

Pity the sad legacy of Barack Obama

Our hope and change candidate fell short time and time again. Obama cheerleaders who refused to make him accountable bear some responsibility



'Most well-paid pundits on TV and radio celebrated the Obama brand.'

By Cornel West
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Eight years ago the world was on the brink of a grand celebration: the inauguration of a brilliant and charismatic black president of the United States of America. Today we are on the edge of an abyss: the installation of a mendacious and cathartic white president who will replace him.

This is a depressing decline in the highest office of the most powerful empire in the history of the world. It could easily produce a pervasive cynicism and poisonous nihilism. Is there really any hope for truth and justice in this decadent time? Does America even have the capacity to be honest about itself and come to terms with its self-destructive addiction to money-worship and cowardly xenophobia?

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville – the two great public intellectuals of 19th-century America – wrestled with similar questions and reached the same conclusion as Heraclitus: character is destiny (“sow a character and you reap a destiny”).

The age of Barack Obama may have been our last chance to break from our neoliberal soulcraft. We are rooted in market-driven brands that shun integrity and profit-driven policies that trump public goods. Our “post-integrity” and “post-truth” world is suffocated by entertaining brands and money-making activities that have little or nothing to do with truth, integrity or the long-term survival of the planet. We are witnessing the postmodern version of the full-scale gangsterization of the world.

The reign of Obama did not produce the nightmare of Donald Trump – but it did contribute to it. And those Obama cheerleaders who refused to make him accountable bear some responsibility.

A few of us begged and pleaded with Obama to break with the Wall Street priorities and bail out Main Street. But he followed the advice of his “smart” neoliberal advisers to bail out Wall Street. In March 2009, Obama met with Wall Street leaders. He proclaimed: I stand between you and the pitchforks. I am on your side and I will protect you, he promised them. And not one Wall Street criminal executive went to jail.

We called for the accountability of US torturers of innocent Muslims and the transparency of US drone strikes killing innocent civilians. Obama’s administration told us no civilians had been killed. And then we were told a few had been killed. And then told maybe 65 or so had been killed. Yet when an American civilian, Warren Weinstein, was killed in 2015 there was an immediate press conference with deep apologies and financial compensation. And today we still don’t know how many have had their lives taken away.

We hit the streets again with Black Lives Matter and other groups and went to jail for protesting against police killing black youth. We protested when the Israeli Defense Forces killed more than 2,000 Palestinians (including 550 children) in 50 days. Yet Obama replied with words about the difficult plight of police officers, department investigations (with no police going to jail) and the additional \$225m in financial support of the Israeli army. Obama said not a mumbling word about the dead Palestinian children but he did call Baltimore black youth “criminals and thugs”.

In addition, Obama’s education policy unleashed more market forces that closed hundreds of public schools for charter ones. The top 1% got nearly two-thirds of the income growth in eight years even as child poverty, especially black child poverty, remained astronomical. Labor insurgencies in Wisconsin, Seattle and Chicago (vigorously opposed by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a close confidant of Obama) were passed over in silence.

In 2009, Obama called New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg an “outstanding mayor”. Yet he overlooked the fact that more than 4 million people were stopped-and-frisked under Bloomberg’s watch. Along with Carl Dix and others, I sat in a jail two years later for protesting these very same policies that Obama ignored when praising Bloomberg.

Yet the mainstream media and academia failed to highlight these painful truths linked to Obama. Instead, most well-paid pundits on TV and radio celebrated the Obama brand. And most black spokespeople shamelessly defended Obama’s silences

and crimes in the name of racial symbolism and their own careerism. How hypocritical to see them now speak truth to white power when most went mute in the face of black power. Their moral authority is weak and their newfound militancy is shallow.

The gross killing of US citizens with no due process after direct orders from Obama was cast aside by neoliberal supporters of all colors. And Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, Jeffrey Sterling and other truth-tellers were demonized just as the crimes they exposed were hardly mentioned.

The president's greatest legislative achievement was to provide healthcare for over 25 million citizens, even as another 20 million are still uncovered. But it remained a market-based policy, created by the conservative Heritage Foundation and first pioneered by Mitt Romney in Massachusetts.

Obama's lack of courage to confront Wall Street criminals and his lapse of character in ordering drone strikes unintentionally led to rightwing populist revolts at home and ugly Islamic fascist rebellions in the Middle East. And as deporter-in-chief – nearly 2.5 million immigrants were deported under his watch – Obama policies prefigure Trump's barbaric plans.

Bernie Sanders gallantly tried to generate a leftwing populism but he was crushed by Clinton and Obama in the unfair Democratic party primaries. So now we find ourselves entering a neofascist era: a neoliberal economy on steroids, a reactionary repressive attitude toward domestic "aliens", a militaristic cabinet eager for war and in denial of global warming. All the while, we are seeing a wholesale eclipse of truth and integrity in the name of the Trump brand, facilitated by the profit-hungry corporate media.

What a sad legacy for our hope and change candidate – even as we warriors go down swinging in the fading names of truth and justice.