

David Freddoso (ND '99) is the best-selling author of The Case Against Barack Obama. A graduate of Columbia's Pulitzer School of Journalism, he works currently for National Review Online and formerly for Robert Novak's Evans-Novak Political Report. He recently answered questions for the Irish Rover.

1) How did you go from being a Classics major at Notre Dame to being a best-selling author?

Classics gives you everything you need to succeed as a writer -- an understanding of language and of ideas. As far as becoming a bestselling author, I owe that simply to the fact that everyone wants to read about Barack Obama right now. Who is this guy, and where did he come from? He's really burst onto the scene suddenly, and the major media have failed to scrutinize his political career and his record.

The topic was an easy sell for a publisher, but I'm not really a huge name in political journalism. It wasn't necessarily easy for me to get a book deal. But I had one thing going for me -- I had been reporting on Obama's rise in politics four years ago and on the early parts of his current campaign. I knew a few things about Illinois politics from other work that I'd done, and I had sources there who could point me in some good directions. I also know Washington pretty well from my time there as a political reporter.

So I put together what I had on Obama and I just started writing, so that by the time my publisher offered me the project, I had written three chapters and fragments of three others. I put together a research team to fill everything in and make sure we hit all the key details and got all of the facts right. And I'm really proud of what we were able to produce on a short deadline.

2) What experiences or opportunities at Notre Dame particularly influenced your desire to be a journalist and write about contemporary American politics and culture?

I started writing for The Observer as a freshman. I covered a lecture about the NAACP under Kweisi Mfume. Boy, did I think my story was important -- I spent hours writing it, only to have it ripped apart by the editors. That was a great learning experience -- it's something that every young writer needs. Over time, you learn to write a lot better and faster -- to focus on what's important and ignore irrelevant details.

At Columbia's J-School, I was really immersed in community journalism -- reporting in neighborhoods in the Bronx and in Brooklyn. I wrote stories about neighborhood drag racing and kids crossing interstate highways (with their baseball coach) as a shortcut, and court cases and bank robberies. I had a lot of romantic ideas about being a neighborhood reporter, which turned out to be my first job, but the pay was terrible and I found it hard to live in New York City. I decided that Washington was probably the best place for a reporter outside of New York, so I went there and started looking for a job. I got to cover Congress right away at *Human Events*. They'd send me to the Hill with a tape recorder and tell me to come back with ten interviews -- it was great training, since I'm naturally a bit shy. I've been simultaneously appalled by and addicted to politics ever since.

3) In the current presidential race, we have witnessed more clearly than ever the extent to which success in American political contests is dependent upon a candidate's rhetorical skills, the language one uses, and the way in which one

markets one's image. From your own experience reporting on political races and from your study of Classics, do you see any reasons to hope that our current political climate could become a more honest and transparent debate between the candidates in the future, or are we stuck with sophism and marketing?

Unfortunately, I don't think we've come very far since they killed Socrates. The demagogues have the upper hand over the statesmen, and all of the tools of modern media just make it easier for them.

Just look at Obama's campaign. It's all about marketing. Here's a man who has never brought positive reform to any political environment he has entered, and yet he's the candidate of "hope and change." I found it particularly interesting that Obama was given an opportunity at the Saddleback forum last weekend to validate the entire premise of his campaign. He was asked to name a time when he had worked across the aisle, against his party's interests or his own political interests, for the common good of the nation. He answered by citing a fictional event -- the time he worked with John McCain on ethics reform. The only problem is that the two men never worked together on ethics reform -- they actually had a nasty and public exchange of letters over it, one day after discussing some kind of collaboration. So Obama is asked to name one instance where his actions have met his rhetoric, and he can't come up with a real example.

But Senator Obama does have a real, non-fiction record when it comes to reform, and I examine it carefully in my book. He has proven himself to be an accommodationist, a consistent enabler of Chicago's corrupt machine politics. He has opposed true bipartisan reformers from both parties and endorsed machine politicians every chance he's had. He has never worked or even spoken on behalf of reform in Chicago because he'd be working against all of his allies who are responsible for his current success.

His body of legislative activity in Springfield is a laundry list of favors done for friends (Tony Rezko is just the tip of the iceberg), for contributors, for the unions who could deliver votes in his Democratic U.S. Senate primary, for his political allies, and even for clients who paid him cash in his private law practice. In Washington, he has positively embraced the systemic corruption that I've been covering for seven years now -- taxpayers being robbed to pay major agricultural corporations, earmarks for campaign contributors and friends, *et cetera*.

I actually agree with the critique that Senator Obama gives of government -- it is a factual and legitimate critique, which is why people like to hear Obama express it. It's a disgrace that people who hire the right lobbyists and give the biggest contributions get whatever they want from government. Sadly, that's how Washington works, but the reason it works that way is that there are too many politicians like Barack Obama in both parties, politicians who lack the courage to do anything on behalf of true reform.

4) Obama has been very successful in how he has portrayed himself to the American public through the media. Do you view the character of the popular following he has attained as a product of the media?

Absolutely. In the news media, there is a clear lack of intellectual curiosity for anything that might paint the man in a bad light. One effect of this is that, in the absence of accurate information that would at least prove he is not the messiah, the crazies on the Internet come up with all of these ridiculous conspiracy theories -- that the man is a secret

Muslim who hates the flag, or that he wasn't really born in America. Their view is just as wrong as that of people who put a completely unjustified faith in Obama as some kind of "new politician."

The mainstream media outlets have completely dropped the ball. They are staffed by reporters who have never even bothered to read the *Chicago Tribune* or the *Sun-Times*, who don't know the first thing about how Chicago works or how Obama fits into it, and who, for ideological reasons, won't hold him accountable for some of the extreme stances he has taken. The New York and Washington media, who set the tone for the national coverage, have bought into Obama's false narrative -- that he is an agent of positive change -- hook, line and sinker, despite a complete lack of evidence. They let him exaggerate his accomplishments because they don't want to research what he's actually done and what effect it actually has. I hope my book provides everyone with a few real threads to pick up, so that we can have a national conversation about Obama's real campaign and stop believing in either the smears or in Obama's propaganda campaign.

5) Since most Notre Dame students will be voting in a presidential race for the first time, what issues do you think students should be most concerned about? What deserves more attention than it is getting in the current race?

Social Security reform should be the priority of everyone under the age of 30. All of the arguments against it are made in bad faith -- when I see young people argue against it, I consider them traitors to their kind. If you are young, you are about to be robbed blind by that program. You won't see a dime of that money. It is baffling that in our financially sophisticated world, any disinterested person could conclude that the best way to handle people's retirement is to pool our money with the government, where it gains no interest and it will be frittered away by politicians who can always be counted on to abuse the public trust. We still must take care of today's elderly, but the young should be allowed to do something with their money that actually makes sense in the modern world.

There's also abortion, which I consider the most important issue and which, as a former fetus, I don't think can be discussed enough. A politician who doesn't even respect your right to life should be viewed with suspicion when it comes to your other rights.

Catholics in particular fall prey to the false notion that Senator Obama is reasonable or ideologically persuadable on abortion -- he is not. If you go on YouTube, you can watch him promise that he "will not yield" on that issue, no matter what. You can also watch him promise that his first act as president -- that's how he put it -- will be to sign a bill (the Freedom of Choice Act) which re-legalizes partial-birth abortion. Apparently, there is such demand for partial-birth abortion that it comes before getting the troops out of Iraq, starting his government health care plan, or raising taxes. Even more appalling were Obama's speeches and votes against the Illinois bill to protect premature abortion survivors. If you are even moderately pro-life, Obama disagrees with you and has promised to work against you as hard as he can when he becomes president.

Another important issue is energy. Obama's solution on energy is to subsidize ethanol, which is a lot like turning gold into lead. Paul Krugman, Chuck Schumer and I agree that ethanol is a total waste of your money. The science and economics of it are irrefutable, but Obama wanted to win Iowa and he also puts parochial interests in Illinois ahead of the common good. President Bush is just as bad on that issue. Obama simultaneously

resists any attempts to expand our energy supply, and he supports an environmental agenda of limiting carbon emissions that will not just cause but actually will require gasoline to cost \$6 or \$7 per gallon so that people use less of it.

6) What has had the greatest influence in shaping your political views?

My Catholic faith comes first. The injustice of abortion is the issue that motivated me to follow politics in the first place, and it's still what I care about most. I've also been strongly anti-war ever since I watched our intervention in Kosovo and the impeachment bombing of Iraq while I was at Notre Dame. That is the one thing where I believe Obama at least took the correct stance in 2002. There is nothing conservative about rattling the saber. I feel betrayed by President Bush's abandonment of the "humble foreign policy," which he promised while campaigning in 2000. He wasn't doing so badly in my book until we invaded in 2003.

The most influential person in my political formation is my former boss, Robert Novak, whose opposition to the Iraq War caused him a lot of grief on the Right. He also appreciates the value of the free-market, of low taxes and less government interference in economics.

I would strongly recommend that, in addition to my book on Senator Obama, everyone interested in politics should read Timothy P. Carney's book, *The Big Ripoff*. I'm not just recommending it because Tim is a close friend and he helped edit my book. I'm recommending it because anyone who wants to understand our system of crony capitalism has no better resource. It will, indirectly, help people understand what makes a politician like Obama tick. It's scholarly and non-partisan, and it contains dozens of great stories and examples of the counterintuitive workings of government and business. You will never understand how Washington works until you read it. It wasn't a bestseller, but it really changed my life. Tim shows how, when government intervenes in the economy, it inevitably acts on behalf of the already privileged and well-connected. The people who find themselves ahead financially use government to build and cement competitive advantage for themselves, at the expense of upstart competitors and consumers as well as taxpayers. Witness, for example, Wal Mart's lobbying on behalf of an increase to the minimum wage, or the Wright Amendment in the airline industry. The best choice is to reject government intervention in the free market as much as possible -- which, by the way, does not in any way lessen every citizen's obligation to help his fellow man.

7) Many adults reflect that they were more liberal in their political thinking during college than during any other time of their lives, and Obama seems to be an especially attractive candidate to the young demographic. What do you think accounts for this? Do you view it as a danger, or does it seem appropriate to the situation in life of college students?

It helps that Obama looks young and he's clearly intelligent. Just remember that there are probably a lot of people like that in your dorm who wouldn't be very good as president. They say that anyone under age 30 who isn't a socialist has no heart, and anyone who clings to such beliefs after age 30 has no brain. I don't know if I agree with the first part of that adage, but the second part makes sense. There's nothing like reading your pay stub and seeing the withholdings to make you realize that you're being robbed so that some

contractor who hired a lobbyist who bundled 100 contributions for a politician can build a bridge to nowhere in Alaska. That's what government does. I'm sorry if that seems cynical, but that's the way the world I cover in Washington really works.