

THE LONG RUN

Obama's Account of New York Years Often Differs From What Others Say



Columbia Undergraduate Barack Obama with his grandparents in New York City around 1981-83, when he was a student.

By JANNY SCOTT
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Barack Obama does not say much about his years in New York City. The time he spent as an undergraduate at Columbia College and then working in Manhattan in the early 1980s surfaces only fleetingly in his memoir. In the book, he casts himself as a solitary wanderer in the metropolis, the outsider searching for a way to "make myself of some use."

The Long Run

Obama in New York

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Barack Obama during his Columbia years. He says little about his college days in his memoir, and declined requests to release his transcript, but some who knew him praised his record.

He tells of underheated sublets, a night spent in an alley, a dead neighbor on the landing. From their fire escape, he and an unnamed roommate watch "white people from the better neighborhoods" bring their dogs to defecate on the block. He takes a job in an unidentified "consulting house to multinational corporations," where he is "a spy behind enemy lines," startled to find himself with a secretary, a suit and money in the bank.

He barely mentions Columbia, training ground for the elite, where he transferred in his junior year, majoring in political science and international relations and writing his thesis on Soviet nuclear disarmament. He dismisses in one sentence his first community organizing job — work he went on to do in Chicago — though a former supervisor remembers him as "a star performer."

Senator Obama, an Illinois Democrat now seeking the presidency, suggests in his book that his years in New York were a pivotal period: He ran three miles a day, buckled down to work and "stopped getting high," which he says he had started doing in high school. Yet he declined repeated requests to talk about his New York years, release his Columbia transcript or identify even a single fellow student, co-worker, roommate or friend from those years.

"He doesn't remember the names of a lot of people in his life," said Ben LaBolt, a campaign spokesman.

Mr. Obama has, of course, done plenty of remembering. His 1995 memoir, "Dreams From My Father," weighs in at more than 450 pages. But he also exercised his writer's prerogative to decide what to include or leave out. Now, as he presents himself to voters, a look at his years in New York — other people's accounts and his own — suggests not only what he was like back then but how he chooses to be seen now.

Some say he has taken some literary license in the telling of his story. Dan Armstrong, who worked with Mr. Obama at Business International Corporation in New York in 1984 and has deconstructed Mr. Obama's account of the job on his blog, [analyzethis.net](#), wrote: "All of Barack's embellishment serves a larger narrative purpose: to retell the story of the Christ's temptation. The young, idealistic, would-be community organizer gets a nice suit, joins a consulting house, starts hanging out with investment bankers, and barely escapes moving into the big mansion with the white folks."

In an interview, Mr. Armstrong added: "There may be some truth to that. But in order to make it a good story, it required a bit of exaggeration."

Mr. Armstrong's description of the firm, and those of other co-workers, differs at least in emphasis from Mr. Obama's. It was a small newsletter-publishing and research firm, with about 250 employees worldwide, that helped companies with foreign operations (they could be called multinationals) understand overseas markets, they said. Far from a bastion of corporate conformity, they said, it was informal and staffed by young people making modest wages. Employees called it "high school with ashtrays."

Many workers dressed down. Only the vice president in charge of Mr. Obama's division got a secretary, they said. Mr. Obama was a researcher and writer for a reference service called Financing Foreign Operations. He also wrote for a newsletter, Business International Money Report.

"It was not working for General Foods or Chase Manhattan, that's for sure," said Louis Celi, a vice president at the company, which was later taken over by the Economist Intelligence Unit. "And it was not a consulting firm by any stretch of the imagination. I remember the first time I interviewed someone from Morgan Stanley and I got cheese on my tie because I thought my tie was a napkin."

Mr. Obama arrived in New York in August 1981, at age 20, from Occidental College in Los Angeles. According to his memoir, he passed his first night in an alley near 109th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, unable to get into his apartment. The next morning, he bathed at a hydrant alongside a homeless man.

Like other transfer students, Mr. Obama lived off campus and bounced from one apartment to another. For a while, he said, he lived with a Pakistani whom he calls Sadik. He recalls that when he lived in a walk-up on East 94th Street, he would chat with his Puerto Rican neighbors about the Knicks or the sound of gunfire at night.

He writes that "it was only now that I began to grasp the almost mathematical precision with which America's race and class problems joined; the depth, the ferocity, of resulting tribal wars; the bile that flowed freely not just out on the streets but in the stalls of Columbia's bathrooms as well," where the graffiti was both racist and anti-Semitic.

In a long profile of Mr. Obama in a Columbia alumni magazine in 2005, in which his Columbia years occupied just two paragraphs, he called that time "an intense period of study."

"I spent a lot of time in the library. I didn't socialize that much. I was like a monk," he was quoted as saying.

He said he was somewhat involved with the Black Student Organization and anti-apartheid activities, though, in recent interviews, several prominent student leaders said they did not remember his playing a role.

One person who did remember Mr. Obama was Michael L. Baron, who taught a senior seminar on international politics and American policy. Mr. Baron, now president of an electronics company in Florida, said he was Mr. Obama's adviser on the senior thesis for that course. Mr. Baron, who later wrote Mr. Obama a recommendation for [Harvard Law School](#), gave him an A in the course.

Columbia was a hotbed for discussion of foreign policy, Mr. Baron said. The faculty included [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#), the former national security adviser, and [Zalmay Khalilzad](#), now the American ambassador to the [United Nations](#). Half of the students in the seminar were outstanding, and Mr. Obama was among them, Mr. Baron said.

Michael J. Wolf, who took the seminar with him and went on to become president of [MTV Networks](#), said: "He was very smart. He had a broad sense of international politics and international relations. It was a class with a lot of debate. He was a very, very active participant. I think he was truly distinctive from the other people in that class. He stood out."

Mr. Obama graduated in 1983. In his memoir, he says he had decided to become a community organizer but could not persuade anyone to hire him. So he found "more conventional work for a year" to pay off his [student loans](#).

"Sometimes, coming out of an interview with Japanese financiers or German bond traders, I would catch my reflection in the elevator doors — see myself in a suit and tie, a briefcase in my hand — and for a split second I would imagine myself as a captain of industry, barking out orders, closing the deal, before I remembered who it was that I had told myself I wanted to be and felt pangs of guilt for my lack of resolve," Mr. Obama wrote.

Cathy Lazere, his supervisor at Business International, described him as self-assured and bright. "He was very mature and more worldly than other people — on the surface kind of laid back, but kind of in control," she said. "He had a good sense of himself, which I think a lot of kids at that age don't."

After about a year, he was hired by the [New York Public Interest Research Group](#), a nonprofit organization that promotes consumer, environmental and government reform. He became a full-time organizer at City College in Harlem, paid slightly less than \$10,000 a year to mobilize student volunteers.

Mr. Obama says he spent three months "trying to convince minority students at City College about the importance of recycling" — a description that surprised some former colleagues. They said that more "bread-and-butter issues" like mass transit, higher education, tuition and financial aid were more likely the emphasis at City College.

"You needed somebody — and here was where Barack was a star — who could make the case to students across the political spectrum," said Eileen Hershenov, who oversaw Mr. Obama's work for Nypirg. The job required winning over students on the political left, who would normally disdain a group inspired by [Ralph Nader](#) as insufficiently radical, as well as students on the right and those who were not active at all.

Nearly 20 years later, Mr. Obama seemed to remember the experience differently. Gene Karpinski, then executive director of U.S. PIRG, a federation of state watchdog groups, met Mr. Obama in Boston. It was at the time of the 2004 Democratic convention, when Mr. Obama delivered the speech that made him a party luminary. Mr. Karpinski introduced himself. And, he recalled, Mr. Obama told him: "I used to be a PIRG guy. You guys trained me well."

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