

Preface

They exploded onto the national scene in 2004 and within four short years captured the ultimate political prize. In so doing, they became a First Couple like no other: He, the biracial son of a free-spirited midwesterner and her brilliant but troubled Kenyan husband, raised in Hawaii and Indonesia and elected the first black president of the *Harvard Law Review*. She, raised on Chicago's hardscrabble South Side by working-class African American parents who sacrificed so she could achieve her own dreams of an Ivy League education and a job at one of America's top law firms.

By the time they claimed the White House in one of the most hotly contested presidential races in modern history, Barack and Michelle Obama were seen by millions around the world as the new Jack and Jackie Kennedy—brilliant, attractive, elegant, youthful, *exciting*. Accompanied by their two young daughters, Malia and Sasha, the Obamas would arrive at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue with the promise of a new Camelot all but assured.

Given the obvious historic significance of what they accomplished together, the marriage of Barack and Michelle stood as one of the great personal and political partnerships of all time. Seemingly overnight, they somehow managed to obliterate barriers that had stood for centuries—and to accomplish this phenomenal feat with humor, grace, and dignity. By the time he was sworn in using Abraham Lincoln's Bible, Barack and Michelle Obama were indisputably the First Couple not only of America but of the world.

Whatever inexplicable forces drew these two remarkable people together also propelled them to the summit of power and prestige. And these same forces enabled them to overcome the strains that, for a time, threatened their marriage.

Like so many of the Presidents and First Ladies who went before them, as individuals each was a mind-spinning tangle of contradictions. He was the supremely confident overachiever whose fatherless childhood left him deeply scarred emotionally, the product of an exotic multicultural upbringing who yearned for roots and a sense of his own racial identity, the prep school alumnus agitating in the 'hood, the would-be reformer who owed his meteoric political rise in part to a famously corrupt political machine. She was the dutiful daughter who was grateful for the sacrifices her parents made to get her into Princeton but hated every minute there, the young corporate lawyer indulging her taste for the finer things but searching for meaning in her life and her work, the wife and mother who despised politicians but outperformed even the most seasoned of them as she helped her husband win the presidency.

Not since Franklin Delano Roosevelt has a President faced an economic crisis like the one waiting for Barack Obama when he entered office. And like Eleanor Roosevelt, Michelle Obama would be called upon to be her husband's strongest ally as he met this challenge head-on. Now, as Barack and Michelle take their first bold steps into history, it is important to understand what it was that shaped them as individuals, and the crucibles—both public and private—that would come to define their marriage. For theirs is a

stirring, against-all-odds saga of hope and commitment, and—above all else—an inspiring, intriguing, uniquely American love story.

September 2001

There was something different about the screams this time. They were more piercing, more frantic and insistent than the sounds that usually roused Sasha's parents from slumber in the middle of the night. As usual, it was Michelle who climbed out of bed first and made her way to Sasha's room while Daddy stayed in bed, hoping that his three-month-old daughter would quickly be lulled back to sleep.

It quickly became clear that the baby would not be consoled. Barack finally threw back the covers and, still half asleep, plodded down the hall to investigate. "Jeez, Michelle," he asked as he walked into the baby's room, "can't you get her to stop?" Michelle, who stood by the crib gently cradling Sasha, whirled around and shot her husband a withering glance.

It was a look he had grown accustomed to since the birth of their first daughter, Malia, in 1998, and never more so than in the few months since Sasha's arrival. Michelle was a graduate of both Princeton and Harvard Law School. She had worked for one of the top law firms in the nation, and then for the office of Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago before signing on with a nonprofit organization called Public Allies. She was beautiful and brilliant and yet, like so many other young working mothers, she was the one who was expected to bear most of the parenting burden.

In truth, Michelle's anger had reached the boiling point a year earlier, after Barack overrode her strong objections and ran in the Democratic primary against popular four-term incumbent Congressman Bobby Rush. Obama had been elected in 1996 to represent Chicago's gentrified, racially integrated Hyde Park neighborhood in the Illinois State Senate—a feat he accomplished by using legal challenges to keep his rivals off the ballot and then running unopposed. After three years, he was impatient to move on and felt confident he could unseat Rush.

A Chicago native, Michelle knew then what lay in store for her husband. She warned him that he was not ready to challenge Rush, a founder of the Illinois Black Panther Party who had earned respectability as an alderman and ward committeeman before being elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Barack, a lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School, had a white mother, an Ivy League education, and no roots in Chicago's black community. In other words, Michelle only halfjokingly pointed out to her husband, he had "zero street cred." Barack's colleague in the State Senate Donne Trotter was even more blunt. Obama, he said, was "a white man in blackface. There are those in our community who simply do not see him as one of us."

The grueling campaign had meant long absences from the family, but Barack did what he could to placate Michelle. In the middle of the congressional primary campaign, Barack kept his promise to take Michelle and then eighteen-month-old Malia to spend the holidays with his grandparents in Hawaii. When Illinois Governor George Ryan begged

him to return for a key vote to make illegal gun possession a felony, Barack reluctantly broached the subject with Michelle. Malia had come down with a cold, and Michelle worried about subjecting the ailing toddler to a long flight. “We’re not going anywhere,” she told him. “But,” she added icily, “you just do what you have to do.”

Barack got the message. Unwilling to further anger his wife, he refused to return to Illinois for the crucial gun control vote. Rush, whose twenty-nine-year-old son had been shot to death on the South Side not long before, hammered away at his opponent’s unwillingness to interrupt his vacation to cast a vote that would save young black lives.

Not surprisingly, Barack went down to crushing defeat—and Michelle wasted no time reminding her husband that she had told him not to run. It wasn’t losing that annoyed her—although she had repeatedly warned him that he would—but the realization that he seemed willing to put politics ahead of family.

This was a nagging concern she wasn’t afraid to share with him directly—and repeatedly. “You only think about yourself,” she would say to him again and again in a tone dripping with disdain. “I never thought I’d have to raise a family alone.” Barack, convinced that whatever time he devoted to his career would ultimately benefit his wife and daughters, shrugged off the criticism. His characteristically cool, detached demeanor had cost him votes in a black community that viewed him as aloof. It was a facet of Barack’s personality that frustrated Michelle as well.

“Barack just doesn’t seem to care *what* I think,” a frustrated Michelle complained to her mother, Marian Robinson. “He can be so selfish—and I just can’t get through to him that we’re supposed to be in this *together*.” She went so far as to question whether, after eight years of marriage, their days as a couple were numbered.

For his part, Barack was also fed up with reprimands that he felt were “petty and unfair.” He was a devoted husband and father, and as far as the election was concerned, it was her insistence that he spend more time with the family that led him to miss the key gun control vote—perhaps more than any other single factor the one thing that had cost him the election.

Barack also thought it odd that Michelle complained about being saddled with most of the child care responsibilities, since for years she had been heartbroken over the fact that she might not be able to conceive. “It was,” said Michelle’s longtime friend Yvonne Davila, “hard for her to get pregnant.” So hard, in fact, that when Davila became pregnant she was reluctant to tell her friend for fear of hurting her feelings. When Michelle finally arrived at Davila’s home one day and announced she was pregnant with Malia, Davila burst into tears.

Michelle became pregnant with Sasha soon after the disastrous congressional election, but the marital bickering continued unabated. While Barack sorted through the wreckage of his first big defeat in search of a way to salvage his political career, his wife seethed.

Michelle's anger over what she viewed as Barack's insensitivity to her plight wasn't the only issue that was coming between them. The 2000 congressional campaign had left Barack, now thirty-eight, more than sixty thousand dollars in debt—this on top of the huge student loans that they both still owed. With his credit cards maxed out, Barack faced some grim economic realities. “He was very dejected” following the 2000 campaign, said his friend Abner Mikva, a former federal judge and Illinois Congressman. “And he was thinking of how else he could use his talents.”

In the face of running a household, raising two small children, and trying to find ways to make ends meet, such soulsearching struck Michelle as self-indulgent. Even though her mother was on hand to help, Michelle felt overwhelmed—and she let her husband know that she felt he was not holding up his end of the bargain. “It's ‘me first’ with him—that's how it is with all men,” she said. “For women, ‘me’ comes in about fourth. . . . That's not healthy, and that's not the way I'm going to live.”

“I love Michelle, but she's killing me with this constant criticism,” Barack confided to Madelyn “Toot” Dunham, the white grandmother who raised him. “She just seems so bitter, so angry all the time.” For the first time he wondered aloud, as Michelle did to her mother, if they were going to make it as a couple.

For a time, it looked as if he might consider making adjustments, especially in response to Michelle's pleas that he get a job that paid “real money.” At one point, Barack was up for a threehundred-thousand-dollar-a-year position as director of a nonprofit organization. He was so nervous that he might actually get the job—a job he didn't really want—that his hands were trembling as he prepared for the interview.

Much to Michelle's consternation, Barack didn't land the lucrative position. To make matters worse, he decided that what he really needed to do following his bruising defeat at the polls was hop a plane for the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. When he got to L.A., he went straight to Hertz to pick up a rental car—and was promptly informed that his American Express card had been declined. After an hour of cajoling over the phone, he managed to convince American Express to authorize his car rental. “Needless to say,” he later conceded, “it was all very embarrassing—and depressing.”

Things weren't much better once he got to the Staples Center, where he was turned away because he didn't have a floor pass. After several frustrating days of trying and failing to secure access that would allow him to watch convention delegates nominate Al Gore as their candidate, Obama flew back to Chicago.

Now he was faced with the daunting task of catching up on his work as a senior lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School—work that he had let pile up during the nine months he'd spent trying to unseat Bobby Rush. “Michelle is furious,” he told a friend. “She was angry that I went to L.A. and even angrier when I told her I never even got inside the convention. She thinks I'm being a fool—not just a fool, but a lazy fool.”

Indeed, Michelle was at the end of her tether. Barack's long absences had left her feeling abandoned; even though the congressional campaign was over, it looked as if her husband was not about to change his ways. If anything, he seemed more restless than ever.

Michelle sought advice from the man she trusted most—the man who married them, who counseled Barack in many matters, and who baptized their children: the Reverend Jeremiah Wright of Trinity United Church of Christ. Wright defended Barack's political ambitions and counseled Michelle to be patient. The reverend stressed that Barack was obviously devoted to his wife and children and that his absences were more in the nature of a sacrifice—a sacrifice aimed at making a better life for his family.

It was an argument she had heard many times before. After all, Michelle had given her blessing when Barack, who was in the middle of his first campaign for the Illinois State Senate, had joined Wright and others in Louis Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March on Washington—ostensibly an affirmation of the African American male's commitment to his family and his community.

While Barack repeatedly referred to Rev. Wright as “mentor” and “father figure” during this period, Michelle had ties to the reverend that were just as close. Michelle was the Obama who played an active role at Trinity United, who occasionally helped out with services on Sundays, and who, when her girls got old enough, made sure they attended Sunday school. If there was any one person other than her mother whom Michelle would listen to, it was Rev. Wright.

But not this time. “Barack seems to think he can just go out there and pursue his dreams,” she told her mother, “and leave all the heavy lifting around here to me.” One resident in their Hyde Park apartment building recalled coming upon the young couple as they quarreled in a hallway. “She was really dressing him down, and he was shaking his head and obviously as angry and fed up as she was,” the neighbor said. “They both shut up the minute they realized someone else was there.”

Now, on this chilly morning in early September of 2001, all those questions had vanished. At this moment, Barack and Michelle were asking themselves only one thing: What was making their infant daughter so agitated, and what should they do about it?

Two hours passed before they finally phoned the family pediatrician. He listened calmly as Michelle described the symptoms, and then told them to bring Sasha to his office at 6 a.m.—he would be there to examine her.

By the time they arrived at the pediatrician's office, both Barack and Michelle were exhausted. Sasha had essentially cried nonstop for nearly four hours, and now they were frantic to discover why. When he finished examining Sasha, the doctor uttered words that would remain with Michelle and Barack for a lifetime. “I think she may have spinal meningitis,” he told them. “It's important that we get her to the emergency room right away.”

Neither Barack nor Michelle had time to dwell on the terror inherent in the word *meningitis*. Instead, they flew into action. She scooped up the baby and walked briskly to the parking lot, where Barack slid behind the wheel of their car and sped straight to the nearby University of Chicago Medical Center.

Once inside, they sat at their daughter's bedside and watched as doctors performed the necessary tests. Squeezing each other's hands and blinking back tears, Sasha's parents listened to her screams as an emergency room doctor performed the one procedure that would reliably provide them with the answer they needed: a spinal tap.

The news was not good. "She does have meningitis," the attending physician told them, "but I think we caught it early enough. We'll start her on intravenous antibiotics right away."

There was still a chance that the meningitis had progressed further than the doctors had thought. She could die, or at the very least be rendered deaf or suffer brain damage. While Michelle's mother looked after three-year-old Malia, Barack and Michelle stayed at the hospital for seventy-two hours straight, taking turns sleeping on a cot in Sasha's room as the nurses and doctors came and went, monitoring her vital signs and periodically checking the IV line that delivered the lifesaving antibiotics to her tiny veins.

Whatever the differences and tensions between them, whatever the doubts and anxieties they had been entertaining about their marriage—none of this mattered now. As Barack would later remember, "My world narrowed to a single point, and . . . I was not interested in anything or anybody outside the four walls of that hospital room—not my work, not my schedule, not my future." Michelle later described the three days of waiting as "a nightmare—the kind of thing you hope and pray will never happen to a child of yours. Any other parent would understand how desperate we felt, and how it brought us closer together."

At the end of the third day, the doctors told Michelle and Barack that Sasha had turned a corner. The antibiotics had worked and the meningitis was in full retreat; their baby was out of danger. Barack and Michelle, who, Barack said, in previous months had had "little time for conversation, much less romance," reacted to the news with a tearful embrace. "Thank God," he said, reaching out to shake the doctor's hand. "Thank God."

For the next several weeks, Michelle stayed home from work so that she, along with her mother, Marian, could keep a watchful eye on Sasha while she made a complete recovery.

As if he needed another soul-jarring reminder of the fragility of life, Barack—and the rest of the civilized world—got it on the morning of September 11, 2001. Obama was driving to a state legislative hearing in Chicago when he heard the news that a plane had slammed into one of the Twin Towers of New York's World Trade Center. He assumed at first, as did millions of Americans, that it was merely a tragic accident. It was not until

later, when he walked into his legislative meeting in the State of Illinois Building on North LaSalle Street, that he was told that the first plane was in fact an airliner and that another passenger jet had subsequently struck the second tower. No sooner had he arrived than he, along with everyone else, was ordered to evacuate the building immediately.

Barack telephoned Michelle at home, where she was watching the terrifying events unfold on television. “Oh my God,” she said. “Are you seeing this? You don’t have any friends working there, do you?”

In fact, Barack, who had spent five years in New York—first as an undergraduate at Columbia University and then as a research associate at a small publisher of financial newsletters—really had no idea if any of his old friends were near the World Trade Center that day. He began working the phones, tracking down his college buddies and coworkers to make sure they were safe.

While Michelle tried in vain to grasp the sheer magnitude of the destruction, Barack focused on the quotidian tasks that each of the victims went through that day—how they got up, drank their coffees, and kissed their spouses good-bye before heading to work, completely unaware of the horror that awaited them. It was the notion that no one is really safe, that anything can happen in an instant, that weighed most heavily on Barack.

When he got home that evening, Barack hugged Michelle and Malia, then picked up Sasha and cradled her in his arms. Along with Sasha’s meningitis scare, this latest reminder of life’s fragile nature brought the Obamas closer together than they had been in years. “How can we argue about all this small stuff?” Michelle asked her husband. “We have so much to be thankful for.”

The lesson was short-lived. As was the case in most households not directly touched by the tragedy of 9/11, the petty concerns of everyday existence soon resumed their place at center stage in the lives of the Obamas.

Things had clearly reached a crisis point in the Obama marriage. Barack believed that his political commitments required him to spend long periods away from home. Those absences seemed likely to grow even longer, since he was not about to give up a burning ambition to achieve higher office. Michelle’s criticisms were “unfair” and “shortsighted,” he repeatedly claimed. And even though they faced financial pressures, his job teaching at the University of Chicago Law School made it possible for them to keep up the mortgage payments on their modest but comfortable condo not far from the university campus, at 5450 S.E. View Park. “We have a good life and I’m trying to make it even better,” he argued. “How can she find fault with that?”

No matter. Michelle refused to budge. Out of what she would later describe to one friend as “a state of desperation,” Michelle delivered an ultimatum to her husband: If Barack couldn’t find a way to pursue his political dreams and at the same time make more time for his family, then he would have to choose between the two. “That’s the way it’s got to be,” she said. “I’m not doing this by myself.”

Long before Michelle met Barack, his character had, in fact, been shaped by two strong women. Now, as he stood at a crossroads in his married life, wondering whether he would have to give up politics for the woman he loved, Barack's thoughts drifted back to his childhood in Honolulu—and the young woman with long dark hair whose real name was Stanley but who called herself Ann.

“Barry!” He could hear his Kansas-born mother's flat Midwestern twang as clearly as if she were standing in front of him. “You are a responsible young man. You know what you've got to do.” Then, just as clearly, he could see his mother kneel down to kiss her little boy, wipe the tears from her eyes, pick up the suitcase that always seemed to be waiting by the front door—and leave. Again.

To read more of the book, click [here](#).