

Alum Pete Souza's book on Barack Obama chronicles  
eight extraordinary years

BY JOEL BROWN

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**PORTRAIT**

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**PRESIDENT**

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Official White House photos by Pete Souza



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The First Dad, with Malia (left) and Sasha outside the Oval Office.

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man and his daughter dance joyously to the music of Prince, playing just feet away. The president and top national security officials watch warily as Navy SEALs raid Osama bin Laden's secret compound halfway around the world. A tall, very famous man bends deeply to forge a bond with a small boy.

Pete Souza (COM'76) started taking pictures of

Barack Obama in 2005, when he was a *Chicago Tribune* photographer based in Washington, D.C., and Obama was a freshly minted senator from Illinois. The connection they made landed Souza the job as Obama's chief official White House photographer, from the first day of his presidency to the last, eight years later. And Obama granted him a stunning level of access, from the biggest moments to the smallest.

Souza had been a White House photographer for President Ronald Reagan, an assistant professor of photojournalism at Ohio University, and a freelancer for *National Geographic*, but photographing the first African American president was the job of a lifetime.

His new coffee-table book, *Obama: An Intimate Portrait* (Little, Brown, 2017), features eight years of pictures, plus an introduction and a photo of Souza—both by Obama. "Souza's photographs touchingly reveal Obama's reticence and self-doubt," the *Guardian* wrote in its review. And from the *Chicago Tribune*: "In conveying both the weight of the office and President Obama's full engagement with its demands, Souza fuels our admiration—and stokes our regret."

The College of Communication honored Souza with the Hugo Shong Lifetime Achievement in Communication Award on February 2. "The collection of photographs Pete Souza has assembled is the most powerful window into the Obama White House and the Obama family," says Thomas Fiedler (COM'71), dean of COM.

Now a freelancer, Souza talked with *Bostonia* about his pictures and his time with the president.



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The president and First Lady Michelle Obama at a White House dinner for US governors.

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**BOSTONIA: How did you get such extraordinary access to President Obama?**

SOUZA: I spent a lot of time with him in his first year in the Senate, in 2005, and went on a couple of trips with him. When you're in that close proximity to someone, you get to know them, especially when you're in their private zone, their personal space. I think he liked the way I worked—very quietly. I didn't interrupt what he was doing. And he could see I took my work seriously and I was after authentic photographs.

**But there must have been times when you were ordered out of the room?**

Not really. One of the things about being a seasoned photographer is that I've been down this road before, dealt with a lot of people in a lot of situations. I think I had a good intuition about if I needed to leave the room and when I needed to leave the room. My goal was to never

have him have to say that to me. If he was having a one-on-one that was literally just him and another person, I knew I needed to get the pictures and then back quietly out of the room, mostly so his guest would not be intimidated that there was someone lurking.

**Let's talk about a couple of your best-known images. Start with the *Situation Room*, showing Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and others watching via video feed as Navy SEALs raided Osama bin Laden's secret compound on May 1, 2011.**

This is an important moment in our nation's history. Here you had all the most powerful men and women of our government in the same room at the same time, and they were helpless in what they were doing. They were monitoring the raid as it happened, but they had made their decision days before and there's nothing they can do

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President Barack Obama at the Resolute desk in the Oval Office on October 14, 2016.

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except watch it play out. I think that's what leads to the anxiety you see in all those faces. And I think the picture gave people— It put them in the room, right? I think that's why it garnered so much interest. People look at pictures different ways. Yet on this picture people had pretty similar reactions.

**At the other end of the spectrum is the May 2009 photo of Obama bending down so a young African American visitor can touch his head, known as *Hair Like Mine*. It must have gotten some powerful reactions.**

Two things. One, it tells you a lot about the president. Yeah, he took the job seriously, but he would also bend over to let some little kid rub his head. It also tells you something about that little boy. A four-year-old African American kid looking up at the president of the United States, who looks like him, who's the same color he is. I think a lot of people identified with it because of that.

I've got this African American kid who lives two doors down from me. When I was putting the book together, just sort of as a tease I posted a group of photos



CHIP SOMODEVILLA/GETTY IMAGES

White House photographer Pete Souza, camera ready, with Obama during an event celebrating the Affordable Care Act in 2010.

on Instagram and asked people to vote on which one should be on the back cover. And the next day I was walking out to my car, and the kid came running up to me. 'Sir! Sir! My mom and I saw your post and we voted!' And I said, 'Which one did you vote for?' And all he did was put his hand on his head, and I almost broke down right there, because it touched me so much.

**Leaving the Oval Office must have been a double whammy for you emotionally—leaving the job and the president on one hand, and seeing Donald Trump taking the country in a very different direction on the other.**

Number two was the punch. When you have put in the kind of time and emotional energy I did over eight years—I was ready to leave. That wasn't a down thing for me. It was time. I don't miss going to the White House every day. It was a great privilege, but it was also a grind. But what's happening to the country—



In one of Souza's most iconic photos, *Situation Room*, Obama, Vice President Joe Biden (far left), and members of the national security team watch in suspense as Navy SEALs raid Osama bin Laden's secret compound in May 2011. "This is an important moment in our nation's history," Souza says. "Here you had all the most powerful men and women of our government in the same room at the same time, and they were helpless in what they were doing."

and this is more as a citizen than as the White House photographer—that is upsetting to me.

**You've been tweaking Trump with Instagram images of Obama that highlight the differences between them. But you let your pictures do the talking.**

It just kind of innocently started late on January 20 when I posted a photo of President Obama after we left Trump's swearing-in. We're in the helicopter flying to Andrews Air Force Base, but the pilot flew by the White House, and I got a picture of him looking out the window at it, and I posted it on the first day of my private Instagram account, and I think my caption was just "Farewell." And the response to it was sort of overwhelming, which was a surprise to me. It got thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of comments. I started to realize people still wanted to see pictures of him. So I continued to do that, trying to be subtle in the words I used to accompany the photographs. Certainly I was more respectful in what I said about them on Instagram than what some people wrote on Twitter. I'll kind of leave it at that.

In Souza's 2009 photo *Hair Like Mine*, Obama bends down so a young African American boy can touch his head. "It tells you a lot about the president," says Souza. "Yeah, he took the job seriously, but he would also bend over to let some little kid rub his head."

