

Obama and Black Americans: the Paradox of Hope

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When Barack Obama was pondering a run for the presidency Michelle asked him what he thought he could accomplish. He replied, “The day I take the oath of office, the world will look at us differently. And millions of kids across this country will look at themselves differently. That alone is something.” His victory was indeed something. The world certainly looked at America differently, though this had as much to do with who he wasn’t—George W. Bush—as what he was, black, among other things.

Polls show that African-Americans indeed look at themselves differently. A January 2010 Pew survey revealed huge optimism. The percentage of black Americans who thought blacks were better off than they were five years before had almost doubled since 2007. There were also significant increases in the percentages who believed the standard-of-living gap between whites and blacks was decreasing.

But for all the ways black America has felt better about itself and looked better to others, it has not actually fared better. In fact, it has been doing worse. The economic gap between black and white has grown since Obama took power. Under his tenure black unemployment, poverty and foreclosures are at their highest levels for at least a decade.

Millions of black kids may well aspire to the presidency now that a black man is in the White House. But such a trajectory is less likely for them now than it was under Bush. Herein lies what is at best a paradox and at worst a contradiction within Obama’s core base of support. The very group most likely to support him—black Americans—is the same group that is doing worse under him.

This condition was best exemplified by Velma Hart, the black chief financial officer for a Maryland veterans organization, who backed Obama in 2008. She told Obama at a town hall meeting in September, “I’m exhausted of defending you.... My husband and I have joked for years that we thought we were well beyond the hot-dogs-and-beans era of our lives. But, quite frankly, it is starting to knock on our door and ring true that that might be where we are headed again.” In November Velma Hart was laid off.

If it were white Americans who remained this loyal to a Republican president under whom they were doing this badly, the left would be claiming false consciousness. If a Republican president were behind statistics like these, few liberals would be offering that president the benefit of the doubt.

So, how do we explain this apparent inconsistency? There would appear to be three main reasons. The first is white people. Not all of them. But enough. Half of white Americans in a Pew survey shared the birthers’ doubt that Obama was born in this country. After the president produced his long-form birth certificate, Donald Trump demanded his college transcripts (claiming he was not smart enough to get into the Ivy League), and Newt Gingrich branded him the “food stamp president.” In the face of such brazenly racist attacks, defending Obama’s right to the office becomes easily blurred with defending his record.

Second, the post-civil rights era concept of corporate diversity, which many black people have

embraced, is central to his symbolism. Racial advancement is increasingly understood not as a process of social change but of individual promotion—the elevation of black faces to high places. Instead of equal opportunities, we have photo opportunities. “We have more black people in more visible and powerful positions,” Angela Davis told me before Obama’s nomination. “But then we have far more black people who have been pushed down to the bottom of the ladder....There’s a model of diversity as the difference that makes no difference, the change that brings about no change.”

Third and perhaps most important, the discrepancy reflects a mixture of realism and low expectations. That black Americans are doing worse than everyone else, and that the man they elected to turn that around has not done so, does not fundamentally change their view of how American politics works; almost every other Democratic president has failed in a similar way. Conversely the fact that a black man might be elected president, that enough white people might vote for him, that nobody has shot him, really has changed their assumptions.

In the black commentariat, opinion is divided over whether African-Americans should demand a more overt commitment to racial justice from a black president or refrain from doing so because it would weaken his appeal to others. The Rev. Al Sharpton insists that calling on Obama to be a “black exponent of black views” is “just stupid,” since it will embolden conservative attacks on projects black people need. Princeton professor Cornel West insists that Obama has “a certain fear of free black men” and “feels most comfortable with upper-middle-class white and Jewish men.”

By concentrating so heavily on race, both sides detract from his responsibilities. Obama should do more for black people—not because he is black but because black people are the citizens suffering most. Black people have every right to make demands on Obama—not because he’s black but because they gave him a greater percentage of their votes than any other group, and he owes his presidency to them. Like any president, he should be constantly pressured to put the issue of racial injustice front and center.

The day he took office, the world may have looked at black America differently, but black America has taken some time to look at Obama differently. When he went from being an aspiration to a fact of political life, the posters that bore his likeness in socialist realist style over single-word commands like Hope, Believe and Change should have been replaced with posters bearing the single-word statement: Power. As Frederick Douglass said: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

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P.S.

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