

ous hogwash, to put it stridently.” Most of his subsequent criticism is rooted in this fundamentally anti-political point of view.

HUGHES’S FLAW, both as a critic and as an autobiographer, is that he puts too *many* things stridently. Though he writes with sensitivity about the art and artists he admires, the passion that more often drives him is not love but anger. Nor is this the “generous anger” that George Orwell ascribed to Charles Dickens (and that Orwell himself possessed in abundance), but a darker emotion that borders on spite. When, for instance, Hughes describes the painter Helen Frankenthaler as “a card-carrying Jewish princess to the very tips of her talons,” it is hard not to read his cheap disdain for Frankenthaler as a person into what he has elsewhere written (wrongheadedly, in my view) about her paintings—namely, that they “are very assured but seem a touch overpleased with their own sensitivity.”

A touch of nastiness enhances a critic’s readability, as when Hughes bangs away at such easy targets as the “oafish collector who . . . thinks Parmigianino was a kind of cheese.” But it is less likely to inspire confidence in the judgment of the critic who overindulges in it. *Things I Didn’t Know* contains so many vengeful sideswipes and settled scores that one comes to see the candor of its irascible author as tic-like, an irresistible compulsion to give offense.

WHAT MAKES Robert Hughes so angry?

When an autobiographer praises others, he is almost always talking about himself. Thus it is instructive that Hughes should make a point of admiringly describing the Australian artist Donald Friend as having had “an expatriate’s nature.” For Hughes himself is an expatriate *pur sang*, both by temperament and, as he explains in *Things I Didn’t Know*, by necessity:

You can lead a complete and totally articulate life as a literary critic in Australia, because books go everywhere and anyone can afford them. . . . Not so with paintings and sculpture. They do not go everywhere. This is the besetting problem for the “provincial” whose concern is the visual arts. . . . Try acquiring a working knowledge of 15th-century Italian painting, or Baroque sculpture, while staying in Australia—it’s flatly impossible. The same, but even more so, with contemporary art. I knew I had to up pegs and leave.

Be that as it may, the decision to emigrate from one’s native land is a fateful act, one that never fails to mark the psyche. Hughes was marked a second time when he returned to Australia in 1999 to film a TV series and became involved in a car accident that did grave injury both to himself and to one of the passengers of the vehicle he struck. In *Things I Didn’t Know*, he describes in excruciating detail the resulting uproar stirred up by the Australian tabloid press, which portrayed him as a “f—king elitist c—t” (his phrase) whose “conscious aloofness” the *Sydney Morning Herald* affected to find “nauseating.” This experience, according to Hughes, caused him to lose “the rather innocent and nostalgic love of Australia that I had retained . . . ever since I left for Europe.”

Hughes’s lingering loyalty to the country with which he is now terminally disillusioned was no mere obeisance to patriotic piety. It suffuses his best book, *The Fatal Shore: The Epic of Australia’s Founding* (1987), a masterly account of the early history of Australia. It is also to be found throughout *Things I Didn’t Know*, perhaps most illuminatingly when, in the course of denying New York’s claim to be “the ‘center’ of Western culture,” he complains of America’s “complete indifference” to “anything done at the outer fringes of the art-historical empire, like Australia.”

Elsewhere he writes bitterly that “if an Australian event doesn’t involve a monster crocodile, a giant shark, or Nicole Kidman, it won’t go anywhere in America.”

It would be too simple to attribute Hughes’s critique of America’s alleged cultural imperialism to the long-simmering *ressentiment* of a self-made elitist from the provinces who longs above all to be taken seriously by the very people he is attacking. There is more to him—and to Australian culture—than that. But one cannot read *Things I Didn’t Know* without recognizing that Robert Hughes, for all his disillusion, remains an Australian through and through, or without sensing something of the psychological complexity of his uncomfortable relationship with the vastly more powerful country in which he has chosen, for better or worse, to live and work.

Off and Running

The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream

by Barack Obama

Crown. 364 pp. \$25.00

Reviewed by
Yuval Levin

BARACK OBAMA, the Democratic star of the moment in American politics, is the junior Senator from Illinois, and for the past two years has been the only black member of the U.S. Senate. Elected after seven years in the Illinois state legislature and a short career as a lawyer and community activist in

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Chicago, he first came to national prominence when John F. Kerry made him the keynote speaker at the 2004 Democratic convention.

Since then he has been something of a celebrity, always in demand for speeches and interviews if not very active on the Senate floor. Washington pundits started buzzing early on about a future White House run, but not until this fall did Obama himself begin to drop hints that he might have his eyes on the Presidency. The hints came in the course of a book tour to launch *The Audacity of Hope*, and the resulting publicity quickly made the book a best-seller.

This is in essence a campaign document, with most of the faults and few of the virtues of the form. Each of its nine chapters (bearing titles like “Values,” “Race,” “Opportunity,” “Faith,” and “Family”) opens with a personal story, generally drawn from Obama’s two years in the Senate, proceeds to a set of social or political questions, and then mentions a policy proposal or two before circling back to the personal story with which it began. The chapter on values, for example, takes up questions of corporate ethics and compassion for the poor. The chapter on opportunity lays out concerns with education and American competitiveness. The discussion of family addresses the challenges of balancing work and parenthood. The chapter on race reflects upon the need simultaneously to celebrate the enormous progress we have made and tackle the great problems that remain. And so forth.

The book (which offers no sign of a co-author or ghost-writer) is crisply written, and the personal stories that shape each chapter are often telling and interesting. But when Obama moves from personal narrative to policy and politics, his chapters turn bland and flat, and his analysis often amounts to little more than an endless barrage of clichés.

Thus, after noting low math and reading scores in high schools, Oba-

ma with exquisite vagueness calls on policy makers to “identify those reforms that have the highest impact on student achievement, fund them adequately, and eliminate those programs that don’t produce results.” His brief discussion of tensions between religious and secular forces in American life ends with the anodyne observation that “it would be helpful . . . if in debates about matters touching on religion—as in all of democratic discourse—we could resist the temptation to impute bad motives to those who disagree with us.” Elsewhere, he takes this same trope to risible lengths by writing that our politics would work better “if liberals at least acknowledged that the recreational hunter feels the same way about his gun as they feel about their library books, and if conservatives recognized that most women feel as protective of their right to reproductive freedom as evangelicals do of their right to worship.”

Now and then, Obama’s centrist platitudes lead him into unsupported or even outright false assertions. Of the \$9 trillion national debt he claims, “the bulk of the debt is a direct result of the President’s tax cuts,” when in fact the tax cuts have involved less than a tenth of that amount. Elsewhere, invoking allegedly declining federal funding for the National Institutes of Health (NIH), he launches into an argument about the Bush administration’s failure to support basic research essential to America’s global competitiveness. But the budget of the NIH has grown by more than \$8 billion, or 40 percent, since Bush came into office, and this year the administration proposed to double federal funding for research in the physical sciences over the next decade.

BY FAR the most prominent and the most clichéd theme of this book, however, is that American politics has been undone by partisan rancor. “You don’t need a poll,” Obama

writes in one characteristic passage,

to know that the vast majority of Americans—Republican, Democrat, and independent—are weary of the dead zone that politics has become, in which narrow interests vie for advantage and ideological minorities seek to impose their own versions of absolute truth. . . . Religious or secular, black, white, or brown, we sense—correctly—that the nation’s most significant challenges are being ignored and that if we don’t change course soon, we may be the first generation in a very long time that leaves behind a weaker and more fractured America than the one we inherited.

Obama clearly wants readers to experience his rebuke of partisan acrimony as a breath of fresh air, a break from the divisive spirit of our times. But since this complaint about our politics is standard fare for a campaign book, one gets the sense less of refreshing honesty than of a populist ploy designed to obscure the fact that the author has not stated any clear-cut views of his own. Politics is *meant* to be an arena of debate and clashing interests. Besides, is it really the case that “the nation’s most significant challenges are being ignored,” or that America is “weaker and more fractured” than it was a generation ago, let alone, as Obama later contends, than “at any time since before World War II”?

Like many on the contemporary Left, Obama subscribes to a kind of false nostalgia, what might be called backward-looking progressivism. Without a hint of irony, he contrasts today’s partisan rancor in Congress with a “time before the fall, a golden age in Washington when, regardless of which party was in power, civility reigned and government worked.” One wonders just when that golden age might have been—during the epic battles over McCarthyism, civil rights, Vietnam, Watergate, détente, Reaganomics, and other fronts too numerous to

mention? Nor does Obama appear to notice that, in admonishing us to heed his warnings lest we find ourselves in “an America very different from the one most of us grew up in,” he sounds more like a stern traditionalist than a liberal Democrat.

But then, Obama does his best throughout this book not to sound like a liberal Democrat. In this, he does a disservice to his own record.

Obama has almost nothing to say, for instance, about his tenure in the Illinois legislature, where his voting record put him on the Left of every major question—from gun control, to taxes, to abortion. In expressing admiration for the “Gang of Fourteen”—the U.S. Senators who last year worked out a compromise to avoid an explosive showdown over judicial nominations—he glosses over the fact that he refused to join them, or for that matter that he was one of only 22 Senators to vote against the confirmation of Chief Justice John Roberts. Similarly, in laying out the case for free trade, he barely mentions that he voted against the Central America Free Trade Agreement approved by the Senate last year.

As a Senator, Obama has earned a 100-percent rating from Americans for Democratic Action, the liberal interest group that scores the

votes of members of the U.S. Congress based on their allegiance to key left-wing causes and interests. Even Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts could manage only a 95 during the same period.

OF COURSE, the effort to mask one’s liberal stripes has not been limited to Obama in this election year. Former Vermont Governor Howard Dean may have drawn ridicule in 2004 for telling a reporter he wanted to be the candidate of “guys with Confederate flags in their pickup trucks,” but since then, Dean’s party has deliberately sought to appear more conservative than it has become, including by recruiting more conservative candidates to run for office. In this year’s congressional elections, the Democrats fielded, among others, Ronald Reagan’s former Navy Secretary James Webb, who resigned his office in protest when he found Reagan’s military buildup inadequate, and Tennessee Congressman Harold Ford, Jr., who at campaign rallies handed out cards with his picture on one side and the Ten Commandments on the other.

Observing these contortions, one may well wonder whether the Democrats are truly moving to the center or whether, as in Dean’s quip two years ago, they merely aim to

pick up support from disillusioned conservative voters without allowing the views of those voters to exercise any real influence on the party’s platform. Contrasting Obama’s centrist conceit in *The Audacity of Hope* with his voting record in the Senate hardly helps to still one’s doubts on this score.

In all fairness, Obama has been in the Senate for only two years, and it is hard to judge so brief a record. But that is only further reason to wonder how he or anyone else could think it is time for him to run for President. His foreign-policy experience amounts to two years as the most junior member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he has no executive experience of any kind.

Obama is aware that the excitement he has generated is due in part to his scant record. “I am new enough on the national political scene,” he writes, “that I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views.” He has certainly done his best here to refrain from filling that “blank screen” with anything of substance. It says much about the condition of contemporary liberalism that this seems to strike some people as reason enough to believe he is ready to govern.
