

# Obamapour

Leopold Haas

## Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art,  
philosophy and psycho-analysis –  
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*My Response to Leslie Stahl's first question on 60 Minutes:*

*(Camera pans to face).*

...some of you may have heard details of my recent divorce, some of you have expressed sorrow, some of you even to my face...and I understand that, I do. As your former president, I think it's fair to say I occupied a special place for a bit, even if you didn't agree with me or didn't vote for me.

Let me be frank. I was more surprised by recent events than many of you... the truth is, I had no idea my life was changing. That my life *could* change.

*(Close up of hands).*

It may sound strange to some folks, but nothing prepares a president for life *after* the presidency. There's no handbook for what to do; there's no number to call. One day the world's attention is on you, the next, you're a ghost. That's how it should be. But it takes getting used to.

It's funny, but for a whole year afterwards, I heard footsteps running behind me. I would turn to my aide to ask if he “got what I said” only to find nobody there. I distinctly recall standing in the greenhouse, addressing a rose bush... (inaudible). My people were gone. They were working for other politicians, other firms. I was “in the dark.” I had a lot of time on my hands. I don't want you to think I spent all of it talking to plants, but the point of this story, Leslie, is that it made me understand, really understand the importance of our democracy, of our free elections and term limits. What someone said about the moon, is also true for any President—“you only ever borrow the light.”

*(Pan to Leslie, nodding; slow pan back to Obama).*

I know...most of you folks see us old presidents as a part of history. You can't imagine that when we walk out of the residence on our last day, we still have a life. You can't imagine that we have to fill in our days like everyone else. And you certainly can't imagine us doing anything real or consequential anymore.

*(Close-up of hands, cuff links).*

I will say this: I never thought I'd come on 60 Minutes to share a part of my life with you: namely, that my closest partner in the world, the woman you have come to know as “Michelle” will no longer be part of my story...

It's difficult... difficult for me to talk about Michelle. Some would say it's not right for me to speak about her. I mean,

like all women, Michelle has her own voice: a loud voice, a powerful voice, an important voice. When Michelle raised her voice in the residence, let me tell you, a lot of my aides ran and hid. The reason they ran and hid? Those aides were following me!

Someone said to me the other day: Michelle wasn't the first lady; she was the *real first lady*. How many of you out there have read her book? *Come on now*.

*(Pan to Leslie, smiling).*

*(Inaudible)... want you to know she's okay. Michelle's okay. She's moving into her own story. In her own name. She's becoming... (pause, inaudible).*

It's sad, but I'm here because we gotta move through this together. We have to stop making this into a story of heroes and villains. Because I've heard some things... I don't want to repeat them here.

You know, sometimes in a person's life, things just turn around. You're all set in one direction and then--

.....

*Memoranda from my post presidential period, constructed from audio notes and entries in the thick leather notepad by my Eames chair...*

June, 2017

Sometime into my retirement, after my *Farewell World Tour* ends, and the months roll out before me, I realise something: I enjoy watching cable TV. I not only enjoy it, but I have a whole lot of time to watch it.

Confession: I like Panel shows, I really do. Sitting around the big glass tables, under the bright lights, I watch some of my old colleagues, people from my former administration, discuss the topics of the day. It makes me feel kind of proud.

July, 2017

I'm sitting in my den, in the studded leather armchair an artist from Haiti made me. Although it's not as comfortable as the Eames, I try to sit in it for an hour a day.

X. calls me with feedback from the Farewell World tour and asks if I'd consider doing a second farewell world tour, as a lot of world leaders felt I didn't include enough of the world in my first go. X. says it's not unusual to do a follow up. I say, let me think about it. I'll ask Michelle. Think of it as a Comeback tour, X. says, and mentions a number of bands that have done Comeback tours.

I spend the evening watching panel shows. They're discussing the topics of the day: gun violence, moral equivalence, race... it makes me feel proud we're having this conversation as a nation. Doesn't matter what channel I turn to: MSNBC, CBS, ABC—heck, even CNN—they're all discussing the same thing. Okay, there's probably one channel that's not...

(If I was giving this as a speech, pretty sure there would be a cheer or a woot woot here).

September, 2017

My farewell world tour part two is getting serious. X. sends me a t-shirt saying “Farewell World, Obama’s Comeback Tour: Paris, London, Lebanon, Hong Kong.”... It’s got a black and white photo of my face, grave and looking upwards, toward hope and change, in the style of my first presidential campaign. I send a text thanking X. I also text Beyoncé for her help with “the design.” My photographer agrees to come by to take a series of photographs of me in my new t-shirt.

October, 2017

Fareed Zakaria asks if I want to do an interview. This is the third time he’s asked me. I tell Z. I’m really not comfortable inserting myself in the national conversation. *Would you consider doing one with Amanpour?* Z. asks. *It’s for our global audience only.* I tell Z. I’ll think about it, but that it doesn’t *sit right*.

I tell Michelle about doing an interview on CNN International. She gets all crazy, because she loves CNN International. She just did one herself, as part of her docu-series trip to assist the education of girls in Africa. *You should do it, Michelle says, I’d do it.*

I tell her that I am concerned that it will be perceived as marketing for my *Farewell World Comeback Tour*.

*I’m calling Amanpour, Michelle says.*

November, 2017

Michelle leaves me a note asking if I’m coming to a charity event with her tonight. It’s a private event supporting freedom of speech and human rights. M. never leaves me notes asking if I’m coming. What is that woman implying? Our schedules are fixed months in advance; primarily because we need to figure out when to book our holidays, which part of the world is truly private, and more importantly, whose estate is bigger than ours (our estate gets boring after months of confinement).

It’s a big deal that Michelle asks me, it’s a big deal because it’s a small deal, and all small deals in our house are big.

December, 2017

Michelle leaves me another note asking if I’m coming to yet another event with her tonight. And to wear the same tux I wore last time.

Again, this confuses me. I think back to the last event she’s referring to. The human rights event. It was a pretty good night. The champagne was excellent. I believe it was made in the UK. Hard to believe they are making champagne there. I instructed X. to buy me a case of the UK human rights’ event champagne and to bring it with on our *Farewell World Comeback Tour*, unless of course we could source some American champagne. X said “Done.” I also recall sitting at a table opposite

Christiane Amanpour and a few of her journalist friends. They were talking about the difficulty of reporting in various parts of the world. Amanpour mentioned something about her new show; people asked various production questions. Although it's not my field, I asked her if she was thinking of a panel format. A. put on her glasses and said she was not actually interested in panels. She wanted to do something *different*. I noticed, I don't know why, that her mascara was expertly applied. Her eyes were dark and penetrating, and I suddenly understood that it was her eyes, or perhaps her mascara, which made her such a formidable host, I mean so penetrating. A. was still talking about "deep dive journalism" and "our perilous times," when she turned to me and said that I, Barack, should watch her new show, or better yet, come on as a guest, to see why it was so important. I felt someone nudge me, it must have been Michelle.

A little later, when the guests were mingling, I approached A. and apologized for how things *went down* at our table. I didn't know where the conversation was heading.

*Went down?* A. asked.

*You know...* I said. And then I told her that I liked panel shows. A. said, yes, she'd heard that.

Michelle, or was it the secret service agent, put their hand on my shoulder. I think it might have been the latter, because that was the last I recall of the night.

January, 2018

I receive a file of photographs featuring me in my *Farewell World Comeback Tour* t-shirt. I'll be honest, I don't look good. It was my idea to go for a steely, "Nevertheless, He Hopes," look, but I think I missed the mark. I think it looks like I have no hope, only a t-shirt. I send one of the better pictures to my daughter, and rename the file, "good looking?" After a few minutes, I realise I made a mistake. I sent the file to Beyoncé and Ye, who happen to be on my frequent contacts list, because I frequently contact them by mistake. Beyoncé simply texts: *why????* Ye sends me a steaming poop emoticon, actually three in a row, and that kind of hurts because I know Ye doesn't text, so it must be his assistant weighing in.

I call my photographer and request a re-shoot. While I'm sitting in my chair on hold, another poop arrives. My door opens as I'm showing the poop to the secret service agent. Michelle comes in holding a half empty packet of American Spirit I left on the porch. Full disclosure: I often leave half empty packets on the porch as part of my temptation-resistance strategy. Although I've tried to explain this to Michelle, it's too complicated, because the material packet gets in the way, and she's already counting how many cigarettes I must have had and what punishment is required.

*Yes, not mine,* I say. I point to the Secret Service guy, the one whose name is difficult to remember, so I call him Roger. *It's Roger's,* I say.

*Really*, Michelle says. “*Really?*” She turns to Roger. *Roger, is this yours?* She’s holding out the packet.

Roger is smiling at the memory of the poop chain.

*Is something funny? Is this all a joke to you?*

*No Ma’am*, the secret service guy says. Next, he does what I’ve told him to do, should this situation ever arise. He reaches into his inner suit pocket and fishes out the lighter I gave him. It’s a cheap lighter, one of those BIC ones in red plastic. For some reason, he goes to light it, and we both watch him try to work the kid safety feature. I’m not sure why he’s attempting to light it. That wasn’t part of the plan.

*Okay*, Michelle says, *I get what’s happening*. She throws the packet onto my desk. This is the cue for Roger to take the packet off the desk, whip it into a plastic evidence bag, check I’m not injured, and give me a “security swipe down,” but Roger simply stands there. *Roger, Roger*, I say. Michelle makes a noise, it’s not a good noise, and says something about how she got a lot of buzz from her CNN docudrama series on girl education in Africa, and what’s my contribution? I know what *not* to say, porch smoking.

*I’ll contact Amanpour*, I say.

February, 2018

The photographer sends me an updated file. This time the pictures are all in black and white, which makes me look iconic and oddly old. A part of me wishes my photographer knew his way around Photoshop. I play around with a “beautify me” app, but the results are inconclusive.

Later, as I settle down to watch *Inside Politics* (my favourite daytime panel show), I get a message from Amanpour’s production team. They ask me to hold off on the interview. A few seconds later, I get another message from Amanpour’s publicity team, which reads like a form letter, ostensibly saying the same thing: *While we recognise your unique contribution to US politics and American life, we regret to inform you that our schedule is fully booked until 2019. We hope you understand that it’s a busy time for us, with many deserving interview subjects all over the world. Thank you for your interest in Amanpour. We wish you... etc., etc.,...*

April, 2018

I feel very refreshed after a three week “Spring break” in the Cayman Islands. Michelle and I renewed our partnership in the company of our closest friends. I feel good.

Before we left, we visited the estate next door for some drinks and a private tour. The estate next door is owned by a Real Estate magnate, who happened to mention he had some guests. That’s when I bumped into Ye. Although Ye’s not a “close” friend, I hold out hope for the guy. He was lying incognito on a shark inflatable which was tethered to the edge of the pool for safety reasons. After some pleasantries, I took the opportunity to tell Ye his assistant was out of line.

*Out of line what?* Ye said.

*No more poop chains,* I said.

*What's this about?* Ye said.

*Poop,* I said. *And chains.*

Ye put his headphones on and said something which was hard to understand. He frowned and took off his headphones, *Wait, what the poop like? Changing?*

*It's more of a chain,* I said.

Ye looked confused.

*You ask your assistant. He knows.*

*Look into the poop chain,* Ye began a sort of rap, *look into the poop chain.*

*I'd appreciate it, Ye.*

May, 2018

Michelle tells me in confidence that the reason Amanpour's production team is not so keen on an interview right now is that they fear I will overshadow the conversation. I admit, that makes me feel good, because you have to realise, any worthwhile ex-president wants to have that "effect."

Michelle notes as an aside that there was also a feeling that I have nothing of substance to add to the conversation. The phrase, "change agent" was mentioned as substantive. She later explains it might have something to do with the fact that I don't have a book or a docudrama series which her audience could buy or watch on their affiliate networks. And that word I use a lot.

*Wait, what about all the talks I give?* I said, *or my last speaking event on the importance of incremental change? Merkel liked that a lot. Macron is Macron, but he didn't "hate" it.*

Michelle shrugged.

All of a sudden, she's not into the word "incremental." She said someone told her it sounded "boring," like putting a jacket on layaway. *Who told you that?* I asked, *Oprah?*

I decide to run "incremental change" by Roger later. This is my new Roger, as my last Roger got recalled. The new Roger is also a qualified risk assessment specialist in second hand and third hand smoke, and maybe even fourth hand smoke, which is not why my wife hired him, but it is an interesting fact.

After my monthly mentor call with Bush the Younger, X. calls and tells me we're all set for the first stop of our *Farewell World Comeback Tour*. He asks me how I'm feeling. I tell X. I'm feeling *very positive* about it. X. tells me the champagne from the UK has arrived and that my team, the ones who are left, are wondering whether to remove the made in UK label and/or cover it with USA flag stickers.

I tell X. that it's his call, but emphasise that erasure and cover-ups are not things I generally support.

*So we'll just leave it?* X. says.

*I'm not sure whether leaving it is the best thing,* I say.

*Okay,* X. says, *so maybe we'll aim for the next best thing.*

*Good,* I say.

Wolf Blitzer's on CNN. The panel is discussing the minutiae of POTUS' early morning tweets. I make an audio note to follow up on with my Harvard buddies on whether POTUS is considered implicative and what that means in terms of say, my general presidential legacy.

One a.m. I wake up and make a new audio note: Is being implicative good or bad? I think it's a nuanced question, but I will defer to my Harvard buds.

Two-thirty a.m. I make a further note: Is being implicative a criminal thing? Or is it, shall we say, literary? Malia thinks it is the latter, but I'm thinking it might be the former. I'll ask Sasha, as she never agrees with Malia.

As I get back into bed, Michelle (who is rarely up this late) says that she forgot to tell me that Amanpour asked for my number.

June, 2018

On the private plane, which was kindly leased to us by Z. for my *Farewell World Comeback Tour*, I make an additional audio note: What does it mean to be an explicative President? Is being explicative good or bad? I think it's a clear argument, not at all nuanced, but I will defer to my Harvard buds.

Part way through the flight, I'm woken up by a hostess with a special night dose of champagne. It's in a real glass flute. I drink it in the dark. That's when I notice my screen light up.

Someone sent me a message up here. It's hard to believe what you can do these days. I smile at the hostess and lower the phone, so no-one gets annoyed. Roger is snoring. Michelle is wearing cat pajamas and a silk eye mask which covers half her face. I go back to my screen. There's a photo attached. It's from someone calling themselves Camanpour. I study the picture closely. It makes no sense. Just a long leg going into a shoe. The long leg is shiny, and features small dots on it, the kind you see on expensive pantyhose. The color is mid-tone, what folks might call a deep caramel. I zoom in and see a small black bag on the floor, open and lined in red. I zoom out and focus on the caramel again, the small imperceptible dots. My head feels light from the champagne. It's not clear what I'm looking at. I identify a shiny calf, an arch and the point of a shoe. Next to the point of the shoe is the black bag, open just enough to reveal its deep red lining. I drink some more champagne, and experience my heart beat as bubbles drawn to the surface of my skin. It's not at all clear what this is about.

Paris, Day 1

This is the first stop of my *Farewell World Comeback Tour*. Before landing, I change into a suit, and make sure Michelle is happy with my choice of tie. Michelle decides to wear black, which in my mind sets a sombre tone, but Roger says is very classy.

It's surprising that there's no-one to meet us at the airport. X. arrives (he came over earlier) and greets me in the CDG private entrance, where he assures me there is no press waiting.

*No press?* I ask.

*It took all my energies to keep this under wraps,* X. says.

We make our way in a three car parade to the Hotel. Along the way, we see the roadside refugee camps. There's a fire on a hill and a couple of men in hoodies fighting over a plastic bag. *Tragic,* I say. X. takes a picture. Michelle is busy doing a phone interview with Time Magazine on her memoir, *Becoming*, and misses the scene.

The hotel is one of those old hotels that exude elegance and taste from a former time, a time before people discovered lumber support and down pillows.

When our luggage is brought to the room, everyone leaves except Roger and another aide. I'm not sure if he works for the hotel, or what, but he's wearing a brocade jacket and leather pants.

Michelle has wrapped up her Time interview and decides to do twenty minutes of isolated self-affirmation before we meet our US team for a debrief on our meeting at the *Élysée*.

I lie down on the bed, which is surrounded by thick gold curtains, and find a missed Skype call from Bush the Younger. I'm tempted to call him but I find myself going through my phone messages until I find the one from Camanpour, with the picture of the long leg going into the shoe. I switch on the TV and scroll through until I find CNN. They're doing a whole special on human trafficking. The situation is really tragic. Even as I watch the CNN journalist secretly record a human trafficker onboard a dirty minivan, I find myself seeing the picture of the long leg going into a shoe, the caramel tone with its imperceptible dots, the open bag on the floor...and the only sound I hear is my heart beat, which is not at all like bubbles this time, but a throb which has moved from my general chest area to my lower groin. I have no idea what this is about.

....

Paris, Day 2

On the whole, my *Farewell World Comeback Tour* has been largely positive. Although, as X. mentions more than once, the t-shirts have not been as popular as he had anticipated.

We have a short debrief in the Hotel bar about whether the photographer made the right choice, you know, to go with black and white, instead of the color picture from my early



days. The question remains unanswered. I make an audio note to ask Bush the Younger, as a hobbyist painter, what he thinks about all of this.

X. leaves me with a contraband packet of *Gauloises* and about five hours of “free time,” while Michelle finishes up at *France 24*, where she’s booked to discuss *Becoming* and give a personal reading which will be screened in bookstores all over Paris to coincide with the *Carnaval des Femmes*.

### Day 3

Perhaps this is my downfall. Free time. I’ve never been all that comfortable with free time.

### Day 4

I mean I have more free time than I anticipated. Usually, a World Tour would be jam packed with events. X. told me that he wanted to give me “some creative time” in Paris. *You mean more nap time?* I asked him.

Well, as I mentioned, that may have been my downfall, if you want to call it that. That and not smoking. Because if you’re a smoker, you’re not flipping channels in a hotel room, you’re outside, constantly outside. I open the packet of *Gauloises* and take out a cigarette. This is purely part of my temptation-resistance strategy. The cigarette feels dry and I put it between my lips for a few seconds until the tip becomes moist.

I watch CNN for a while, which is the only channel I can understand. This time, they’re talking money markets. An old stock market guy in a vest is assessing the value of the Snapchat IPO. I have to admit, I miss the panels. I don’t know why CNN international is not on board with panels.

### Day 5

I’m feeling a little restless. I met with a lot of officials, some old friends, as part of my *Farewell World Comeback Tour*. I’d been scheduled to meet with Macron, but as I recall it, Macron had more pressing things to do. What did he want with an ex-President? I admit it hurt me somewhat that Macron did not have ten minutes to set aside. An aide of an aide came in to tell my aide that Macron was “swept up” in local affairs. *Swept up*. Even Michelle got ten minutes with Macron’s wife. That hurt just a little bit.

I’m tired, and a little upset that my wife knows more about French state affairs than I do. Michelle even spoke a few words of French, and repeated them here and there to much applause. Later, she repeated the French words to me, without the cameras around, on our date night, of all nights. I reminded her that we had a strict “no bringing work home” policy. I believe that repeating those lines in French was a little worky, it’s not something she ever did when we were in Germany for example. Michelle struggled with German. *But it’s French*, she said, *it’s romantic*.

While Michelle was showering, I thought to myself, let’s watch

a panel show. Then I remembered where I was, and no amount of channel changing led to a panel show. I put the *gauloises* cigarette between my lips and found the picture on my phone. The long leg going into the shoe. I regret not doing more art in school. How do I read this picture? No sooner had I asked myself this question, than I became the question—I became a question to myself. I heard nothing but my heart beat, it was being transported around and around, and soon I could not even think.

*I'm all alone in Paris, I said into my phone. Michelle's in the shower, my daughters aren't answering my what's apps, and she comes on...*

The steam from the bathroom is coming through the crack. They have these windows in the hotel you can't open. So I watch the steam pass into my line of sight. And she comes on...

#### Day 6

Although I did not get to meet Macron, I feel very positive about the Paris leg of my *Farewell World Comeback Tour*. I gifted a crate of the UK champagne to staff who were leaving to work on Biden's campaign, some of them even admitted they were thinking of Bernie. Bernie? *Come on now, I said. You won't be drinking this champagne with Bernie.*

There was a lot of camaraderie, a lot of high spirits and sad farewells. Our London leg was a transition of sorts. Michelle was staying behind in Paris for a few days. She had an invitation to join Macron's wife on a tour of regional French schools, where they were attempting to radically assimilate recent immigrants. Or was it to assimilate recent radical immigrants? I don't recall. Michelle was hoping to use it to "side promote" her docudrama series on Girl Education in Africa, but she is also genuinely curious about matters relating to education.

When I left the hotel for the airport, Michelle handed me a note.

#### London, Day 7

I did not read Michelle's note until I arrived in London early the next morning. I put it in my breast pocket and it was only when I got frisked by Roger that I remembered the note and took it out.

These notes from Michelle are a new thing. I don't understand this woman. I opened up the note. It was long so I fished out my glasses.

By the time I arrived in my London Hotel, I was set on sending a picture to Camanpour. I only just put two and two together. I mean, part of the reason was Michelle told me in her note that Christiane Amanpour had tried contacting me on my private number, and would I please look out for "Camanpour." Michelle did not mention the photograph, which I found odd, but not overtly odd.

The picture I sent to Amanpour took me about an hour to stage.

I could have sent her one of me in my “Nevertheless he Hopes” sequence, where I’m wearing the *Farewell World Comeback Tour Tee*, but Ye’s poop chain and Beyoncé’s *Why????* made me second-guess the idea. I could have asked Bush the Younger for his opinion on the matter, in personal terms that only an amateur portrait painter would understand. As a last resort, I could have asked my photographer, or my old Harvard Buds, although I suspected they would argue for and against over many hours, with various arcane cases cited as possible precedent. I could have turned on the television and watched a panel show on Boris’ new hairstyle, or put the *Gauloises* cigarette between my lips while I sought inspiration. But something else was called for—something I didn’t really understand. I lay on my bed and took off my pants.

What would a real photograph of the real me, captured “on the fly,” look like?

In my inner room, free of Roger at last, part of me wondered what it was I was doing. Was I a criminal or was I literary? The picture I sent her was of a section of my inner thigh, where the hairs go in a thousand directions. My hand was resting in an upward position, towards the remote, which was just out of my reach.

#### Day 8

X. called me and said that May enjoyed our meeting at Chequers very much and apologised for the small reception. *She loved, loved, loved the tees*, X added. *She said they reminded her of her old tour t-shirts, from the days when she saw The Monkees play.*

*The Monkees? She said that?*

X. said maybe he was mis-remembering. *It could have been Motorhead*, he added.

#### Day 9: Amanpour’s Flat

Roger comes in and announces he’s taking a “mental health day.” He leaves me in the company of his London aid, a guy called “Mr. Green,” who is wearing what looks like a bell-hop uniform. Roger assures me Mr. Green has been vetted by “our folks” and will do whatever is necessary to ensure my security.

I tell Roger I have an appointment. Roger says, *tell Mr. Green*. I tell Mr. Green I have an appointment. Mr. Green says that he knows that, and will drive me there presently. The Brits, they have such a way with words. *So you know where I’m going?* I ask. *I’ve been informed*, Mr. Green says. *And by presently, you mean? Presently*, Mr. Green says.

I put on my suit. I don’t have anything much planned. X. tells me the whole day is marked “free time.” Mr. Green drives across London, through a leafy area, which seems to get larger and larger, while the streets get smaller and smaller, and the cars get older and older.

Outside a modest white building, next door to other modest white buildings, Mr. Green comes to a stop. He opens my

door, as he's been instructed to do, and leads me to a black door, which, as a matter of courtesy, is already slightly open. Another man nods at Mr. Green and escorts me inside. After that, I am alone.

I walk up the stairs to a small landing. The second door to the left is ajar. I enter without knocking. The room is smaller than I expected, darker, and out the window I see a small tree, one of those English trees that seem perennially half dead, but somehow charming. To my left, I see two arms emerging from a velvet armchair. The light near the armchair is dim. The grainy light of a film, you know, a real film from the 60's. Pale, like the film's been stored in a canister deep in the archives.

She says nothing. She is not looking at me. *Hello?* I say. Addressing the velvet or the arms. The carpet is soft underfoot and I trip over something. *Hello?*

*Why don't you take a seat?*

I sit down. On what, I don't know. She is arranged, her open bag on the floor, her long leg going into a shoe.

*I like panel shows,* I say.

*But that's not why you're here, is it?*

I look at the velvet chair, the thick carpet, the small tree in the yard.

*Poor Obama.*