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## Obama: the First Jewish President?

By **David Paul Kuhn**

He is of a diaspora. Has often been compared to Star Trek's Vulcans. His pedigree is that of the overachieving Ivy Leaguer. A lawyer who married a lawyer. He emerged in Chicago activism as a disciple of Jewish urban organizer Saul Alinsky. He is Hyde Park liberal--urbane with a preference for arugula. An intellectual's intellectual, in virtue and in vice.

This is a man famous for his Talmudic-like mind. He deconstructs, deduces, feels compelled to cover all sides of a debate. His humor leans heavily on self-deprecation. He even held the first Passover Seder inside the White House.

Two of his closest advisers are Jewish men-- David Axelrod, cast as the archetypal sophist, and Rahm Emanuel, cast as the excitable dealmaker. He is caricatured as a "rootless cosmopolitan." His beliefs are attacked as "socialist." He is even said, by some, to not *really* be an American.

Barack Obama, the first Jewish president.

Novelist Toni Morrison famously described Bill Clinton as the nation's "first black president." It was the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal. And Morrison believed Clinton "white skin notwithstanding," was subjected to an opposition that "African-American men seemed to understand ... right away."

Morrison went on to summarize what she believed a black man heard in the impeachment circus. "No matter how smart you are, how hard you work, how much coin you earn for us, we will put you in your place," she wrote.

Morrison reached for the black experience to understand Clinton's experience. But could it be that this president, who is the personification of black dreams no longer deferred, is living nearer to a stereotypically Jewish experience?

The far right is burning again with radicalism. There are the "birther" conspirators. Some angry radicals on the right now bring guns to the speeches of an American president, our head of state. Fox News star Glenn Beck has declared Obama has, "a deep-seated hatred for white people." And most recently, there is the Republican congressman who yelled "liar" during Obama's bicameral address--unprecedented even in this hyper-partisan era.

Many liberals are struggling to digest the far right's virulence. Some leading voices believe as Jimmy Carter recently said, "an overwhelming portion" of that virulence "is based on the fact that he is a black man."

Obama's extreme opponents, however, do not paint him with black stereotypes. Radicals, unintentionally, have instead often depicted him using conventionally negative Jewish stereotypes.

Most conservative protest signs confront tax dollars funding big government and big banks. Real Americans forced to save the moneylenders! But the signs are ignored and racial subtext is sought. If indeed there is bigotry, is it more along the script of hate for blacks or Jews?

Think Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" or William Jennings Bryan's anti-Semitic overtones, his frequent references to the House of Rothschild. Just as tellingly, Obama is caricatured as a socialist--a philosophy long pinned on Jews. "Spread the wealth around" is said to betray his inner Marxist.

Then there is his biography. Obama's many homes: Kansas, Indonesia, Hawaii and Chicago.



**David Paul Kuhn**  
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This black man was the "wandering Jew." He became the "rootless cosmopolitan," a term Joseph Stalin summoned in his campaign against Jews.

Obama's logic-driven pursuit has led many to the Vulcan analogy. When Jewish actor Leonard Nimoy first personified this fictional people, he made a traditional Jewish symbol Vulcan, popularizing the spread-finger gesture of the rabbinic Cohanim.

Obama is cast not as a real American, not only in spirit--an allegation that has tarred many liberals like Michael Dukakis--but literally not American.

Jews know this charge well. For centuries in Europe, Jews were kicked out of one country after another. They were the original western "other."

### **Dershowitz: 'I take them almost personally'**

There are few more visible Jewish public intellectuals than Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz. In a phone conversation, I sprinted through what appeared so stereotypically Jewish about how Obama was portrayed--at least to this Jewish writer.

"When I hear the attacks on Barack Obama, I take them almost personally. It never occurred to me why, until you mentioned this to me," Dershowitz said. "When I was growing up in Brooklyn, I took very personally the attacks on Jackie Robinson because I knew the people bigoted against Jackie Robinson were bigoted against me."

Of course, there is no reason to think Obama's extreme critics are anti-Semitic. It ill suits reason to substitute one unsubstantiated charge for another.

And there is irony that Carter, of all people, accused Obama's critics of racism. Carter's relentless one-sided criticism of Israel has led many Jews to wonder if he harbors anti-Semitic views.

Obama was so immediately popular, in part, because many Americans projected themselves onto him. He is both white and black. He is urban, with Kansas roots. He can coolly nail a three-pointer but lacks the same grace on the dance floor.

He can be nerdy. Yet he personifies cool beyond the bounds of Washington, a city dependably uncool. He values unity yet polarizes. He wants to quit smoking but sometimes sneaks a smoke. He is the Mac but thinks like a PC. He is a Christian with the middle name Hussein, who feels like a stereotypically Jewish president. He is us.

And if he is us, he is also wholly none of us. In fact, he was foremost an idea, the most hackneyed of political ideas, "change." And all who wanted change could project their idea of it onto him. So he became a brand to be filled with ourselves.

That means, as well, extremists opposing Obama can be characterized as we see them. Only in America would critics of critics put aside obvious divisions, like our entrenched debate over the role of government, and seek a racial explanation. Anti-black racism can be deciphered in a poster or comment. But the conventional memes of anti-Semitism appear more prevalent. But of course, that's silly. He is not the first Jewish president. And that's the point. We are projecting ourselves into this president. This absurdity is possible because, like the cop and professor incident months back, the race debate is already divorced from him. It's rather about us.

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