

Book Review: Reading Obama - WSJ

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By

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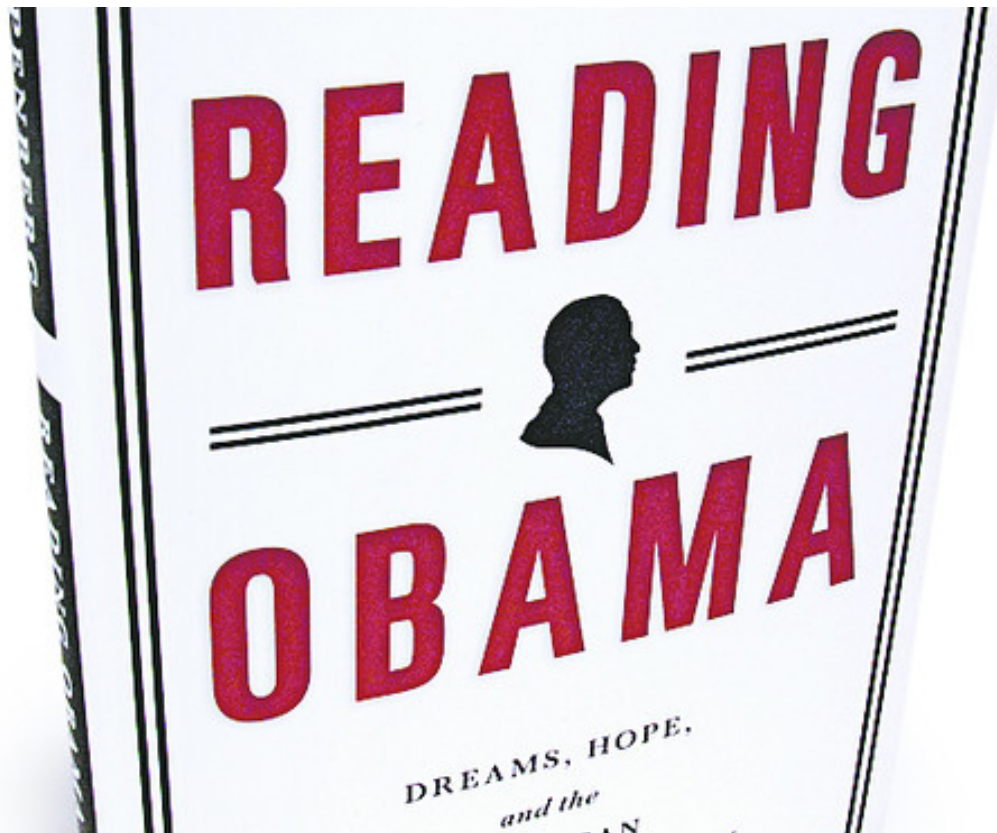
In mid-October, by which time it had become evident that the November midterm elections would deliver a rebuke of historic proportions, President Barack Obama stated in a New York Times Magazine interview that his mistake had been to neglect "marketing and P.R. and public opinion." His problem, in other words, was a failure to communicate.

This claim is difficult to reconcile with the extraordinary rise in 2009 of an energized grass-roots movement combining disaffected Republicans, libertarians and independents. They seemed to grasp the president's goal: to enact a sweeping progressive agenda. In the best traditions of democracy in America—and by means of town-hall meetings, tea-party rallies and the marvels of social networking—people organized to elect representatives and block the transformative ambitions with which they disagreed.

The president's self-assessment is also difficult to reconcile with James Kloppenberg's thesis in "Reading Obama." Mr. Kloppenberg argues that, thanks to the ideas to which Obama was exposed and the moral and intellectual virtues he cultivated during his journey through the American academy—he was a student at Occidental, Columbia and Harvard Law School and a faculty member at the University of Chicago Law School—he became an exemplar, in word and deed, of moderation, balance and accommodation.

Mr. Kloppenberg is certainly right to call attention to the effect on Mr. Obama's sensibility of "the developments in American academic culture since the 1960's." And he convincingly shows that Mr. Obama's two books, shorter writings and speeches contain thoughtful and sometimes eloquent variations on "a surprising number of the central themes in the American political tradition, particularly as it has come to be understood in the last half century."

But "Reading Obama" does not explain Mr. Obama's failure, in his first 22 months in office, to find common ground with conservatives and independents; his refusal to slow down and win over a majority before proceeding with large-scale reforms; and his readiness, as president, to vilify those who disagree with his policies and purposes.



According to Mr. Kloppenberg, Mr. Obama's uncommon experience—being the son of a white American woman and black African man, living abroad in Indonesia with his mother and her second husband, spending his teenage years in Hawaii in his white grandparents' home—nurtured a gift for seeing the world from a multiplicity of perspectives and for feeling empathy for a diversity of people. So, contends Mr. Kloppenberg, Mr. Obama was well prepared to absorb the best of what was being taught in philosophy, political theory and law at American universities in the 1980s and 1990s—above all, deliberative democracy and philosophical pragmatism.

Deliberative democracy has its roots in the writings of the philosopher John Rawls and in the recovery of the civic-republican tradition in America by, among others, the historian Gordon Wood. It emphasizes the benefits that come from citizens discussing opinions about politics and crafting compromises to achieve the common good. Philosophical pragmatism, for its part, was elaborated by William James and John Dewey. It was revived in the period in which Mr. Obama came of intellectual age, most notably by the philosopher Richard Rorty. It rejects absolutes and instead, as Mr. Kloppenberg writes, "embraces uncertainty, provisionality, and the continuous testing of hypotheses through experimentation." Both deliberative democracy and philosophical pragmatism celebrate open-ended conversation as the animating principle of constitutional democracy.

Mr. Obama, Mr. Kloppenberg explains, brings a "supple understanding," "tenacious hope" and the "'Christian virtue' of humility" to bear on these ideas. The results, in the author's estimation, are nothing short of spectacular. To the extent possible, Mr. Obama reconciles

the claims of the individual and community, of personal freedom and majority rule, of rights and responsibilities. All the while Mr. Obama recognizes that progress is provisional and fragile and appreciates the imperfections of man, the limitations of reason and the tragic necessity, at times, to use force to advance the cause of liberty and equality.

In short, Mr. Kloppenberg's brief intellectual biography of Mr. Obama provides an excellent portrait of the shining self-image of the progressive intellectual. But it proves a poor guide to understanding the connection between Mr. Obama's ideas and his conduct in the White House, because Mr. Kloppenberg fails to take into account the dark side of deliberative democracy and the perversity of pragmatism.

Theorists of deliberative democracy typically denigrate the messy give-and-take among actual flesh-and-blood citizens and dismiss it as the outcome of flawed procedures for conversation. They prefer the conclusions that derive from abstract and sometimes intricate theories. Meanwhile, in the guise of rejecting absolutes, the adherents of philosophical pragmatism absolutize partisan progressive goals and reconceive "moderation" as merely exercising patience and flexibility in the pursuit of progressive ends.

To read Mr. Obama accurately and to grasp fully the connection between his ideas and his politics, one must examine not merely the dreams and hopes that inspire deliberative democracy and philosophical pragmatism but also the intellectual vices that these doctrines foster and the illiberal and antidemocratic tendencies that they spawn. A lot of voters this week, intuitively, did grasp the connection. The problem goes beyond "marketing or P.R." to ideas.

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