

» spotlight

Barack



HOW WILL THE WORLD REMEMBER HIM?

BY TRISTAN BRONCA

A Canadian reflects on **Barack Obama's** presidency and what the election of Donald Trump may mean for his legacy.



A presidential legacy is a complicated thing, like an equation where his character, decisions, policies, promises, failures, successes, and anything of any consequence on a national or international scale are variables. Right now, people – not just Americans, obviously – are looking back on the last eight years in the U.S. and weighing these variables, tipping the scales according to their view of the world. If you're a West Virginia coal miner, a African American schoolteacher from Chicago, or a journalist from Toronto, you're going to see things differently. But as more time passes, the legacy will begin to look more similar to more people.

For soon-to-be-former President Barack Obama, that convergence of views is still a dot on the horizon. Right now, his accomplishments are being refracted through the prism of many worldviews, magnifying him

into a giant of progressive causes in the eyes of many (including yours truly), and twisting him into something else entirely in the eyes of others.

If the election of Donald Trump proved anything, it was that there were far more of those others in America than most expected. Consider, for example, the fact that he was the first African American to win the presidency. He had what many people would characterize as two successful terms, and yet Trump ran a campaign built on racial resentment – regularly saying things that should have disqualified him for the position – and won (if you're not fully convinced of that, I should point out that the Ku Klux Klan is planning a parade in North Carolina to celebrate Trump's election; or that the president-elect's chief strategist, Steve Bannon, is a hero of the white nationalist movement). Or consider the DREAM Act, a law that would prevent the children of undocumented immigrants from being deported. ■

“REALITY HAS A WAY OF ASSERTING ITSELF.”

- BARACK OBAMA

It sat in legislative purgatory for 11 years until Obama went ahead with executive action. The idea that such a policy would be safe under President Trump – who lit a fire in so many of his supporters with his campaign promises to deport millions of illegal immigrants – would be laughable if we weren’t talking about breaking up of thousands of families.

In light of this, an article on Obama’s legacy feels like a terribly depressing assignment. That dot on the horizon, all the future fond remembrances of the changes that Obama made, is now being threatened by a rising tide of fear and hatred in America.

But maybe that’s unfair. Maybe to suggest that an orange real estate mogul with zero political experience could walk into the Oval Office and shake the Etch A Sketch clean of all of Obama’s accomplishments is me getting a little ahead of myself. “Reality has a way of asserting itself,” the president said in a news conference days after his first meeting with Trump. After all, it’s too soon for Obama to forget how hard he fought for much of what was accomplished. He knows no matter the gaping political divides in America today, and no matter the resentment that led to Trump’s win, it would be harder for his successor to take away what he, Obama, had won for so many people than it was for him to convince the country it would be worth it.

I.

THE FIGHT FOR OBAMACARE

Earlier this year, when *The New York Times Magazine* asked 53 historians what Obama’s greatest accomplishment was, Obamacare topped the list. “It’s an achievement that will put Obama in the ranks of FDR (Social Security) and LBJ (Medicare) because of its enduring impact on the average American’s well-being,” wrote Thomas Holt of the University of Chicago. “He won’t need bridges and airports named after him since opponents already did him the favour of naming it ‘Obamacare.’”

It seems impossible that a piece of legislation that has so far provided almost 20 million Americans with health insurance could be so polarizing. In 2012, two years after the bill was passed, a Reuters-Ipsos poll found that just 14% of Republicans supported the law, with many fearing it would disrupt existing health plans, send premiums soaring and add to the country’s \$500-billion deficit. Slowly, Obama’s administration claimed the term “Obamacare” from those trying to discredit him, but it still has a charged meaning. A CNBC poll from 2013 found that 46% of the public was opposed to Obamacare but only 37% were opposed to the Affordable Care Act. They are, of course, the same thing.

The bill – whatever you choose to call it – was never perfect. The price of premiums on mid-level plans is expected to rise a whopping 25% next year, which will be a deterrent for desperately needed enrollees. Insurers are now beginning to pull out of certain states, recognizing that a lack of enrollees could create instability in the market.

The price hike can be explained by looking at the types of people who are signing up. Because the bill prohibited insurers

from turning away those with a preexisting condition, all of sickest people signed up first. Problem was, not enough healthy people did. Obama had every reason to believe that would not happen. The initial prices of premiums were low enough that most healthy people without coverage should have bought in. Even after the price hike, patients aren’t likely paying much out-of-pocket. The government subsidizes the cost.

Predictably, the pushback has been furious and now that Republicans will take control of the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Oval Office, the program’s future is in serious jeopardy. Opponents of the law have unsuccessfully voted to repeal it over 60 times and many now assume that Trump will succeed where they have failed (though it’s not clear what, if anything, he’ll replace it with). But even if it were to be repealed tomorrow, the fact that Obama managed this reform does matter. If you accept – as us Canadians do – that healthcare is a human right, then he personally paid an unreasonably high political price to win it for those who couldn’t afford it.

II.

REWRITING THE WASHINGTON PLAYBOOK

If you watch Obama on talk shows or when he hangs out with what I imagine are regular people during those painfully stilted photo-ops, one of the first things you notice is how cool he is. He’s almost universally recognized as funny and he seems just as laid back handing out candy to tiny superheroes at the White House’s annual Halloween party as he is when he’s rubbing shoulders with senators and congressmen.

This public persona contains traces of another popular trope that’s often referenced in political circles: that of the “Spockian” Obama, the unflappable, methodical and confident leader. These characteristics seem to have played an important role in his dealings with hostile foreign powers.

One of the defining moments of Obama’s presidency was his famous “line in the sand,” his promise that if Syrian President Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against his own people, the American military would be forced to intervene. In 2013, Assad did and with America’s reputation as a superpower at stake, many members of Obama’s inner circle were pushing for a decisive show of force. Despite this, the president broke his promise.

In “The Obama Doctrine,” the 20,000-word cover story that ran in the April issue of the *Atlantic*, Editor-in-Chief Jeffrey Goldberg went to great pains to diagnose the president’s decision. It’s clear that he agonized over it for some time but ultimately he found that American intervention would have costs that hadn’t been carefully considered: that Assad might place civilians as human shields around obvious targets, or that strike might send plumes of poison gas drifting uncontrollably towards innocent people. There was also the question of what would happen after the strike. Would America be committed to further intervention? Was such a course in anyone’s best interest? Obama’s choice played out as a radical departure from the Bush years, which saw America mired in several Middle-Eastern conflicts.





"There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow," Obama told Goldberg. "(It) prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions."

To this day, many see "the line in the sand" as one of the greatest failures of his presidency but it's worth noting that, under American pressure, Assad later agreed to remove all chemical weapons. It was a triumph of diplomacy, and it was just one example of a uniquely thoughtful and level-headed approach that would define Obama's foreign policy. That may not sound as consequential as a great military victory but in a part of the world already ravaged by war, his restraint likely mattered more than action.

III.

THE TRAPPINGS OF THE PRESIDENCY

Obama never had any illusions that he would be able to fix all of America's problems, as if a health system, or climate change, or gun violence, or mass incarceration, or illegal im-

migration, or unemployment were a leaky faucet. You can't turn a country on a dime, and though eight years is basically that, Obama has done an admirable job. But as important as the wins are, there will always be people who remember the president for his failings, and it would be a mistake to believe that those failings will always fall under the shadow of his accomplishments.

After George Bush enacted the Patriot Act following 9/11, the National Surveillance Agency expanded to become the most massive intelligence-gathering operation ever, violating basic rights of U.S. citizens along the way. Edward Snowden, the whistleblower who revealed those violations, was prosecuted under the 1917 Espionage Act – an act that Obama has used to prosecute more than twice as many whistleblowers as all previous U.S. presidents combined. The executive use of military drones has spiked, in Pakistan for example by 700%, and their use has bred immeasurable fear and hatred towards the west. Then there's Guantanamo Bay. Since its inception, the military prison has been a den of human rights violations where suspected enemies of the U.S. have been held indefinitely without the possibility of a trial. Obama

promised in his first term to close the prison and remains committed to moving prisoners out, but it now seems impossible that it will ever close. Trump, as will come as a surprise to no-one, has vowed to keep the prison open and fill it with "some bad dudes."

When we talk about these failures, it's not enough to say Obama tried to do better. They happened under his watch. Whether they were byproduct of the unstoppable march of technology and the growing popularity of a 'do whatever it takes to keep America safe' attitude (as one could argue is the case with the executive use of drones), or a Gordian knot of legal and bureaucratic problems (as is the case in GTMO), he still bears responsibility for them. Such is the burden of the presidency. And when we remember the great strides Obama has taken to make healthcare more equitable, to combat climate change, or to change the way the rest of the world looks at the U.S., we will hopefully remember that he carried that burden gracefully. ■