

Baracketology

For the first seven Marches of his presidency, Barack Obama spent the Tuesday before the start of the NCAA men's basketball tournament very publicly filling out his brackets. Those picks, revealed with ESPN's Andy Katz and posted like any policy statement on WhiteHouse.gov, touched off curiosity, punditry, and occasional controversy.

Analysts had their opinions. Obama's tendency to pick the chalk was emblematic of his cautious nature. He had blundered by ignoring the women's bracket, an oversight he acknowledged by sharing his women's picks with Katz's colleagues Rebecca Lobo or Doris Burke every March after that first. The mere fact that he chose to devote time to the exercise was scandalous, majority whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.)

charged, when the White House hadn't yet delivered a budget. (A typical Fox News chyron, from 2014:

"OBAMA PICKS NCAA BRACKET WHILE PUTIN DECLARES CRIMEA AS PART OF RUSSIA.")

As for the deep runs he foretold for teams in swing states—before he was safely reelected, that's where half of the teams to make his Final Fours came from—wasn't that what you'd expect from a politician? "A complete coincidence," Obama told Jay Leno over laughter on *The Tonight Show*. Data guru Nate Silver nonetheless reverse-engineered Obama's 2009 bracket with what he called "a logistic regression model" and concluded that the president's picks did indeed have a swing-state bias.

As it happened, "Baracketology" could be traced to a seemingly unrelated figure: retired general Colin Powell. During the 2008 campaign, to balance an ESPN *Outside the Lines* segment about Cindy McCain's passion for auto racing, Katz pitched a piece looking into Obama's connection to basketball, including the role his brother-in-law, Oregon State coach Craig Robinson, played in the senator's decision to run. Two

Sundays before Election Day, Katz and an ESPN crew caught up with the campaign at a Hampton Inn in Dunn, North Carolina, near Fort Bragg, where Obama was scheduled to speak. As Obama sat for the interview that morning, advisor David Axelrod and press secretary Robert Gibbs got word that Powell had just endorsed their candidate on *Meet the Press*. The news meant that Obama would need to revise his prepared remarks. But until Axelrod and Gibbs could discuss exactly how, the candidate wouldn't be leaving that Hampton Inn—and Katz suddenly found himself with forty extra minutes.

"Now, we're just talking," Katz recalled. "And I say, 'Senator, if you win, how about I come to the White House and fill out the bracket with you?' He says, 'Sure.' And I turn to Axelrod and Gibbs and say, 'You heard that?' And they say, 'Yeah, yeah.'"

At that, Katz's producer leaned over and whispered to him, "You realize, you may have just invited yourself to the White House."

Katz clinched the deal during the transition. And as members of the ESPN delegation left the White House that

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DECEMBER 1971

Barack Obama Sr. gives his son a basketball as a Christmas gift during a holiday visit to Hawaii

WINTER 1977-78

16 year-old Obama throws down the first dunk of his life

MARCH 1979

A senior at Punahou, Obama's team wins a Hawaiian state basketball title

SPRING 1990

Michelle Obama asks her brother to discreetly assess the character of the man she has been dating for a year by taking him along for a game

SPRING 2007

Obama plays basketball against local teams to build relationships with voters

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The
Audacity
of
Hoop

first year, lugging away a marked-up whiteboard graced with the presidential seal, they found themselves trailed by two *Politico* reporters desperate for a peek at Obama's picks.

In 2011 the filming nearly didn't take place. Katz later learned that, earlier in the day, Obama had met to plan the raid that would kill Osama bin Laden. "In retrospect, I could tell," Katz said. "He was into [the tournament], he knew it, but he was a little rushed." Days earlier, a tsunami had hit the Japanese coast; at the request of the White House, ESPN turned the unveiling of the bracket into a kind of public service announcement, flashing a phone number for donations on the screen.

"When it first started, Republicans were critical," Katz said. "Rush Limbaugh was taking shots and there was a feeding frenzy on Fox." But by Obama's second term the practice had jumped the aisle, as politicians of all stripes tried to bond with their respective electorates. GOP senators Rob Portman of Ohio, Rand Paul of Kentucky, and Marco Rubio of Florida began to make public their brackets or predictions. In 2015, joining Katz

in the Rotunda of Congress, Paul Ryan (R-Wisc.) talked up his home-state Badgers and Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.) touted Gonzaga, which sits in her district. At the same time, presidential hopeful Jeb Bush was pushing out on social media a full bracket, as if it were some position paper. Indeed, 2015 was the year much of the world accepted that the president would fill out a bracket, and instead used his picks for validation or motivation. "The fuck wrong with Barack Obama?" said North Carolina State's Anthony (Cat) Barber in the locker room after the Wolfpack, the president's pick as second-round losers to Villanova, upset the Wildcats. Brenda Frese, coach of the top-seeded Maryland women, was less profane but just as eager to rub it in the First Fan's face. "Sorry, man, but we had to bust your bracket!" she said in the locker room after her Terps ruined Obama's upset special, Princeton—whereupon her players pummeled a cardboard cutout of the president, who had at least owned up to a bias because his niece played for the Tigers. Confirmation that Baracketology had

become part of the natural order, in official Washington and beyond, also came in 2015, when ESPN delivered that year's presidential bracket boards to the Smithsonian. They were placed in storage for possible inclusion in a future exhibit about how American culture gives rise to shared experiences.

During the 2012 campaign Katz was asked if he would continue to do the brackets with a President Romney. "There'd be an obligation to ask out of bipartisanship," he said. "But we probably wouldn't do it if he didn't follow the sport." In March 2012, asked for his own picks, Romney confessed, "I'm not plugged in well enough" to do a bracket. (Three years later Romney entered the ESPN Tournament Challenge—and placed in the 99.9th percentile.)

Said Katz, "With [George W.] Bush, if you did a baseball bracket, he'd hit it out of the park. With Obama, this has worked for the same reason—because he's interested."

The White House decided it made sense to project the president's basketball brand beyond that of a pickup player. "I don't think anyone

NOVEMBER 2007

At the Iowa Democratic Party's Jefferson-Jackson Dinner, Obama mounts the dais with the Chicago Bulls' pregame introductory music—"Sirius," by the Alan Parsons Project

MARCH 2009

Obama fills out an NCAA men's tournament bracket during a taping with ESPN's Andy Katz, picking North Carolina to win the title, which the Tar Heels will do

JUNE 2009

The National Park Service completes a retrofitting of the South Lawn tennis court into a full basketball court

JULY 2010

Justin Friedlander, a 14-year-old with an inoperable brain tumor, shoots hoops with the President at the White House court

will be elected president by filling out an NCAA bracket,” said Axelrod. “But I do think that that accessibility to a person is important. People want to support people they can relate to and are comfortable with.”

Indeed, Obama was filling out a bracket long before ESPN’s cameras began documenting his picks. That first year, after choosing North Carolina as his champion, he turned to address the camera. “The Tar Heels that are watchin’, I picked you all last year and you let me down,” he said. “This year, don’t embarrass me in front of the nation, all right? I’m counting on you.”

They didn’t embarrass him. For the only time during seven years in the White House, Obama’s pick to win it all actually did. ■

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NOVEMBER 2011

After a state dinner at Parliament House in Canberra, Obama meets Australian guard Patty Mills of the Portland Trail Blazers, who is playing for a club team in Melbourne because of the NBA lockout

JANUARY 2013

In welcoming the 2012 NBA champion Miami Heat to the White House, Obama accepts from LeBron James a basketball signed by the team

AUGUST 2014

To celebrate his 53rd birthday, Obama and a small circle of friends play a round-robin three-on-three tournament at Camp David

JANUARY 2015

Hall of Fame center Kareem Abdul-Jabbar appears with the president at a White House event to urge that \$215 million in support for precision medicine, including genomic data analysis and drug trials, be included in the federal budget

MAY 2015

The White House tweets a photo of “Air POTUS” going up for a layup as a Punahou School senior

