

A Defense of Obama That Cherry-Picks the Facts

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Commentary

By Peter Berkowitz

RCP Contributor

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In his farewell address last week, President Obama contended that his administration had accomplished more than one could have reasonably expected. But Donald Trump's election threatens the legacy of the president who aspired to be transformative in the manner of Ronald Reagan.

Leading progressive voices trace the threat to nefarious causes. In a widely read article, Atlantic national correspondent Ta-Nehisi Coates asserted, "Trump's candidacy was an explicit reaction to the fact of a black president." In a forum at The New Republic, Annette Gordon-Reed, a Harvard law professor, agreed with Nell Irvin Painter, a Princeton professor emeritus, who stated that Trump's election had nothing to do with Obama "personally, except that he's a black man." According to the professors, "Trump was a gut-level response to what many Americans interpreted as an insult eight years ago, and have been seething against ever since." In the New York Times Magazine, staff writer Nikole Hannah-Jones wrote, "[S]tates that reliably backed Obama—states like Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania—flipped Republican" because of "racism and racial anxiety."

Although racism has not been eradicated, public opinion polling refutes the grim assessments emanating from The Atlantic, The New Republic, and The New York Times. In February 2009, a few weeks after his inauguration, Obama's job approval rating reached 65.4 percent in the RealClearPolitics poll average. On Nov. 9, 2016, the day after Trump's election, Obama's approval rating stood at 52 percent. Although, like his predecessors, he faced rough stretches, Obama will end his eight years in the White House the way he began them—as a popular president.

Meanwhile, on Election Day 2016, according to the RealClearPolitics average, only 31.2 percent thought the country was on the right track while 61.9 percent thought it was on the wrong track. This was no anomaly. In not a single month of Obama's presidency did a majority approve of the country's direction and for nearly all of his time in office a substantial majority disapproved of it.

The razor-thin margins by which Trump defeated Hillary Clinton are better explained by the manifest weaknesses of the candidate Obama backed to succeed him and even more by the sound suspicions among key constituencies in crucial Rust Belt states that she would perpetuate the president's persistently unpopular progressive policies.

Obama loyalists are likely to find such a conclusion far-fetched if not offensive. In their eyes, the president's achievements have been spectacular and where he fell short it was because of Republican intransigence or malice or both.

This is certainly part of the story, according to Obama loyalist Jonathan Chait. In "Audacity: How Barack Obama Defied His Critics and Created a Legacy That Will Prevail" the longtime senior editor at The New Republic and now political columnist for New York Magazine contends that Obama "succeeded" in effecting "change on a massive, historic scale." Drawing on a rather one-sided selection of reporting, social science, and policy analysis, Chait argues that despite "the hatred and white racial paranoia that rose in opposition," the 44th president has "accomplished nearly everything he set out to do, and he set out to do an enormous amount."

Chait, who in 2003, in the pages of The New Republic, defended hating President George W. Bush as a moral imperative, is, like fellow progressives, promiscuous in ascribing racial hatred to Obama's critics—as if opposition to the Affordable Care Act or to the Iran nuclear deal would have been more restrained had Joe Biden been president. Chait insists, though, that more than racism is at work in keeping Obama from receiving his due.

"The evidence that Obama succeeded in changing America in the major ways he set out to do is so strong," maintains Chait, "that an explanation is required for why so many of us failed to see what was there all along." His explanation revives a theory advanced during the 2008 campaign by legal scholar Cass Sunstein that Obama was a pragmatist who "resisted ideological templates." The image of Obama as unusually measured and accommodating was further expounded by then-New York Times Book Review Editor Sam Tanenhaus who, shortly after America's first African-American president took office, argued that Obama was, more than any leading figure on the right, "steeped in the principles of Burkean conservatism."

Chait goes even further than Sunstein and Tanenhaus, maintaining that "by temperament and ideology, Obama is a pragmatist" who "gravitated toward the liberal Republican tradition." However, reports Chait, Republicans were determined to thwart his every move. Many Democrats, moreover, could not appreciate the president's "long-term horizons": some, wedded to obsolete conventions of bipartisanship, blamed Obama for failing to bring Republicans along; others on the left disparaged the president because of their "infantile rejection of the compromises inherent in governing." In Chait's telling, all of the right and swaths of the left proved unworthy of Obama, incapable of fathoming his "careful, rational deliberation" and grasping the enduring benefits that his deft political maneuvering and farsighted legislative initiatives rendered to the country.

Chait thinks that Obama's manifold achievements are hiding in plain sight. In early 2009, the president signed into law an approximately \$830 billion stimulus program that was "a gigantic success" in preventing the Great Recession of 2008 from becoming a second Great

Depression. He overcame unbending Republican opposition and sometimes weak-kneed Democratic support to pass the Affordable Care Act, which provided some 20 million additional Americans with access to health care. Despite the failure to pass cap-and-trade legislation, his administration responded to the scourge of climate change by stimulating green energy development and by issuing sweeping environmental regulations. Conceding that Obama's foreign policy "was not transformative" and while acknowledging mistakes, particularly in Syria, Chait nevertheless characterizes the agreement with Iran as a "breakthrough" and credits Obama for keeping his campaign promise to remove combat troops from Iraq.

Chait's case for Obama largely ignores the case against. It is one thing to defend the utility of deficit spending in a recession; it is quite another to blink away doubling American debt in eight years to a staggering \$20 trillion and growing. It is appropriate to credit Obama for expanding access to health care, but it is deceptive to gloss over his repeated deceptions concerning insurance cost, keeping one's doctor, and keeping one's insurance. The reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is good, but no excuse for undermining constitutional government by extravagant exploitation of executive orders to skirt the people's representatives in the legislative branch. And while the Middle East was unstable and dangerous before Obama, it is negligent to overlook how his determination to circumscribe America's international role has emancipated the forces of chaos and destruction in the region.

Overreach and underperformance have consequences. Not the least part of Obama's legacy is a shrunken and enfeebled Democratic Party in the states, a successor in the White House he tried hard to derail, and Republican majorities in both houses of Congress who are determined to overturn his signature domestic and foreign policy achievements.

To the extent Obama transformed America, it is by inadvertently reminding voters of their reasons, eloquently expounded by Ronald Reagan, for distrusting a highly centralized, know-it-all federal government at home and for seeking a strong America abroad.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.