African American Perceptions of Obama

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This paper was presented during a seminar on African and African American Perceptions of President Barack Obama at the Africa Institute of South Africa (AISA) on 19 March 2013. The paper is divided into three sections: (1) The significance of the Obama presidency; (2) Who is the first African American president? and (3) How do African Americans perceive Obama? (This theme is woven throughout the paper.) Most of the concluding remarks deal with the author’s opinion of the Obama presidency.

The significance of the Obama presidency

Millions of people throughout America wept, got down on their knees and thanked ‘God, Mohammed, and other higher powers’ for finally lifting the centuries of physical, mental and emotional bondage that had kept them enslaved by the incomprehensible racism of America. Some did not even realise that the legacy of bondage, from slavery to Jim Crow (America’s apartheid), and then the brutal Civil Rights Movement that was supposed to end white racism, was still deep in their souls; souls that needed much healing. Healing was now before them.

So it was that on election day in November 2008, America had finally given African Americans the gift of great hope – the first African American president had been elected. Those who were terminally ill and frail could now go home to glory knowing that things would be different for their children, grandchildren, and those yet unborn. African Americans now believed that they were fully accepted by a country that they loved so dearly, but that seemingly had not loved them in return – until Obama’s election.

People would start talking about a post-racial1 America and the true meaning of the Declaration of Independence, which decreed that ‘All men are created equal’. True freedom was at hand. Two months later, millions took the journey to be in Washington, DC, at the inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama. It did not matter how cold it would be outside. It did not matter if the closest a person could get to the inauguration platform was miles away.

Of this historic event, Ta-Nehisi Coates, an African American, wrote in the mainstream Atlantic magazine,

...For most of American history, our political system was premised on two conflicting facts – one, an oft-stated love of democracy; the other, an undemocratic white supremacy inscribed at every level of government. In warring against that paradox, African Americans have historically been restricted to the realm of protest and agitation.2

He stated that with the historic election of Obama, for the first time ‘power’ was in the hands of a black person. Finally, African Americans were to...
see a new image of themselves – and this image finally went beyond the limitations of protest and agitation.³

So what did some African Americans want from Obama, who now had the power of the federal government⁴ in his hands? Martell Teasley and David Ikard, in a chapter entitled ‘Barack Obama and the politics of race: The myth of post-racism in America’ identify the following expectations:

1. The implementation of polices that would result in the reduction of disparities in the areas of, for example, health care and education;
2. Economic investment in the challenged urban infrastructure in which at least 70% of African Americans live; and
3. The availability of college and entrepreneurship grants.⁵

But as the days, months, and years went by in this so-called post-racial America, white people started talking about ‘taking back the White House’, as if aliens lived there. When the visual portrayal of Obama and his parents as monkeys by a member of the newly-minted ‘Tea Party’ heated up the internet, even those who wanted to believe that there was a post-racial America were alarmed. The insults in public spaces by white people who could not deal with the fact that a black man had become the most powerful man in the world were unprecedented in the history of the US presidency. Even the vilification of the former US president Bill Clinton, stemming from his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinski, a young intern in the White House, seems tame compared with the disrespect that Obama and his family have endured.

With respect to racism in America, I was alarmed when The Star, a South African newspaper, featured in March 2013 a leading article on the front page entitled ‘The devil’s in the detail’. According to the article, Twitter comments went viral when people began to suggest that there was a resemblance between President Obama and the Moroccan actor who plays the devil in a Bible series.⁶ In addition to the obvious racism that this represents in America, I am not certain why The Star would publish this as headline news without adding a commentary in the opinion section of the paper. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the media is still controlled by white people in South Africa?

Parallel with the depiction of President Obama as a monkey or the devil is an African American president who keeps assuring the nation, as the issue of race keeps showing its ugly head, that he is the president of all Americans. Though issues of race seem to permeate every aspect of Obama’s presidency, it has been determined that Obama has talked less about race than any other Democratic president since 1961.⁷ Obama’s racial strategy has been, if anything, the opposite of radical: ‘He declines to use his bully pulpit to address racism, using it instead to engage in the time-honored tradition of black self-hectoring, railing against the perceived failings of black culture.’⁸ The once or twice he has dared to respond to racial issues, he has been vilified by anti-Obama critics.

To further enforce this image of the non-racial president, Cornell Belcher, a pollster for Obama, has noted, ‘a black man can’t be president in America, given the racial aversion and history that is still out here…However, an extraordinary, gifted, and talented young man who happens to be black can be president.’⁹

Who is the first African American President?

He is a man with impeccable family values, with a beautiful, photogenic family that the media never tire of exploiting. President Obama is also a man of many interests, who engages among others in an activity that all presidents seemingly engage in – hunting game. A picture of him out hunting was released by the White House, no doubt for the benefit of the National Rifle Association (NRA), to prove that Obama was not against the ‘right to bear arms’, especially for recreational purposes. The picture, which shocked many, was released as Obama announced plans to address the need to implement strict gun-control laws in an effort to stop the senseless mass murders that have become a frightening reality of life in America.

One of the questions that has plagued Obama as president is whether or not he is ‘black enough’; which is really a politically incorrect question to pose in America, with some arguing that with a population of 40 million black people, there are at least 40 million different ways of being black.¹⁰

But to home in on a perspective that resonates with a lot of African Americans from the Civil Rights era, noted TV critic Touré, in a book entitled Who’s afraid of post-Blackness? What it means to be Black now, argues the following:

Wielding Blackness in a non-threatening way can mean many things. A Black person, who whites know will never rob them, can take something even more valuable by throwing in their face the pain of oppression or the embarrassment of white supremacy. Obama,
while campaigning for president, never did that. ‘The manner in which he addressed the issue of race during the campaign was absolutely brilliant,’ Sharon Pratt [a former mayor of Washington, DC] said, ‘and one reason he was so good is he could soar above the pain. You watch his manners, his energy – he doesn’t have those scars. He didn’t have to worry about the police. He didn’t have to worry about whether he could use the water fountain. He didn’t have to stay on a road and try to figure out where you go to a restroom. He didn’t have none of that and he was reared by a very loving white family from Kansas so he doesn’t bring that to the party – the edge.11

The late Ronald Walters, a noted African American political scientist, calls Obama’s blackness ‘functional.’ Walter determined this while reading Obama’s book, *Dreams from my father.* Here we are taken on a journey which helps us to understand Obama’s functional blackness.12 To prove his point, Walter quotes from Obama’s book:

> I knew it was too late to ever claim Africa as my home, and if I had come to understand myself as a black American, and was understood as such, that understanding remained unanchored to place. What I needed was a community, I realised, a community that cut deeper than the common despair that black friends and I shared when reading the latest crime statistics, or the high fives I might exchange on a basketball court. A place where I could put down stakes and test my commitment.13

‘In other words,’ Walter notes, ‘Obama answered a question raised on the same page in a letter from his father, who instructed him to “know where you belong”, and [Barack] proceeded to resolve the issue by accepting his identity as an African American with its attendant commitments, and he set out to test them functionally as a leader of the Black community’.14 To help him with his functional blackness, his then girlfriend, now his wife, Michele Obama, convinced him to change his name from Barry to Barack.

Obama, unlike previous male African American presidential candidates, is not an ‘angry’ black man striving to undo the injustices African Americans have experienced and continue to experience in America. While Obama admits that he is riding on the backs of those who paved the way for him to become president, he has no personal experience of deep white oppression, having been raised by a white mother and loving white grandparents. In fact, because he is not on the edge as an angry black man, Obama has acquired the nickname, ‘No Drama Obama’.15

So Obama represents what we can perhaps call the Post-Civil Rights era of black politics or, more accurately, according to Touré, the Obama-era candidate.16 I think it is safe to say that we are in the Obama-era political arena. So what are the estimated ten prerequisites for becoming an African American leader in the Obama-era political arena? Again, noted talk host Touré sums up the prerequisites as follows:

1. The candidate ‘takes great pains to make sure that their language is designed to never make whites feel racist. It is never an indictment; it is always about allowing people to be off the hook.’17

2. ‘The black candidate must also allay subliminal association to those Black men by whom whites feel physically threatened… As president, during certain crises people publicly longed for Obama to seem angry, and thus emotionally engaged, while he insisted on presenting a cool exterior that sometimes seemed emotionally detached from the turbulence of the situation. All this is part of conveying the non-threatening Blackness that is necessary to be seen as a credible Black leader of whites.’18

3. ‘On a personal level, the Black candidate must be beyond reproach – the private life blunders that many officials have gotten away with would never be tolerated in a Black candidate or officeholder.’19

4. ‘It helps if you can evoke a certain innocence with your face. By this is meant a baby face. While Robert Livingston admits that “Obama does not have a classic baby face”, it is said that “his protruding ears and big, quick, easy smile” are effective disarming traits. Another classic Caucasian-calming trait that Obama has – one that few want to discuss but is real – is light-colored skin. We know whites attach feelings of trust and expectations of intelligence to lighter-skinned Blacks.’20

5. ‘The way you talk – the grammar articulation, and diction you choose to employ as well as the specific tone that comes from your throat – is also a critical way of either disarming and comforting whites and subtly suggesting that you deserve to be a leader, or of scaring them and cancelling yourself from the game.’21

6. ‘Modern Black politicians must also be very careful to never appear like emissaries for the Black community. They must insist that they’re
enthusiastic about representing all their constituents.\textsuperscript{22}

7. ‘But at the same time voters want to feel that the candidate is comfortable in his own skin and at peace with being himself. So while you’re proving that you’re non-threatening, able to speak the King’s English, able to love white people, not going to make them feel guilty about whiteness, and willing to rhetorically spank Black people once in a blue moon, you must also show that you love Black people and being Black…’ For example, by marrying a Black woman who will give you fist bumps.\textsuperscript{23}

8. ‘Marrying Black communicates a comfort with Blackness that both Black and white voters want to see. So does a healthy and robust relationship with the Black community… So while you can’t appear to be a representative focused on the Black community, you must be able to draw on their support as any ethnic candidate would.’\textsuperscript{24}

9. ‘So while your political style must be doggedly inclusive – you cannot let white voters think you will put Black legislative concerns first – you must still make them think you are personally comfortable living within their expectations of a Black person.’ As Goff notes: you don’t want to say, “I’m not a Black person”; you want to say, “I’m not that kind of Black person.” So Obama’s decision to regularly play basketball was, I think, as much a personal decision as it was a political image decision. It says, “I’m genuine, I’m Black and I don’t have to hide it.”\textsuperscript{25}

10. ‘But what about the Black voter? If you can win the Mollifying White Decathlon it will be because you have learned many different ways of making whites trust you while holding on to the love and admiration of your Black constituents. But, like Obama, you will not have gained power solely from the Black community and thus you will owe us less. After campaigning by convincing white voters they would not give Blacks any special favors, once in office they must keep that promise. This is why Obama has not proven to be the racial savior that some thought he might be. It would seem like cronyism. And Black voters who gain the spiritual uplift and group esteem power boost from having a Black president (or governor or senator or even major) lose out on a specific political advancement.’\textsuperscript{26}

In this regard, noted African American commentator and author Eric Dyson argues that he is not certain that, in the final analysis, the complexity of this ‘Blackness’ does not result in black people surrendering territory that has been gained.\textsuperscript{27} What Dyson is clearly suggesting is that African Americans could end up being worse off as a result of the Obama-era political arena.

How do the majority of African Americans Perceive Obama?

I would argue that that the majority of African Americans perceive Obama in a positive light and would overwhelmingly support him no matter what.\textsuperscript{28} While not representing a post-racial America, for the majority of African Americans Obama’s ascendance to power still represents hope and a new era in American politics. It also reflects the reality of the demographic changes that people have been discussing since the 1980s. Given these changes, we might not see another white male win a presidential election in the US. If Hillary Clinton runs for president and wins, we clearly have eight years of a female presence in the White House, which very well could be followed by a Hispanic president. By that time, whites are predicted to be the ‘new minority’ in America.

Returning to the issue at hand: African Americans’ perceptions of President Obama, I think the response to African American talk-show host Tavis Smiley’s remarks about the president on Sunday, 20 January, the day before Obama was to take the oath of office for the second time, reflects the fact that there is no monolithic perception of Obama. Smiley said the following about the president:

I’ve heard people exclaim that President Obama is the fulfillment of Dr. King’s dream. We’re still a long way from that… well, not exactly…. Obama might be a good down payment, but he is not the fulfillment of King’s dream. We’re still a long way from that….The interrelated triple threat of poverty, militarism and racism that King talked about still looms large in a yet deeply divided America….In the spirit of MLK, it’s time for President Obama to deliver a major policy speech on the eradication of poverty in America. He ought to tell us how the richest nation in the history of the world is going to confront the scourge of poverty….In the spirit of MLK, President Obama should rethink the random use of his favorite weapon – the unmanned aerial vehicles, better known as ‘drones,’ which have killed too many innocent women and children….In the spirit of MLK,
President Obama should not continue to feel boxed in by his blackness, but feel liberated in a second term to find ways to push back on the most intractable issue in America: racism.... The president wants to channel King so badly that he’s decided to use Dr King’s Bible at the inauguration ceremony tomorrow....Obama is a politician, and a pretty good one, but King was a prophet. And while I can appreciate the president’s fascination with King’s legacy of unarmed truth and unconditional love, I’m feeling some sort of way about King being used symbolically for public pomp and circumstance, but disregarded substantively when it comes to public policy.29

The African American response to this statement ranged from – ‘just as with MLK and Malcolm X, Obama’s enemies look more like him than not. Tavis has screwed up so bad this time, he might as well forget any political hopes he may have had’, to ‘Many had much higher hopes for Barack Obama to bring more to the big table specifically for people of color in America. As he launches his second term, I think the realisation that he is in this for himself is setting in. Not that African Americans don’t understand what he does and why, just that once more a leader other than MLK, that brought so much hope, will fall very short of the desired goals aspired by his adoring public.”30

Conclusion

In conclusion I would argue that there exists a great deal of grey in between these two perspectives. At a fundamental level, I think Tavis Smiley is making a great mistake in comparing Martin Luther King, Jr. and Barack Obama. While the former was a great Civil Rights political activist, the latter is a politician. As a politician, in order to get elected, Obama had to tell the people what they wanted to hear. King, as a Civil Rights activist, had to tell the truth about the injustices of the American system. Both were/are flawed men, as all people are. In this regard I think Obama’s greatest flaw is his continued struggle with identity. I still am not sure that Obama really feels in the very deep core of his being that he is an African American. In this regard I think that to expect Obama to really understand what it is like to be African American is like asking me to fully understand what it is like to be an African. I am a Pan-Africanist.

Do I think that African Americans have lost ground as a result of the Obama-era political arena, as previously suggested by Eric Dyson? No, not really, but I could be wrong. My point of reference is the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Reagan was such a proponent of white supremacy that he basically gave white Americans the licence to express their hatred of African Americans. I am hopeful that this period in our history parallels that of the Reagan administration and therefore does not represent a backlash against the gains African Americans have made with respect to civil and political rights in America.

But what I do think is that African Americans have come to realise that there is no short cut to dealing with the issues of race, poverty, unemployment, dysfunctional family units, and the like. I personally never imagined that Barack Obama was going to begin to solve the serious problems that African Americans face. As a political economist, I knew he was going to be in the ‘Belly of the Beast’ – a place that only American presidents can appreciate. In fact, I wondered why Obama would even want to inherit the myriad problems that the US was confronted with during the elections of 2008.

In the final analysis, however, if President Obama inspires some African Americans to feel they can realise their true potential, then his presidency will not have gone to waste. This, I think, has occurred. Anything beyond that is for the icing on the cake.

The major lesson that we can learn from Obama is that no matter what a person may be able to achieve personally, America will never be a post-racial country. The country was founded on the premise that all people were not created equal, and this will continue to be the foundation of our political, economic, and social structure for some time to come. If there is any group of people who understand structural racism, it is South Africans.

In having unrealistic expectations of Obama, and fantasising that he would be anything other than a conservative Democratic leader, African Americans succumbed to the ‘divide and rule’ strategy that you know so well in this country. A people divided will never be able to rise to the occasion of realising their full power. In the final analysis, why should Obama be any different from any other politician who personalises political power?

Notes and References

1 In this regard, former Conservative African American Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, noted that ‘...I think what you really saw here was that race is no longer the factor in American identity and American life, and that’s a huge step
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
7 Coates, T.N., op. cit.
8 Coates, T.N., op. cit.
9 As quoted in Coates, T.N., op. cit.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p.181.
17 Phil Goff, as quoted in Touré, 2011, op. cit., p.181.
18 Ibid, p.182.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., pp.183–184.
21 Ibid., pp.184–185.
22 Ibid., p.185.
23 Ibid., p.186.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., pp.187-188.
27 Ibid., p.188.
30 Ibid.