An exhaustive look at Obama's road to the White House

June 11, 2017 12:00 AM

By Glenn C. Altschuler

One evening, while he was a student at Columbia University, Barack Obama confessed to his girlfriend, Genevieve Cook, that he had felt sorry for himself when he was 15 years old and cried a lot. Genevieve was pleased that Barack was opening up and urged him to “Speak to me.” More often, however, she felt that he carefully filtered everything in his mind and heart. “There’s something also there of smoothed veneer, of guardedness,” she told him. “I’m still left with this feeling ... of a bit of a wall — a veil.”

Ms. Cook’s assessment was — and is — shared by many Obama watchers, including folks close to him. In “Rising Star: The Making of Barack Obama,” David Garrow, a professor of history and law at the University of Pittsburgh, and the Pulitzer-Prize winning author of “Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference,” documents Mr. Obama’s at times impenetrable and opaque behavior — and seeks to lift the veil. Taking his subject from his birth into a biracial family in Hawaii, through a painstaking search for his identity, to his decision in 2008 to run for president, Mr. Garrow reveals Mr. Obama in all his complexity: preternaturally intelligent; outwardly calm; aloof; alienated; angry; idealistic; pragmatic; and, perhaps above all else, calculating and ambitious.

The result of extensive research and more than 1,000 interviews, “Rising Star” is immensely informative. It is, alas, also numbingly long, repetitious and digressive. Mr. Garrow’s decision to begin with a 40-page chapter on the economic decline of the South Side of Chicago in the 1980s (long before Mr. Obama moved to the city) was a mistake. The rest of the book is cluttered with the names of the texts assigned in each one of the classes Mr. Obama took in law school and with summaries of student evaluations for every single course he taught as a professor. “Rising Star” is clogged with dozens and dozens of tracking polls for Obama’s races for the Illinois legislature and the U.S. Senate and with the assessment of hundreds of people (who often used the same words) about whether he should become a candidate for president in 2008. Again and again — and again — Mr. Garrow tells us that Barack smoked a lot of cigarettes; that Michelle Obama feared that her husband’s political career was taking a toll on his family;
and that Barack Obama had had his eyes on the prize (the White House) for quite some time. The reaction of virtually every reader, I suspect, will be: “I’ve got it. Enough.”

More important, despite the voluminous detail in “Rising Star,” the evidence supporting Mr. Garrow’s unflattering portrait of Mr. Obama is often rather thin. He relies heavily on Sheila Jager’s claim that Barack Obama decided that no matter how deep his love for her, he could not marry a white woman and fulfill a political destiny that depended on his (recently assumed) identity as an African-American. Mr. Garrow discounts testimony that attributes Mr. Obama’s heightened racial consciousness to his work as a community organizer in Chicago. And he shrugs off Mr. Obama’s characterization of his “pragmatic” approach to fundamental life choices (including the charge that he married Michelle Robinson because she would help him establish a base in the black community) as “pretty cynical” and “pretty offensive to me.”

Nor does Mr. Garrow adequately contextualize his allegation that ambition at times led Mr. Obama to temper — or abandon — the liberal legislative agenda. He highlights Mr. Obama’s vote of “present” on a bill he co-sponsored in the state Senate to curry favor with a labor organization whose support he needed in the Democratic primary for the U.S. Senate. To be sure, that vote did not enhance his candidacy for a profile in courage. And Mr. Obama can be taken to task, legitimately, for a tendency to compromise too quickly. That said, throughout his career Mr. Obama may well have been more ideologically consistent than many politicians.

Finally, Mr. Garrow’s relentlessly negative assessment of Mr. Obama’s tenure as president doesn’t even mention his most important achievements or the partisan polarization with which he had to contend. It reminds us, it seems to me, that despite its inordinate length, “Rising Star” is not likely to be the last word on one of the most important, fascinating and flawed figures in American politics.

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