



**OBAMA, US AND OTHERS:
THE PROBLEMATIC OF BEING PRESIDENT**

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The presidency of Barack Obama poses a particular problematic for us as African people, not only because we see it as a historic victory against all odds and one we helped shape and proudly share, but also because we have developed a compelling ethnic and ethical sense of obligation to secure and expand it. This has led too many of us to believe any criticism of Obama is self-destructive betrayal at best and at worst ethical heresy, brother-hate and willfully aiding and abetting the enemy. Moreover, our sense of commitment to Obama is deepened when right-wing or even progressive Whites criticize him for what we read as their own racial, racialized, racist or mistaken reasons. Even when he transforms himself from being a compromising president to them into a reprimanding preacher to us, we applaud him, excuse him and urge understanding of his delicate and difficult position, and counsel patience with his problematic reversals and delays concerning the progressive promises he made.

After all, we reason, he is progressive, right-and-good hearted, trying to do the best he can with what and who he has to work. The Bush-men left much wreckage and ruin in their wake and he is called on to repair it: an ICU economy on life-support of illusions and loans; a system privatized, gutted and gobbled up by corporate coldbloods; a legacy of laws, patterns and practices violative of civil and human rights; two unjust, cruel, economy-collapsing and world destructive wars and a country high on fear, flag-waving and self-congratulation and aggressively resistant to needed criticism, questioning and fundamental change.

So, whatever we see in Obama, want for him and us and hope for the country and the world, his options and actions are admittedly

severely constrained not only by things in place but also by the ruling class and its allies in Congress, the corporate world, the academy and the country at large who are deeply committed to the continuance of the established order of things. Indeed, they have their idea of how Obama can best serve their interests and unless there is a progressive movement to check and counter them, they will shape Obama's agenda along familiar lines.

First, the established order expects Obama to provide a *moral mask* to continue previous practices which have been so disruptive and disastrous for this country and the world. Indeed, some of the people responsible for these policies have found positions in the administration. It is his identity as an African American that gives Obama here his special status, extensive appeal and strategic usefulness. For he is part of a people whose history of oppression, resistance and achievement gives them a special moral status in the hearts and minds of the people of the world as a model and standard of moral measure. Thus, what if this person, this representative of this social and moral vanguard, could be used to sanction or support the immoral, unjust and oppressive, or delay, dilute or deflect criticism of it, in a word, give it a new face and future?

Secondly, the established order already uses the election of Obama as a *shield against social justice claims*. Making such important demands are portrayed as out-of-touch-and-time, lacking awareness of the "massive" changes which have been made. As the irrational reasoning goes, Obama's presidency proves Blacks can do anything, if they work hard and that America is an open society, long rid of its racist past and ready to receive at the highest levels those with ambition, ability and

appropriate historical amnesia and social blindness. It is said there are no serious social justice claims now, only by-gone grievances from the bitter, angry, activist and intellectual types, too ethnically emotional to see what social miracles Obama's election has wrought and is yet to reveal. Thus, we are to forget the history and historical costs and consequences of our oppression in all forms, deny the pernicious presence and brutal reality of racial differences in wealth, power and status on almost every level and focus on a future of hope without foundation in past and present practices.

Thirdly, the established order seeks to use Obama's presidency as a way *to reduce and dissuade criticism* of the system itself. For now, Obama is its chief spokesman, the protector and promoter of U.S. state interests. Thus, if we, thru ethnic and/or political loyalty to Obama, fail to offer constructive criticism of his wrongful policies, regardless of their unjust and injurious character, we are not just supporting him; we are endorsing systemic evil and injustice and collaborating in our own oppression and that of others. Never before have we given any person, politician or preacher, teacher or beloved leader immunity from criticism. We have criticized and called to task every leader we've ever had, many times excessively and unjustly, but we saw it as part of our being politically conscious, morally responsible and socially engaged. Clearly, we feel restrained by apprehensions that we will undermine a shared historic victory, aid his right-wing critics, add to his already heavy burden of leadership, deny him

a chance to establish his presence and power and interrupt the progressive transformation he has promised. But how do we justify immunity from criticism for any person, group or government; collaborate in wrongful and unjust governance; and still understand ourselves in the moral and progressive ways our history, culture and struggle require?

Finally, the established order sees in the presidency of Barack Obama an opportunity to facilitate an *increased Americanization* without rightful respect of society's multicultural character. In the current litany to be learned, we are all Americans, without the need to identify our differences in color. But what about our differences in conditions that accompany our color, the differences in life-chances, differences in wealth, power and status? How do we deal with these stark differences and the monopoly one racial group has on these? And what about culture differences? Do we not have a responsibility to respect each people and culture as a unique and equally valuable way of being human in the world?

Obama's studied self-concealment, playing down the African and stressing the American during the campaign and afterwards is posed as the way to success, at least for us. However, other ethnics of color will not be easily homogenized and some White ethnics will not even be asked to surrender their identities for both racial and religious reasons. And anyhow, everybody knows it's not the colors or cultures we need to change, but our disadvantaged positions so that all may be truly free and flourish.

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