

## Obama hasn't changed much at all. There's something frustrating about that

*Anderson Cooper's recent CNN interview of Obama was underwhelming and light on substance*



*'It may be asking too much of Barack Obama to hope for anything more than left-of-center opinions.'* Photograph: Elijah Nouvelage/AFP/Getty Images

*Nicholas Russell*

Thu 10 Jun 2021

Barack Obama's CNN interview with Anderson Cooper on Monday night covered a range of topics one could consider wide if they weren't so predictable.

The storming of the Capitol, race, Trump, political division, Black Lives Matter. At this point in his post-office years, Obama seems to pop up in more or less casual fashion as a kind of guiding moral compass during particularly harrowing national moments. Obama, trading in the suit for the still very-calculated understatement of a button-up with rolled sleeves, elicits an almost Pavlovian reaction. We miss you. Come back. This worked to more dramatic effect when Trump was still in office and Obama's opinion, given far from the White House, seemed to come down from a heaven that was distinctly out of reach. But that allure is fading.

Obama criticized the "Republican establishment" for their lack of action on Russian meddling during the 2016 election, and on Charlottesville. Political division might be one of Trump's lasting legacies and Obama's outrage that "nobody stood up" isn't wrong, per se. But lukewarm critiques like these are low-hanging fruit – the kind we expect from liberal pundits on MSNBC. One would hope for more from a former president whose very existence threatened the right so dramatically.

When race is mentioned, he talks about “terrible things” that happened in America’s history, but doesn’t mention slavery or Jim Crow by name. He speaks about the need for local media, but doesn’t take Google and Facebook to task for decimating newsrooms. He spends a lot of time talking about the need for better narratives, and better conversations, which can sound lofty and vague. We don’t hear much about more tangible, thorny questions, like the need to support unions, or the threat posed by the growing power of corporations.

Obama spent much of the interview pontificating about unity, which is par for the course for him, whose optimism about America and its narrative as a place of goodness and opportunity is often couched by his own confusion at the country’s troubled state of affairs. “How do we start once again being able to tell a common story about where this country goes?” Obama asked, loftily. At one point, Cooper quotes a passage from Obama’s memoir *A Promised Land*: “*We need to explain to each other who we are and where we are going.*” Cooper asks: “I mean, as somebody who has dedicated myself to storytelling, that really resonates with me. But I wonder, are we as a country still willing to listen to each other’s stories?”

That question alone is specious, as if every issue across the country could be distilled down to the essential quandary of “listening”. But this is CNN’s version of a big interview, a glorified press conference for Obama. His response, on the other hand, goes where one would expect. “I think that this is the biggest challenge we have. We don’t have the kinds of shared stories that we used to.”

These shared stories are, of course, myths. Freedom, patriotism, grit and glory, these are staples of a utopian vision of America that nearly every president has tried to sell to the public. On that front, Obama isn’t special. What should separate him, even if it is no longer the galvanizing anecdote it once was, is his status as the first black person to hold the nation’s highest office. As history is continually rewritten, whether expanding to include the erased stories of indigenous genocide or the destruction of black communities, or contracting to focus on the achievements of a select few white men whose vision for America never included minorities to begin with, one would assume Obama’s heritage offers him a uniquely frank perspective. This also fails to be true.

On the issue of racism, Obama offered this weak assessment: “It’s hard for the majority in this country of white Americans to recognize that, look, you can be proud of this country and its traditions and its history and our forefathers. And yet, it’s also true that this terrible stuff happened. And that, you know, the vestiges of that linger and continue.”

Obama seems to be settling into the role of political commentator, except without any controversial opinions

It may be asking too much of Obama to hope for anything more than left-of-center opinions. After all, one of the hallmarks of his two terms was the disappointing, but unsurprising, revelation that his radical outspoken proclamations were often transformed into watered-down, bureaucratic non-starters. Still, it’s frustrating to think that, even in the aftermath of Trump’s presidency, Obama hasn’t changed all that much.

The nightmare that came after Obama's last term exacerbated the stark difference between the two men, turning Obama into even more of a heroic figure than before. Where before the future was his campaign's bread and butter, nostalgia became a crucial asset. Now, in the midst of his former vice-president's term, Obama seems to be settling into the role of political commentator, except without any controversial opinions.

On the topic of what lies ahead, Obama turned to the potential of his daughters' generation: "They're not just interested in making noise, they're interested in what works." Somehow cancel culture, one of the most loaded, overused, yet wildly imprecise terms floating around, used to describe everything from firing CEOs for discrimination to the vague destruction of American values, crept into the conversation. To Obama, this amounts to "condemning people all the time", though he doesn't get any more specific than that. What matters is that his daughters rise above it. "They'll acknowledge that sometimes..."

The expectation has never been perfection. It's knowing that someone can and should be doing more.

- *Nicholas Russell is a freelance writer*