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DOUBLE



DOWN



GAME CHANGE 2012

MARK HALPERIN
and JOHN HEILEMANN

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

PENGUIN BOOKS

DOUBLE DOWN

Mark Halperin is the co-managing editor of Bloomberg Politics. During his career covering seven presidential elections, Halperin has been the political director of ABC News and editor-at-large at *Time* magazine. The co-author of *Game Change* and *The Way to Win*, he received his BA from Harvard University and resides in New York City with Karen Avrigh.

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Praise for Mark Halperin and John Heilemann's *Double Down*

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—Geraldo Rive

“Huge.”

—Willie Geist, NBC News

DOUBLE DOWN

★ GAME CHANGE 2012 ★

MARK HALPERIN
AND JOHN HEILEMANN



PENGUIN BOOKS

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Version_3

For Karen and my family
—MEH

For Diana and my dad
—JAH

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AUTHORS' NOTE

This book is a sequel to *Game Change*, our account of the 2008 presidential election, in all the obvious ways, but also in its animating impulses, objectives, and techniques. Once again, the campaign we set out to chronicle had been covered with great intensity across a multiplying array of platforms. Once again, we were convinced that many of the stories behind the headlines had not been told. Once again, we have tried to render the narrative with an unrelenting focus on the candidates and those closest to them—with an eye toward the high human drama behind the curtain, and with accuracy, fairness, and empathy always foremost among our aims.

The vast bulk of the material in the preceding pages was derived from more than five hundred full-length interviews with more than four hundred individuals conducted between the summers of 2010 and 2013. Almost all of the interviews took place in person, in sessions that often stretched over several hours. (Beyond these marathon sittings, there were countless telephone and e-mail conversations to follow up and check facts.) Many sources also provided us with e-mails, memos, notes, journal entries, audio and video recordings, and other forms of documentation. Only a handful of people declined our requests to participate.

All of our interviews for the book—from those with junior staffers to those with the candidates themselves—were done on a “deep background” basis. We took great care with our subjects to be explicit about what this term of art meant for this project: that we were free to use the information they provided (once we had determined its veracity) but that we would not identify them as sources in any way. In an ideal world, granting such anonymity would be unnecessary; in the world we actually inhabit, we believe it is essential to elicit the level of candor on which a book of this sort depends.

Inevitably, we were called on to compare and reconcile differing accounts of the same events. But we were struck by how few fundamental disputes we encountered in our reporting. In almost every scene in the book, we have included only material about which disagreements among the players were either nonexistent or trivial. Regarding the few exceptions, we brought to bear deliberate professional consideration and judgment.

In reconstructing scenes and conveying the perspectives of the participants, we relied exclusively on parties who were directly involved or on those to whom they spoke contemporaneously. Where dialogue is within quotation marks, it comes from the speaker, someone who was present and heard the remark, notes, transcripts, or recordings. The absence of quotation marks around dialogue indicates that it is paraphrased—meaning that our sources were in agreement about the nature, texture, and substance of the statement, but there were minor divergences regarding precise wording. Where thoughts or feelings are placed in italics, they come from the person identified or others to whom she

or he expressed her or his state of mind.

The interviews for *Double Down* were all governed by a strict embargo, meaning that we agreed to use the information we obtained only after Election Day and only in the book. In a few instances—including, notably, the episode described in Chapter 3 revolving around Obama's list, in which we were the book authors to whom the items on the list were disclosed, shortly after the president shared the contents with his team—our reporting efforts became part of an unfolding story. But that in no way affected our commitment to the embargo. At the same time, our reporting and writing here was grounded in our daily and weekly coverage of the campaign for our respective magazines; a number of passages in the book are drawn from that work.

—Mark Halperin and John Heilemann

September 2013

PROLOGUE

THE DEBATE WAS ONLY a few minutes old, and Barack Obama was already tanking. His opponent on this warm autumn night, a Massachusetts patrician with an impressive résumé, a chiseled jaw, and a staunch helmet of burnished hair, was an inferior political specimen by any conceivable measure. But with surprising fluency, verve, and even humor, Obama's rival was putting points on the board. The president was not. Passive and passionless, he seemed barely present.

It was Sunday, October 14, 2012, and Obama was bunkered two levels below the lobby of the Kingsmill Resort, in Williamsburg, Virginia. In a blue blazer, khaki pants, and an open-necked shirt, he was squaring off in a mock debate against Massachusetts senator John Kerry, who was standing in for the Republican nominee, Mitt Romney. The two men were in Williamsburg, along with the president's team, to prepare Obama for his second televised confrontation with Romney, forty-eight hours away, at Hofstra University, in Hempstead, New York. It was an event to which few had given much thought. Until the debacle in Denver, that is.

The debate in the Mile High City eleven days earlier jolted a race that for many months had been hard-fought but remarkably stable. From the moment in May that Romney emerged victorious from the most volatile and unpredictable Republican nomination contest in many moons, Obama held a narrow yet consistent lead. But after Romney mauled the president in Denver, the wind and weather of the campaign shifted dramatically in something like a heartbeat. The challenger was surging. The polls were tightening. Republicans were pulsating with renewed hope. Democrats were rending their garments and collapsing on their fainting couches.

Obama was nowhere in the vicinity of panic. "You ever known me to lose two in a row?" he said to his friends to calm their nerves.

The president's advisers were barely more rattled. Yes, Denver had been atrocious. Yes, it had been unnerving. But Obama was still ahead of Romney, the sky hadn't fallen, and they would fix what went wrong in time for the town hall debate at Hofstra. Their message to the nervous nellys in their party was: Keep calm and carry on.

Williamsburg was where the repair job was supposed to take place. The Obamans had arrived at the resort, ready to work, on Saturday the 13th. The first day had gone well. The president seemed to be finding his form. He and Kerry had been doing mock debates since August, and the session on Saturday night was Obama's best yet. Everyone exhaled.

But now, in Sunday night's run-through, the president seemed to be relapsing: the disengaged and pedantic Obama of Denver was back. In the staff room, his two closest advisers, David Axelrod and David Plouffe, watched on video monitors with a mounting sense of unease—when, all of a sudden, a

practice round that had started out looking merely desultory turned into the Mock from Hell.

The moment it happened could be pinpointed with precision: at the 39:35 mark on the clock. A question about home foreclosures had been put to POTUS; under the rules, he had two minutes to respond. Before the mock, Kerry had been instructed by one of the debate coaches to interrupt Obama at some juncture to see how he reacted. Striding across the bright red carpet of the set that the president's team had constructed as a precise replica of the Hofstra town hall stage, Kerry invaded the president's space and barged in during Obama's answer.

The president's eyes flashed with annoyance.

"Don't interrupt me," he snapped.

When Kerry persisted, Obama shot a death stare at the moderator—his adviser Anita Dunn, standing in for CNN's Candy Crowley—and pleaded for an intercession.

The president's coaches had persistently worried about the appearance of Nasty Obama on the debate stage: the variant who infamously, imperiously dismissed his main Democratic rival in 2008 with the withering phrase "You're likable enough, Hillary." His advisers saw glimpses of that side of him in their preparations for Denver—a manifestation of a personal antipathy for Romney that had grown visceral and intense. Now they were seeing it again, and worse. The admixture of Nasty Obama and Denver Obama was not a pretty picture.

Challenged by Kerry with multipronged attacks, the president rebutted them point by point, exhaustively and exhaustingly. Instead of driving a sharp message, he was explanatory and meandering. Instead of casting an eye to the future, he litigated the past. Instead of warmly establishing connections with the town hall questioners, he pontificated airily, as if he were conducting a particularly tedious press conference. While Kerry was answering a query about immigration, Obama retaliated for the earlier interruption by abruptly cutting him off.

In the staff room, Axelrod and Plouffe were aghast. Sitting with them, Obama's lead pollster, Joe Benenson muttered, "This is *unbelievable*."

Watching from the set, the renowned Democratic style coach Michael Sheehan scribbled furiously on a legal pad, each notation more alarmed than the last. Reflecting on Obama's interplay with the questioners, Sheehan summed up his demeanor with a single word: "Creepy."

After ninety excruciating minutes, the Mock from Hell was over. As Obama made his way for the door, he was intercepted by Axelrod, Plouffe, Benenson, and the lead debate coach, Ron Klain. Little was said. Little needed to be said. The ashen looks on the faces of the president's men told the tale.

Obama left the building and returned to his sprawling quarters on the banks of the James River with his best friend from Chicago, Marty Nesbitt, to watch football and play cards. His advisers retreated to the president's debate-prep holding room to have a collective coronary.

That the presidential debates were proving problematic for Obama came as no real surprise to the members of his team. Many of them—Axelrod, the mustachioed message maven and guardian of the Obama brand; Plouffe, the spindly senior White House adviser and enforcer of strategic rigor; Dunn, the media-savvy mother superior and former White House communications director; Benenson, the bearded and nudgy former Mario Cuomo hand; Jon Favreau, the dashing young speechwriter—had been with Obama from the start of his meteoric ascent. They knew that he detested televised debates. That he disdained political theater in every guise. That, on some level, he distrusted political performance itself, with its attendant emotional manipulations.

The paradox, of course, was that Obama had risen to prominence and power to a large extent on the basis of his preternatural performance skills—and his ability to summon them whenever the game was on the line. In late 2007, when he was trailing Hillary Clinton in the Democratic nomination fight by

thirty points. In the fall of 2008, when the global financial crisis hit during the crucial last weeks of the general election. In early 2010, when his signature health care reform proposal seemed destined for defeat. In every instance, under ungodly pressure, Obama had set his feet, pulled up, and drained three-pointer at the buzzer.

The faith of the president's people that he would do the same at Hofstra was what sustained them in the wake of Denver. For a year, the Obamans had fretted over everything under the sun: gas prices, unemployment, the European financial crisis, Iran, the Koch brothers, the lack of enthusiasm from the Democratic base, Hispanic turnout in the Orlando metroplex. The one thing they had never worried about was Barack Obama.

But given the spectacle they had just witnessed at Kingsmill, the Obamans were more than worried. After spending ten days pooh-poohing the widespread hysteria in their party about Denver, Obama's debate team was now the most wigged-out collection of Democrats in the country, huddling in a hotel cubby that had become their secret panic room. Three hours had passed since the mock ended; it was almost 2:00 a.m. Obama's team was still clustered in the work space, reading transcripts and waxing apocalyptic.

"Guys, what are we going to do?" Plouffe asked quietly, over and over. "That was a disaster."

Among the Obamans, there was nobody more unflappable than Plouffe—and nobody less shaken by Denver. The campaign's research showed that there was a deep well of sympathy for Obama among voters; in focus groups after the first debate, people offered excuse after excuse for his horrific presentation. In Florida, one woman said, almost protectively, "I just bet you he wasn't feeling well."

But what the research also told Plouffe was that Obama was "on probation" after Denver. The public might brush off a single bad debate showing; two in a row would not be so readily ignored. With Hofstra less than forty-eight hours away, the Obamans essentially had a day to diagnose the malady afflicting their boss—the sudden sickness that had robbed their great communicator of his ability to communicate under pressure—and find a remedy. What was wrong? What *would* they do? No one had a clue.

All Plouffe knew was that, if Obama turned in a performance at Hofstra like the one they had seen that night, the consequences could be dire.

"If we don't fix this," Plouffe said emphatically, "we could lose the whole fucking election."

. . .

THE MOST HELLISH DAYS of 2012 for Obama were heaven on earth for Mitt Romney. Before his turn on the debate stage in Denver, Romney had never achieved a moment in the campaign that was politically triumphal and, to his mind, revealing of who he was. His performance as a candidate was unartful, and in exactly the ways that both the Obamans and the GOP establishment had predicted at the start of the race. His greatest credential for the Oval Office—his enormous success in the private sector—was savagely turned against him. His public image from his first national run, in 2008, had been that of a flip-flopping Mormon; in 2012, he was rendered a hybrid of Gordon Gekko and Mr. Magoo. But at that first debate, the Romney in whom his advisers, friends, family, and supporters believed made a powerful appearance: a good and decent man with a formidable intellect, economic expertise, problem-solving know-how, and patriotic zeal. In an instant, the former Massachusetts governor looked like a plausible president. It was a conquest that propelled Romney toward the finish line with new fervor, and one he would savor long after the votes were counted.

With the benefit of hindsight, innumerable analysts would declare that the result of the election

was foreordained: that Obama always had it in the bag. But the president and his people spent all of 2011 and most of 2012 believing nothing of the sort. The economic headwinds that Obama faced were ferocious and unrelenting. His approval ratings during his first term rarely edged above 50 percent. The opposition inspired by his presidency was intense and at times rabid, from the populist ire of the Tea Party to the legislative recalcitrance of the congressional wing of the GOP to the wailing and gnashing of the anti-Obama caucus in the business world and on Wall Street especially. The country was split almost cleanly down the middle, and more polarized than ever.

The two sides had few beliefs in common, but one of them was this: the outcome of the election mattered, and not a little. The ideological contrast between the parties had rarely been starker. In terms of specific policies, the size and role of government and the fundamental priorities of the nation, the practical implications of which man won were vast.

With so much at stake, the 2012 election had the feel of a big casino, as the players took on the complexion of compulsive gamblers, pushing more and more chips into the center of the table. On the right, a phalanx of millionaires and billionaires doubled down on Romney even after his flaws were as too clear, pouring gargantuan sums into his campaign and conservative super PACs. The Republican nominee, in turn, not only doubled down on the orthodoxies of the right but on his own controversial statements and positions. On the left, the Obamans were engaged in their own doubling down: on the coalition that had elected their man in 2008; on their pioneering use of new technology; on their grassroots get-out-the-vote machine. But no doubt the biggest wager they placed was on Obama.

On that mid-October night in Williamsburg, with the election three weeks away, it remained unclear who would leave the casino flush and who would exit with picked-clean pockets. In the end, the answer would lie in the hands of the president of the United States—who, at that hour, far from the cameras, was more imperiled than anyone imagined, his greatest gift having deserted him at the worst possible time. After four years of economic hardship, nagging uncertainty, and disappointment that change had come so slowly when it came at all, Obama would have to rise to a different kind of challenge—a challenge from within himself—before the country would double down on him.

PART ONE

MISSIONS ACCOMPLISHED

BARACK OBAMA WAS BACK in Chicago and back on the campaign trail, two realms from which he had been absent for a while but which always felt like home. It was April 14, 2011, and Obama had returned to the Windy City to launch his reelection effort with a trio of fundraisers. Ten days earlier, his people had filed the papers making his candidacy official and opened up the campaign headquarters there. Five hundred and seventy-two days later, the voters would render their judgment. To Obama, Election Day seemed eons away—and just around the corner.

Working his way from two small events for high-dollar donors at fancy restaurants to a crowd of two thousand at Navy Pier, the incumbent served up the old Obama fire. He invoked the memory of the last election night in Grant Park, “the excitement in the streets, the sense of hope, the sense of possibility.” He touted his achievements as “the change we still believe in.” He ended the evening with a “Yes, we can!”

But again and again, Obama cited the burdens of his station. Although he’d always known that as president his plate would be full, the fullness was staggering—from the economic crisis to the swine flu pandemic, the BP oil spill, and the hijacking of an American cargo ship by Somali pirates. (“Who thought we were going to have to deal with pirates?”) He acknowledged the frustrations of many Democrats at the fitfulness of the progress he’d brought about, the compromises with Republicans. He apologized for the fact that his head wasn’t fully in the reelection game. “Over the next three months, six months, nine months, I’m going to be a little preoccupied,” Obama said. “I’ve got this day job that I’ve got to handle.”

The president’s preoccupations at that moment were many and varied, trivial and profound. In public, he was battling with the GOP over the budget and preparing for a face-off over the federal debt ceiling. In secret, he was deliberating over an overseas special-ops raid aimed at a shadowy target who possibly, maybe, hopefully was Osama bin Laden. But the most persistent distraction Obama was facing was personified by Donald Trump, the real estate billionaire and reality show ringmaster who was flirting with making a presidential run under the banner of birtherism—the crackpot conspiracy theory claiming that Obama was born in Kenya and thus was constitutionally ineligible to preside as commander in chief.

Obama had contended with birtherism since the previous campaign, when rumors surfaced that there was no record of his birth in Hawaii. The fringe theorists had grown distractingly shrill and increasingly insistent; after he won the nomination in June 2008, his team deemed it necessary to pos

his short-form birth certificate on the Web. The charge was lunacy, Obama thought. Simply mental. But it wouldn't go away. A recent *New York Times* poll had found that 45 percent of Republicans and 25 percent of voters overall believed he was foreign born. And with Trump serving as a human bullhorn, the faux controversy had escaped the confines of Fox News and conservative talk radio, reverberating in the mainstream media. Just that morning, before Obama departed for Chicago, ABC News's George Stephanopoulos had asked him about it in an interview, specifically citing Trump—twice.

As Obama made his fund-raising rounds that night, he avoided mentioning Trump, yet the issue remained much on his mind. What confounded him about the problem, beyond its absurdity, was that there was no ready solution. Although Trump was braying for his original long-form birth certificate officials in Obama's home state were legally prohibited from releasing it on their own, and the president had no earthly idea where his family's copy was. All he could do was joke about the topic, he did at his final event of the night: "I grew up here in Chicago," Obama told the crowd at Navy Pier, then added awkwardly, "I wasn't born here—just want to be clear. I was born in Hawaii."

Obama was looking forward to spending the night at his house in Kenwood, on the city's South Side—the redbrick Georgian Revival pile that he and Michelle and their daughters left behind when they took up residence in the White House. He arrived fairly late, after 10:00 p.m., but then stayed up even later, intrigued by some old boxes that had belonged to his late mother, Ann Dunham.

Dunham had died seven years earlier, but Obama hadn't sorted through all her things. Now, alone in his old house for just the third night since he'd become president, he started rummaging through the boxes, digging, digging, until suddenly he found it: a small, four-paneled paper booklet the world had never seen before. On the front was an ink drawing of Kapi'olani Maternity and Gynecological Hospital, in Honolulu. On the back was a picture of a Hawaiian queen. On one inside page were his name, his mother's name, and his date of birth; on the other were his infant footprints.

The next morning, Marty Nesbitt came over to have breakfast with Obama. The CEO of an airport parking-lot company, Nesbitt was part of a tiny circle of Chicago friends on whom the president relied to keep him anchored in a reality outside the Washington funhouse. The two men had bonded playing pickup basketball two decades earlier; their relationship was still firmly rooted in sports, talking smack, and all around regular-guy-ness. After chatting for a while at the kitchen table, Obama went upstairs and came back down, wearing a cat-who-ate-a-whole-flock-of-canaries grin, waving the booklet in the air, and then placing it in front of Nesbitt.

"Now, that's some funny shit," Nesbitt said, and burst out laughing.

Clambering into his heavily armored SUV, Obama headed back north to the InterContinental hotel where he had an interview scheduled with the Associated Press. He pulled aside his senior adviser David Plouffe and press secretary Jay Carney, and eagerly showed them his discovery.

Plouffe studied the thing, befuddled and wary: *Is that the birth certificate?* he thought.

Carney was bewildered, too, but excited: *This is the birth certificate? Awesome.*

Obama didn't know what to think, but he flew back to Washington hoping that maybe, just maybe, he now had a stake to drive through the heart of birtherism, killing it once and for all—and slaying Trump in the bargain. Striding into a meeting with his senior advisers in the Oval Office the next Monday morning, he reached into his suit pocket and whipped out the booklet, infinitely pleased with himself.

"Hey," Obama announced, "look what I found when I was out there!"

• • •

NO INCUMBENT PRESIDENT EVER travels a road to reelection paved with peonies and primrose. But Obama's plunge into the fever swamp of birtherism was just the latest detour on what had already been a long, strange trip—with many miles still to go.

From the outset of his improbable and dazzling journey to the presidency, Obama had been endowed with an almost superhuman confidence and self-possession. His ascension had taken place with astonishing speed, leaving both his public image and his private self-conception unblemished by the hyper-partisan freak show of American politics. On the eve of his decision to run for president, Obama pledged to his wife and team, "I'm going to be Barack Obama and not some parody—I'm going to emerge intact." And, amazingly, he had. By the end of the campaign, he had proven almost entirely impervious to the right-wing hit machine. On Election Day, he carried a majority of independent voters and nearly 10 percent of Republicans. He sailed into the White House as a transformational figure, an avatar of a new era of post-partisanship, a leader capable of mitigating the ruinous divisiveness that had bedeviled Washington for two decades.

Now, at forty-nine and on the brink of his bid for a second term, Obama confronted a different political reality. Rather than bringing the country together, he had become an even more polarizing presence than Bill Clinton or George W. Bush. When he glimpsed his own image in the media, it was no longer one he recognized; instead he saw a cartoon. His reelection campaign would be waged in the teeth of a feral opposition and an economy that had improved on his watch but remained god-awful, plagued by slow growth and high unemployment. He was vulnerable, beatable, perhaps even the underdog.

That he had been dealt a horrific hand upon assuming office was beyond reasonable dispute: an epochal economic meltdown, a worldwide financial crisis, a collapsing auto industry, an imploding housing market, and two costly, unpopular wars in need of denouement. That he had taken dramatic action was also inarguable. He had signed the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the largest fiscal stimulus in U.S. history. He had rescued the financial sector and also reregulated it with the Dodd-Frank Wall Street reform law. He had tossed a lifeline to Detroit and was moving to end the conflicts in Iraq (rapidly) and Afghanistan (slowly). He had achieved a long-held Democratic dream with the passage of near-universal health care coverage through the Affordable Care Act.

Obama had no regrets about any of this. He had done the right things, the difficult things, the necessary things—of this he was certain. But he knew that the political price he would pay was steep. On the night of the passage of health care reform, in late March of 2010, Obama celebrated with his staff on the Truman Balcony of the White House. Holding a champagne flute, the president approached his political director, Patrick Gaspard, a wiry Haitian-born operative who earned his political stripes in New York's ruthless union backrooms. Tipping his glass and cocking an eyebrow, Obama said, "You know, they're gonna kick our asses over this."

Truth be told, the tuchus kicking had been going on from the start. Congressional Republicans assailed Obama at every turn, painting him as a profligate, reflexive liberal, opposing his legislative agenda loudly and in lockstep. In the business world, he was widely regarded as either clueless about or hostile to the private sector. On the far right, he was denounced as an amalgam of Hitler, Chairman Mao, and Huey Newton—even as the left was disappointed to discover that he wasn't a combination of Ted Kennedy, Norman Thomas, and John Lewis. In the middle of the electorate, the stimulus, the bailouts, and health care reform proved unpopular; independent voters abandoned him in droves. From a high of 69 percent on Inauguration Day, his approval ratings had slid to the mid-forties by summer 2010.

With the congressional midterm elections looming in November of that year, Obama and his people saw the writing on the wall. After a season they had christened “Recovery Summer,” the economy was growing at just 2 percent, the unemployment rate was 9.5, and the Tea Party was on the rise. Obama had watched this new force take shape from a remove, but with gathering alarm. The incendiary town hall meetings the previous year. The reports of vandalism at Democratic congressional district offices. The roiling populist outrage on display that reminded him of the jagged outbursts at McCain-Palin rallies at the end of the 2008 campaign. And the more Obama learned about the Tea Party candidates poised to win in November, the greater his incredulity—and disgust.

“If people vote for *this*,” he said to one of his aides, “they deserve it.”

But vote for it they did, on Election Day 2010, delivering to the president and his party what Obama aptly termed a “shellacking.” Democrats were stripped of eleven governorships, including those in the battleground states of Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In the Senate they ceded six seats, while in the House they were massacred, suffering the largest midterm loss since 1938—sixty-three seats, many to be filled by Tea Party freshmen.

In the wake of the midterms, Obama was besieged by the Democratic establishment with calls for a midcourse correction. He should steal a page from the playbook employed by Bill Clinton when he endured a similar drubbing in 1994, Obama was told. Reach out to Republicans. Mend fences with business. Move to the middle.

Obama believed that he was already there. His lament on the topic was all too familiar to his advisers.

I didn’t push for a single-payer health care law, he would say, pointing out that the individual mandate at the heart of his plan was a Republican idea, concocted at the Heritage Foundation and implemented by Mitt Romney as governor of Massachusetts. My climate change policy—cap-and-trade—was Bush 41’s, Obama would complain. My auto rescue was more market-minded than the one proposed by Bush 43. I didn’t nationalize the banks when everyone, even Alan Greenspan, said I should. And my critics call me a socialist? Please.

What the president did want to reboot was his political team, which throughout his career had been a tight and static crew. In the 2008 campaign, there were only five people he trusted on big decisions and with whom he actively conferred: his chief strategist, David Axelrod; his communications director, Robert Gibbs; his close friend Valerie Jarrett, from Chicago, also an intimate of Michelle’s; his campaign manager, Plouffe; and his Senate chief of staff, Pete Rouse. He carried four of them into the White House—Axelrod, Jarrett, and Rouse as senior advisers, Gibbs as press secretary—with Plouffe taking what he called a “two-year sabbatical” to write a book and hit the lecture circuit.

This cadre had been the essential cogs of a well-oiled campaign machine: disciplined, devoted, and light on drama. But inside the White House, with the core Obamans working alongside a clique of high-wattage Clintonites—notably chief of staff Rahm Emanuel and National Economic Council director Larry Summers—the dynamic was wildly, dysfunctionally different. The political and policy shops were often in conflict, arguing and rearguing issues in front of the president. Tactics frequently trumped strategy. On-the-fly decision making was more the rule than the exception. There was infighting and leaking, backchanneling and backbiting, much of it revolving around Jarrett, whose relationship to the first couple inspired envy and enmity. It was a noisy, tumultuous scene.

Michelle was unhappy with her husband’s team, and she made no bones about it. The president was unhappy, too. He wanted the noise to stop.

Obama placed much of the blame on the brilliant, abrasive, frenetic Emanuel—but Rahm was already out the door, having departed the White House in October to run for mayor of Chicago after

Richard M. Daley announced he would not seek reelection. As Emanuel's replacement, Obama chose Daley's youngest brother, Bill, who brought to the job a formidable résumé: commerce secretary under Clinton, chairman of Al Gore's 2000 presidential campaign, and, most recently, a top executive at JPMorgan Chase. Daley also had deep ties to Obamaworld, if not to Obama; he had known Axelrod for thirty years, served as Joe Biden's political director on his 1988 presidential bid, and was one of Emanuel's biggest boosters in Chicago. He was sixty-two years old, with a shiny bald head, a brawler's build, and no tolerance for bullshit—a word he employed as a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, and definite article.

The addition of Daley to Obama's White House team was coupled with a pair of even more significant subtractions: Axelrod and Gibbs. The fifty-five-year-old Axelrod, with his slouchy stance and sauce-splattered ties, had been Obama's "keeper of the message" since his start in national politics; Gibbs had been with him since his Senate race in 2004. But Obama believed his communications operation was a mess. He was overexposed. The thread had been misplaced. *The reason I'm here*, Obama thought, *was that I told the American people a story—and somehow we lost track of that.*

Axelrod seemed burned out to Obama. Axelrod *was* burned out. He had planned to return home to Chicago in the spring to help guide the campaign. Obama told him no—he should go even sooner, after the State of the Union address in January.

As for Gibbs, Obama was convinced that the White House's relations with the media were needlessly contentious, thanks in part to his press secretary's combative briefing style. Gibbs had also recently become embroiled in a string of distracting flaps: annoying House speaker Nancy Pelosi in July by conceding on TV that Democrats could lose majority control of the lower chamber in the midterms; inflaming progressives by dismissing liberal activists as the "professional left"; and contributing to the White House's internal friction through his rocky relations with Michelle and Jarrett. The president wanted Gibbs off the podium. This was fine with the press secretary—he expected to step up into a broader West Wing role with a grander title—but Obama made it clear that he preferred to have Gibbs trumpet his message from outside the building. I need my own James Carville out there on cable, arguing my case, Obama told him. You'll make money, get to see your family more.

Axelrod and Gibbs were more than advisers or even friends to Obama; they were closer to kin. But the president betrayed little emotion as he ushered them out the door. "It's good," he said coolly to one intimate about the departures.

Obama's approach to his White House overhaul was shot through with such clinicality, and sharply focused on two challenges: coping with the newly Republicanized legislative landscape and gearing up for his reelection battle. Axelrod and Gibbs were household names, ubiquitous presences on TV, widely perceived as shameless partisans—so off to the campaign side they went. By contrast, Obama saw Daley as the solution to a multitude of problems. He would help repair the rift with business, be a potent economic spokesman and a bridge to Republicans on Capitol Hill, and, as a quasi outsider to Obamaworld, answer the accusation that the White House was suffocatingly insular.

Significant as these changes were, Obama wasn't cleaning house entirely. Though Jarrett had become a lightning rod for criticism beyond the building as well as within it, Obama left her role untouched. Rouse, who had been serving as acting chief of staff since Emanuel's exit, remained as influential as ever. (So influential that Obama told him that he wouldn't hand the job over to Daley if Rouse wanted to keep it.)

Most critically, Obama summoned Plouffe back to the fold. Data-driven and pretense-free,

relentlessly cool and collected, Plouffe, forty-three, was in many respects the antithesis of both the disorderly Axelrod, his former consulting partner, and the volatile Emanuel. His remit was, in effect, to function as the chief strategist for both the White House and the campaign.

While Obama reshuffled the personnel deck in the last days of 2010, he was dealing simultaneously with the lame-duck session of Congress. And to this he brought a similar sort of reelection-driven calculation. The message of the midterms, Obama believed, was that voters were exhausted by the partisan warfare of the previous two years. *They want to see Democrats and Republicans agreeing on . . . anything*, he thought.

The lame duck presented a golden opportunity, and Obama seized it. He abandoned his opposition to renewing the Bush-era income tax cuts for the wealthy, in return for \$238 billion in new fiscal stimulus (an extension of unemployment insurance, a payroll tax holiday, and more). Then, in quick succession, he pocketed an array of additional victories with bipartisan support: the repeal of the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy prohibiting gays from serving openly; ratification of the New START treaty on nuclear arms; a \$4.2 billion compensation package for 9/11 first responders; and a child nutrition bill beloved by Michelle.

The left was livid with Obama for folding on the Bush tax cuts for the rich, which had been a campaign cornerstone for Democrats in the midterms. Obama didn't give a fig. The flagging economy needed juice, the deal would provide it, and the idea of letting the tax cuts expire for everyone in the hope that a better compromise could be brokered down the road—after Republicans had taken control of the House—was ludicrous on its face. Case closed.

Looking ahead, Obama had no doubt about the correct approach to the congressional Republicans: cooperate when possible, confront when necessary, exploit conservative overreaching. But Obama's reelection would depend on his ability to undertake a broader project. To occupy a higher plane than he had in his first two years, elevating himself above the posturing, petulance, and bile spewing of the linthead extremes in both parties. To play the role of presiding adult in a town full of adolescents. In other words, to be Barack Obama again.

For a moment, it looked as though he would have the chance. On the back of his legislative victories, his moving speech at the Tucson memorial after the shooting of Arizona congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and eighteen others in a supermarket parking lot, and his State of the Union address, the president's approval ratings in the early weeks of 2011 edged up above 50 percent for the first time in more than a year.

As he rolled into reelection season, Obama's plan was to spend the months ahead talking incessantly about jobs, infrastructure, and the economy. But the world had other ideas—presenting the president with a series of distractions. Some were of global significance: the fall of Hosni Mubarak, the Libyan civil war, and myriad events of the Arab Spring. Others were time-honored Washington pseudo-crises: the threat in early April of a government shutdown, necessitating a down-to-the-wire negotiation with the new House speaker, John Boehner.

Obama had known that much of his job would be scrambling to cope with the unexpected. "Any president can only affirmatively effect 20 percent of his agenda—all the rest is reaction," he told his 2008 campaign team. His time in office had hammered that truth home. Distractions, high and low, were among the burdens that every incumbent faced and could do little about.

But if the distraction happened to be named Trump, that was a different story.

• • •

WHITE HOUSE COUNSEL BOB BAUER took one look at the booklet in Obama's hand and knew it wasn't the birth certificate. It was just a commemorative keepsake, the kind of thing hospitals give to parents as a token of the blessed day. But that Monday morning, April 18, in the Oval Office, the booklet proved to be something more: a spur to the Obamans to revisit a question they had debated many times before—whether to make a run at obtaining the actual long-form certificate from Hawaii.

Bauer had been Obama's chief legal adviser since his days in the Senate and was among the most preeminent campaign attorneys in the Beltway bar. He was against the idea, as he always had been, and for a straightforward reason. Under Hawaiian state law, Bauer pointed out, the short-form "certification of live birth" that the campaign had posted online three years earlier was Obama's birth certificate, and putting out the long form might be treated by some as tantamount to admitting that all along the short form had been insufficient.

Plouffe had a different objection. Listen, having this issue out there isn't the worst thing in the world for us, he said. Most voters think that the president was born in Hawaii, and most voters think the birthers are nuts. The more oxygen Donald Trump gets, the better off we are long term.

Nevertheless, Plouffe saw another side to the coin. The White House was starting to take incoming fire from the liberal punditocracy—MSNBC's Chris Matthews had been on a tear—for not putting the issue to rest. There were also implications for governing. If half of the Republican electorate believed that Obama was an illegitimate president, Plouffe observed, that only made it harder for their representatives on the Hill to do business with the White House.

Obama's views were more nuanced—and more personal. He and Michelle were both avid consumers of political commentary. Her habit was cable, and especially *Morning Joe*. (She watched the show religiously while working out, then fired off agitated e-mails to Jarrett about what this or that talking head had said.) The president indulged in a greater degree of channel flipping than he admitted, but was more immersed in the blogosphere, and not just its leftward precincts. On his iPad, to which he was so attached it seemed like an appendage, he monitored the hard-right realms of the online echo chamber, surprising friends with his familiarity with the work of ultra-con tyro Michelle Malkin. As for Fox News, he believed the network's relentless hostility toward him shaved five points off his approval ratings.

For two years, the conservative quadrants of the freak show had labored to delegitimize Obama, often in race-freighted fashion—from the suggestions that he was a closet Muslim to the idea, floated by writer Dinesh D'Souza and latched on to by Newt Gingrich, that he could be grasped only through the prism of "Kenyan anti-colonial behavior." The president rarely complained about the racial overtones of such commentary. "We all know what that's about," he would say, sloughing off the subject. But the birther charge was a provocation too far, especially as *real* topics were being ignored.

"This is everything that's wrong with our politics," Obama said that Monday in the Oval Office meeting after his Chicago trip. I understand that politically this is probably good for us, since it makes their party look crazy. But let's pop the balloon and shut down this foolishness once and for all.

Bauer was tasked with approaching the Hawaii department of health and requesting a waiver that would allow the release of the original long-form certificate. Nine days later, on April 27, the document was in hand in the West Wing and a press conference scheduled. There was never any doubt that the president would unveil it himself, delighting in the opportunity to shame the press and cuff the freak show. As he walked into the prep session before the presser, he spied Bauer and his lead wordsmith, Jon Favreau.

"We've got the lawyer and the speechwriter here, so this must be a big deal," Obama cracked.

By coincidence, Trump, as part of his dalliance with a presidential bid, was traveling to New Hampshire that day. As if to affirm Obama's belief that the media required a slap upside the head, a number of TV networks carried the two events—the Donald touching down in his branded helicopter in Portsmouth, the POTUS taking the podium at the White House—using a split screen.

“Normally I would not comment on something like this, because obviously there's a lot of stuff swirling in the press at any given day and I've got other things to do,” Obama said. He noted that, in a week in which he and House Republicans put out competing budgets, “the dominant news story wasn't about these huge, monumental choices that we're going to have to make as a nation. It was about my birth certificate. And that was true on most of the news outlets that were represented here.” Then Obama delivered the Trump *de grâce*: “We're not going to be able to solve our problems if we get distracted by sideshows and carnival barkers . . . We do not have time for this kind of silliness.”

. . .

THE BARKER IN QUESTION, up in the Granite State, gave no indication that he realized the joke had been on him. “Today, I'm very proud of myself,” Trump declared. “I've accomplished something that nobody else has been able to accomplish . . . I am really honored, frankly, to have played such a big role in hopefully, *hopefully* getting rid of this issue.”

Favreau had no intention of allowing Trump to miss the point the next time—and oh, yes, there would be a next time, just four days later, when The Donald attended the annual White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, at which Obama would, by custom, deliver a presidential stand-up routine.

The morning of the dinner, Axelrod, Favreau, and another speechwriter, Jon Lovett, tromped into the Oval Office to run through the president's script with him. Favreau and Lovett wanted to do more than torment Trump; they wanted to torpedo his putative White House run. They recruited Hollywood comedy kingpin Judd Apatow, of *Bridesmaids* and *Knocked Up* fame, to help out with Obama's script. And Apatow, riffing over the phone, had contributed a cutting gibe that referred to an episode of Trump's reality TV show, *Celebrity Apprentice*.

Axelrod, Daley, and Plouffe all wondered whether Obama would find the Apatow joke too barbed. But the president pronounced it one of his favorite set pieces in the script. There was only one joke, in fact, to which Obama objected, and it didn't involve Trump. It was about another GOP presidential prospect, the former governor of Minnesota, Tim Pawlenty. “He *seems* all-American,” the script said “but have you heard his real middle name? Tim *Osama bin* Pawlenty.”

“Osama is the middle name? I think we could do something a little more original than that,” Obama said.

Favreau was perplexed. “What about Hosni?” he asked.

“That's great,” said Obama. “Let's just go with Hosni.”

That night, Obama took to the stage in the basement ballroom of the Washington Hilton, in front of twenty-five hundred bejeweled women and black-tied men—celebrities, congresspeople, presidential wannabes, even some reporters. With impeccable comic timing, the president lit into Trump: “No one is happier, no one is prouder, to put this birth certificate matter to rest than the Donald. And that's because he can finally get back to focusing on the issues that matter. Like, did we fake the moon landing? What really happened in Roswell? And where are Biggie and Tupac?” The crowd roared with delight.

They howled again when Obama unloaded Apatow's *Apprentice* takedown: “The men's cooking

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