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Many watch brands enter into contracts with well-known ambassadors. Far fewer watches have been chosen by Presidents. This is a tale of two such watches.

# Barack Obama's WATCHES

BY JEFF STEIN



**M**y adventure with Barack Obama's watches began in September 2008 with a call from my friend Rachel Branch, senior director of public relations and education at TAG Heuer North America.

"Jeff, we are looking at a photo of Barack Obama on the cover of the July 2007 issue of *Vanity Fair*, and he's wearing one of our watches; probably a Series 1500 diver. Can you have a quick look and confirm the reference number and production dates?"

After five months, hundreds of Google searches, and reviewing thousands of photographs, my "quick look" has evolved from researching one watch to a study of the imagery and popularity of President Obama and his watches.

The initial task of identifying Barack Obama's watch—shown on the cover of that *Vanity Fair*—proved to be fairly simple. Of the twenty different commemorative covers of this issue of *Vanity Fair*, all featuring celebrity portraits by Annie Leibovitz, two covers

showed Obama. While both these covers only showed a portion of his watch, peeking out of his cuff, they revealed some distinctive features—especially a rotating steel bezel, with raised gold triangular markers.

A few visits to Getty Images and Flickr yielded some better photos of Obama's watch, and America's leading Heuer historian, retired watchmaker Hans Schrag, took a quick look at the photos and announced with certainty that it was a Series 1500 two-tone diver, reference 955.713G, which was introduced around 1990.

Schrag's timeline seemed consistent with Obama's graduation from law school in 1991 and wedding in 1992. Either of these occasions might have been commemorated with his purchase or receipt of this watch.

## The Series 1500

TAG Heuer's Series 1500 two-tone diver watch came from an era when TAG Heuer focused on professional sports watches. These quartz watches were offered in three sizes, with a variety of dial



(Scott Olson, Getty Images)

and bezel colors. All had the features essential for divers—water resistance to 200 meters, a uni-directional rotating bezel, screw-down crown, sapphire glass, and luminous hands and dial markers.

The Series 1500 watches were positioned at a price point below some of the company's more expensive series and marketed as "a functional instrument at an attractive price." Obama's watch was available on either a leather strap (\$575) or a two-tone bracelet (\$625).

Photos from the archives yielded some interesting information about Obama and his watch-wearing habits: He almost always wears a watch, and for more than fifteen years the only watch he wore was this TAG Heuer model. Over these years, we see photos of Obama lecturing as a law professor, campaigning for office, traveling to Africa, and addressing the Senate, but always wearing this same watch. Perhaps it was only on the basketball court that he went watchless.

#### **Time for a Change?**

Despite my quick success in iden-

tifying Barack Obama's TAG Heuer, confusion arose when I noticed that in more recent photos Obama appeared to have retired his TAG Heuer in favor of another watch. His new watch was an oversized steel chronograph with a black dial and classic tri-compax design. Still, even as I studied this watch from every possible angle, I was unable to identify it. I found

that I was in good company, as there was much speculation, but no consensus, about the identity of Obama's new chronograph.

This mysterious chronograph—captured in numerous photos, blown up and studied pixel-by-pixel—had become something of a Rorschach test for watch enthusiasts as participants in online discussion forums

## Perhaps it was only on the basketball court that Obama went watchless



President Obama wearing his Jorg Gray quartz chronograph with the shield of the Secret Service while campaigning. (Coutesy www.dreamstime.com)

watch as a gift in August 2007 on the occasion of his 46th birthday.

With these clues, and some information from a contact at the Secret Service headquarters, in Washington, D.C., the details of Obama's second watch soon became clear. It also becomes clear why the watch had eluded identification for such a long period of time.

### Jorg Gray

The watch that Barack Obama has worn daily since August 2007 is a private-label watch manufactured by Jorg Gray known as the Series 6500 chronograph. The Jorg Gray watch company is owned by Logomark, Inc., a California-based company principally dedicated to custom manufacturing items with third-party logos. The Secret Service employees store in Washington, D.C., had ordered approximately fifty of these Series 6500 chronographs, each with the Secret Service shield at the top of the dial. The store, operating on a non-profit basis, sold the watches to Secret Service employees at the "nice price" of \$210.

The Series 6500 features a tri-compax design—a 24-hour indicator at three o'clock, continuous seconds at six o'clock and chrono-

graph minutes at nine o'clock—with a quick-set date at the 4:30 position. The 41-millimeter screw-back case is stainless steel and water resistant to 100 meters. The chronograph is powered by the Japanese Miyota Caliber OS-20 quartz movement.

After identifying these watches—both the TAG Heuer Series 1500 and the Jorg Gray Series 6500—I created a webpage in September 2008 detailing the history of Obama's watches. Traffic on my webpage reached its peak on January 20, 2009, as Obama wore the Jorg Gray chronograph on Inauguration Day, wearing it as he placed his left hand on the Lincoln Bible to take the oath of office and as he danced with wife Michelle at the evening's numerous balls.

Since Obama's inauguration as the 44th President of the United States worldwide interest in his Jorg Gray chronograph has increased dramatically. Ask any search engine for information about Barack Obama's watch or type in the query, "What watch does Obama wear?" and you will find dozens of blog postings, forum messages and online articles that tell the story of these watches. Obama's Jorg Gray chronograph has received worldwide attention, far more than the Timex watches worn by predecessors Bush and Clinton.

saw chronographs ranging from a Panerai to an IWC to a Ulysse Nardin. How could the most photographed man in the world be wearing an oversized chronograph, campaigning through the hot summer with his sleeves rolled up, without the experts being able to identify his watch?

### Happy Birthday!

Further digging through online forums and news articles yielded the two clues that ultimately led to my identification of Obama's chronograph. One message on a discussion forum showed an enlargement of the dial and stated that the design at the top of the dial was the shield of the United States Secret Service. A newswire article suggested that Obama had received this "Secret Service"

### An instant industry

As soon as enthusiasts (and entrepreneurs) realized that watches were available through Logomark distributors, the race was on to offer them to members of the public. A February 20 Google search showed that the Jorg Gray Series 6500 chronographs were available on both Amazon and eBay, through multiple listings on Craigslist, and through various Logomark distributors, all seeking to capitalize on the intense interest in all things Obama-related.

But discerning collectors soon realized that there were, in fact, three types of Series 6500 chronographs being offered—those with the Secret Service shield, the “blanks” with no logo or branding at all, and a new series of Jorg Gray chronographs commemorating Obama’s election as the 44th President of the United States.

### The real thing

The Secret Service employees store sold approximately fifty Jorg Gray Series 6500 chronographs, all bearing the Secret Service shield on the dial. This version of the Series 6500 chronograph is rarest of all and is highly coveted by collectors. Four of these watches have appeared on eBay, fetching prices of up to \$1,525.

Of course, the entrepreneurs (who some might call “opportunists”) quickly realized that the Jorg Gray Series 6500 chronographs were widely available through Logomark dealers, and there was an exceptional, if short-lived,

arbitrage opportunity here—buy a dozen at wholesale, sell twelve individual watches at retail, and make a few dollars for this effort. Accordingly, several persons began offering the “blanks” (Jorg Gray Series 6500 chronographs with no logo or special markings) through a variety of channels. Websites and Amazon.com stores sprang up almost overnight, seeking to capitalize on the sudden demand for “Obama’s watch.”

### An Opportunity

Being in the unique position of having designed and produced the watch that Barack Obama has worn for the last eighteen months and sensing that global Obama-mania was growing stronger each day, Jorg Gray founder and owner, Trevor Gnesin, realized quickly that the Series 6500 represented a unique asset for the brand.

“The worldwide fascination with Barack Obama and the breadth of his appeal is unprecedented,” he says. “He has the highest profile of any person in the world right now, and he is wearing a very visible chronograph that people notice and admire.”

Gnesin also realized that the “wild west” approach—of entrepreneurs offering “blanks” through multiple channels—would dilute



This Jorg Gray Chronograph is now available to consumers worldwide through [www.JorgGray.com](http://www.JorgGray.com) and [www.barackswatch.com](http://www.barackswatch.com). For \$325, one can wear the same timepiece as the president.

the value of this asset with each passing day. So his firm removed the Series 6500 chronograph from its catalog, and quickly developed a special commemorative edition for retail sale.

### The Commemorative edition

The Jorg Gray Series 6500 commemorative edition features the Jorg Gray logo on the dial (in the place of the Secret Service shield) with the caseback engraved to mark Barack Obama’s inauguration as the 44th President of the United States. These watches are currently available exclusively through JorgGray.com and an online partnership with New York City watch retailer Presidential

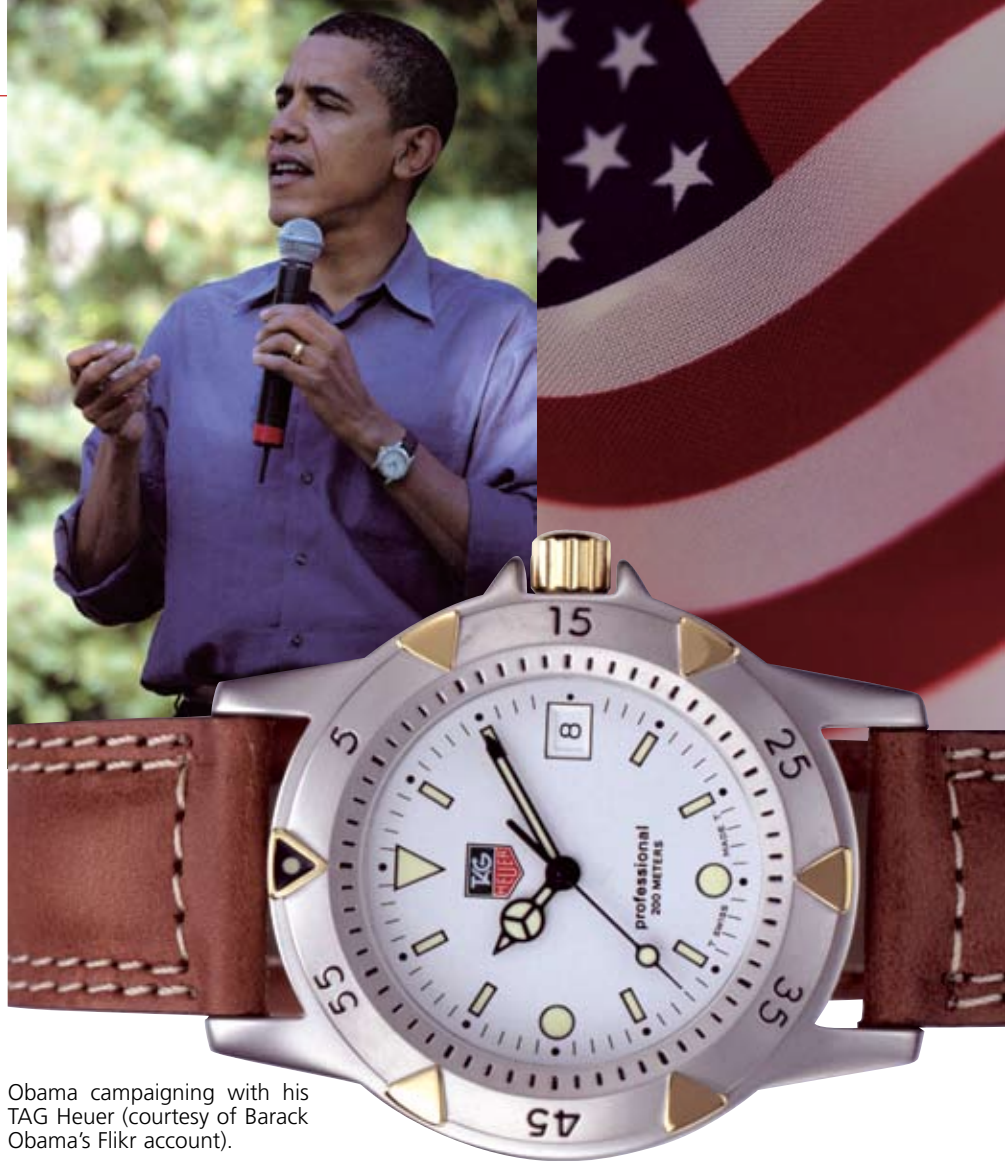
Watches, Inc. (through its www.BaracksWatch.com website).

Presidential Watches, Inc., founder John Pantalena said that the most remarkable aspect of the offering has been the watch's resonance with international customers, with website visits from more than one hundred individual countries and sales to more than twenty-five countries within weeks of launch. At a price of \$325, the Series 6500 commemorative edition is positioned as a high-quality, affordable chronograph.

Beyond producing the Series 6500 commemorative watch in the form worn by President Obama, Gnesin has indicated that Jorg Gray will seek to produce a broader line of commemorative watches, building on the original Series 6500 chronograph, to develop a line that will include versions for women, as well as further enhancements in the watch's materials and design. With the development of this line of watches, Gnesin believes that Jorg Gray will also make the transition from a promotional brand to a retail brand, with worldwide distribution of a broad line of watches.

### Victory for TAG Heuer

For TAG Heuer the discovery that Barack Obama had worn its Series 1500 watch for many years represents something very different. With the Heuer brand approaching its 150th anniversary, Barack Obama's selection of a TAG Heuer represents a powerful affirmation of the position of TAG Heuer's sport watches.



Obama campaigning with his TAG Heuer (courtesy of Barack Obama's Flickr account).

The 1995 TAG Heuer catalog describes the Series 1500 as strong, functional and modern, while also offering efficiency and value. We see the words “dynamism,” “boldness” and “achievement,” as we turn the pages.

This was the watch that the young Barack Obama selected as he graduated from law school, embarked on his professional career and was married, and this was the watch that he wore every day for the next fifteen years. Here we have a man of action, an adventurer—indeed, the ultimate racer—wearing a watch that matches his unique style so well. Many watch brands enter into contracts so that “ambassadors

“wear their watches; Presidents have chosen far fewer watches.

And our story ends, as it began, with a call from TAG Heuer's Rachel Branch. “Have you seen Barack Obama on the cover of the March 2009 issue of *Vanity Fair*? He's wearing the TAG-Heuer Series 1500. Gotta love that watch!” ☺

*Jeff Stein collects vintage chronographs, primarily those made by Heuer, and maintains a webpage covering Barack Obama's watches. You can visit that webpage—at [www.onthedash.com/obama.html](http://www.onthedash.com/obama.html)—for additional information and images.*