private funding, much of which came in small amounts from individual donors, he accumulated well over half a billion dollars, an unprecedented amount to raise privately. His campaigns also made innovative use of the Internet. He took part in three televised debates with McCain and was generally judged to have won them all. Further weakening the McCain campaign was its association with the presidency of George W. Bush, whose popularity sank under the weight of a major economic crisis and unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the final weeks of the 2008 campaign, opinion polls showed the Obama-Biden ticket leading McCain-Palin by a significant margin.

For the general election on November 4, voter turnout was estimated at over 60 percent, relatively high by modern American standards. More than 130 million votes were cast, with nearly 70 million (53 percent) going to Obama. Electoral College results were 365 to 173 in favor of the Democratic ticket, which ran strongest in the populous states of the East Coast, West Coast, and upper Midwest. The Republican ticket claimed nearly 60 million votes (47 percent), prevailing in the South, Southwest, and lower Midwest. The Democratic Party also won overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress. At a victory rally on the night of his election, Obama addressed a massive crowd in downtown Chicago’s Grant Park, where forty years earlier police and protesters had clashed in one of the most turbulent Democratic conventions in history. Until his inauguration on January 20, 2009, Obama and his transition team worked with the outgoing Bush administration to deal with the mounting global financial and economic collapse.

Obama took office as the United States’ first African American president amid a vast array of economic, social, and international challenges. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that year in recognition of his “efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.” The award stirred controversy, since America remained heavily involved in two wars, and the Nobel committee was criticized by some for acting prematurely to honor a president mere months into his term. The committee, however, argued that Obama had “captured the world’s attention and given its people hope for a better future.” Obama’s first term as president saw him sign the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (also known as Obamacare) into law on March 23, 2010, as well.

On April 4, 2011, Obama announced that he would seek reelection for a second term as president; he officially accepted the Democratic Party nomination at the National Convention on September 6, 2012. His challenger was former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, sharing the Republican ticket with Congressman Paul Ryan. The November 6, 2012, election went to Obama, who won his second term with 332 electoral votes against Romney’s 206. Obama began his second term on January 20, 2013.

The first half of Obama’s second term focused primarily on US domestic issues, especially in relation to gun control following the December 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in which twenty children and six school employees were fatally shot by one gunman. Obama also advocated for the US Supreme Court to overturn as unconstitutional the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act and California’s 2008 Proposition 8, both of which opposed same-sex marriage, and he championed equal rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) communities. In September 2014, Obama announced in a speech before the United Nations General Assembly that the United States would be taking the lead in responding to such global crises and conflicts as the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa and Russian aggression in the Ukraine. He also stated his administration’s intent to dismantle the so-called Islamic State (a
militant extremist group also known as ISIL) and called on the rest of the world to join America in training and equipping soldiers to fight the terrorist organization.

Significance

Although the Obama presidency faced unprecedented, paralyzing dilemmas, its mere existence was a major milestone in American history. In his November 4, 2008, victory speech in Chicago's Grant Park, Obama proclaimed that his ascension to the presidency had proved that “America is a place where all things are possible.” His campaign emphasized “change” and “hope” as its main themes, and his election symbolized for many Americans the changing of long-held racial attitudes and hope for a more unified future.

Bibliography


