

BOOK REVIEWS

Audacity of Hope

By Barack Obama

Crown Publishers

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Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope* is essentially a campaign book; that it appears a year earlier than such works would have in previous presidential campaigns indicates how early the 2008 campaign has begun.

In this tome Obama intends to present himself as far more moderate than his voting record in the Illinois Legislature and Congress would justify. In many of the chapters he presents an excellent presentation of both sides on various issues. Each chapter could be a stand alone essay on topics such as "Politics," "Values," "Our Constitution," "Opportunity" (economics) "Faith," "Race," "The World Beyond Our Borders" (foreign policy), and "Family."

Obama's prose flows very well and this work is interesting to read. The chapters entitled "Democrats and Republicans" and "Politics" give the reader a real feel for modern politics and especially his life in politics, all without the intense biased strident advocacy so common in works of this type.

As the book has been available for sometime and reviewed by many critics, I will do a review concentrating on analyzing the work in relation to social justice. "Social justice" is one of those terms like "patriotism" or "righteousness" that everybody is for, but which is very hard to define. Beyond saying that it is what is right for society, there isn't much consensus. It is a term more favored by liberals, but also one that conservatives could claim. It all depends on how you use it.

Obama tries to deal with "social justice" in the chapter called "Values." While Obama doesn't deny that he is a liberal, he does well at presenting a balanced view of the social issues and values involved. He is sensitive to the personal values held by most Americans, which he enumerates on page 54. His list includes: self-reliance, self-improvement, risk taking, drive, discipline, temperance, hard work, thrift and personal responsibility. On page 56 he discusses how these individual values can degenerate into self-centeredness. On page 63 he presents such communal values as mutual responsibility and social solidarity. He recognizes that sometimes individual and communal values are in conflict. This balanced chapter is one of the most engrossing in the book. Although balanced, the chapter does lean toward the liberal preference for communal values. While this bias is present, one can still get a sympathetic feel for both sides of the values question. Because it is fairly balanced it demonstrates the quandary of actually defining and implementing "social justice".

Although Obama has taught constitutional law, the next chapter, “Our Constitution is one of the weakest and poorly argued. On most social matters he is a judicial activist, but on national security and religion he becomes a very strict constructionalist. Like former Supreme Court chief justice Earl Warren and many others who demand what they perceive as “social justice”, Obama wants the courts to ask “is it fair?” He seems to have perception that this is the province of the Congress, not the Supreme Court which is only supposed to ask the question what do the Constitution and law say and then apply the law accordingly. However, when President George W. Bush claims national security, Obama he is quite willing to abandon judicial activism and become a strict constructionalist. Although generally unfriendly to the federalist states’ right position, Obama desperately thrusts the states rights concept forward to defend his pro-choice advocacy and thus evade defending his position on the politically dangerous issue of abortion. All and all he tries to maintain a safe position on abortion that will get him through the 2008 presidential democratic primary and general election while claiming to be advancing social justice.

His views on economics generally favor the liberal point of view that social justice is gained through government programs, regulation and unions. This economic view is tempered by his acknowledgment of the limits of big government and regulation. Also he concedes that free enterprise is a key element for economic success and the betterment of people’s lives. The chapter labeled “Opportunity” dealing with economic well being is worth reading for its balance and insights.

His chapter on religion called “Faith” is interesting. Obama sees religion only as positive when viewed through the social gospel viewpoint. He is hostile toward those who see religion from the individual salvation point of view. In other words, religion only exists to advance social good. Unlike many liberals, he believes that it is permissible for one’s religious beliefs to inform one’s position in the public forum of ideas and politics. However, Obama adamantly favors the more extreme application of Jefferson’s “wall of separation between church and state.”

“Race,” the chapter dealing with racial issues, is fairly balanced—probably because of his mixed race background. He does have a blind spot when it comes to “affirmative action,” which in his usage means “quotas.” He has no concept that this may disadvantage members of other races. To him “affirmative action” is merely a way to obtain social justice and is thus beyond debate. However, to be fair, he does see racial justice as complicated.

The problem of applying social justice to foreign affairs is evident in his chapter entitled “The World Beyond Our Borders.” This chapter is the second longest and the most incoherent. Sometimes Obama is interventionist. Sometimes he is isolationist. Sometimes he favors the idealistic approach. Sometimes he favors *realpolitik*. At one point or another he is both a supporter and critic of each of these foreign policy

approaches. The one thing that does emerge is that he doesn't support the Iraq war. However, because this is a political work and 9/11 is so tricky politically, there is much confusion on what our foreign policy should be. He can't seem to cogently apply social justice to this issue.

The chapter named "Family" is rather blasé about marriage. Obama adopts the ultra-libertarian point of view that however people organize their families is just fine. He sees that a two parent family is advantageous and that having a father present is good for the children. But apparently marriage is merely an option, but of no great importance. The big problem for him in relation to the family is economics. He favors the European approach of the all-enveloping state as the way to obtain social justice for the family. He dismisses those who would push for a return to the "traditional family" with the old cliché "you can't legislate morality." Although he says he is not against the "traditional family"—and indeed he has a traditional family—one gets the feeling that he has a snobbish disdain for, as he puts it, the "1950's family." Of course, as a political tome and given the chapter's libertarian thrust, he does not reject such a family.

The Audacity of Hope is a highly readable book with surprising balance in most chapters. The insertion of his personal life and history enhances the work. I did get the feeling that he was overemphasizing his moderateness to hide his liberalism. Nevertheless, I didn't get the feeling that I was being bludgeoned by a political polemic. It was interesting with numerous insights. It was one of the better campaign opuses I have read.

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Reporting Nonfinancials

By Kaevar Gazdar
John Wiley & Sons
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Financial accounting and reporting goes back to the Industrial Revolution and the separation of management and capital. It is the process by which managers indicate the financial results of their stewardship to investors and creditors.

Financial accounting and reporting is a conservative process by design. Assets are recorded at the amounts for which they have been acquired from another party. Most assets that are developed internally are simply not recorded. Financial accounting rules in most jurisdictions bar putting such assets on the balance sheet because they cannot be valued with sufficient objectivity.