

## Barack Obama and Me By J. D. VANCEJAN. 2, 2017

I first became interested in politics as a middle school student in the late 1990s, when sexual scandal and presidential impeachment dominated national headlines. The opinion leaders of the day seemed to fall into two camps: those who argued that the president's private life was none of the public's business, and those who felt the president lied under oath and deserved to face the consequences.

I wasn't sophisticated enough to have an opinion on that topic, though I watched the impeachment proceedings like an interested spectator at a sporting event. My politics had started to drift to the right of my family, many of them classic blue dog Democrats. Still, I admired President Clinton in a way that happens when someone like you really *makes it*. He was a poor boy with a vaguely Southern accent, raised by a single mother with a heavy dose of loving grandparents. As my grandmother told me, presidents were almost always rich people, but Bill Clinton was one of us.

Yet it was that very relatability that made Mr. Clinton's personal failings frightening. The data shows that working-class families like mine face much higher rates of marital strife and domestic instability. Demons like Mr. Clinton's had haunted my home and family for generations, and at an age when I first began to develop strong feelings about my future, I knew that I wanted to outrun them. I cared little for Mr.

Clinton's elite education, his economic success or even his ascendancy to the most powerful office in the world. I cared that he had managed to build the domestic tranquility that he lacked as a child. But here, in one sex scandal, he had blown it all up. If a man of his abilities had done this, then what hope was there for me?

I often wonder how many kids look at our current president the way I once looked at President Clinton. Barack Obama was elected during my second year of college, and save for his skin color, he had much in common with Bill Clinton: Despite an unstable life with a single mother, aided by two loving grandparents, he had made in his adulthood a family life that seemed to embody my sense of the American ideal.

I suspected that there were skeletons lurking in his closet, too. Surely this was a man with a secret sex addiction, or at least an alcohol problem. I secretly guessed that before the end of his term, some major personal scandal would reveal his family life to be a sham. I disagreed with many of his positions, so perhaps a dark part of me wanted such a scandal to come out. But it never came. He and his wife treated each other with clear love and respect, and he adored and cared for his children. Whatever scars his childhood left, he refused to let those scars control him.

The president's example offered something no other public figure could: hope. I wanted so desperately to have what he had — a happy marriage and beautiful, thriving

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:52 PM

**Comment [1]:** and Me, too!

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:14 PM

**Comment [4]:** What about his "pursuit?" Is it possible that ambition informs Clinton's biography?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:15 PM

**Comment [5]:** "appearance of"?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:04 PM

**Comment [6]:** "One?" Gennifer Flowers? Connie Hamzy? Paula Jones?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:17 PM

**Comment [7]:** How might race function in this analysis? Why wouldn't Clinton's whiteness have figured into what he was able to achieve?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:22 PM

**Comment [8]:** Here's how one article explores this subject:  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/03/obama-and-the-kids/474462/>

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:05 PM

**Comment [2]:** So no other forms of identity matter here?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:25 PM

**Comment [9]:** Honest

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:10 PM

**Comment [3]:** What studies are you looking at here? Is that your only frame? What about literature? Does the data that you reference apply to Troy Maxson and Willie Loman?

children. But I thought that those things belonged to people unlike me, to those who came from money and intact nuclear families. For the rest of us, past was destiny. Yet here was the president of the United States, a man whose history looked something like mine but whose future contained something I wanted. His life stood in stark contrast to my greatest fear.

Eventually, I achieved something roughly similar to the president's early, personal accomplishments: a prestigious law degree, a strong professional career and a modicum of fame as a writer. There were many personal heroes in my life: aunts and uncles, a protective sister, a father who re-entered my life at the right time. But I benefited, too, from the example of a man whose public life showed that we need not be defeated by the domestic hardships of youth.

It is one of the great failures of recent political history that the Republican Party was too often unable to disconnect legitimate political disagreements from the fact that the president himself is an admirable man. Part of this opposition comes from this uniquely polarized moment in our politics, part of it comes from Mr. Obama's leadership style — more disconnected and cerebral than personal and emotive — and part of it (though a smaller amount than many on the left suppose) comes from the color of his skin.

On Jan. 20, the political side of my brain will breathe a sigh of relief at Mr. Obama's departure. I will hope for better policy from the new administration, a health reform package closer to my ideological

preferences, and a new approach to foreign policy.

But the child who so desperately wanted an American dream, with a happy family at its core will feel something different. For at a pivotal time in my life, Barack Obama gave me hope that a boy who grew up like me could still achieve the most important of my dreams. For that, I'll miss him, and the example he set.

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 1:51 PM

**Comment [16]:** Is he serious?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:29 PM

**Comment [10]:** Sounds like the foundation for a critique of Obama's "My Brother's Keeper" initiative: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/my-brothers-keeper#section-about-my-brothers-keeper>

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:47 PM

**Comment [17]:** Barack Obama will still be a citizen of the United States. What is so significant about losing his example once he no longer holds office as President? If it is true that the education and the money that Clinton had were not as important as his family life, why can't Obama's life as an example maintain its potency once he's out of office?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:32 PM

**Comment [11]:** This sentiment definitely supports the view that Obama well-represents all of America.

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 2:38 PM

**Comment [12]:** This is interesting...the Republican Party disagreed with the President on principle, so didn't this preempt the legitimacy of the opposition?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 1:54 PM

**Comment [13]:** But isn't it precisely his ability to convey the "personal and emotive" through his leadership that you have come to recognize your articulation of the American Dream?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 1:48 PM

**Comment [14]:** How is J.D. Vance measuring this? How do you know that "this small amount" isn't like a cancer that can spread?

Michelle Hite 1/2/2017 1:55 PM

**Comment [15]:** Perhaps this is entangled with the other side of your brain.