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## Political Narratives and "Abraham Obama"

Molly Andrews

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### Summary and Keywords

Political narratives examine the ways in which stories, or narratives, are used to investigate the political world. Historically, stories have not been regarded as legitimate sources of data for such explorations. In recent years, however, this has changed, as “the narrative turn” hit the social sciences; still, while disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology were more amenable to this alteration—representing, as it does, not only different methodologies, but also a different epistemological framework—many political scientists continue to resist the idea that political narratives can offer a very particular, and almost unique, perspective on how individuals and groups construct the political world and are constructed by it. One of the most dramatic uses of highly effective political narratives, which blurs the boundaries between the personal and public, is that of Barack Obama, which is used as a central case study in this article.

Keywords: political narratives, social transformation, narrative imagination, Barack Obama, Abraham Lincoln

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## Politics and Stories

Abraham Lincoln<sup>1</sup> once described his style of storytelling, for which he was well known: "I am compelled by nature to speak slowly. I commence way back like the boys do when they want to get a good start. My weight and speed get momentum to jump far" (Blasidell, 2005, p. 68). More than a century and a half later, another man would occupy the White House who not only emulated Lincoln, but whose capacity as a highly skilled raconteur helped him to "jump far."

President Barack Hussein Obama has told and retold the story of his own personal voyage, his "unlikely candidacy," as he terms it, many times, embedding his personal journey into a national narrative, which is in turn combined with a counterstory of an America that has lost its way.<sup>2</sup> Into this multitiered storytelling, Obama has brought not only his own story, but also the stories of millions of other Americans. In his campaign for the 2008 election, as volunteers throughout the country gathered in town halls, living rooms, and school auditoriums, he invited people to tell their stories and to share those stories with others. Through this mechanism, Obama built a sense of community that not only helped him to identify the issues that were closest to people's hearts, but also made people feel that they, as well as their individual stories, were part of a larger whole, and that together, their stories counted. The strategic use of political storytelling is a hallmark of the Obama presidency, and it has been applied in virtually every key moment when he has needed to get his message across to the American people. It is interesting to note that, despite the power of stories demonstrated by Obama and others, narratives have been widely neglected by political psychologists and others who wish to understand the dynamics of political thought and behavior. However, this has begun to change.

## Political Narratives: Some Background

The opening decade of the 21st century has been marked by an increasing interest in what can broadly be termed "political narratives" (Andrews, 2007; Davis, 2002; Jackson, 2006; Polletta, 2006; Selbin, 2010; Tilly, 2002; Zingaro, 2009), a phenomenon that can perhaps be seen as one manifestation of the ballooning study of narrative more generally within the social sciences. Stories are one of the most effective tools that individuals and communities have for making sense of themselves and the world around them, and as such, the study of the relationship between narrative and politics is vital. As Selbin (2010, p. 30) writes:

People rely on stories to make sense of their world, their place in it, and their (im)possibilities.... stories reflect and refract people's lives in a way that almost no

other text can, making the abstract concrete, the complex more manageable, and rendering matters 'real.' Stories reduce the immense complexity of the world, involving our daily lives, to human-sized matters, adding information to stores that are already stocked, fitting by and large into familiar pathways.

While there is no strict consensus over what is and is not to be regarded as a political narrative, there appears to be a general agreement that stories—both personal and communal—are pivotal to the way in which politics operates, both in people's minds (i.e., how they understand politics and their place within and outside the formal political sphere) and to how politics is practiced. For a policy to be effective, there needs to be a reasonable story about why it is needed or why another response would be inadequate or inappropriate. These stories, as it were, are not just within the domain of the individual; they are built upon the collective memory of a group, just as they help to create how that memory is mobilized and for what purposes. And critically, narratives are central to the machination of politics, for in constructing the stories about what is and isn't working, and how this compares to a notion of "how it should be," we are invariably deciding what aspects of social/political/economic/cultural life are and are not relevant to the current problem and its solution—in other words, the lifeblood of politics. Thus, political narratives engage the imagination, not only in constructing stories about the past and the present, but in helping to articulate a vision of an alternative world. As Marqusee (2012, p. 10) writes:

We need utopian thinking if we are to engage successfully in the critical battle over what is or is not possible, if we are to challenge what are presented as immutable 'economic realities.' Without a clear alternative—the outlines of a just and sustainable society—we are forced to accept our opponent's parameters.

All these stories—constructions of the past, present, and future—only ever exist in relation to other stories, and politics is nothing if not a stage for competing stories to be told about the same phenomena.

So what are political narratives? What do they actually look like, and how can we recognize them when we see them? Elsewhere, I have described political narratives as the "stories people tell about how the world works, how they explain the engines of political change, and the role they see themselves, and those whom they regard as being part of their group, as playing in this ongoing struggle" (Andrews, 2007, p. 8). But the meaning of the term *political narrative* is not limited to stories that are told or untold, lived, dreamed, or imagined by individuals. Rather, it can also refer to a larger cluster of national stories, within which individuals position themselves, explicitly or otherwise.

Discussion of political narratives always turns to an examination of the relationship between macro- and micro- narratives—in other words, the relationship between the stories of individuals and the stories of the communities in which they live. Political narratives that individuals tell may or may not be explicitly about politics; often, the most telling of them are not. But in the stories that they weave, individuals reveal how they position themselves within the communities where they live, to whom or what they see

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themselves as belonging to/alienated from, how they construct notions of power, and the processes by which such power is negotiated. For individuals, as for communities, political narratives are the ligaments of identity, revealing how one constructs the boundaries of, and the connections between, the self and the other. Hannah Arendt has argued that storytelling is the bridge by which we transform that which is private and individual into that which is public, and in this capacity, it is one of the key components of social life" (Arendt, 1958, p. 50). "What makes mass society so difficult to bear is ... the fact that the world has lost its power to gather [people] together, to relate and to separate them" (pp. 50–51). Political narratives are vital in establishing these relational bonds.

However, one could also make an observation of the reverse trend; that is, one of the stumbling blocks to realizing social change in modern times has been a tendency to overpersonalize issues that should remain in the sphere of the public/political domain. Zingaro (2009, p. 11) describes an "emotional economy," in which there is an "offering up of 'the real story' of trauma, pain, or humiliation, from someone who has 'been there.'" While such stories might be able to provide particular insight into difficult experiences, their telling depends upon the existence of a willing, listening audience. Knowledge that is "too threatening or too different from the listener's experience" is suspect: "A story without recognizable landmarks, or some measure of a familiar narrative trajectory, marks the teller as lying, or possibly exaggerating" (Zingaro, 2009, p. 11). Stories always exist in relation to other stories, of both individuals and communities, and they rely upon these bonds in order to be "tellable." Political stories, even when they relate to individual experience, are never just the property of isolated selves.

In the life of the community, political narratives fill a number of key functions. In times of traumatic rupture, the construction of a story about the past can be regarded as the first and most critical step in moving out of the darkness. This is the basic premise upon which some truth commissions have been established. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of South Africa, for example, attempted to piece together a "tellable past" through the collection of more than 22,000 personal narratives in which individuals recounted what abuses they and their loved ones had suffered during key moments in the apartheid era (specifically between the Soweto massacre of 1961 and the first democratic election in 1994). Desmond Tutu, who chaired the TRC, commented at the first victim hearing:

We pray that all those people who have been injured in either body or spirit may receive healing through the work of this commission ... We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past. To lay the ghosts of that past, so that they will not return to haunt us and that we will hereby contribute to the healing of a traumatized and wounded people.

(cited in Field, 2006, p. 32)

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Central to the construction of the TRC was that storytelling, even about horrific events, could perform a healing function—if not for individuals, then at least for communities who must now find a way to live together.

Although the actual act of narrating a painful past may cause additional suffering, it is also true that finding commonality with the stories of others can itself bring a measure of satisfaction, even agency: “The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves” (Arendt, 1958, p. 50). Political narratives play a critical role in creating and recreating history—at the level of the individual, the community, and the nation. Inasmuch as identity is inextricably linked to story and is forever a project in the making, political narratives are, by extension, a mechanism through which the past is reformulated in light of a desired future.

Finally, political narratives are strategically employed in the construction of national identity. Through the use of political narratives, we tell ourselves and others who we are (and as observed previously, these stories change over time). These are the hardships that we have endured; these are the principles for which we stand; these are rewards that we as a people have procured. Our group identity claims rest upon our stories. And these stories are then represented in a myriad of ways, including in public celebrations, memorialization, and history lessons.

National narratives are not synonymous with political narratives, although there is a significant overlap between them. However, not all political narratives concern matters of the nation, and many national narratives are about culture, or art, for instance. While politics encompasses the broad spectrum of stories about power—who has it; how it is shared or abused; the particular contexts that inform its various manifestations; and so on—national narratives are concerned with those negotiations that happen explicitly around questions of the nation. Questions of national identity are invariably linked to national narratives. Nations are communities, both real and imagined, and from the time that they are very young, people develop a sense of what it means to be from this place, a sense of belonging and/or alienation, an evaluation of how things run, who has control over what, and how that control is exercised. National narratives are both general (this is who we are as a people) and specific (this is what it means to me to be from here), and are manifest in both formal and informal ways. National identity can be expressed either in a formal, public context (e.g., public statues, national holidays and history books), but also in more informal ways, through routine cultural practices and in the daily talk of ordinary people, as they reveal the complexities, contradictions, and passions of what this identity means to them as situated individuals and groups.

Thus, it is clear that political narratives have a significant role to play in realizing social change. They help to establish the framework through which communities make sense of themselves, and their dynamic nature is such that, as many have commented, the past is never really past, for different versions of the past invariably arise in different times and places. As Dienstag (1997, p. 206) comments:

Debates over the meaning of history cannot be exorcised from politics ... Whoever abandons work on memory to others may find themselves imprisoned by the results ... Human beings fight over history because they conceive their pasts to be an essential part of who they are. And they are right.

If political narratives invariably change over time—and they do—how is it that this happens? Returning to the example of Obama, how is it that he has been able to inject new meaning into the American national narrative? A humorous manifestation of this rapid shift was Garrison Keillor's comment that on November 5, 2008, the world awoke to find many Americans no longer feeling that they had to pretend to be Canadian (Keillor, 2008). There are certain key features that were instrumental in Obama's successful reinvention of what it means to be American. These include (a) the compelling manner in which he continually recounted his own biography; (b) the way in which he related his story to a more generic "American story"; (c) his collection of and reliance upon other personal narratives; and (d) the connections that he explicitly made between present-day and historical narratives.

## **"Out of One, Many ...": Individual Biography and the Spirit of the Nation**

While virtually all politicians tell stories about themselves, their backgrounds, their communities, their roots, and their personal struggles, Barack Obama is unusual in the extent to which he repeatedly referred to his own biography, interweaving it within a broader theme, that of "the American story." In the opening words of his address to the Democratic convention in 2004—a speech that in the eyes of many placed him for the first time at center stage in American politics—he began by saying,

Let's face it, my presence on this stage is pretty unlikely. My father was a foreign student, born and raised in a small village in Kenya. He grew up herding goats, went to school in a tin-roof shack. His father—my grandfather—was a cook, a domestic servant to the British.... [My mother] was born in a town on the other side of the world, in Kansas ... My parents shared not only an improbable love, they shared an abiding faith in the possibilities of this nation.... And I stand here today, grateful for the diversity of my heritage, ... I stand here knowing that my story is part of the larger American story, that I owe a debt to all of those who came before me, and that, in no other country on earth is my story even possible.

(Obama, 2004)

Throughout his political career, Obama has made references to "his funny name." In 2006, he described his experiences when he first ran for state senate. He said that when

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he approached people in “barber shops, bake sales, guys standing on the corner,” he was always met by the question:

Where’d you get that funny name, Barack Obama? Because people just couldn’t pronounce it. They’d call me “Alabama,” or they’d call me “Yo Mama.” And I’d have to explain that I got the name from my father, who was from Kenya.

(Obama, 2006)

Schama (2009) summarizes the many strands of Obama’s biography:

Through Barack Hussein Obama runs culture lines that connect Kenya with Kansas; ethnically complicated Polynesian-Asian Hawaii with black south Chicago; Scots-Irish bloodlines with a touch of Cherokee on his maternal grandmother’s side. His and Michelle’s daughters, Malia and Sasha, bring together west and east Africa; the atrocity of the slave ships with his Luo father’s voluntary immigration.

Such is the power of his particular biography that in the words of Cobb (2010, p. 20), he is “freighted with the vast weight of his own symbolism.... a metaphor for a metaphor. It is possible, almost unavoidable, to see Obama’s entire life—from birth to inauguration—as a referendum on civil rights causes.”

In the comparatively short time that Obama has been on the international political scene, his personal story has become familiar to much of the world; indeed, it is hard to remember that there was a time when many did not in fact know how to pronounce his name. In November 2008, the month of the U.S. presidential election, his two autobiographical memoirs *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* were ranked number one and number two on *The New York Times* bestseller list (Wallace, 2008). Obama’s personal voyage to the White House has become so well known that many of the millions who attended his inauguration felt a personal warmth to see the various members of his family—“brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles, and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents,” as he described them in what has now become known as his “race” speech—gathered in Washington to celebrate the first inauguration of this not “most conventional candidate” realizing his “improbable quest.” There was Auma, and Obongo, and Maya, and even Granny Sarah, nearly 90 years old. And two days before the election, when his grandmother, Madelyn Dunham (“Toot”), died, the nation joined Obama in mourning her death. They were Obama’s family, but they had become known to the world through the public consumption of his biography.

Obama had a story to tell, and he told it well. In the eyes of Toni Morrison, one of the most skilled wordsmiths of these times, he is “a writer in my high esteem.” In an interview with National Public Radio, Morrison remarked on Obama’s

ability to reflect on this extraordinary mesh of experiences that he has had, some familiar and some not, and to really meditate on that the way he does, and to set

up scenes in narrative structure, dialogue, conversation—all of these things that you don't often see, obviously, in the routine political memoir biography. [...] It's unique. It's his. There are no other ones like that.

(Ulaby, 2008)

But Obama's gifts extend beyond that of storyteller. No matter how mesmerizing his accounts of life in Kisumu, Kenya, Chicago's South Side, Honolulu, and Jakarta, Indonesia, may have been, what was special about his stories was that they represented so much more than his own individual life—they formed a personal narrative symbolizing William Blake's "world in a grain of sand." In the speech that Obama made in Philadelphia on March 18, 2008, he described his story as "a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one." Equally, however, he embodied the quintessentially American narrative of diversity. Cobb (2010, p. 3) writes: "The American creed of 'Out of many, one' has been turned on its head, a character defined by the ideal of 'Out of one, many.'"

Obama's personal story of his roots was transformed into so much more when it became woven into the wider narrative of what it means to be American. Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 50) comments that:

even the greatest forces of intimate life—passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses—lead to an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling.

*Dreams from My Father* meets this challenge of the deindividualization of personal narrative masterfully, doing justice to both the unique and broader aspects of Obama's own experiences.

For Obama, the flow between micro- and macro-narratives is two-way; not only does he connect his personal journey to a wider American narrative, but equally, in the larger plotline, he sees himself and the journey that he and others have travelled. In *Dreams from My Father*, he describes his attraction to biblical stories—a passage that he himself quoted in his "More Perfect Union" (a.k.a. "race") speech:

Those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears ... Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black ...

(Easton, 2009, p. 61)

Here, as elsewhere, Obama travels subtly and—politically speaking—significantly between "I" and "we." He manages to establish an important relationship between himself and others, his story and theirs, linking his narrative not only to others in the

present, but also to an enduring narrative that stretches across time and is the lifeblood of the nation.

## **The Great Emancipator and the Brother-in-Chief: Integrating Different Registers of Language and Symbolism**

The fact that Obama has publicly pointed to Abraham Lincoln as a guiding spirit<sup>3</sup> in his political life has been widely noted. If one had missed articles such as the one that appeared in *Time* magazine in 2005 entitled "What I See in Lincoln's Eyes," it still would have been difficult not to notice the symbolism of Lincoln at critical points in the campaign, and finally—and theatrically—throughout his first inauguration and the days leading up to it. And it was only fitting that Obama should become president in the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth.

Like Lincoln, Obama stepped onto the stage of national politics as the junior senator from Illinois. Obama has spoken of Lincoln's "humble beginnings, which often speak to my own" and says that "it was hard to imagine a less likely scenario" that he would win his race for the U.S. Senate, "except, perhaps, for the one that allowed a child born in the backwoods of Kentucky with less than a year of formal education to end up as Illinois' greatest citizen and our nation's greatest President" (Obama, 2005). Given the affinity that Obama has expressed for Lincoln, it is not altogether surprising that he announced his candidacy for president in Springfield, Illinois, on the steps of the Old Capitol, where Lincoln had practiced law and where he delivered his famous "A House Divided" speech. In 2009, when Obama travelled with his family to Washington, D.C., to attend his inauguration, he did so by boarding a train in Philadelphia and following the historic route that Lincoln took to his own inauguration. The concert that officially kicked off the celebrations of the inauguration was held at the Lincoln Memorial. In his brief address on that bitterly cold Sunday afternoon, as more than a million people gathered on the mall to welcome their new president and to listen to some of the greatest bands and musical artists of the time (including Pete Seeger, Beyoncé, U2, Stevie Wonder, and Herbie Hancock), Obama told the crowds, "behind me, watching over the union he saved, sits the man who in so many ways made this day possible" (Easton, 2009, p. 189). And again, a few weeks later, speaking in the Capitol on the bicentenary of Lincoln's birth, Obama expressed "a special gratitude to this singular figure who in so many ways made my own story possible—and who in so many ways made America's story possible" (Travers, 2009).

At the inaugural swearing-in ceremony, Obama used the same Bible that Lincoln himself used to be sworn in as the 16th president of the nation in 1861—something that no other president has done. And at the luncheon following the swearing-in, Obama chose one of

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Lincoln's favorite meals (seafood, game, and root vegetables), which was served on replicas of Lincoln's White House china.

All of this conscious mirroring notwithstanding, however, it is important to consider that for Obama, it was "the man and not the icon that speaks to me." He then elaborated on this view (Obama, 2005):

I cannot swallow whole the view of Lincoln as the Great Emancipator. As a law professor and civil rights lawyer and as an African American, I am fully aware of his limited views on race. Anyone who actually reads the Emancipation Proclamation knows it was more a military document than a clarion call for justice ... But it is precisely those imperfections—and the painful self-awareness of those failings etched in every crease of his face and reflected in those haunted eyes—that make him so compelling.

It is Lincoln the man, with all his imperfections and contradictions, to whom Obama is drawn. Lincoln not only reminded Obama of his own struggles, but "he also reminded me of a larger, fundamental element of American life—the enduring belief that we can constantly remake ourselves to fit our larger dreams." Moreover, he added, "as we remake ourselves, we remake our surroundings" (Obama, 2005). Remaking ourselves, reinventing who we are and what we stand for, is what Obama is all about. He placed himself in the shadow of Lincoln's narrative precisely because that narrative is so ripe for reinterpretation, full of contradictions, and enduring.

Francesca Polletta (2006) argues convincingly that one of the most important criteria for the effective strategic use of political narratives is their ability to mean different things to different people. Stories, Polletta suggests, "may be influential precisely insofar as they are open to multiple interpretations" (p. 19), and, again, stories are "effective in fostering agreement across difference, not in spite of their normative ambiguity but because of it" (p. 30). Lincoln is a figure who can simultaneously hold contradictory positions. Lincoln's memory has long served the function of "unifying opposites," as Barry Schwartz (2000) has well documented. He is both the common man who split logs and the man carved out of white marble. Lincoln, Schwartz (2000, p. 312) writes, "became America's universal man: changing and remaining the same; standing beside the people and above the people; a reflection of and model for them—at once behind, above, and within them." Schwartz's work documents the changing fortunes of Lincoln's reputation, and he argues that it was not until the progressive movement, at the beginning of the 20th century, that he began to assume the shape of "a god in human form" (Schwartz, 2000, p. 264). The reason that he gives for this advance in reputation relates directly to Obama's comment given previously, that we remake ourselves to fit our larger dreams. As we remake ourselves, we remold our models as well. The past is never past, but it is always constructed in service of the needs of the present (Schwartz, 1990, pp. 101–102):

Lincoln was not elevated at the time because the people had discovered new facts about him, but because they had discovered new facts about themselves, and regarded him as the perfect vehicle for giving these tangible expression.... The reconstruction of Abraham Lincoln during the Progressive Era was the making of a complex figure, one whose contradictory qualities reproduced the contradictions of American society ... Elevating Lincoln, the Americans affirmed for themselves their commitment to both commonness and greatness.

It is Lincoln's memory, as it serves the needs of the present, that is key to understanding why his figure cuts such an attractive model for Obama's message. Speaking on the 200th anniversary of Lincoln's birth, in Springfield, Illinois, Obama described Lincoln as a man who:

knew, better than anyone, what it meant to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. He understood that strain of personal liberty and self-reliance at the heart of the American experience. But he also understood something else. He recognized that while each of us must do our part, work as hard as we can, and be as responsible as we can—in the end, there are certain things we cannot do on our own. There are certain things we can only do together. There are certain things only a union can do.

(Obama, 2009)

And at this point, evoking the memory of Lincoln, Obama delivers a speech about the current economic crisis and what must be done to fight it:

Only a nation can do these things. Only by coming together, all of us, and expressing that sense of shared sacrifice and responsibility—for ourselves and one another—can we do the work that must be done in this country. That is the definition of being American.... We will be remembered for what we choose to make of this moment. And when posterity looks back on our time, as we are looking back on Lincoln's, I don't want it said that we saw an economic crisis, but did not stem it ... That we were consumed with small things when we were called to do great things. Instead, let them say that this generation—our generation—of Americans rose to the moment and gave America a new birth of freedom and opportunity in our time.

(Easton, 2009)

Here, one can see clearly Obama's most skillful use of political narratives. While honoring Lincoln—a man who "rose to the moment" during a national crisis—he manages to re-create that story, making it purpose-built for the economic crisis of the 21st century. His sense of narrative timing is brought to the fore as he asks his audience to project their imaginations into the future and envision how the United States as a nation will want to

look back on actions now taken or not taken. Like Lincoln, “we will be remembered for what we choose to make of this moment.”

Schwartz (1990, p. 83) argues that the debates regarding the nature of collective memory—is it essentially continuous or discontinuous?—are resolved “nowhere more clearly and more dramatically than in America’s memory of Abraham Lincoln.” It is, Schwartz argues, both. There is a general sense in which Lincoln’s legacy endures—albeit in different manifestations—since his death in 1864. But equally, what and how he is remembered, and for what purpose, are questions that each generation must answer anew.

The Lincoln industry has been a long and thriving one—and as Schwartz and others have commented, the construction of him as a man and as a politician has had many and varied forms in the 150-odd years since his death. Still, it is probably more than a coincidence that it was particularly flourishing at the same time as Obama’s presidency. Adam Gopnik (2007), himself a biographer of Lincoln, refers to the new Lincoln literature as “multiplying by fission, as amoebas do, on the airport bookstore shelves.” In November 2012, American history professor James McPherson published an article in the *The New York Review of Books* in which he reviewed four recent books on Lincoln.

At roughly the same time, two Lincoln films—of rather different genres—were launched on both sides of the Atlantic. *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* casts our hero waging battle against vampires who are planning to take over the United States. Meanwhile, *Lincoln* is Steven Spielberg’s attempt to tell the iconic story of Lincoln’s attempt to pass the 13th Amendment, abolishing slavery in the United States. In the first two weeks after its release, it had taken in \$62 million at the box office—almost as much as it cost to make. A review of the movie, written a few days after its release and the week after Obama’s reelection for president in November 2012, remarks: “for a few days or weeks now, it is the moment in a way few modern movies have managed. It’s very good, but that’s not the point. It’s necessary” (Thomson, 2012). There are many lessons for our time to be taken from the movie—not least that second terms in the White House are not always easy. Days after his reelection, Obama watched the film with Spielberg and many members of the cast, including Daniel Day-Lewis (who would later win the Best Actor Oscar for his performance as Lincoln), at a special screening at the White House. Obama explained the “incredibly powerful” effect that the film had on him (Stengel, Scherer, & Jones, 2012):

What made [Lincoln] such a remarkable individual, as well as a remarkable President, was his capacity to balance the idea that there are some eternal truths with the fact that we live in the here and now, and the here and now is messy and difficult. And anything we do is going to be somewhat imperfect. And so what we try to do is just tack in the right direction ... Being able to project across a very long timeline while still being focused on the immediate tug and pull of politics I

think is a useful lesson, and an accurate portrayal of how I think about my work day to day.

Gopnik (2012) sees a different cautionary tale. Lincoln, far from embracing the spirit of conciliation, was effective because he was willing to fight his enemies. As he writes: "When the South seceded, Lincoln chose war—an all-out, brutal, bitter war of a kind that had never been fought until then. 'Let the erring sisters go in peace!' the editor Horace Greeley recommended, and Lincoln said, 'Lock the doors and make them stay.'" Needless to say, there is much in the story of Lincoln for those of us in these troubled modern times to contemplate.

Reviewing the case of Obama the political storyteller—both in words and performed through historically pregnant symbols—it seems curious that political narratives have not attracted more attention from political psychologists. One of the key challenges may well be that stories have not, until recently, been the focus of social science scholarship more generally, though that has changed over the past 25 years. Obama's use of story is instructive because of the way in which he interweaves his own biography with the stories of other Americans, bringing them together into the framework of a particular version of American history, with a revitalization of the memory of Lincoln as a key driving force.

## Conclusion

Through the example of Barack Obama, we can come to appreciate the power of stories not only as a means for understanding how individuals and communities frame the political world, but also as a means of shaping that world. While Obama is a particularly skillful narrator, weaving his personal biography with that of millions of Americans, he is not the first and will not be the last to do so. Obama's use of political narratives, with their careful movement between the personal and public, between times past and what is to come, owe much of their effectiveness to their ability, as stories, to "eludida[te] who, what, why, when, where, and how we were, are, and will be.... Often we use [stories] to guide, to warn, to inspire, to make real and possible that which may well be unreal and impossible. Stories allow us to imagine the transformation of our lives and our world" (Selbin, 2010, p. 3).

Through this example, we can see the importance of taking stories seriously; not to do so is to turn our backs on one of the most revelatory sources of political meaning-making. Through political narratives, we imagine and reimagine the past, present, and future; they are one of the primary vehicles of social transformation and thus demand serious consideration by those who wish to understand how individuals and communities make sense of the complex and political worlds that they inhabit and remake.

Note: This chapter is adapted from material originally published in Andrews (2014).

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### Notes:

(1.) "Abraham Obama" is taken from the name of the iconic image created by Ron English and used throughout Obama's 2008 presidential election campaign. (For more on this see Fairey and Gross 2009 *Art for Obama*.)

(2.) This chapter is adapted from material originally published in *Narrative Imagination and Everyday Life* by Molly Andrews (Chapter 5 "Politics," Oxford University Press 2014).

(3.) The Great Emancipator is obviously the name for Lincoln, while the phrase "Brother-in-Chief" refers to Obama, a phrase I borrow from William Cobb (2010), p. 148.

### Molly Andrews

University of East London

