

# INSIDE THE EAST WING

A new book pulls back the curtains on the First Couple

**T**HIS MONTH, JODI Kantor, 36, a Washington correspondent for *The New York Times*, delves into the lives of the president and First Lady with *The Obamas* (Little, Brown and Company, \$29.99). It's billed as a penetrating, gossipy page-turner of a biography about their time in the White House. No advance copies were sent out—the pub date is January 10—and Kantor was on orders from her publisher not to reveal too much. But she did share some insights with *Chicago* contributing editor Carol Felsenthal. Here is an edited excerpt.

**The Obamas didn't talk to you for the book. So how did you get your information?** The story I wanted to write was never going to come from the Obamas' lips. There's so much they can't say. I'd [previously] interviewed each of them on different topics, from religion to parenting to their marriage. I interviewed 33 White House staffers, most of them many times. I wouldn't trade that for a quick interview with the president, because I'm not sure he's at liberty to discuss the real questions I asked in this book. In a way, it goes to Barack Obama's own predicament as president:



He's such a gifted storyteller. Yet can he really tell his own story anymore?

**When the Obamas left for D.C., they said they would come home about every six weeks. Yet they've hardly been back at all.** They did not have a clear idea of what the presidency was going to be like. Look at the contrast between George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Bush's father was the president and before that was the vice president, so the Bushes spent holidays in the White House; they knew the staff, the routines, the traditions. The Obamas didn't have any of that. Four years before the Obamas went to the White House, they were living in this condo apartment in Hyde Park, which I've been

in; fairly small, has a very small closet, so it's hard to figure out how Michelle Obama's clothes, even her more modest wardrobe back then, fit in there.

**Are they close to any former presidents or First Ladies?** They have never had the Clintons over to dinner in the White House, which to some people speaks to the fact that the Obamas have not been schmoozers at all. In Washington, they are considered quite introverted.

**Would the president be more outgoing if Michelle were not there to restrain him?** You could say the opposite. Michelle Obama is the real politician in the family in the sense she is more effusive, better at connecting instantly with people. A good source of mine once said to me, "Here's what you have to remember: She is Bill Clinton, and he is Hillary."

**What if there is no second term?** Eric Whitaker told me that the president has a very unrealistic fantasy. [He] thinks that once he's out of the White House he's going to be able to walk around like a normal person again. But their South Side house is very exposed, not really a great place for an ex-president to live. It's hard to imagine them going anywhere but Chicago. Everyone I've talked to thinks they'll come back and yet lead a very different life from the one they've led here so far. ●

## F—ING GOLDEN? NO, F—ING KHAKI



When he was governor, Rod Blagojevich had two looks: dapper power suits (he spent \$205,000 at the custom clothier Oxxford) and jogging outfits, usually snug tanks and short shorts. If his sentencing goes through on December 6, Blago will trade those threads for standard-issue khaki jumpsuits provided by the Federal Bureau of Prisons and gym clothes from the prison commissary. We browsed the catalog from Bob Barker Company, the nation's leading prison-supplies firm, to see what he can expect. —DAVID BERNSTEIN

THE SUIT LOOK  
\$35.95

THE JOGGING LOOK  
\$24.64

