
President Barack Obama's Crappy Legacy

05/10/2016



Barack Obama came into the White House on a wave of passionate new voters, many of them black or young and white, becoming the nation's first black president and promising a new era of "hope and change."

Eight years later, as he is preparing to exit the White House, he leaves behind considerable wreckage, disappointment and a legacy of death and destruction, plenty of it physical, but also much of it in the legislative and political arena.

He did give us, over the last eight years, a lot of change, but not much hope, and most of the change has been negative.

Let's just run through at least some of the list:

* One of candidate Obama's big selling points in 2008 was that he promised to end the Bush/Cheney administration's disastrous war in Iraq, to close the horrific torture site and prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, so damaging to American principles and to the country's international reputation, and to restore the rule of law with regard to government behavior in areas like torture, extrajudicial killing and surveillance. Eight years later, the war in Iraq — a country almost totally destroyed by the illegal US invasion in 2003 and by the subsequent occupation and deliberate encouragement of civil war between Sunni and Shia populations — continues, with US forces being added even as our Nobel Peace Laureate president prepares to leave office. Guantanamo remains open and stocked with prisoners, many of them known to have been wrongly accused of terrorism, as the president has proved too gutless to do the right thing and just shut the place down, or order the captives released. Meanwhile, torture continues, the president has expanded and formalized a system of state-sanctioned and directed murder, even of US citizens abroad, and surveillance of Americans has reached appalling levels not even imagined by science fiction writers like George Orwell a generation or more ago. Indeed, the Obama administration had its lawyers actively and aggressively defend these Constitutional assaults, crimes and violations of international law in the nation's federal courts, even appealing when courageous federal judges made the right decisions.

* Race relations in the US, and the economic condition of people of color in America, have only deteriorated during President Obama's two terms. When a police officer arrested a distinguished middle-aged Harvard professor in his own house early in Obama's first term, falsely assuming the man, despite showing his faculty ID, was a burglar, the president had the two men to the White House for a "beer summit," instead of demanding an end to such racial profiling. As a result, racial profiling and the killing of unarmed blacks, including children, by mostly white police officers has become epidemic and an almost daily occurrence on this president's watch, along with a general militarization of police (encouraged by his administration's offer of free military surplus war armaments) to the point that it's hard to distinguish them from an army of occupation across the land. The president has had basically nothing to say about reversing this catastrophic assault on freedom and democracy.

* The prison system has continued to expand, with perhaps some of the worst conditions of all in Supermax prisons run by the federal government (under the direct control of the president), where all inmates are held in conditions of solitary confinement that the civilized world considers to be a form of torture. The president has done nothing about this giant prison industrial complex of some 2 million inmates (not to mention the millions more living as half-citizens on permanent "parole" as ex-felons). It's a situation which has appropriately been labeled a new form of chattel slavery by such experts as Mumia Abu-Jamal, a man who spent over two decades in such conditions, and who is still serving a life sentence in a Pennsylvania jail, a victim of corrupt and racist courts and unseemly political pressure from the nation's police union, the Fraternal Order of Police.

* A once-in-a-generation opportunity to finally scuttle this country's outrageous and uniquely expensive and class-based for-profit health care system in favor of some kind of government run "single-payer" national system such as, again, the rest of the civilized nations of the world have adopted at much lower cost and with far better access and outcomes, was squandered by this president. Although he had advocated a "socialized" system before running for president, he opted to exclude that option from his "reform" planning. Instead, he gave us the Affordable Care Act — a complex and increasingly unaffordable system that was the preference of the insurance industry, whose shares rose dramatically with its passage into law. Obama's legacy in this case is a system so inherently costly to both government and the public that it is doomed to crash and burn, leaving many or even perhaps most Americans worse off than before what is now known as "Obamacare" existed. (In effect, Obama gave the US almost exactly what Hillary Clinton's mangled effort tried to give us 16 years earlier in the early years of husband Bill Clinton's presidency: a complex private insurance industry-run system doomed to collapse under its own profit-maximizing weight.)

* Climate disaster, which candidate Obama warned was the biggest crisis facing America and the world, has been allowed to worsen almost unimpeded. The president refused to make it his number one issue, which is inexcusable given that he began by claiming that is what it was. Eight years that, with action taken, could have made a difference in at least slowing the looming disaster, were wasted while the president instead pursued his wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Somalia and elsewhere and his drone killing campaigns elsewhere in places like Pakistan and Yemen, and as he promoted a gratuitously confrontational foreign policy towards both Russia and China as advocated by the neo-con advisors he appointed to key positions in his administration, including as Secretary of Defense.

* Particularly where it comes to energy, the president not only did nothing significant to reduce carbon emissions in the US (any declines in US carbon production were the result of the enduring economic slowdown, itself in many ways the result of the president's too timid approach on taking office to try and use his huge initial popularity in early 2008 to press for a major spending campaign to jump start the economy out of recession. He actually took a page from his wacky opponents, Sen. John McCain and running mate Sarah Palin, and pressed for a "drill, baby, drill" policy of promoting "all of the above" energy sources, including offshore oil and gas exploration, extensive fracking for oil and gas, and even expanded drilling in the increasingly fragile Arctic and Arctic Ocean. He continues to back the construction of pipelines that only encourage more exploitation of heavy carbon-producing "dirty" oil from places like North Dakota and Canada's tar sands.

* Nuclear war, which the president as candidate promised to make less likely, has become more likely, in the view of many experts, than any time since the Cuban Missile Crisis. This is in large part because this president has pushed an aggressive program of trying to inviting countries on Russia's border into NATO, of undermining the elected government of Ukraine only to replace it with a coup government run by anti-Russian fascists, of installing nuclear-tipped missiles right on Russia's western border in Poland, and of "modernizing" America's nuclear stockpile, including the design and manufacture of "useable" small nukes of only a few kilotons of destructive power, weapons which could in the future be used in battlefield settings, with disastrous potential for escalation to

bigger bombs. This alone should cause the Nobel Committee to revoke the president's ill-deserved Peace Prize, though since Norway is a compliant member of NATO that highly appropriate if unprecedented action is unlikely to happen.

* The president campaigned with tremendous labor movement support on a pledge to make a reform of the hugely pro-management labor relations laws, beginning with a bill to make "card check" calls for a union, where a majority of workers simply have to sign cards saying they want one, sufficient to mandate that an employer recognize a union and bargain fairly for a contract. He never even submitted such a bill, saying once elected that he had bigger issues facing him. American workers have continued to have to battle to survive during the president's two terms under a National Labor Relations Act that is stacked against them.

* Beginning in 2010, the president, instead of calling on the mass of supporters developed during his 2008 campaign, to get out and back progressive candidates for Congress, oversaw as head of the Democratic Party a campaign to undermine and run conservative Democratic candidates against most more radical and progressive candidates seeking office in Democratic Party primaries. The result of this backstabbing of progressive candidates was that support for Democratic Congressional nominees that year and in subsequent elections was lackluster at best, leading to Republican takeover of both House and Senate — a grim situation that will now be difficult to undo.

* In the area of education, the president has actively encouraged the continuing privatization of public school systems at the expense of public schools, instead of working to better fund poor school districts. In what is a zero sum game, this has simply shifted public tax money from poor schools to selective privately run schools, where much of it ends up being siphoned off to high-salaried executives and the shareholders of for-profit management companies running the charters. The losers in all this have been the nation's children. At the level of higher education, the president had the government take over as lender to students, but although such loans do not even allow default, they continue to be offered at extortionate interest rates, leaving graduates as essentially indentured servants for life. Note that big banks are able to borrow money at zero interest (which they simply turn around and invest in treasures to earn a 2-3-percent spread, rather than lending out), but students, whose successful education should be seen as a boon to the whole nation, instead have to pay 3-6% rates for their borrowed federal loan funds. (Student debt ballooned from \$600 million when Obama first took office to a record \$1.3 trillion in 2016 as he is leaving.)

* In the area of open and law-abiding government, candidate Obama promised a new era of open government. That was probably his biggest whopper. By all accounts, his has been the most secretive government in history, with the most prosecutions of whistleblowers, including the use of the hoary and clearly Constitution-undermining Espionage Act, his hounding of such courageous exposers of government wrongdoing as Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, NSA critic Edward Snowden, and war-crimes exposers Chelsea Manning, and his G W Bush-like fondness for executive orders. Open government died with President George Bush and his consigliere, Vice President Dick Cheney. It has been buried by President Obama.

* Finally, Obama failed abysmally on the economy, in large part because just as with the criminals of the Bush/Cheney administration whom he declined to prosecute for their clearly illegal and unconstitutional crimes of torture, aggressive war-making and illegal surveillance on Americans, he decided to bar the Justice Department from prosecuting the criminal bankers at the head of the nation's largest banks for causing, through their corrupt lending and fraudulent derivative-marketing programs, the real estate and stockmarket bubbles that ultimately collapsed the US and the global economy.

That decision was a disaster that still haunts the USA today, where some 20 percent of the workforce remains unemployed or unwillingly working less than full-time, often at a fraction of the wages they were earning before 2008. By bailing out the banks instead of breaking them up, he did nothing to encourage actual lending to people and small businesses for year on critical year.

So accommodating has this president been of the leadership of these billionaire banksters (many of them big contributors to his political campaigns), that not one top bank executive since 2008 has even been required to resign or retire, much less face prosecution, even at banks that ultimately, this year, were actually charged with felonies, but were allowed to cop a guilty plea in return for simply paying billions in fines — fines which they were able to write off against their taxes, in effect making the public pay them.

It's hard, amid all this presidential wreckage, to find significant area where Obama is leaving any progressive legacy of substance. If anyone can think of something, it is sure to be dwarfed by the monumental pile of crap that

he has allowed or even actively encouraged to pile up during his sorry two-term watch as president.

The sad thing to add about his exit is that he has so befouled the electoral landscape by his record of vacuous promises and subsequent lack of leadership and non-delivery of the goods that a jaded and/or angry public is likely to deliver us one of two replacements in the White House who will be even worse.
