

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: AN ASSESSMENT

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TRANSFORMATIONAL PRESIDENCIES



- A transformational presidency could be defined as one where an administration's achievement proved to be a lasting, benchmark accomplishment. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal with respect to Social Security and the inauguration of the welfare state; Harry Truman's Truman Doctrine that contained Communism, or Jimmy Carter's Camp David accords whose framework for peace in the Middle East remains a paradigm for his presidential successors. The example of George H. W. Bush's nimble use of multilateralism and military might in Desert Storm became a model for a deft foreign policy. Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act and its permanent impact of inclusion of heretofore excluded persons from health care coverage and access.

TOKEN “BLACK PRESIDENT”: BILL CLINTON



- Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison described in 1998 Bill Clinton as “the first black president.” She said that he “displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working class, saxophone playing, McDonald’s-and junk food-loving boy from Arkansas...” He embodied how the presidency increasingly became a contested terrain for cultural warfare.

TOWARD A PRESIDENTIAL PRECEDENT FOR DEMOGRAPHIC INCLUSION: GEORGE W. BUSH



- As the governor of Texas, he developed relationships with Mexicans, supported NAFTA, and backed the teaching of Spanish in public schools. Instead of opposing affirmative action, he supported affirmative access by increasing pools of diverse applicants for state universities. As president, he appointed Condoleezza Rice as National Security Adviser and Colin Powell as Secretary of State. Refused to demonize Muslims after 9/11. “Minorities, Multiculturalism, and the Presidency of George W. Bush” by Gary Gerstle in Julian Zelizer, ed., THE PRESIDENCY OF GEORGE W. BUSH: A FIRST ASSESSMENT (Princeton University Press, 2010)

TRANSRACIAL SENSIBILITIES IN THE WHITE HOUSE: THE BARACK OBAMA PRESIDENCY



- President Obama nominated the first Hispanic woman, Sonia Sotomayor, to the United States Supreme Court. Historian Gary Gerstle describes Barack Obama as an advocate of “civic nationalism” which posits “the belief that all Americans are fundamentally equal and are endowed with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” He personified these civic ideals. Hurt blacks and harmed whites could find “a common faith in the American dream.” President Obama, Gerstle contends “will come to be seen as having guided America to its 2050 demographic date with destiny when a majority of the country will be nonwhite.” “Civic Ideals, Race, and Nation in the Age of Obama” by Gary Gerstle in Julian Zelizer, ed. THE PRESIDENCY OF BARACK OBAMA: A FIRST HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT (Princeton University Press, 2018)

TRANSLATING BLACKNESS INTO PUBLIC POLICY: THE OBAMA CHALLENGE



- According to Ta-Nehisi Coates, Barack Obama spent eight years walking on ice and never falling in. His embrace of white innocence was demonstrably necessary as a matter of political survival.” He intentionally entered the world of blackness as a “racial cosmopolitan.” Coates added that “Obama’s formula for closing this chasm between black and white America, like that of many progressive politicians today, proceeded from policy designed for all of America.” (Ta-Nehisi Coates, WE WERE EIGHT YEARS IN POWER: AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY (New York, One World, 2017)



- According to Peniel E. Joseph, “racial conflict...unfolded faster than the political vision behind the Obama Administration’s reforms.” He did recognize “the way in which BLM had revealed the halting, at times illusory, nature of racial progress in America.” Additionally, “BLM activists at times failed to recognize the magnitude of the federal government’s efforts to roll back policies and legislation that took decades to fully implement. Despite its limitations, the DOJ made real progress on issues related to criminal justice in sentencing, reforming the Bureau of Prisons, aiding juvenile offenders upon reentry, and easing obstacles that prevented ex-offenders from remaining in their communities as productive citizens.” Peniel E. Joseph, “Barack Obama and the Movement for Black Lives: Race, Democracy, and Criminal Justice in the Age of Ferguson.” in Julian Zelizer, *THE PRESIDENCY OF BARACK OBAMA: A FIRST ASSESSMENT* (Princeton University Press, 2018)