

## 7 BARACK OBAMA

On 4 November 2008, Barack Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States after securing more votes than any other presidential candidate in the history of the country. With his election, he became the first African American president of the country and went on to lead it through a period of turmoil and anxiety.

Obama was born in Hawaii on 4 August 1961. His mother, Stanley Ann Dunham (known as Ann) was from Kansas, in the United States. His father, Barack Obama Senior, was from Kenya, in Africa. The young Obama was raised with the support of his grandparents. His grandfather, who had a military background, and his grandmother, who worked her way up from secretary to manager positions in a bank, were hugely influential in his upbringing. Their key values and morals were later said to influence his presidency and his drive to ensure that every child, regardless of background, was given the same chances and opportunities without prejudice.

With the help of loans and scholarships, Obama worked his way through college before later moving to Chicago. With a church union, he helped to rebuild a number of communities that had been devastated by the closure of local steel plants. This life-changing experience helped to shape his belief in uniting people from different walks of life to create positive and meaningful change.

Obama later attended the prestigious Harvard Law School, in Cambridge Massachusetts, near Boston. There, at the age of 28, he became president of the *Harvard Law Review* – a student-run organisation that publishes legal journals.

After graduating, Barack began to teach constitutional law: the study, practice, interpretation and administration of laws based on the United States constitution. His career in politics began as he won seats in the Illinois State Senate and the United States Senate (part of the United States Congress, which is a small group of elected people who help decide the laws of the country).

In 2008, Obama was formally announced as the Democratic nominee for president of the United States. No other African American had ever received this honour. He fought a campaign against the Republican nominee, John McCain of Arizona state. A record number of voters took part in the election, and Obama eventually secured his victory on 4 November 2008.

An estimated two million people attended the formal ceremony to begin his presidency in Washington – thought to be the biggest ever audience for such an event.

Obama hoped that his election to the presidency would send a positive message to black students. He said: 'The fact that I've been elected shows a lot of progress. It's encouraging – but it's important that stories like mine aren't used to say that everything is OK for blacks. You have to remember that, for every one of me, there are hundreds or thousands of black students with at least equal talent who don't get a chance.'

Obama took up what is arguably the world's most important job at an extremely problematic time in America, but immediately made his priorities clear.

In only his first few days, Obama directed the US military to begin withdrawing troops from Iraq. He ordered the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, which is a controversial US prison that poses a threat to human rights – although Congress blocked this order. He also gave financial aid to international family planning organisations, made legal changes to assist claims for equal pay for women and authorised a programme for children's health insurance.

Throughout his time in the White House, Obama helped to revitalise the economy of the country, reform the health care system and withdraw troops from war. He became an iconic and inspirational figure around the globe, and involved himself in the politics not only of the United States of America but also of the world. In 2009, Obama was awarded a prestigious Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between people.

Barack Obama was succeeded as president of the United States by Donald Trump in 2016. Since leaving office, he and his wife Michelle, whom he met at a Chicago law firm, have continued to campaign for causes close to their heart, supporting and inspiring others. Michelle Obama has become an inspirational figure and role model for people across the world. She authored a book, *Becoming*, which discusses her life both inside and outside of the White House. The book quickly became a best seller.

