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Supermax prison blocked Obama books requested by detainee

Officials at the Florence, Colorado supermax prison deemed the bestsellers 'potentially detrimental to national security'

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He has been president of the United States for 172 days, yet it appears that Barack Obama is still deemed capable of producing writing that is "potentially detrimental to national security".

That peculiar judgement was made following a request by a high-security prisoner to read Obama's two bestselling books, *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. The plea was made by Ahmed Omar Abu Ali, who is being held at a supermax prison in Florence, Colorado which applies the toughest security restrictions to some of the country's most dangerous prisoners.

Abu Ali, a US citizen, was found guilty on 25 November of helping al-Qaida and plotting to assassinate the then US president George Bush. He was sentenced to 30 years.

The prisoner asked to see Obama's two books last August, at a time when the US presidential elections were entering the home stretch. Such was the sensitivity of his al-Qaida connections that the request was sent to the FBI for consideration. Later, the prison authorities turned down permission for him to read the books on the grounds that they contained material "potentially detrimental to national security".

Details of the rejection are contained in court documents prepared for a hearing involving Abu Ali later this month and seen by Associated Press. According to the news agency, the documents refer to one page in *Dreams from My Father* and 22 pages from *The Audacity of Hope*. Most of those pages deal with foreign affairs, though it is unclear

which precise passages are considered problematic.

For a country that prides itself on the First Amendment to freedom of speech, the withholding of the president's books is surprising, particularly given their huge circulation.

Dreams from My Father, which covers Obama's childhood and education up to his election as the first black president of the Harvard Law Review, has been in the New York Times bestsellers list for the past 154 weeks.

Joshua Dratel, a lawyer acting for the prisoner, has complained that Abu Ali is being imprisoned under such harsh conditions they resemble something out of Lewis Carroll. The prisoner himself wrote a short handwritten note saying his first amendment rights had been violated.

Other prisoners who are also being held at the supermax facility in Colorado include the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski and Zacarias Moussaoui, convicted of involvement in the New York and Washington attacks on 11 September 2001.

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