

Barack Obama Was Never the Man We Thought He Was

In Joe Biden, we've finally uncovered the truth about the Obama administration four years too late.



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History HD



Three days ago, Joe Biden received an endorsement from Barack Obama in his bid to beat Donald Trump following Bernie Sander's swift concession from the hotly contested race. The announcement brought a poetic conclusion to a Democratic primary that was mired with candidates who, in some way, shape or form, bore uncanny resemblances to our former president. For some reason, the Democratic Party remains strangely infatuated with him, and their fondness could not have been clearer than in this year's Democratic primary where countless candidates ran not to be the next presidential nominee but to be the next Barack Obama.

There was Pete Buttigieg, a small-town mayor who came from relative obscurity to eventually win the Iowa primary alongside Bernie Sanders. After headlining his own town hall hosted by CNN, our country was introduced to a candidate who was an openly gay man, a military veteran, a millennial, and — most importantly — a Rhodes Scholar! Not only were his credentials a breath of fresh air from every other governor, senator, and billionaire in the race, but he also spoke with a charming (albeit plagiarized) eloquence and an impassioned vision that Democrats came to miss from the years when Barack Obama was president. While he frequently came short in terms of policy, he garnered appeal as the “new kid on the block” that gave Democrats momentary relief from the same-old politicians they were bored by.

Of course, we can't forget about Elizabeth Warren. Though she often ran to the left of the Democrats, Elizabeth Warren's catchphrase “I've got a plan for that!” established her as a policy wonk who was fine-tuning the legislative details of her policies before most candidates even had a policy page on their websites. Like our former president, Elizabeth Warren came from humble beginnings and eventually shored up in academia where she became an expert in law; leading up to the 2008 recession, she spearheaded the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and demonstrated her knack as a technocrat on Capitol Hill. For the most part, she resembled the detail-oriented part of Barack Obama: a politician who could get very specific about legislation and answer every question about her policies with dazzling charm and eloquent finesse.

Last but not least, we have Joe Biden. What better silhouette is there of the man Barack Obama was than his own vice president? In the face of his ideological competitor Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden platformed on the prior accomplishments of his administration —



against its challengers both from the left and the right. His service as vice president was his hallmark credential against the best and brightest that the Democratic Party had to offer, and no one could quite lay claim to our former president as he did so frequently. Today, after a year or so spanning a crowded primary, he is our presidential nominee in the general election to beat Donald Trump. Perhaps we might get a third term of Barack Obama after all!

Even as we select our candidate for what many consider to be the most important election of our lifetimes, we are still enamored by the effect that Barack Obama once had on our country when he first emerged at the Democratic National Convention in 2004 and later became president four years after. After all, his mythical appeal is quite undeniable: not only was he the first black president of the United States, but he was also well-spoken, charming, handsome, and otherwise the gold standard for “presidential.” For young people like me who came of age during the Obama and Trump administrations, the hatred and incompetence of our current president only made us miss Barack Obama even more, even if we didn’t quite understand the implications of his presidency.

However, as we bore witness to Donald Trump’s victory back in 2016, we wondered what went wrong; what made a fascist demagogue ascend to the Oval Office where a political luminary faithfully served for eight years? Walking in the footsteps of Barack Obama was Hillary Clinton, one of the most credentialed politicians in Washington who was going to be our first ever woman president; how did she lose to a crooked businessman who was — by no stretch of the imagination — totally unqualified to be our president? The election of Donald Trump eluded young people like me for years, simply because we couldn’t understand why millions of people chose to burn down the house that Barack Obama built. Now, after we’ve been given several years to think about how and why we got here, we finally know why: the Obama administration wasn’t what we thought it was.

Barack Obama did not keep his promise that our country provided opportunity to all who had a dream. When he took the presidential helm in 2008 and inherited a recession, he immediately beckoned to Wall Street in bailouts that costed taxpayers billions upon billions of dollars. Though the 2008 recession very much resembled the Great



offered a continuation of the crony capitalism that had been well-established on Capitol Hill for decades ever since the years when Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton were our presidents. As a result, the Rust Belt witnessed the death of the American Dream as factories closed and countless manufacturing jobs disappeared, leaving behind millions of unemployed and impoverished Americans who soon became the Obama-Trump voters longing to make America great again.

Despite his gracious attempt to see past “blue states” and “red states,” Barack Obama spent eight frustrating years in observance of a house divided against itself. Only two years after his historic election as the first black president, Barack Obama was confronted with another historic election from across the aisle: Republicans won 63 seats in the House of Representatives, elected six new governors, and flipped over a dozen state legislatures. For the remaining years, the Republicans completely stonewalled the Democrats and barely allowed the Affordable Care Act to pass. Near the tail end of his presidency, Barack Obama’s appointment of Merrick Garland to the Supreme Court was blocked by Mitch McConnell in the Republican Party’s last rebuke to the Obama administration. Despite Barack Obama’s best efforts to bring our country together, the house no longer stood by 2016.

Though Barack Obama was the first black president, he was also a black president who was apathetic to the incidents of police brutality spanning his two terms, who detained and deported more immigrants than any other president in recent memory, who dropped thousands of bombs on the Middle East and effectively upstaged his hawkish predecessor, who failed to rally behind movements like Black Lives Matter, and who otherwise failed to serve people of color at the highest executive office of our country. In reminding us that our presidents no longer had to be exclusively white men, he also reminded us that our police officers, ICE agents, drone operators, and prison wardens didn’t have to be exclusively white men either.

By endorsing Joe Biden for president, Barack Obama has bequeathed the legacy of his administration onto the man that our former president would’ve been if he was not the charismatic sweet-talker and policy wonk that Democrats fell in love with: the shallow specter of a neoliberal fantasy dreamt by Third Way politicians that now haunts our twenty-first century reality in the form of Donald Trump, a man whom millions of people



living as if the day were January 20, 2009 when the first black president was inaugurated. The two-term victory of Barack Obama followed by the humiliating defeat of Hillary Clinton and eventual nomination of Joe Biden is, in many ways, a three-stanza poem describing how little Democrats have learned from the eight years when the Obama administration gave rise to its fascist successor simply by operating under the Clintonian pretense that “America never stopped being great.”

I remember back in 2016 when my friends jokingly wished for Barack Obama to run for a third term because we knew he would wipe the floor with Donald Trump; in Joe Biden, we have him, though he’s not quite the man we remembered him to be. Joe Biden is running a campaign that is simply a dozen years too late, and he has failed to learn from the mistakes that Donald Trump seems to have held Democrats’ feet to the fire with since Hillary Clinton lost. Much like the president he once served alongside, he is running in the midst of an economic downturn equivalent to or worse than that which Barack Obama inherited from George Bush, and he offers a neoliberal agenda that assures Wall Street that “nothing would fundamentally change.” However, something must fundamentally change; we are no longer living in 2008 or 2012 when our country was willing to give Barack Obama two terms to make good on his promise. We’ve seen this movie twice before, and the Democratic Party wishes to hit rewind once again even when the rest of the country can no longer bear to watch.

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