

Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

in full **Barack Hussein Obama II** born August 4, 1961, Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S.



Barack Obama.
Courtesy of the Office of U.S. Senator Barack Obama



Barack Obama with his wife, Michelle, being sworn in as the 44th president of the United States.
MSgt Cecilio Ricardo, U.S. Air Force/U.S. Department of Defense



Key events in the life of Barack Obama.
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4th president of the United States (2009–2017) and the first African American to hold the office. Before winning the presidency, Obama represented Illinois in the U.S. Senate (2005–2008). He was the third African American to be elected to that body since the end of [Reconstruction](#) (1877). In 2009 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.

Early life



Barack Obama with his father, Barack Obama, Sr., undated photograph.
© Obama for America/Handout/Reuters/Corbis



Janny Scott discussing her book *A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama*.
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Obama's father, Barack Obama, Sr., was a teenage goatherd in rural Kenya, won a scholarship to study in the United States, and eventually became a senior economist in the Kenyan government. Obama's mother, S. Ann Dunham, grew up in Kansas, Texas, and Washington state before her family settled in Honolulu. In 1960 she and Barack Sr. met in a Russian language class at the University of Hawaii and married less than a year later.



Barack Obama on the day after being elected the first African American president of the United States.
Steve Liss/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

When Obama was age two, Barack Sr. left to study at Harvard University; shortly thereafter, in 1964, Ann and Barack Sr. divorced. (Obama saw his father only one more time, during a brief visit when Obama was 10.) Later Ann remarried, this time to another foreign student, Lolo Soetoro from Indonesia, with whom she had a second child, Maya. Obama lived for

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several years in Jakarta with his half sister, mother, and stepfather. While there, Obama attended both a government-run school where he received some instruction in Islam and a Catholic private school where he took part in Christian schooling.

He returned to Hawaii in 1971 and lived in a modest apartment, sometimes with his grandparents and sometimes with his mother (she remained for a time in Indonesia, returned to Hawaii, and then went abroad again partly to pursue work on a Ph.D. before divorcing Soetoro in 1980). For a brief period his mother was aided by government food stamps, but the family mostly lived a middle-class existence. In 1979 Obama graduated from Punahou School, an elite college preparatory academy in Honolulu.

Obama attended Occidental College in suburban Los Angeles for two years and then transferred to Columbia University in New York City, where in 1983 he received a bachelor's degree in political science. Influenced by professors who pushed him to take his studies more seriously, Obama experienced great intellectual growth during college and for a couple of years thereafter. He led a rather ascetic life and read works of literature and philosophy by William Shakespeare, Friedrich Nietzsche, [Toni Morrison](#), and others. After serving for a couple of years as a writer and editor for Business International Corp., a research, publishing, and consulting firm in Manhattan, he took a position in 1985 as a community organizer on Chicago's largely impoverished Far South Side. He returned to school three years later and graduated magna cum laude in 1991 from Harvard University's law school, where he was the first African American to serve as president of the *Harvard Law Review*. While a summer associate in 1989 at the Chicago law firm of Sidley Austin, Obama had met Chicago native [Michelle Robinson](#), a young lawyer at the firm. The two married in 1992.



Barack Obama, 2004.
Nam Y. Huh/AP

After receiving his law degree, Obama moved to Chicago and became active in the Democratic Party. He organized Project Vote, a drive that registered tens of thousands of African Americans on voting rolls and that is credited with helping Democrat Bill Clinton win Illinois and capture the presidency in 1992. The effort also helped make [Carol Moseley Braun](#), an Illinois state legislator, the first African American woman elected to the U.S. Senate. During this period, Obama wrote his first book and saw it published. The memoir, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), is the story of Obama's search for his biracial identity by tracing the lives of his now-deceased father and his extended family in Kenya. Obama lectured on constitutional law at the University of Chicago and worked as an attorney on civil rights issues.

Politics and ascent to the presidency



U.S. Senators Barack Obama (left) and Dick Durbin, both Democrats from Illinois, chairing a Senate hearing.
Scott Olson/Getty Images



Barack Obama delivering the keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention in Boston, July 2008.
Robyn Beck/AP/Getty Images

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In 1996 he was elected to the Illinois Senate, where, most notably, he helped pass legislation that tightened campaign finance regulations, expanded health care to poor families, and reformed criminal justice and welfare laws. In 2004 he was elected to the U.S. Senate, defeating Republican Alan Keyes in the first U.S. Senate race in which the two leading candidates were African Americans. While campaigning for the U.S. Senate, Obama gained national recognition by delivering the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in July 2004. The speech wove a personal narrative of Obama's biography with the theme that all Americans are connected in ways that transcend political, cultural, and geographical differences. (See [primary source document: Keynote Address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention.](#)) The address lifted Obama's once obscure memoir onto best-seller lists, and, after taking office the following year, Obama quickly became a major figure in his party. A trip to visit his father's home in Kenya in August 2006 gained international media attention, and Obama's star continued ascending. His second book, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), a mainstream polemic on his vision for the United States, was published weeks later, instantly becoming a major best seller. In February 2007 he announced at the Old State Capitol in Springfield, Illinois, where [Abraham Lincoln](#) had served as a state legislator, that he would seek the Democratic Party's presidential nomination in 2008. (For coverage of the 2008 election, see United States Presidential Election of 2008.)



Barack Obama, 2006.
Scott Olson/Getty Images



Memorabilia from Barack Obama's presidential campaign.
Obama for America

Obama's personal charisma, stirring oratory, and his campaign promise to bring change to the established political system resonated with many Democrats, especially young and minority voters. On January 3, 2008, Obama won a surprise victory in the first major nominating contest, the Iowa caucus, over Sen. Hillary Clinton, who was the overwhelming favourite to win the nomination. Five days later, however, Obama finished second to Clinton in the New Hampshire primary, and a bruising and sometimes bitter primary race ensued. Obama won more than a dozen states including Illinois, his home state, and Missouri, a traditional political bellwether on Super Tuesday, February 5. No clear front-runner for the nomination emerged, however, as Clinton won many states with large populations, such as California and New York. Obama produced an impressive string of victories later in the month, handily winning the 11 primaries and caucuses that immediately followed Super Tuesday, which gave him a significant lead in pledged delegates. His momentum slowed in early March when Clinton won significant victories in Ohio and Texas. Though still maintaining his edge in delegates, Obama lost the key Pennsylvania primary on April 22. Two weeks later he lost a close contest in Indiana but won the North Carolina primary by a large margin, widening his delegate lead over Clinton. She initially had a big lead in so-called superdelegates (Democratic Party officials allocated votes at the convention that were unaffiliated with state primary results), but, with



Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton on the cover of *Newsweek*, Dec. 25, 2007.
PRNewsFoto/Newsweek/AP Images

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Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

Obama winning more states and actual delegates, many peeled away from her and went to Obama. On June 3, following the final primaries in Montana and South Dakota, the number of delegates pledged to Obama surpassed the total necessary to claim the Democratic nomination.



Barack Obama at a rally in St. Paul, Minn., on the day he became the presumptive Democratic nominee □
Emmanuel Dunand □ AFP/Getty Images



Michelle and Barack Obama (couple at left) and Jill and Joe Biden at Invesco Field on the final ...
Carol M. Highsmith/Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

On August 27 Obama became the first African American to be nominated for the presidency by either major party and went on to challenge Republican Sen. John McCain for the country's highest office. McCain criticized Obama, still a first-term senator, as being too inexperienced for the job. To counter, Obama selected Joe Biden, a veteran senator from Delaware who had a long resume of foreign policy expertise, to be his vice presidential running mate. Obama and McCain waged a fierce and expensive contest. Obama, still bolstered by a fever of popular support, eschewed federal financing of his campaign and raised hundreds of millions of dollars, much of it coming in small donations and over the Internet from a record number of donors. Obama's fund-raising advantage helped him buy massive amounts of television advertising and organize deep grassroots organizations in key battleground states and in states that had voted Republican in previous presidential cycles.

The two candidates offered a stark ideological choice for voters. Obama called for a swift withdrawal of most combat forces from Iraq and a restructuring of tax policy that would bring more relief to lower- and

middle-class voters, while McCain said the United States must wait for full victory in Iraq and charged that Obama's rhetoric was long on eloquence but short on substance. Just weeks before election day, Obama's campaign seized on the economic meltdown that had resulted from the catastrophic failure of U.S. banks and financial institutions in September, calling it a result of the Republican free-market-driven policies of the eight-year administration of George W. Bush.



Results of the American presidential election, 2008.
Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.



President-elect Barack Obama at an election-night rally in Chicago's Grant Park, Nov. 4, 2008. With □
Jae C. Hong/AP



Barack Obama taking the presidential oath of office and delivering his inaugural address on January □
White House



Barack and Michelle Obama with their daughters, Sasha (in white dress) and Malia, in the Green Room □
Photo by Annie Leibovitz/Official White House Photo

Obama won the election, capturing nearly 53 percent of the popular vote and 365 electoral votes. Not only did he hold all the states that John Kerry had won in the 2004 election, but he also captured a number of states (e.g., Colorado, Florida, Nevada, Ohio, and Virginia) that the Republicans had carried in the previous two presidential elections. On election night tens of thousands gathered in Chicago's Grant Park to see Obama claim victory. (See [primary source document: 2008 Victory Speech.](#)) Shortly af-

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ter his win, Obama resigned from the Senate. On January 20, 2009, hundreds of thousands turned out in Washington, D.C., to witness Obama taking the oath of office as president. (See [primary source document: Inaugural Address.](#))

David Mendell

Presidency

The Nobel Peace Prize and partisanship

In an effort to improve the image of the United States abroad—which many believed had been much damaged during the Bush administration—Obama took a number of steps that indicated a significant shift in tone. He signed an executive order that banned excessive interrogation techniques; ordered the closing of the controversial military detention facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, within a year (a deadline that was not met); proposed a “fresh start” to strained relations with Russia; and traveled to Cairo in June 2009 to deliver a historic speech in which he reached out to the Muslim world. Largely as a result of these efforts, Obama was awarded the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Yet some left-wing critics complained that he actually had adopted and even escalated most of the war and national security policies of his predecessor. Indeed, when Obama accepted the Nobel Prize in December, he said, “Evil does exist in the world” and “there will be times when nations—acting individually or in concert—will find the use of force not only necessary but morally justified.” Notwithstanding that tough talk, there were others who criticized Obama for issuing only a mild condemnation of the Iranian government’s crackdown on pro-democracy dissidents following a disputed election in June 2009. Moreover, the Obama administration’s handling of national security was questioned by some when a Nigerian terrorist trained in Yemen was thwarted in an attempt to bomb an airliner headed for Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009.

After enjoying soaring popularity early in his term, Obama became the target of increasing criticism, largely due to the slow pace of economic recovery and continued high unemployment rates but also because of widespread opposition to Democratic efforts to reform health care insurance policy, the signature issue of the Obama presidential campaign. Obama had entered office promising to bring an end to partisan squabbling and legislative gridlock, yet, in the wake of the failure to obtain any real bipartisan cooperation, congressional Democrats, according to Republicans, had settled into governing without substantive Republican involvement. Republicans, on the other hand, according to Democrats, had become the “Party of No,” seeking to obstruct Democratic legislative initiatives without offering real alternative proposals. It was in this highly polarized environment that Obama and the Democrats attempted to enact health care insurance reform.

Passage of health care reform

Health care reform, popular with Americans during the election, became less so as legislators presented the proposed changes to their constituents in town hall meetings in summer 2009 that sometimes erupted into shouting matches between those with opposing viewpoints. It was at this time that the populist Tea Party movement, comprising libertarian-minded conservatives, emerged in opposition to the Democratic health care proposals but more generally in opposition to what they saw as excessive taxes and government involvement in the private sector. Republicans across the board complained that Democratic proposals constituted a “government takeover” of health care that would prove too costly and mortgage the future of generations to come. Their opposition to the Democratic plans was virtually lockstep.

In many respects the president left the initiative for health care reform in the hands of congressional leaders. House Democrats responded in November 2009 by passing a bill that called for sweeping re-

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Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

form, including the creation of a "public option," a lower-cost government-run program that would act as competition for private insurance companies. The Senate was more deliberate in its consideration. Obama seemed to let conservative Democrat Sen. Max Baucus take the lead in that body at the head of the "Group of Six," comprising three Republican and three Democratic senators. The resulting bill that was passed by the Senate—holding the allegiance of all 58 Democrats plus independents Bernie Sanders of Vermont and Joe Lieberman of Connecticut, it barely survived a filibuster attempt by Republicans—proved to provide far fewer changes than its House counterpart, most notably leaving out the public option. Before a compromise could be reached on the two bills, the triumph of Republican Scott Brown in a special election for the seat formerly held by Sen. Ted Kennedy destroyed the Democrats' filibuster-proof majority. Many Democrats believed this meant that they would have to start over, as Republicans had been demanding.



Pres. Barack Obama (centre left) and Vice Pres. Joe Biden (centre right) reacting after the U.S. [Pete Souza—Official White House Photo

Obama and other Democratic leaders, especially Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, thought otherwise and continued to push for passage. Obama went on the offensive, skillfully moderating a nationally telecast summit of Republicans and Democrats at which the pros and cons of the Democratic proposals were debated. He also took his case outside the Beltway, in speech after speech, emphasizing the message that health care was a right and not a privilege and increasingly sharpening his criticism of the insurance industry. In March 2010, in an attempt to win the support of Democrats in the House who opposed the legislation because they felt it would weaken limitations on abortion funding, Obama promised to sign an executive order guaranteeing that it would not. With that crucial

group on board, Pelosi confidently brought the Senate bill to the House floor for a special vote on Sunday night March 21. The bill passed 219–212 (34 Democrats and all the Republicans voted against it) and was followed by passage of a second bill that proposed "fixes" for the Senate bill. Democrats planned to employ the relatively infrequently used procedure known as reconciliation, which requires only a simple majority for passage, to get these fixes through the Senate. Speaking on television shortly after the House vote, Obama told the country, "This is what change looks like."



U.S. Pres. Barack Obama (seated centre) signing into law the Patient Protection and Affordable Care [Mandel Ngan—AFP/Getty Images



Introduced by Vice Pres. Joe Biden, U.S. Pres. Barack Obama speaking before signing into law the [Official White House Video

On March 23 Obama signed the bill into law. Senate Republican efforts to force another House vote on the bill of proposed fixes included the introduction of more than 40 amendments that were voted down along party lines. Ultimately, on March 25, the Senate voted 56–43 to pass the bill, which, because of procedural violations in some of its language, had to be returned to the House, where it passed again by a vote of 220–207. No Republicans in either house voted for the bill.

The legislation would, once all its elements had taken effect over the next four years, prohibit denial of coverage on the basis of preexisting conditions and extend health care to some 30 million previously uninsured Americans. The bill made the attainment of health care insurance mandatory for all citizens, but it also called for a tax increase on the wealthiest Americans that would largely bankroll subsidies for

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Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

premium payments for families earning less than \$88,000 per year. Moreover, the bill promised a tax credit to small businesses that provide coverage for their employees. In some corners the bill was considered an unconstitutional "government takeover" of an industry representing one-sixth of the economy, and in others it was hailed as legislation as monumental as that which had come out of the civil rights movement.

Economic challenges



Pres. Barack Obama meeting with members of his cabinet in the Cabinet Room at the White House, 2009.

Photograph by Pete Souza/The White House

Responding to the economic crisis that had emerged in 2008 and prompted a rescue of the financial industry with up to \$700 billion in government funds (see Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008), Obama—aided by large Democratic majorities in both the Senate and the House of Representatives—pushed through Congress a \$787 billion stimulus package. By the third quarter of 2009 the plan had succeeded in reversing the dramatic decline in GDP, resulting in 2.2 percent positive growth on a per annum basis. Unemployment, however, had also risen, from 7.2 percent when Obama entered office to about 10 percent. And Republicans complained that the stimulus package cost too much, having swelled the federal deficit to \$1.42 trillion. Still, it appeared that the U.S. economy was recovering, albeit slowly. The president could proudly point to the dramatic turnaround of General Motors: in June 2009 GM had lapsed into bankruptcy, necessitating a \$60 billion government rescue and takeover of about three-fifths of its stock, but by May 2010 the auto manufacturer, employing a new business plan, had shown its first profit in three years. Obama looked forward to "Recovery Summer," anticipating the payoff of the massive federal investment in infrastructure-improvement programs aimed at

creating jobs and stimulating the economy. But as the summer of 2010 progressed, the prospects for the economy seemed to dim as unemployment stagnated (partly because of the demise of temporary jobs tied to the decennial census). Some economists feared that a second recessionary trough was approaching, while others argued that the stimulus package had been insufficient.

Obama was able to claim another major legislative victory, however, in July, when Congress passed (60–39 in the Senate and 237–192 in the House) the most sweeping financial regulation since the New Deal. Among other statutes, the bill established a financial consumer-protection bureau within the Federal Reserve, empowered the government to take over and shut down large troubled financial firms, created a council of federal regulators to monitor the financial system, and subjected derivatives—the complex financial instruments that were partly responsible for the financial crisis—to government oversight.

Deepwater Horizon oil spill



U.S. Pres. Barack Obama inspecting a tar ball from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill during a visit □

Official White House Photo by Chuck Kennedy

The spring and summer of 2010 would be remembered more, though, for a massive oil spill that dragged on for months in the Gulf of Mexico, the largest marine oil spill in history (see Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010). The disaster began with an explosion and fire that killed 11 workers and led to the collapse and sinking on April 22 of the Deepwater Horizon drilling platform some 40 miles (60 km) off the coast of Louisiana. The resulting oil spill endangered marine life, fouled beaches, and brought a halt to fishing in a huge area. The Obama administration's efforts to address the spill were criticized by some as ineffectual, as most Americans

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felt helpless in the face of the largely futile ongoing efforts by BP, the well's owner, to staunch the spill. Ironically, in a policy shift just weeks before the spill, the president had proposed ending a long-standing ban on offshore oil exploration from northern Delaware to central Florida as well as in some other locations. In the spill's wake, however, the Interior Department instituted a six-month moratorium on new deepwater drilling that included halting operations at more than 30 existing exploratory wells. Before the Deepwater Horizon oil spill was finally contained and the well capped in July 2010, it was estimated that some 4.9 million barrels of oil had been released into the water.

In happier news for the president, August 2010 marked the Senate confirmation of his second Supreme Court nominee, Elena Kagan. Associate Justice Sonia Sotomayor had been confirmed in July 2009.

Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan



Barack Obama speaking to military personnel at Camp Victory in Baghdad, April 7, 2009.

Charles Dharapak/AP

For all of Obama's efforts at rapprochement with much of the world, he—like George W. Bush—was a wartime president. With the situation in Iraq continuing to improve and the target date for ending U.S. combat operations there approaching, in February 2009 Obama increased the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan to 68,000 troops. Throughout his presidential campaign he had argued that the focus of U.S. military efforts should be in Afghanistan rather than Iraq, and, with the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the military requested that Obama deploy an additional 40,000 troops there. After carefully weighing the situation for three months, Obama choose to send an additional 30,000 troops,

a decision that was criticized by many in his party.



Stanley McChrystal (right) and U.S. Pres. Barack Obama, 2009.

Official White House photo by Pete Souza

In June 2010, as the Afghanistan War rivaled the Vietnam War as the longest in U.S. history and as American war deaths there topped the 1,000 mark, the president was faced with another challenge when Gen. Stanley McChrystal, commander of NATO-U.S. forces in Afghanistan, and members of his staff made derisive comments about top Obama administration officials to a reporter from *Rolling Stone* magazine. Obama relieved McChrystal of command, replacing him with Gen. David Petraeus, who had been responsible for the surge strategy in Iraq. In August, on schedule, the U.S. combat mission in Iraq came to a close; though 50,000 American troops remained, the majority of U.S. forces had been withdrawn. In a televised national address marking the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Obama stressed the importance of American and NATO efforts in Afghanistan even as corruption continued to undermine the faith of the Afghan people in their government.

Many columnists and political cartoonists were quick to see parallels between the potential pitfalls prolonged involvement in Afghanistan held for Obama's ambitious plans for social legislation and the way in which the Vietnam War had undermined Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson's efforts to build the Great Society. With the prospect of double-dip recession looming in summer 2010, some said Obama had been too preoccupied with the wars to give the economy the needed attention.

In the run-up to the fall's midterm congressional election, Obama found himself snagged in controversy over whether an Islamic centre and mosque should be built in New York City near the site of the

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September 11, 2001, attacks. Initially the president reacted by strongly supporting the constitutional right of Muslim Americans to freedom of religious expression, but then he seemed to waffle regarding the location of the mosque. All this came at a time when polling showed that nearly one-fifth of Americans incorrectly believed that Obama was Muslim, up from about one-tenth a year earlier.

The midterm congressional election and its aftermath

As Americans headed into the midterm election of 2010, much of the electorate was characterized as angry and pessimistic. The struggling economy and a persistent high level of unemployment were the central issues in an election that was widely viewed as a referendum on the first two years of Obama's presidency. In the weeks before the election, Obama campaigned hard for Democratic candidates and sought to convince voters of the importance of his administration's accomplishments, including staving off what some economists believed was a potential economic depression. He also emphasized that the change he had promised as a presidential candidate, as well as the Democratic Congress's efforts to stimulate the economy, would take time. In the event, many of the independents who had supported Obama and other Democrats in the 2008 election swung back to the Republicans, and voters returned control of the House to the Republicans, who gained some 60 seats (the biggest swing since 1948). Although the Democrats held on to control of the Senate, their majority was severely reduced. Chastened but unbowed by the election results, Obama approached the second half of his term and the challenges of divided government with a renewed call for bipartisanship.



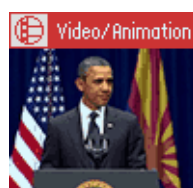
U.S. President Barack Obama signing the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," December 22, 2010

Chuck Kennedy—Official White House Photo



Introduced by Vice Pres. Joe Biden, U.S. Pres. Barack Obama speaking before signing into law the
Official White House Video

With only weeks remaining in the congressional term, Obama and the administration aggressively courted Republicans with compromise proposals that resulted in a flurry of significant legislation that marked the lame-duck Congress as one of the most productive bodies in recent memory and that brought a rebound to the president's popularity. Breaking a campaign pledge, Obama agreed to extend to all Americans (including the wealthiest) for another two years the tax cuts that had been enacted under the Bush administration. In return Republicans voted to extend unemployment benefits. In addition Congress rescinded the military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy to allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the armed forces (fulfilling one of Obama's campaign promises). Congress passed legislation that increased the number of children served by the school lunch program and improved the quality of food to be provided. And Congress extended medical benefits and compensation for the rescue workers who had responded to the September 11 attacks. Moreover, the Senate ratified a new Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) treaty with Russia—one of the administration's top foreign policy goals. On the other hand, a Republican filibuster in the Senate stalled the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which would have granted eventual citizenship to aliens brought to the United States when they were age 16 or younger.



U.S. Pres. Barack Obama speaking at the memorial for the victims of the shooting in which Rep. □
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But even as gridlock was at least temporarily dislodged and partisanship eased during the season of legislative success, the debate over the vehemence of political polarization was quickly again at the centre of the national conversation when, on January 8, 2011, a gunman killed six people and critically wounded Gabrielle Giffords, a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, as she met with constituents in Tucson, Arizona. Giffords, a moderate Democrat who had voted to support the health care bill, had already had her office vandalized and had experienced an aggressive challenge to her seat from a Republican candidate who was backed by Tea Party supporters. She survived the gunman's attack. In a well-received speech at a memorial for the victims in Tucson, Obama called for civility in American politics and public discourse and for discussions that heal instead of harm. "Rather than pointing fingers or assigning blame," he said, "let us use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together."

Upheaval in the Middle East

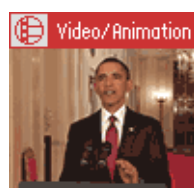
Nevertheless, partisan squabbling intensified as members of both parties dug in their heels during the impassioned debate and hard-nosed negotiations over the passage of the federal budget for the remainder of the fiscal year. Beginning in October 2010, Congress passed a series of stopgap measures that kept the federal government operating as negotiations continued. As the April 8, 2011, funding deadline for the most recent of these stopgap budgets approached, the new Republican majority in the House threatened to vote against further short-term funding, forcing the shutdown of the federal government, if deep budget cuts were not enacted. The administration and the Democratic-controlled Senate, while acknowledging the need for budget reductions, remained adamant in their defense of a range of entitlement programs the Republicans sought to reduce or eliminate. With only hours re-

maining before the government shutdown, the two sides reached agreement on a budget that included some \$38 billion in funding cuts.

The new year had brought a series of world-shaking changes to the Middle East, where popular political uprisings resulted in abrupt ends to longtime authoritarian regimes in Tunisia (*see Jasmine Revolution*) and Egypt (*see Egypt Uprising of 2011*) and widespread demonstrations and conflict in other countries in the region. The Obama administration sought to carefully articulate its support for the demonstrators' democratic aspirations, balancing past commitments to some of the threatened regimes with the U.S. advocacy of free representative government. Moreover, Obama attempted to take a role in world leadership without direct intervention in the affairs of other countries. In Libya, where the political revolt against the four-decade rule of Muammar al-Qaddafi transformed effectively into a civil war (*see Libya Revolt of 2011*), however, Obama felt U.S. intervention was necessary to prevent a humanitarian disaster as Qaddafi employed his overwhelming military advantage in a brutal attempt to expunge opposition. On March 19, U.S. and European forces with warplanes and cruise missiles began attacking targets in Libya in an effort to disable Libya's air force and air defense systems. After initially taking a leading role in these operations, the Obama administration relinquished command to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on March 27.



Pres. Barack Obama (seated second from left) and various government officials—including Vice ...
Pete Souza—Official White House Photo



Pres. Barack Obama announcing that U.S. forces had killed Osama bin Laden, May 2011.
Official White House Video

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On April 4, Obama officially announced that he would seek reelection. Less than a month later, on May 1, the president made a dramatic late-night Sunday television address to inform the world that U.S. special forces had killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in a firefight in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, not far from the Pakistani capital of Islamabad. (U.S. forces took custody of the body, which they buried at sea, and confirmed bin Laden's identity through DNA testing.) "Justice has been done," Obama said. "Americans understand the costs of war. Yet as a country, we will never tolerate our security being threatened, nor stand idly by when our people have been killed. We will be relentless in defense of our citizens and our friends and allies."

Budget battles



Pres. Barack Obama delivering the State of the Union address, January 27, 2010.

Charles Dharapak/AP

Partisan squabbling intensified as members of both parties dug in their heels during the impassioned debate and hard-nosed negotiations over the passage of the federal budget for the remainder of the fiscal year. Beginning in October 2010, Congress passed a series of stopgap measures that kept the federal government operating as negotiations continued. As the April 8, 2011, funding deadline for the most recent of these stopgap budgets approached, the new Republican majority in the House threatened to vote against further short-term funding, forcing the shutdown of the federal government if deep budget cuts were not enacted. The administration and the Democratic-controlled Senate, while acknowledging the need for budget reductions, remained adamant in their defense of a range of entitlement programs the Republicans sought to reduce or eliminate. With only hours remaining before the government shu-

tdown, the two sides reached agreement on a budget that included some \$38 billion in funding cuts.

The concern over the increasing deficit that was at the heart of the budget battle intensified as spring turned to summer and as government borrowing approached the congressionally mandated national debt ceiling of \$14.29 trillion. In mid-May the government reached this limit, but, by shifting funds, the Treasury Department was able to forestall the anticipated deadline for default on the public debt until August 2. When the closed-door negotiations among congressional leaders overseen by Biden stalled in late June, Obama began taking a more active role. The Republican leadership, much influenced by the Tea Party faction, continued to seek a large reduction in the deficit through deep spending cuts (indeed, the Republican-controlled House passed a bill that prohibited an increase in the debt ceiling unless accompanied by commensurate spending cuts). The president and Democrats also proposed spending cuts but sought to prevent a drastic overhaul of Medicare and Medicaid and called for tax increases for the wealthiest Americans and for the repeal of tax breaks for some corporations, especially those in the oil industry.

Against a backdrop of escalating partisan posturing, Obama and Republican Speaker of the House John A. Boehner began meeting privately in early July and nearly hammered out a "grand bargain" that would have included trillions in spending cuts, changes to Medicare and Social Security, and tax reform. Increases in tax revenue were pivotal to the "balanced approach" advocated by the president, who wanted the burden of deficit reduction to be shared by everyone, including the wealthiest Americans who had benefited from the Bush-era tax cuts. The deal foundered toward the end of the month, however, on the level of proposed tax-revenue increases. Media reports indicated that Boehner had agreed to \$800 billion in increased tax revenue but pulled out of the deal when the president asked for an additional \$400 billion. It was widely believed, though, that

Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

Boehner would have had trouble winning sufficient Republican support for the agreement in any case.

As the threat of default and the possibility of a downgrading of the U.S. government's credit rating grew more imminent, there was an increasing consensus across party lines on the need to raise the debt ceiling. Absent a broader agreement, compromise appeared to hinge largely on the issue of whether the ceiling would be increased in two steps or one, the latter of which would push it beyond the 2012 election. On July 31, just two days before the deadline, an agreement was reached by the president and congressional leaders of both parties whereby the ceiling would be raised in two main stages by some \$2.4 trillion, with equivalent cuts to the deficit to be achieved over a 10-year period. The deal called for a \$900-billion short-term increase in the debt ceiling (\$400 billion of which would be immediate) to be offset by an immediate cap on domestic and defense spending that would yield some \$917 billion in deficit reduction. The agreement also stipulated the establishment of a congressional "super committee" charged with making recommendations by the end of November 2011 that would reduce the deficit by an additional \$1.2 to \$1.5 trillion to allow for a commensurate increase in the debt ceiling. The agreement did not include any tax increases, and neither did it provide for major changes to Medicare or Social Security. It did, however, mandate that if the bipartisan committee failed to reach a consensus or if Congress failed to pass the committee's proposals in December 2012, automatic across-the-board cuts of up to \$1.2 trillion would be implemented, evenly divided between defense and nondefense spending. The deal also required that both the House and the Senate vote on an amendment to the Constitution mandating a balanced budget. The final bill was passed by the House by a vote of 269-161 and by the Senate by a vote of 74-26.

Although he effectively had been campaigning for weeks, Obama officially kicked off his reelection bid with speeches in Ohio and Virginia on May 5, 2012. Just a few days later, on May 9, he made headlines

again when he revealed a change in his stance on same-sex marriage, saying during a television news interview, "At a certain point I've just concluded that for me personally, it is important for me to go ahead and affirm that I think same-sex couples should be able to get married." Earlier in the week Vice President Biden had expressed strong support for same-sex marriage in another television appearance.

The economy continued to recover but slowly and unevenly, so that in April 2012 *Time* magazine characterized the rebound as "The 97-lb. Recovery" (alluding to bodybuilder Charles Atlas's 97-pound weakling). Profits were up again for many corporations, big banks had returned to solid footing, and the stock market had bounced back from the dark days of the Great Recession of December 2007 to June 2009, but wages remained largely stagnant, foreclosures were still commonplace as the housing market continued its struggle to regain its balance, and, though unemployment had generally decreased, it remained high at 8.2 percent in May. The presumptive Republican presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, a former governor of Massachusetts, focused much of his campaign on a critique of Obama's stewardship of the economy. On the other hand, some observers noted that the U.S. economy was considerably more robust than that of Europe, which remained deeply mired in the euro-zone debt crisis. More than a few attributed the relative health of the American economy to the government's stimulus efforts and to the successes of the Troubled Asset Relief Program (authorized under the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act), which had come to the rescue of foundering American financial institutions.

In June, responding largely to the Senate's earlier failure to pass the DREAM Act, the Obama administration made an important policy change, generally ending the immediate deportation of illegal immigrants who had come to the United States as children. Although the policy did not embrace the "pathway to citizenship" promised by the DREAM

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Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

Act, it granted a two-year reprieve from deportation and the opportunity to seek a work permit to those age 30 and under who had immigrated before age 16, been in the country for at least five years, did not have a criminal record or pose a security threat, and were either students or high-school graduates or had served in the military.

Immigration was in the headlines again later in the month when the Supreme Court struck down three provisions of Arizona's controversial 2010 immigration law but upheld its centerpiece "Show me your papers" provision, which required police to check the legal status of anyone they stop for another law enforcement concern if they reasonably suspect that the person is in the country illegally. Obama applauded the court's rejection of three other provisions of the law, including one that had made it a crime for illegal immigrants to seek work, but he expressed concern that the upheld provision could result in racial profiling.

As important as that ruling was, the Supreme Court announced another decision on the final day of its session (June 28) in a case that many hailed as the most important heard by the court in more than a decade: it upheld the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (*see* Affordable Care Act cases). That decision provided the president with a huge victory by preserving the signature legislative achievement of his administration. Pivotal to the 5-4 ruling was the court's decision not to strike down the act's "individual mandate" provision, which would financially penalize Americans for not obtaining health insurance, a requirement many Republican politicians argued was unconstitutional.

The 2012 election

At the beginning of September, at its national convention in Charlotte, North Carolina, the Democratic Party officially nominated Obama and Biden as its candidates for president and vice president of the United States. On the anniversary of the September

11 attacks, Obama's attention and that of the world was directed to Benghazi, Libya, where an attack on the U.S. diplomatic post resulted in the deaths of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans. Initially, it was believed that the attack had been a spontaneous outgrowth of rioting occurring outside the post in response to an anti-Islam film that had been produced in the United States. Angry demonstrations against the film had occurred elsewhere, most notably at the U.S. embassy in Cairo. In the following days and weeks, however, it looked increasingly certain that the assault had been a premeditated terrorist attack. Obama promised to get to the bottom of the matter, but both he and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton acknowledged their ultimate responsibility in the situation. The issue persisted as a point of criticism of Obama by Romney and the right in general.

Obama maintained a significant lead over Romney in September in the national opinion polls, partly a result of a "convention bounce" and partly because of negative perceptions some held of his Republican challenger. Those perceptions were deepened by the release of secretly shot footage at a private fund-raiser at which Romney said, "There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what" who believe that they are victims and whom he would never be able to convince that "they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives." In the heated aftermath, Romney stood by his remarks, though he said that they had not been "elegantly stated."

Both campaigns were spending fortunes in what was projected to be the most expensive presidential campaign in history, the first since the creation of the public financing system in which neither candidate accepted public funds and the spending limitations that went with them. Romney and the Republican Party, as well as Obama and the Democrats, each raised about \$1 billion in donations, totals that did not include the tens of millions spent by "super PACs," the political action committees that as a result of the Supreme Court's 2010 decision in *Citi-*

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Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

zens United v. Federal Election Commission were allowed to accept unlimited donations from wealthy individuals, corporations, and unions, provided that the PACs operated independently of the candidate's campaign.

Obama and Romney both presented themselves as champions of the middle class and those who aspired to join it. While the president offered a vision of American prosperity that spread centrifugally from the middle, his Republican challenger believed that economic well-being was initiated at the top by "job creators" and flowed down, an approach that Obama claimed had been tried in the past and failed. In highlighting the importance of tackling the deficit, Obama emphasized the need for spending cuts but proposed returning tax levels on the wealthiest Americans to those that were in place during the Bill Clinton administration. Romney advocated maintaining the Bush-era tax cuts, including those for people at the top of the economic pyramid, as well as providing additional cuts, while promising to reduce the deficit with spending cuts and the elimination of tax loopholes. He accused Obama of being unsympathetic to business while citing his own success as an entrepreneur as a prime qualification for the job of setting the economy right as president. Much of Romney's campaign was grounded in a criticism of the handling of the economy by Obama, whom Romney blamed for the slowness of the recovery and the consequent hardships endured by the middle class, especially those who were among the long-term unemployed. Obama was quick to acknowledge the suffering of many Americans brought about by the Great Recession and the gradualness of recovery, but he was equally quick (too quick according to many Republicans) to point to the "bad hand" he had been dealt by the Bush administration. Some of the president's supporters believed that he had not been adamant enough in emphasizing how his own policies had helped forestall much-greater economic calamity. Romney also promised to revoke the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, which he referred to derisively as "Obamacare," a term the president

proudly owned as he trumpeted the benefits of the act on the campaign trail. Reversing the advantage Republicans traditionally had enjoyed on defense and security issues, Obama repeatedly noted the elimination of Osama bin Laden on his watch. He also highlighted his successful removal of American forces from Iraq and his promise to remove U.S. troops from Afghanistan by 2014.

Despite his earlier political missteps, Romney stole Obama's momentum and reenergized his campaign on October 3 with a commanding performance in the first presidential debate, in which he showed himself to be the president's equal in terms of stature and presence. To some ears, Obama's plea for patience with his policies sounded apologetic, and his performance was generally agreed to have been lacklustre. Biden breathed new life into the Democratic effort by taking the offensive in his debate with the Republican vice presidential nominee, Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan, a key spokesman for some of the most conservative elements within his party. Obama regained his stride in the second, town hall-style debate by engaging more forcefully with Romney, as he would again in the third and final presidential debate. Despite those strong performances, however, Obama seemingly had, at best, pulled even with Romney nationally. In the final weeks of the campaign, the candidates primarily focused on a handful of "battleground" states, whose electoral votes, it was believed, would determine the outcome of a razor-close election in the electoral college.

In the last week of October, Sandy, a hurricane-turned-superstorm that had ravaged parts of the Caribbean, brought widespread destruction to the East Coast and Mid-Atlantic states. New York City and New Jersey were particularly hard hit, and the image of Obama and New Jersey's Republican Gov. Chris Christie—up to that point one of the president's most vocal critics—touring devastated areas in his state and bringing promises of rapid aid was a remarkable demonstration of bipartisan leadership by both men.

Welcome to Encyclopædia Britannica's Guide to Black History

On November 6, 2012, Obama won a narrow victory in the national popular vote but triumphed in almost all the battleground states to win a second term. "Democracy in a nation of 300 million can be noisy and messy and complicated," he said in his election-night victory speech, adding that "we are not as divided as our politics suggest. We're not as cynical as the pundits believe. We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions."

Jeff Wallenfeldt

Illinois. Pete Souza, *The Rise of Barack Obama* (2008), presents a collection of photographs. Liza Mundy, *Michelle: A Biography* (2008), offers a fairly objective portrait of Michelle Obama, though the author was able to conduct only one brief interview with her subject. Barack Obama and Lisa Rogak (ed.), *Barack Obama in His Own Words* (2007), is primarily a collection of speeches by Obama. Barack Obama, *Change We Can Believe In: Barack Obama's Plan to Renew America's Promise* (2008), is basically a long policy paper, but it does give the reader some idea of Obama's campaign promises.

David Mendell

Inauguration 2009



The table provides a series of photographs from Pres. Barack Obama's inauguration.

President Obama's cabinet



The table provides a list of cabinet members in the administration of Pres. Barack Obama.

Additional Reading

David Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power* (2007), is a comprehensive biography based on interviews with Obama and with his wife, family, friends, aides, and rivals as well as on the author's experience as a journalist covering Obama's rise. Although written by an ardent supporter and former law student of Obama's, John K. Wilson, *Barack Obama: This Improbable Quest* (2007), provides a useful examination of Obama's policy positions in

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