



The Press Focused Too Much on Obama's Bio Back in 2008, Not Too Little

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Besides, what really needs looking at now is his record as president -- not his youth.

Over at *Slate's* excellent [Weigel](#) blog, eponymous author David Weigel, a booster of Delaware whose status as a natural-born American I can't personally verify, offers the beginning of an answer to those who contend that President Obama's past was insufficiently vetted during Election 2008. "The 'Obama wasn't vetted' outrage doesn't have any quantitative, factual proof," the onetime *USA Today* editorial page assistant writes. "If you're angry that Obama won in 2008, it sure feels like the media went too easy on him. It sure feels like the press was so interested in the story of the First Black President that it ignored stories that reflected poorly on him. Feeling isn't proving."

The former roommate of The Cato Institute's Julian Sanchez is quite right.

But I'd go a step farther.

It isn't just that the *New York Times* published "a 2,593 word [Jodi Kantor story](#) (with additional reporting from Kenya!) about Rev. Jeremiah Wright and his relationship to Barack Obama," or that its story, "[Pragmatic Politics, Forged on the South Side](#)," included this passage:

Mr. Obama also fit in at Hyde Park's fringes, among university faculty members like Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn, unrepentant members of the radical Weather Underground that bombed the United States Capitol and the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War. Mr. Obama was introduced to the couple in 1995 at a meet-and-greet they held for him at their home, aides said.

Now, along with Mr. Obama's former pastor, the [Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr.](#), Mr. Ayers has become a prime exhibit in the effort by Mr. Obama's presidential rivals to highlight what could be politically radioactive associations. In 2001, Mr. Ayers said he did not regret the Weatherman bombings.

The fact is that American voters circa 2008 were presented with more biographical stories about the early years of Barack Obama, including the politics of his Kenyan father, the time he spent as a child in Indonesia, the relationship with Antoin "Tony" Rezko that was the subject of another 2007 *New York Times* [story](#), and the youthful drug use that has been mentioned in [multiple Times stories](#) over the years, than it has about anyone it has ever elected to the presidency. The press obsessed over his biography, right down to re-reporting his autobiography.

Most of the details were legitimate subjects of journalistic inquiry. But looking back, the vast majority were as irrelevant to figuring out what Obama would do if elected as the various biographical details I've included in this piece are to assessing the work of Weigel, who attended high school in England and moved to Chicago in 2000, the same city where Barack Obama met the people who remain in his inner-circle of friends, according to [The Washington Post](#) circa 2008.

That's why the conservatives complaining that Obama's past was insufficiently vetted are urging exactly the wrong thing in their media criticism. The problem in 2008 wasn't that the political press spent too little time focused on President Obama's biography, but that his more interesting than average life story was given too much attention and emphasis, as if it was extremely relevant to the job he'd do in office. Biographical narrative can be seductive, because it gives us the illusion that we understand the subject. In fact, it often led pundits astray.

[Stories can do that.](#)

Has President Obama's unique identity helped him to preside over a truce in America's cultural, religious, and racial "wars," as Andrew Sullivan predicted in his eloquent essay "[Goodbye to All That](#)"? Nope. Has his youthful experimentation with drugs made him a less zealous drug warrior? It hasn't. Did his time as a community organizer and ties to the far left make him less beholden to Wall Street? No. Did his forays abroad as a youth make him averse to violating the sovereignty of other countries, or less likely to order military strikes that kill innocents? No.

Did his father's anti-colonial crusade make him uncomfortable keeping the U.S. military at bases in countries throughout the world? No. Did having an immigrant parent and relatives in the country illegally cause him to deport fewer people than his predecessor? No. Were ties to Bill Ayers an early hint that Obama would be soft on terrorism? No. Did his time in Jeremiah Wright's church help us predict anything about his presidency that we'd have missed had we ignored it?

Nope.

I'm sure there are moments in the biographical sketches that seem, in hindsight, to tell us something non-obvious about Obama. If Romney is elected, re-reading all the profiles being written about his early years will produce similar nuggets that will seem to have been instructive. But many more will mislead us, and there's no way to tell in advance the useful anecdotes from the ones that will lead us astray. Unfortunately, the conservative media is [investing](#) in more vetting by biographical sketch and anecdote, and urging the mainstream media to do the same.

Right-leaning commentators are on stronger ground when they complain that decades old anecdotes about Mitt Romney's alleged high school bullying or his wife's participation in a Sport Rich People Like tell us anything predictably useful about how he'd govern. These conservatives would do well to recognize that complaining the Romney stories are irrelevant is incompatible with an insistence that voters should have been -- and should be -- subjected to even more "Barack Obama's past" stories from the MSM.