



INTRODUCTION

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."
— Abolitionist Frederick Douglass, 1864

LIKE MOST SEISMIC EVENTS, Barack Obama's ascendancy to the American presidency meant different things to different people. To his party faithful, it was the long-awaited changing of the guard, a transformation of the political landscape orchestrated by a man possessed of a measured and hopeful vision for the future. To political historians, it was an unprecedented triumph by the most unlikely of candidates—young, unknown, itinerant—that captured the imagination of a nation torn by anxiety. And to Americans of a certain age, it was the most unfathomable event of their lifetimes: the repudiation of the very racism that had stained this country's proud claim to freedom since before its founding.

To children, however, the election of Barack Obama as America's 44th President was something less nuanced. Raised in an era of media saturation, kids today were more likely to view the 2008 election through the prism of modern-day reality shows: In the end, the best guy won for the obvious reasons—he was cool, he was smart, he was good looking, and he sure knew how to play the crowds.

And yet...there was something else. Today's children came of age during the sleepy prosperity of the nineties and the tense passion play that sprung from the rubble of September 11th. And while both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush inarguably had their shining moments of command during their presidencies, neither man seemed to electrify the electorate in quite the same way as the 47-year-old, mixed-race, Hawaii-born community organizer from Chicago.

Why was this? Current events played a large part. For the first time since the 1930s, America is suffering multiple ruptures in its foundation, from the economic meltdown at home, to two wars abroad, to the looming environmental crisis. It is no accident that the Obama campaign found success in its clarion call for sweeping change. In times of desperation, America has always exhibited an uncanny fearlessness about going back to the drawing board. The 2008 election proved no exception.

Then there was the oratory. Throughout his 21-month campaign, Barack Obama galvanized Americans by daring them not just to ponder the possible, but to dream the impossible; and he did so with words that spilled beyond the frame of the teleprompter and into the hearts of a nation hungry for inspiration. Although his rivals often tried to challenge the authenticity of his oratorical gifts, Barack Obama's eloquent enunciation of an "audacity of hope" was something rare and special in presidential politics.

And so the idea behind *Dear President Obama* was a relatively simple one: to recapture the exhilarating spirit of the 2008 election from the perspective of our nation's youngest citizens.

The day after the election, we began emailing a select handful of friends and relatives, asking them if their children would like to write a letter to the President-elect. Eager to test the waters, but unsure of the response we'd get, we kept our outreach modest. To our surprise—and delight—the children and parents we'd contacted not only responded positively, but launched an unexpected grass-roots effort of their own, forwarding our email to their relatives and friends, in the end reflecting the same kind of infectious enthusiasm that fueled the Obama campaign itself.

The final product is in these pages: In nearly 200 letters and drawings from every region of the country—from the seventh-grader in a Manhattan private school, to the nine-year-old in one of the poorest schools in Nebraska—these children, ages 4 through 18, do what kids do best: enunciate their hopes, fears and dreams about the world they live in, and their unchecked excitement about the historic election that took place during their young lives.

Naturally, in many of letters (which were written after the election, but before the inauguration) the children express observations they'd obviously gleaned from the grown-ups in their lives—their parents, their teachers, their family members. And yet the way in which they re-frame the news is all kid, especially when they discuss the environment.

"I want my children's children to see polar bears!" writes ten-year-old New Yorker Paola Wernick.

"How are you going to make this continent greener?" asks Claire Mortenson, 11, of Utah.

And more than a few of the children accompany their letters with colorful, hopeful drawings of our planet, floating serenely in space.

Introduction

The tone of the letters is frequently warm and familiar. "I feel like if I knew you," writes third-grader Emily Bloomfield, "I could trust you like I trust a friend." One of the children even assumes that the 44th president knows him.

"Dear President Obama," begins eight-year-old Isaac Pagano-Toub, "I am the kid who sent you \$4.74 during the campaign..."

Not surprisingly, many of the children broach the issue of race in their letters, acknowledging Barack Obama's historical crossing of the color line with both awe and pride. For a few of the kids, their words are at once hopeful and heart-breaking.

"I was happy to see that someone who looks like me can be President of the United States of America," writes Casey Mack, 14, of Connecticut. "The kids at school have been saying some mean things about people who look like us. But now I believe we can change their negative points of view."

In February of 2008, musician will.i.am created a music video that quickly became emblematic of the heart of the Obama campaign. Adapted from candidate Obama's startlingly optimistic concession speech after the New Hampshire primary, the song, "Yes We Can," became an instant viral hit on the internet, and ultimately cemented the Obama campaign's three-word slogan. It was will.i.am's hope that the song would inspire children everywhere to memorize the uplifting speech, and in the process, apply those words to their lives.

Similarly, we hope that the voices of the children in this book will help set the tone for the remarkable journey on which America is now embarking.

Bruce David

Bruce Kluger and David Tabatsky
March 2009



DRAWING BY EMILIO ZUNIGA, 9, LINCOLN, NEBRASKA