

The go-between

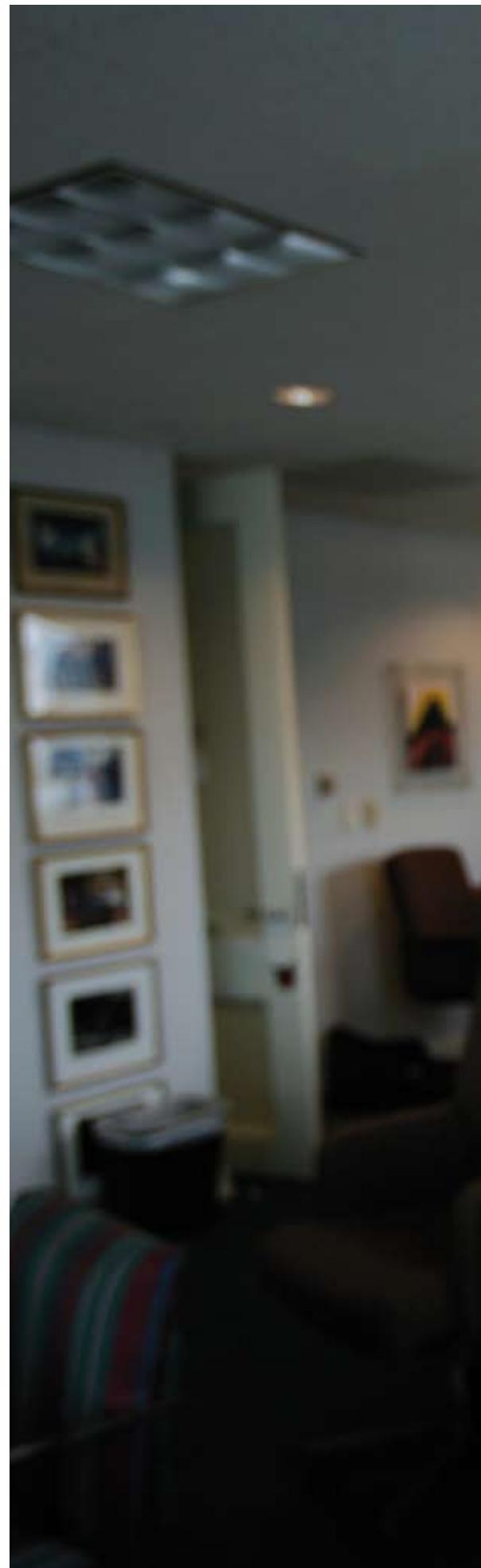
Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and Tony Blair all have Robert Barnett to thank for their multimillion-dollar book contracts. How did a Washington lawyer come to be the power-broker behind some of the biggest deals in publishing?

By D.D. Guttenplan

B

ARACK OBAMA AND JOHN McCAIN DON'T AGREE ABOUT MUCH, BUT WHEN, IN THE MIDDLE OF ONE OF THEIR DEBATES THIS MONTH, OBAMA REFERRED TO "THOSE OF US, LIKE MYSELF AND SENATOR McCAIN, WHO DON'T NEED HELP [FINANCIALLY]", HIS OPPONENT NODDED. Whoever comes out ahead in 10 days time, the next president of the United States will be a rich man. McCain made his first million the old-fashioned way: he married the daughter of a wealthy businessman. But Barack Obama, the son of an absent African father and a mother who relied on government-issued food stamps to feed her children, became a millionaire in a more modern manner – on the back of a book deal.

It happened circuitously. In 1990, Obama was already enough of a celebrity – the first black president of the prestigious Harvard Law Review – for the New York publishers Simon & Schuster to



*Washington lawyer
cum literary agent
Robert Barnett in
his office at
Williams & Connolly*



offer a “six-figure contract” for a proposed autobiography. The only problem was that Obama was too busy finishing law school to write the book, and the contract was eventually cancelled. By the time Obama finished *Dreams From My Father* – published by Times Books in 1995 – his advance was only \$40,000. In 2004, Obama – now a state senator in Illinois and a candidate for the US senate – was chosen to be the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention, but his book was long out of print. Yet when he arrived in Washington, the \$169,300 senator’s salary was not going to be his mainstay: two weeks before he was sworn in, Crown Books announced a \$1.9m three-book contract with the senator-elect.

As *The Audacity of Hope* shot up the bestseller lists, taking a reprint of *Dreams From My Father* along with it, Obama became a rich man. But like McCain, he had help: before that deal with Crown, he left his longtime book agent for Robert Barnett, a Washington lawyer also responsible for negotiating Tony Blair’s £4.5m contract with Random House a year ago today. It was a move that revealed a streak of ruthless calculation that may help land Obama in the White House. But to Washington insiders it was far from surprising. “Nobody games the system better than Bob Barnett,” says Peter Osnos, a former Washington Post journalist and head of Times Books when the company acquired *Dreams From My Father*.

Barnett does more than handle book contracts; he negotiated Blair’s consulting contracts with Morgan Stanley (reported at £2m a year) and Zurich Financial Services (more than £500,000 a year) as well as lucrative speaking engagements – last November, a single speech to Chinese businessmen earned the former PM a reported \$500,000. Barnett tailors his

As well as Tony Blair’s £4.5m book deal, Barnett negotiated his consulting contracts

service to the client’s priorities, playing career coach as much as book agent. With his well-cut suits and Savile Row shirts, his tortoiseshell glasses and ornate antique cufflinks, Barnett seems at home in the corridors of power. “Many of these people who come out of government have an enormous number of offers,” he says. “The first thing we do is sit down and say ‘What are your goals? Do you want to live here or live there? You wanna make money or have fun?’”

WHEN ROBERT BARNETT WAS A YOUNG LAWYER, HIS FIRM HAD OFFICES IN THE HILL BUILDING, A FEW BLOCKS FROM THE WHITE HOUSE. Just across the street was a People’s Drugstore, and

every day at lunchtime, Clark Clifford, the legendary capital insider, “dressed to the nines, wearing a hat, would go in, sit at the lunch counter and eat a tuna sandwich. So if you wanted to see him you could just go to People’s and there he’d be, eating his sandwich and reading *The Washington Post*,” Barnett remembered. Clifford advised US presidents from Harry Truman to John Kennedy to Jimmy Carter, served as secretary of defence in the Johnson administration and was widely regarded as the most influential attorney in Washington – a description many people now apply to Barnett, whose client list includes Bill and Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush and her daughter Jenna, Dick and Lynne Cheney and their daughter Mary, Paul Wolfowitz, Karl Rove and Alan Greenspan – as well as Blair and Obama.

Barnett resists the comparison. “Clark served at high governmental positions. I’ve never done that. Clark Clifford is well above my pay grade.” He also refrains from pointing out that after four decades as the capital’s prime fixer, Clifford, who died in 1998, ended his career in disgrace thanks to his involvement in the BCCI scandal, where his role as front man for the bank’s American operations left him, as he later lamented, with the “choice of either seeming venal or stupid”. Not even his harshest critics would accuse Robert Barnett of stupidity.

As for venal, Bob Woodward, the reporter whose stories brought down Nixon and who has been a Barnett client for 20 years, describes him as “the last bargain in Washington”. Now a managing partner at Williams & Connolly, the capital’s best-connected, most-feared law firm, Barnett commands fees at the top end of the scale: reports range from \$750 to \$1,000 an hour. “He charges a lot by the hour,” says Woodward. “But he doesn’t take 10 or 15 per cent [of book advances and profits, as most agents do]. And when you get an hour of his time you are getting all of the knowledge and the experience that he has.” Not to mention the contacts. On any given





Though there are certain people Barnett claims he would never represent, his talent list is defiantly non-partisan. Clockwise from far left, Tony Blair, Bill Clinton, Jenna Bush and Lynne Cheney



Sunday in America, it is not unusual for a television talk show to feature one of Barnett's clients refereeing a debate between two others.

Normally, the man who The New York Times has dubbed "the Kingpin of Washington book deals" and "the doorman" of the capital's revolving-door culture, prefers to remain in the background. And yet at the debate between Sarah Palin and Joe Biden, Barnett became something of a pundit himself, his comments being quoted on Sky News and numerous websites. Although most of the stories identified Barnett as a long-time Democratic adviser, none of them noted that Gwen Ifill, host of PBS's *Washington Week* and moderator of the debate, is also a Barnett client.

All Washington lawyers are political. But over the years of Barnett's rise to influence the meaning of "political" has changed – from blood sport to "just business". Last winter, when Hillary Clinton was slugging it out with Obama and John Edwards for the Democratic presidential nomination, Barnett had negotiated book deals for all three. In 2004, when Edwards faced Dick Cheney in the vice-presidential debate, Barnett was Edwards' debate coach, impersonating Cheney in practice sessions. This year, Barnett was coaching Hillary Clinton. Their friendship, which dates back to before her husband's presidency, is sufficiently close, and Barnett sufficiently tactful, that he was reportedly given the job of informing her about her husband's "friendship" with Monica Lewinsky.

Mandy Grunwald, head of media relations for the Clinton campaign, said that in an organisation famous for infighting, Barnett "got along with everyone. He's not a polarising figure". Barnett's business relationships with Edwards and Obama, she said, never caused the Clinton campaign any concern. "John and Barack had no question they could trust him. And we never had any question we could trust him."

BORN IN WAUKEGAN, ILLINOIS, THE SON OF A FEDERAL CIVIL SERVANT, BARNETT GRADUATED FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN AND WENT ON TO STUDY LAW AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.

"When you go to a doctor, you don't ask 'What are his politics?'"

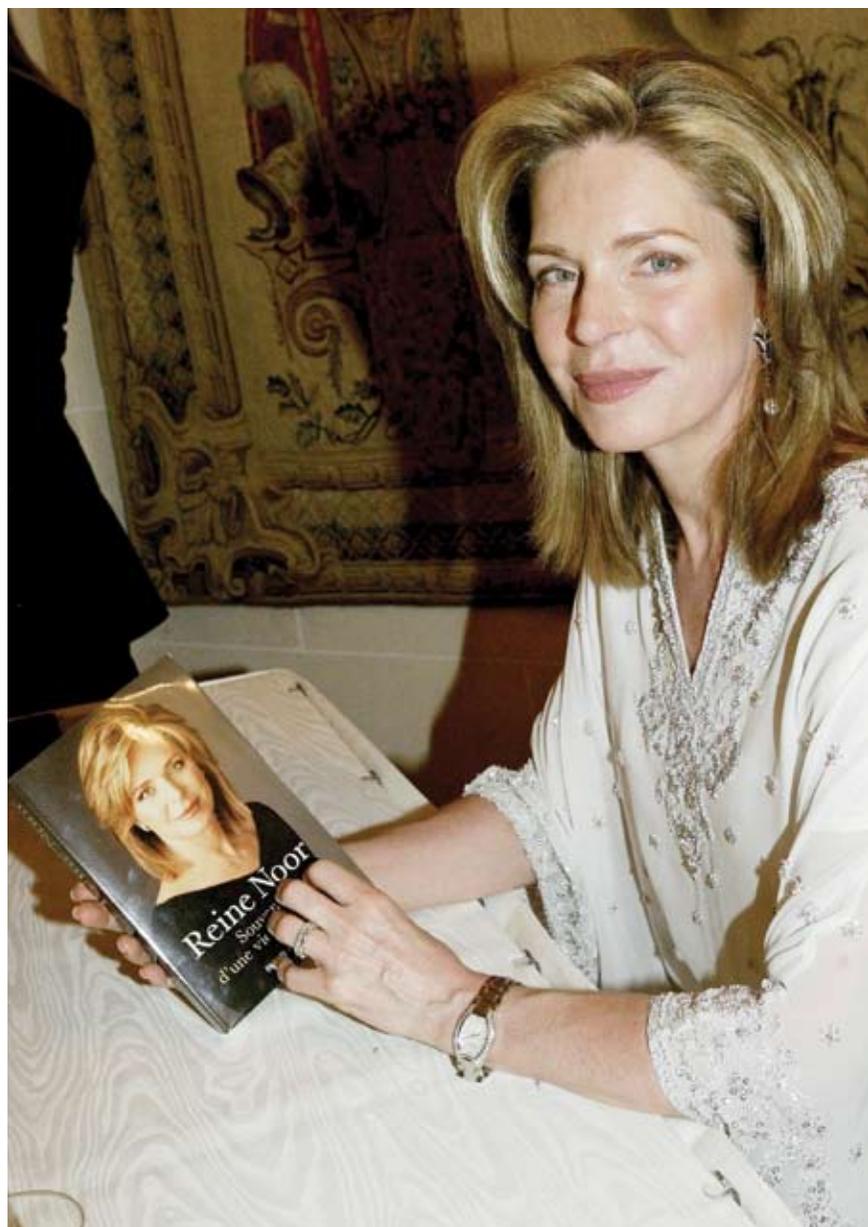
There he won a place on the Law Review (as comment editor), and went on after graduation to clerk for a federal judge in New Orleans and then Byron White at the Supreme Court. A job as legislative aide to Minnesota senator Walter Mondale allowed Barnett to remain in Washington, where he joined Williams & Connolly in 1975. When Jimmy Carter picked Mondale as his running mate in 1976, Barnett took a break to work on the vice-presidential campaign for a year. "And of course we won, so that was great."

Eight years later, when Mondale chose Geraldine Ferraro to be his running mate, he asked Barnett to help her prepare for the vice-presidential debates. If the Democrats had won in 1984, Barnett might well have been tempted to join the administration. Instead, he returned to the law. But his practice was taking a new direction. "My wife was a producer for Fred Graham, the [CBS] law correspondent, and he wanted to use a lawyer, not an agent. Then I worked for a woman named Susan Mercandetti who was the producer at *Nightline* with Ted Koppel [on ABC]. Then I represented a guy who was the central American correspondent at NBC. So I had somebody at each network."

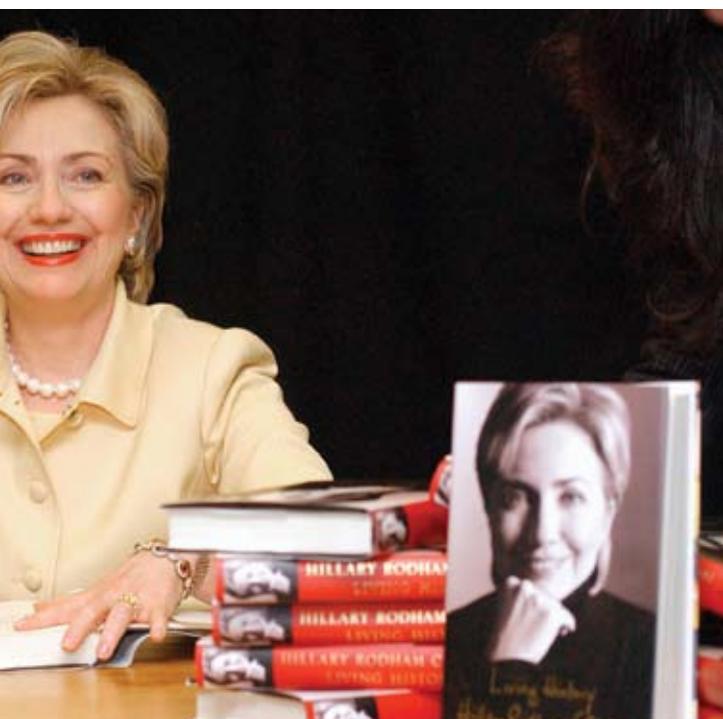
Meanwhile, Ferraro was mulling over a book. No great shakes as a legislator, as a vice-presidential candidate she hadn't even been able to carry her own district. But as an author, the controversies which had dogged her campaign – her husband's refusal to release his tax returns, her son's arrest for cocaine – only added to her appeal. "Everybody wanted Gerry to write a book," recalls Barnett. "So I hired an agent, and worked with the agent, and we got the first seven-figure Washington autobiography."

Barnett also realised he could do this on his own. The following year, David Stockman, who had been Ronald Reagan's budget director, "wanted to do a book. I auditioned. He picked me because he liked my charging model, and no agent was involved. And then I'd done one Republican and one Democrat."

Ferraro's million-dollar book deal wasn't just the beginning of a new career. It also marked a change in the way the public saw politicians – and the way politicians made money. Says Peter Osnos: "The assumption has taken hold that any significant figure in public service should be entitled



Barnett's catholic client list covers royals, politicians and economists. Clockwise from left, Queen Noor of Jordan, Hillary Clinton and Alan Greenspan



to sell their memoirs at a very high number. This has a corrupting effect. Public service is supposed to be its own reward. [Instead] public service has become an opportunity for a post-service payday." Osnos knows he sounds quixotic, but the public seemed to agree – at least at first. Even in 1994, when Newt Gingrich, then speaker of the House of Representatives, signed a \$4.5m contract with HarperCollins, the outcry was so great Gingrich had to give back the money. And yet the outrage hasn't seemed to hurt sales. These days, it is Joe Biden, with his declaration during the vice-presidential debate that all his equity is in his house – "that's my total investment" – who is the exception: Obama and McCain have both been fixtures on the bestsellers list.

BARNETT'S IMPACT ON THE PUBLISHING BUSINESS MAY BE EVEN GREATER THAN HIS IMPACT ON POLITICS. Stephen Rubin, head of Doubleday/Broadway in New York and, as US publisher of *The Da Vinci Code*, something of an expert on the economics of the blockbuster business, says: "It's shocking to me more authors don't do this. You do the math." If the reports of Tony Blair's advance are anywhere near the truth – neither Blair nor his spokesman Matthew Doyle would comment – a standard 15 per cent agent's commission on £4.5m would be £675,000. Even if Barnett spent 200 hours on the book, at £500 an hour, Blair would still have saved more than £500,000.

Barnett's business model doesn't suit all authors. "I probably get 50 proposals a year I don't make sense for," he concedes happily. "I make no sense for a first-time novelist in Vermont who's going to get a \$10,000 advance. I make better sense for Bill Clinton or Tony Blair or James Patterson." In the case of Patterson, who dependably produces eight best-selling novels a year (only actually writing a portion of them), the savings can run into tens of millions. Patterson, a former ad executive whose books earned \$50m in the past year alone – only J.K. Rowling made more – left his third agent for Barnett early last year. And he probably doesn't even need the full treatment.

But for those who do need more assistance, says Barnett, that "can involve helping with the proposal, going to the right publishers, deciding whether to negotiate or to have an auction. Most agents are not lawyers. I do the contract. I do the rollout. Sometimes I edit the book, if the client wishes." Barnett is an acknowledged expert at each of these stages. When he auctioned Ted Kennedy's memoirs, which sold for a reported \$8m, he told the senator not to bother writing a proposal. Instead he had Kennedy host a series of elegant lunches with each interested publisher. "Publishers kind of know what the story is," says Barnett. "You wanna have a meeting. That's important." And Barnett "gives great meeting", says Stephen Rubin. "There's no bullshit. He's never in a rush. What you see is what you get."

"There is no bullshit. What you see is what you get"

Gail Rebeck, who bought Tony Blair's memoir for Random House, and also signed James Patterson, says that "the thing about Bob that always amazes me is that he runs this huge business. He's still engaged in politics. He looks after this select client list. He has a tentacle-like ability to be in touch with quite complex negotiations. And he has an incredible eye for detail."

When the actual book is published, Barnett oversees every aspect of "the rollout". For Hillary Clinton's memoirs "we planned *60 Minutes*, we planned which NPR [National Public Radio] programme, which CNN programmes, which newspapers, which magazines. I do all that, which most agents don't get involved in." When Lynne Cheney's memoir *Blue Skies, No Fences* came out last October, Barnett's wife, Rita Braver, gave viewers of the CBS programme *Sunday Morning* a guided tour of the vice-presidential residence – and though the segment included a disclosure statement advising that Braver's husband represented Cheney, the broadcast remains controversial.

IN PERSON, BARNETT IS EXTREMELY AFFABLE, BUT HE WIELDS THAT AFFABILITY AS A WEAPON AGAINST ANY INTERVIEWER GAUCHE ENOUGH TO SUGGEST THAT WORKING BOTH SIDES OF THE POLITICAL STREET – and all the angles of a deal – risks at least the appearance of conflict of interest. "When you go to a doctor you don't ask 'What are his politics?' You want to know if he's a good doctor," he says. "If you've got appendicitis you go to the best doctor for appendicitis, and you don't care what their politics are. And if you're the doctor, you don't ask what their politics are."

When I press the point, asking if helping a hate figure for Democrats such as Oliver North to cash in on his political notoriety is really the same as removing a diseased appendix, Barnett says simply: "I find again and again that most people – not all people – have saving graces, and if you care to, you can find those and enjoy them."

So is there anyone he wouldn't work for? "I'm not going to give you examples... but there are people – well-known people – who I consider purveyors of hate, and I have turned them down and they're quite successful and I wish them well. But I don't want to have anything to do with them." >

More interesting was Barnett's response when I asked him the name of the agent he had worked with on his first book deal (the Ferraro autobiography). At first he said, "A woman. I can't remember." Then, when I e-mailed him a few follow-up questions, and he answered all but that one, he claimed he didn't want the "individual - whomever it may be - badgered by colleagues" for launching him into publishing. In the acknowledgements of *Ferraro: My Story*, Esther Newberg is thanked for her contribution "above and beyond that of literary agent". Newberg, whose clients include Thomas Friedman (currently number three on The New York Times non-fiction bestseller list) and Patricia Cornwell (number three on the mass-market fiction list), doesn't agree with Barnett's account of the Ferraro negotiations. "He didn't work with me. He did the contracts later. I sold the book in an auction. He watched." She adds that "three-quarters of the people he [Barnett] represents are morally repugnant to me". Apprised of Newberg's comments via e-mail, Barnett replied: "[She] taught me a lot, but seems to have regretted it - and been jealous about it - ever since."

Barnett's clients rely on him to coach them in a rough league, so a certain amount of ruthlessness probably goes with the territory. Certainly, if you ask them to describe what he does for them, toughness is taken for granted. As is intelligence. "I always felt exceptionally comfortable taking his advice," says Alan Greenspan, who came to Barnett through his wife, the NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell, another Barnett client. Nor, despite the headlines, is it always about the money. Greenspan wanted to find a publisher (it turned out to be Penguin, a sister company to the FT) that didn't expect a full book tour. Woodward wanted a way to remain at

"Clients rely on him to coach them in a rough league... ruthlessness goes with the territory"

The Washington Post and to stay with an editor - Simon & Schuster's Alice Mayhew - he trusted.

For Woodward, loyalty was non-negotiable. "He's able to do great on the money. But he always says 'Don't auction your books.' He knows a way to figure out what your interests are." Woodward recalls going to Barnett with a \$5m offer from the University of Texas for his and Carl Bernstein's Watergate papers. "He said, 'Absolutely, you don't want to do this.' I said 'Actually, I think I do. But I want you to write the contract.' He was sure it wasn't going to work - one of the conditions was that we retain physical custody of anything relating to

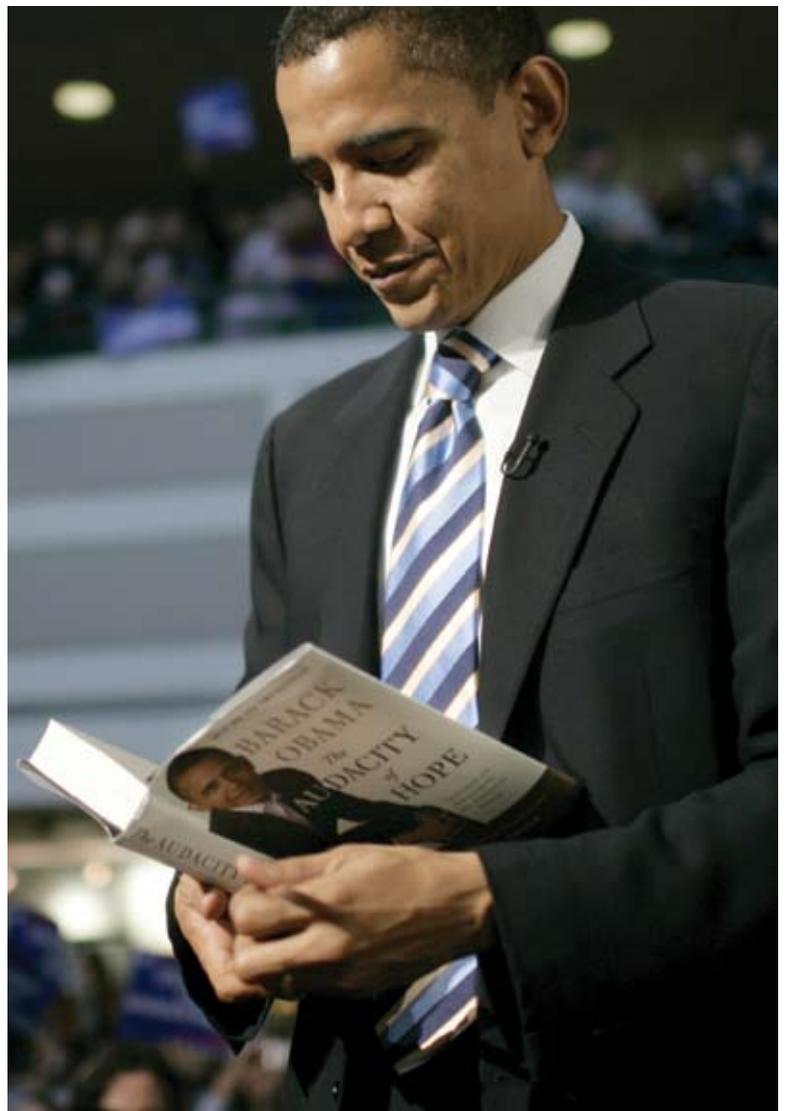
confidential sources as long as they are alive. He said, "They won't do it." But Texas agreed to everything."

On another occasion, it was Barnett who said no. Without telling anyone, Woodward had written the draft of a book detailing his relationship with Mark Felt, the Watergate source known as "Deep Throat" whose identity he'd kept secret for more than 30 years. Barnett insisted Woodward obtain signed releases from Felt, his family and his doctors. "But when I met with Mark Felt to get his permission, it was clear he was not [mentally] competent," Woodward says, adding that Barnett's response was "fierce: 'You don't want to be seen taking advantage of someone who is not competent.' He and Ben Bradlee convinced me I shouldn't do it until Felt was deceased." It was only after Felt, 91 years old and suffering from dementia, outed himself in May 2005 that Woodward felt free to confirm his identity and to publish *The Secret Man*.

"This isn't just a super lawyer, a power player," says Woodward. "I can call 500 lawyers in Washington, and 495 will say, 'Great! I'll draft the contract.' You want the person who will say 'You absolutely shouldn't do that.'"

How would Barnett advise Gordon Brown? Though the question is rhetorical, the answer is not. "He's never spoken to me about a book. He and Alan Greenspan are good friends. I've met him two or three times but he's never said he wants to do a book." Of course, if he did, Barnett would be happy to help. He and his wife come to London every couple of months and are regulars at the Stafford Hotel in St James's. But for the moment, he's anticipating a bumper crop of new Washington clients in November - whoever wins on election day. "After every change of administration there are always people who want to do books," he says. Robert Barnett, genie of the revolving door, is open for business. ■

D.D. Guttenplan is the London correspondent for the Nation.



Barack Obama was advanced just \$40,000 for his first book. Subsequently he hired Robert Barnett - who negotiated a \$1.9m three-book deal that commenced with "The Audacity of Hope"