

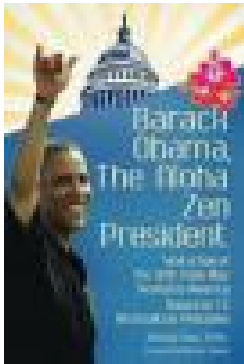
Obama: not a leader or decider, but a deliberator

John Olinger | Jul. 6, 2011

READING OBAMA: DREAMS, HOPE, AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL TRADITION

By James T. Kloppenberg

Published by Princeton University Press, \$24.95



BARACK OBAMA, THE ALOHA ZEN PRESIDENT: HOW A SON OF THE 50TH

STATE MAY REVITALIZE AMERICA BASED ON 12 MULTICULTURAL PRINCIPLES

Edited by Michael Haas

Published by Praeger Books, \$54.95

Twelve principles, three developments, one man: Barack Obama. It is safe to say that never has an American president who has completed only half a term been so analyzed.

James T. Kloppenberg's *Reading Obama* and Michael Haas' *Barack Obama, the Aloha Zen President* are but two of the latest in a seemingly never-ending stream of books seeking to explain the 44th president. Each makes a case for the unique nature of Obama, yet they take very different approaches. Each portrays a man who prizes conciliation and compromise above all else, a man who cares more for a peaceable journey than its destination. In fact, Kloppenberg specifically cites what he says is Obama's belief in democracy as deliberation.

Reading Obama is essentially what its title purports, a book based on Obama's writings. Kloppenberg, a Harvard historian of ideas, argues that Obama is the product of three developments in American history: the incomplete nature of American democracy, philosophical pragmatism, and the intellectual upheaval in American universities in the 1960s and 1970s. Obama lies squarely in what Kloppenberg calls the venerable tradition of American democracy: respect for one's opponents and a willingness to compromise with them. In developing this theme, he provides a masterly survey of American political thought as envisioned by the intellectual elite.

The various stages of Obama's career are viewed through this rarifying prism. In Chicago, as an organizer, Obama exercises patience and deliberation in mobilizing a disenfranchised and impoverished community. Unfortunately, we do not learn from this book exactly what the goals or the outcomes of this organizing were. Obama's editorship of the *Harvard Law Review* is a model of balancing competing and conflicting interpretations of the law. But again there is no sense of his own views. Process is all.

In his discussion of Obama as a professor of constitutional law, Kloppenberg makes the strongest case for Obama's views on, and great respect for, the Constitution. There is great irony in the fact that this professor of constitutional law has allowed himself to be portrayed as one who has traduced the Constitution. Reading Kloppenberg, one would expect that Obama would explain clearly, if not forcefully, how his agenda fit in the scheme of the Constitution. Instead, never perhaps since the Civil War has the Constitution been so misunderstood and contested.

Kloppenberg praises Obama's skills as a storyteller, one who communicates complex ideas through stories of individuals' lives. Yet, with the exception of the recent superb elegy in Tucson, Ariz., Obama has seemed tongue-tied when he most needed to explain his position. Kloppenberg cites Obama's health care speech as an appeal to replace acrimony with civility, but if that was its purpose, the speech must be judged a failure.



Haas, half a world away in Hawaii, deals in a different world altogether.

Originally published as *Multicultural Hawaii* in 1998, *Barack Obama, the Aloha Zen President* is a collection of essays by 12 scholars examining the development of a Hawaiian culture that is very much different from her 49 sisters on the mainland. The essays are heavily laden with social and political science methodology and are replete with tables. Yet they succeed in painting a compelling portrait of a place whose exoticism extends well beyond leis and luaus. Haas and his colleagues compellingly make a case that Hawaii is different in important and salutary ways. One can't help but think that the rest of the country would benefit more from a cable TV series on Obama's Hawaii than we do from the existing one on Sarah Palin's Alaska.

Haas claims that Obama's formative years in Hawaii are essential to understanding his unique approach to government, an approach that is cooperative rather than conflictual, that stresses communitarianism rather than hyperindividualism. Perhaps most strikingly, Haas challenges the framework that interprets Obama in terms of post-racialism. The correct frame, writes Haas, is multiculturalism.

The book's 15 essays attempt to buttress that argument. They are valuable in explaining the evolution of Hawaii from a society dominated by a privileged, largely white elite to a state in which political and economic power has devolved throughout different ethnic groups. Together they make a convincing case for a society that places a high value on harmony. The essay on electoral politics, for instance, makes the point that ethnic identity has been replaced by a local Hawaiian identity.

As interesting as these contributions are, they fail to make a strong case for the essential Hawaiian nature of the 44th president. It is intriguing to think, as Haas does, that when Obama watched 'Star Trek' as a teenager he saw a fictional paradigm of his real-life experience in Hawaii, but it is not clear how relevant that is to his approach to governing.

Unfortunately, the book shows too many signs of a hasty reworking of old material. There is no essay on Hawaii's pathbreaking enactment of the Prepaid Healthcare Act of 1974 that required employers to provide health insurance for their employees. In 1998, in the aftermath of President Clinton's failed attempt to enact comprehensive health reform, the Hawaiian program probably seemed beside the point. Today such an essay

would be quite instructive.

In the final essay, in which Haas provides a quick sketch of President Obama, there are far too many errors, some minor, some humorous. The Washington neighborhoods in which Obama sometimes indulges his taste for cheeseburgers and fries are no longer the working-class neighborhoods that Haas believes them to be. Rather they are prime examples of gentrification and working-class displacement.

Both of these books suffer from a similar displacement. They share a certain bloodlessness. They reflect little of the conflict of the last two tumultuous years. Whether through pragmatism or Zen, we are left with the image of a president not as a leader -- or spare us -- even a decider, but as a deliberator.

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