

President Obama's Legacy and Record

Introduction

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A president's legacy is difficult to gauge while he is still in office and many will argue it is often a task best left to historians. Many American presidents who were seen as failures when they left office, were subsequently seen as incredibly consequential. Years after they leave, hindsight allows us to see the true significance of their policies and to judge them with greater accuracy. When Harry Truman left office few would envision that he would be seen as a visionary leader who helped establish the policy of containment that would guide the US through the Cold War. Lyndon Johnson too was viewed by many as a failed president who increased US involvement in Vietnam and undermined American unity. Now looking back, many remember Johnson as much for the Voting Rights Act and the Great Society as for the war.

As defined by Rockman, a legacy is "something durable left by an administration that others will benefit by or have to deal with as a set of problems well into the future (Rockman 2008, 326)." A legacy can be either positive or negative. Hoover's economic policies resulted in not only the election of Franklin Roosevelt, but also the New Deal; and Bill Clinton's actions in the former Yugoslavia, including the promotion of an independent Kosovo, structured our future relationship with Russia. At the same time, big accomplishments do not necessarily translate into legacies. This is especially true if political fortunes change. The example of George H. W. Bush is telling. Having enjoyed some of the highest approval ratings in history after Desert Storm in 1991, he saw his support evaporate as he lost the 1992 election after backtracking on his promise of "no new taxes" (Grossman, Matthews, and Cunio 2009).

It must therefore be acknowledged that any discussion of President Obama's legacy must be tentative. We will only be able to truly assess his impact long after he has left office. While recognizing the risk of examining a president's legacy just as he leaves office, the authors in this special issue make an effort to predict how future historians will remember this president. In this they are not alone. As Obama's final term

ended, many in the press were already opining on his legacy (e.g., Young 2016; Grunwald 2016; Geraghty 2016). Beyond his policies, in one specific way, Obama's legacy is ensured. One hundred and fifty-one years after the American Civil War and 51 years after the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the people of the US elected an African American president. That is an historic event and one that will forever be remembered. Beyond that there is much dispute over what effects his presidency had on the country and what his actions as president will mean for the US and the world.

The articles that follow were originally presented at a conference on President Obama's legacy held at the University of Mount Union (cosponsored by the Bliss Institute at the University of Akron) in March 2016 as the competition for President Obama's successor was starting to intensify. The authors attempt to provide a type of pre-mortem on the Obama presidency, with the acknowledgment that the analysis provided and the arguments presented will likely be adjusted and disputed as the years pass.

R. Eric Matthews begins our discussion, asking whether President Obama will be remembered as a transformative president or as a transitional president. Contrasting the leadership styles of George W. Bush and Obama, Matthews argues that Obama initially tried to correct the perceived overreach of the previous administration. Yet, Obama ended up mimicking many of the actions taken by Bush, resorting to signing statements and executive orders when faced with an intransigent Congress. Matthews concludes by arguing that much of Obama's legacy remains in doubt and will likely be debated by future scholars, noting that many of the promises made in 2008 continue to be unfulfilled and remain on the table for his successors, a claim that many of Obama's early supporters will acknowledge.

Ryan Barilleaux and Jewel Maxwell further explore Matthews' argument, noting that as a candidate, President Obama harshly criticized President Bush for trampling civil liberties, circumventing Congress, and overstepping his authority as president. Yet upon assuming office, the authors argue that Obama embraced unilateral actions similar to his predecessor, retaining many of the security-related procedures of George W. Bush and even, as in the case of drone strikes, expanding them in certain areas. They conclude by contending that despite Obama's denouncement of Bush's use of

executive action, his own actions have in fact contributed to the institutionalizing of a “super-strong unitary executive.” These actions represent a legacy from which all future presidents will draw.

Richard Conley further builds on the argument that President Obama may not be as transformative a president as many had hoped when he was elected in 2008. Examining President Obama's role in the expansion of the welfare state in the

coalition still lacks the demographics to build a lasting majority. Consequently, it will be up to future leaders to expand the coalition.

Returning to policy, Scott Waalkes takes a look at Obama's foreign strategy, describing it as cautious. Similar to many of the authors in this issue, Waalkes argues that President Obama began his term with great promises of transformational potential only to subsequently govern in a much less

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United States, he notes that, while the Obama administration did relax many of the regulations placed on welfare recipients and expanded many of the programs, the growth in these programs had less to do with the president and more to do with the economic downturn that started in 2008. Conley assesses some of the claims leveled against the Obama administration including the mythical “Obama phones” as well as the accusation that he was responsible for the increase in welfare rolls, finding them lacking in empirical evidence. Conley observes that most of the programs Obama was accused of fostering were created before his presidency, concluding that, despite his critics' claims, he was not responsible for an expansion of the welfare state.

Christopher Banks examines Obama's legacy through the lens of the challenges to what many will argue is his signature policy: the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or Obamacare. Banks examines several lawsuits filed against the Obama administration including *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, *King v. Burwell*, and *Sissel v. Department of Health and Human Services*, noting the failure of opponents of the law to destroy it. Comparing the continued effort to end Obamacare to Captain Ahab's pursuit of the white whale, Banks argues that in using the judiciary, the best that challengers to the law could accomplish—and can hope for—is to pique the law on the margins. Short of legislative repeal, there is little chance for the repeal of the ACA. Consequently, its survival, and Obama's legacy, will rely to a great extent on who will be the next president and which party controls the Senate.

Jeff Bloodworth moves beyond policy and looks at the impact Obama has had on the restructuring of the Democratic coalition, which has steadily moved away from being dominated by rural populism to reflecting the rise of an urban liberal core. Bloodworth traces the origins of this transformation to the excesses of the Gilded Age and the anti-monopoly sentiment of twentieth century America that created a Democratic coalition of rural populists and urban liberals. This coalition began to be replaced in 1972 as New Politics liberals began to take over the party with the nomination of George McGovern. According to Bloodworth, Obama is both the beneficiary of this transformational change in the Democratic coalition as well as its representative. At the same time, this

sweeping manner, preferring to focus on “not doing stupid stuff.” Obama, according to the author, moved to a much more state-centric foreign policy advocated by Condoleezza Rice prior to 9/11, preferring realism over idealism. This reflected his more deliberative style and the need to address the economic crisis facing the US as he took office. Subsequently, while the president was forced to adopt many of the foreign policy frameworks of George W. Bush, including the war on terror, he pursued them with more limited means, eschewing the more transformative foreign policies of his predecessors.

Chris Dolan takes a more focused examination of President Obama's foreign policy, evaluating the administration's efforts at the now famous “Asia pivot.” Dolan notes that the president's goal upon entering office was to complete the US withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and reduce the US footprint in the Middle East, thus freeing up resources to focus on countering a rising China. Yet, as with past presidents, unforeseen events interfered with the administration's plans. The fallout from the Libyan intervention, the Syrian civil war, and the refugee crisis resulting from that conflict, all worked to thwart the Obama administration's efforts to extricate the US from the Middle East as it refocused on Asia and the Pacific.

Leonard Cutler also finds Obama's early wish to transform America's foreign policy undermined by circumstance. In an examination of the administration's policy in Afghanistan, Cutler traces the development of US policy under Obama. The administration began with the stated goal of getting US troops out, followed by a surge to help stabilize the country, the building of infrastructure, efforts to eliminate political corruption, and the struggle to win the hearts and minds of the population. In the end, the Obama administration was left with the realization that US involvement in that country was far from over for the foreseeable future. Cutler notes that, while President Obama's vow to get troops out of Afghanistan was to be part of his legacy, the fact that neither a negotiated settlement nor a military victory were possible meant that his successor will be forced to continue to deal with Afghanistan with no end in sight.

On first inspection, the initial promise of an Obama presidency to be truly different, whether by choice or by circumstance, did not seem to materialize. Many of the Bush era

policies, condemned by candidate Obama, were continued by the Obama White House and in some cases—as with the use of drones—expanded. While the president had noteworthy accomplishments, including the ACA, many of these seem now to be just the beginning of the process for future presidents to

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continue and finish. It will be up to future scholars to determine the true legacy of President Obama, but for now, the authors presented here leave one with the sense that President Obama leaves office less a transformational president than a transitional one. ■

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