

Is this truly Obama drama?

In her profile of the first couple, Jodi Kantor makes it up as she goes along



Barack Obama speaks at a 2007 campaign rally at the University of Illinois at Chicago, while protective wife Michelle Obama looks on.

THE OBAMAS, by Jodi Kantor. Little, Brown, 359 pp., \$29.99.

BY MARION WINIK
Special to Newsday

With all the headlines this week about Jodi Kantor's book on Barack and Michelle Obama, the biggest surprise about it is this: There aren't any surprises.

I learned little about the Obamas or the presidency that I didn't know or imagine, and I'm not even a passionate follower of events in Washington. Well, one thing shocked me. Can you believe the White House residence has a spotty Internet connection and only one extension of the landline?

Though the book is admiring of its subjects and seemingly inoffensive, it is not an authorized work. The Obamas, having granted Kantor a 40-minute interview when she was working on an article about them for *The New York Times* magazine in 2009, never spoke to her again. The White

House press office and Michelle Obama have said the private moments and emotions reported in the book are made up, and that Kantor's characterization of tensions between East and West Wings is exaggerated.

No one can say that Kantor, a *Times* reporter and former *Slate* editor, didn't report the living daylights out of the story — interviewing 200 people, including all the top West Wing staff, and covering pretty much every minute of the Obama presidency. But without firsthand insight from the subjects, the emotional moments seem forced. In fact, the two most moving elements are the text of a speech by the president, and a photograph in the pictorial insert.

The speech is at the memori-

al for the victims of the Gabrielle Giffords shooting last January. Obama had just come from Giffords' bedside and seen the congresswoman open her eyes for the first time. Even just reading the words "Gabby opened her eyes" repeated several times, as Obama did that day, brought tears to my eyes. Kantor writes: "With Obama's repetition and refrains, he was speaking the language of the church. . . . He quoted Job, his command of Scripture rebuking those who said he was not a Christian. That told-you-so look flickered in his eyes — I will mention Jesus on my own terms, you jerks."

Kantor's analysis starts on solid ground with the comparison to spiritual oratory, but goes off the deep end with the invented internal dialogue — attributing to the president mean, buzz-killing thoughts at that. And her attempt to penetrate Michelle's mind at that moment is no more uplifting: "The expression on Michelle's face was one of deep satisfaction. He had given the kind of speeches he knew he could

give. The look on her face said: This is the kind of president I wanted you to be."

Kantor explains, as others have before her, that Michelle Obama is beautiful and self-possessed, that she is a traditional South Side Chicago girl, that she is critical yet intensely supportive and ferociously protective of her husband. Somehow these themes are most movingly expressed by the Damon Winter photograph at the center of the photo section. Barack is in profile in one half of the picture — out of focus, somewhere between person and icon. Michelle watches him from behind, high-def down to the arch of her eyebrows and the swoop of her bangs. The alert, solemn, worried expression on her face is worth a thousand words.

The Obamas are boring do-gooders with a solid marriage: they dine with their kids five nights a week, have made no new friends in Washington, don't have anyone over except two couples they've been besties with since Chicago. They don't party or go to parties. The few times they've

tried to have a life — the infamous Date Night in New York, Michelle's trip to Spain — they've been slapped down so hard, they mostly just stay home. The only drama this book has to serve up is the nail-biter of the presidency itself, so it's disconcerting that Kantor cuts it short before its ending, which would have been the coming election.

As the story closes in August 2011, things are a mess. Staff members are leaving, the U.S. credit rating has been downgraded and a helicopter carrying Navy SEALs from the unit that took out Osama bin Laden has been shot down. Yet 2012 looms. Will Obama retire in failure or re-emerge to rewrite history again?

Why stop this story before we know how it turns out? Perhaps the author and publisher thought they'd better hurry up before Obama gets the boot and no one cares about him anymore. Though the outcome will be revealed in real life, I felt as a reader as if I'd been dragged from the theater before the final curtain.

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