
Introduction

American power and identities in the age of Obama

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Abstract Although the election of Barack Obama to the US presidency represents a landmark event in the history of that country, questions remain over its broader political significance. What is the likelihood of Obama's foreign and national security policies differing fundamentally from those of the Bush administrations? Does Obama's election signal a 'post-racial' phase in American national life? What are the factors that suggest opportunities to change and expand American identities as opposed to those that limit Obama's sphere of action? This article introduces the special issue and suggests that although Obama's room for manoeuvre is limited by legacies inherited from the Bush administration, Obama's own appointments to high office as well as other actions, despite the availability of alternative courses, indicate that he is not the transformational president he claimed to be. American identities, therefore, are deeply embedded and remain heavily imbued with racial, religious and imperial features.

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Most of the articles in this special issue of *International Politics* stem from a Symposium at the University of Manchester, in summer 2009, just a few short months after the inauguration of the United States' first African-American head of state, President Barack Hussein Obama. His election, in the wake of the deeply unpopular presidency of George W. Bush – which brought 'anti-Americanism' to new highs across the world (O'Connor and Griffiths, 2007) – was truly historic. As *The Economist* noted, 'When they voted to send a Black man to the White House at the end of 2008, Americans performed one of the most remarkable acts of *rebranding* in the history of their remarkable nation' (Vucetic, 2011). An African-American in the truest (immigrant-not-descended-from-slaves) sense of the word was elected president – born to a white American

mother, and a Kenyan father, with Islamic family roots. Further, Obama had spent a significant part of his childhood on Hawaii, not to mention Indonesia. In his profoundly engaging *Dreams From My Father*, Obama more than hints at an understanding of the workings of neo-colonial power in 'post-colonial' Africa (Obama, 1995). Elected on a massive tide of discontent about America's role in the world and its own sense of worth, occasioned by the travails of Bush's global war on terror and horrific tales of systematic torture and kidnapping of terror suspects, held without charge, trial or the protections of the US constitution, Obama was the 'new face' of American power, one that would steer America away from imperialistic hubris and war towards reconciliation, consultation and understanding: America under Obama would, once again, be a force for good in the world, and a power that would heal a divided society.

But what does Obama's elevation to the White House really signify? What does it mean for the nature of American society, its racialised system of inequality, its political order, its very self-concepts and identities? While the election of Obama certainly represents an historic change (whoever predicted that a Black man would enter the White House as commander-in-chief?) less than 50 years after the passage of the Voting Rights Act that guaranteed the franchise to African-Americans in the 'Jim Crow' deep south of racial segregation, *The Economist's* reference to 'rebranding' points up ambiguities about the depth of the change Obama actually represents in regard to fundamental transformational politics. Obama is reputed to have said somewhere, in response to a question about whether he really was 'the change candidate', '*I am the change*' Dickerson (2008). In its own way, this raises the issue of agency and structure in politics. How much change could be expected of a president inheriting two major foreign wars, encompassed by the 'war on terror' or 'the long war', a global financial-economic crisis and international and domestic crises of confidence? And how would he cope with long-term structural factors over which no president could expect to exercise significant influence let alone control. Such structural factors are advanced and substantiated in some detail by the first three articles in this issue – Trubowitz and Mellow, McCormack and Halperin. Given such factors, and a legacy of wars and financial crisis, how much room for manoeuvre did/does Obama actually possess? In other words, given the context, what difference could Obama make? Whatever the answers to these questions might be in *hard political terms*, the fact remains that his *campaign* – in the context of a deeply unpopular and, indeed in some quarters, hated, Bush administration – implied a promise of political transformation. Its slogans, 'Change We Can Believe In' and 'Yes We Can', heavily indicated that Obama would break from the Bush administration, particularly in foreign and national security affairs.

President Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy, however, strongly echoes that of his predecessor, George W. Bush, and is also almost identical



to that suggested by a large group of elite academics, military officials, businessmen and former Clinton administration insiders brought together as the Princeton Project on National Security (PPNS) back in 2004–2006. The Princeton Project was led by Princeton academics Anne-Marie Slaughter and G. John Ikenberry, featured Reagan's secretary of state, George Schultz and Clinton's national security adviser, Anthony Lake, as co-chairs. Francis Fukuyama, erstwhile neo-con, sat on the steering committee and was co-author of the Project's working paper on grand strategy. Henry Kissinger acted as adviser, as did Harvard's Joseph Nye, author of the concept of 'Soft Power', morphing more recently into 'Smart Power' (see Nye, 2004, 2008; Parmar and Cox, 2010). PPNS represented a new cross-party consensus on how to 'correct' the excesses and reckless enthusiasm for American power of the Bush administration.¹

Several PPNS participants and leaders were appointed to the Obama administration: for example, Jim Steinberg to the state department, Michael McFaul and Samantha Power to the national security council. Anne-Marie Slaughter heads up the state department's policy planning staff – the department's in-house think tank, the first director of which was Princeton's George F. Kennan, author of the concept that defined US policy in the cold war era: containment. PPNS was a self-conscious attempt to replicate Kennan's work and impact in the post-Bush era, in the wake of the 'war of choice' (then supported by numerous current Obama administration members) against Iraq (Smith, 2007). Other appointees, including Jim Jones as national security adviser, John Brennan to head of counter-terrorism and Robert Gates (retained as secretary of defence from the Bush administration) further suggest that Obama *chose* to retain strong elements of the Bush foreign policy programme.

The similarities of Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy to those of Bush and Princeton suggest that it is/will be 'business as usual', in the main. The principal lines of US global behaviour – in Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Israel – remain the same, with tactical and stylistic differences. Undoubtedly, Obama's rhetoric is less bellicose and less inflammatory than Bush's, but that softening of tone was beginning in the final months of the previous administration in any case. The military surge in Afghanistan, the identification of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as the focus of the war on terror, the military 'draw-down' in Iraq, the 'military surge' concept combining lethal military power and restoration of public services, were also processes begun under Bush. The attempts to close Guantanamo began under Bush, and continue, without success, today (Parmar, 2010).

But Obama continues to back 'rendition' (kidnapping terror suspects) and has actively prevented the extension of constitutional protections to inmates at Bagram and other lawless prisons holding uncharged terror suspects

(WSJ.com, 2010). He may be accused by some of declaring war on Israel (Horowitz and Laskin, 2010), but one would hardly know it from his total silence on Israel's war on Gaza or its recent illegal attack on a ship carrying aid for Israel's million-and-a-half victims in Gaza, not to mention the billions of dollars of US military and other aid to Israel (Actions in Support of Obama's National Security Strategy. Fact Sheet, 2010).

Obama's mission – US leadership, military superiority, global reach, shaping the international order, making and enforcing global rules, spreading freedom and democracy, lauding postwar international institution-building under President Harry Truman (the golden age to both Bush and Obama, and PPNS' Ikenberry and Slaughter) – is of a piece with all post-1945 American administrations. The rhetoric and tactics vary with conditions within the United States and in the world at large but the goals remain the same.

At this point in time, the United States is suffering from military overstretch and economic crisis: it struggles physically to fight, and financially to afford, two wars (even after ending the combat mission in Iraq at the end of August 2010) at the levels of intensity required, and remains committed to a professional military rather than a conscripted one (which proved problematic during the Vietnam War) (Dumbrell and Ryan, 2007). At home, there are rumblings about America's internal problems of unemployment and other social issues, as well as increasing scepticism about the nature and costs – financial and moral – of America's global interventionism. Hence, Obama has adopted a policy similar to Prime Minister David Cameron's 'big society': building alliances with non-governmental groups, think tanks and foundations better to intervene in world affairs, especially in the governance of other societies designated as threats or potential threats to America's 'security' (Obama, 2010).

Although the above arguments might make the prospects for 'root and branch' change seem distant, even relatively minor changes may have significant effects in international politics. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was crucial to the identification of Jimmy Carter as a candidate for the White House in the wake of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal in the mid-1970s,² similarly isolated Obama as the man to restore America's battered moral authority in world affairs in the post-Bush era (MacGillis, 2007). And it is difficult to argue that Obama's election did not dent world-wide anti-Americanism.³ The securing of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 was precisely for the *anticipated* impact of Obama on the 'atmospherics', the tone of American foreign policy and world politics – with its rhetorical emphasis on *listening to*, *consulting* and *cooperating* with other nations and multilateral organisations. But what deep effects do such 'minor' changes inaugurate? How long does the 'feel good' factor last in the absence of *substantive* policy change? The impacts of insubstantial changes are usually temporary: the Muslim world never fully



bought the Obama story (Skerry, 2010); and Europeans are beginning to learn that Obama is no 'soft touch' as he presses them to send more troops to Afghanistan and be ready financially and otherwise to support principles for which they claim to stand (Joyner, 2009).

The articles below consider these and other issues of change and continuity from a variety of angles and through examining a range of themes. A key aim is to increase our understanding of how racial, religious and imperial factors have helped to shape American identities and power, and to begin a discussion of the ways in which those factors combine and impact on American power and identities in the Obama era. Leading scholars from the United States, Europe and Britain examine the ways in which race, religion and empire intertwine and help constitute US power. However, race, religion and empire's symbiotic relationship constitutes a deep structure and process rooted in US history. This issue of *International Politics* interrogates the ways in which historical structures, agencies and processes have changed, or mutated, and how they might further transform under President Barack Obama.

Before exploring these ideational themes, however, three articles argue that long-term structural factors at work within American society, economy and polity, severely limit the degree of change that Obama can effectively bring about. Peter Trubowitz and Nicole Mellow argue that the bi-partisan aspirations of Obama are extremely unlikely to come to fruition in terms of a political consensus on foreign and national security policy, despite broad acceptance of the salience of the 'terrorist threat' since 9–11. This is because bipartisanship results not only from a shared perception of an external threat but also a strong domestic economy and regionally diverse party coalitions, conditions that prevailed during the cold war but patently do not today. Tara McCormack, on the other, argues that Obama must cope with the fundamental fact that US hegemony in Europe was predicated on Europe's relative domestic weaknesses after the Second World War, a condition more or less eliminated today. The Soviet 'threat' had clearly played a key role in cementing US hegemony but of even greater salience had been European post-war domestic vulnerability and insecurity. That no longer being the case, Europe is more assertive and less likely to yield to US pressure – for greater levels of economic and financial stimulus, for example, or for greater troop commitments to America's wars, including the long-running war in Afghanistan.

From a political economy perspective, Sandra Halperin's article is continuous with, but adds to, the themes considered above. In particular, Halperin considers the *Anglo-American* basis of the pursuit of economic resources. Halperin argues that 'the invasion of Iraq can best be understood as part of the latest phase of Anglo-American global restructuring; and that it has much to tell us about the political economy of Anglo-American power'. Rather than instituting radical change, Barack Obama's administration inherited and

is actively developing a strategy that harks back to the nineteenth century of *Pax Britannica*. In addition, then, to the lack of hegemony-producing domestic economic and political conditions within the United States and Europe, Halperin argues that the political economy of Anglo-American power severely constrains the possibilities of change that Obama could inaugurate.

The rest of the articles in this special issue focus on ideational processes that tend to produce strong tendencies towards continuity, further eroding the possibilities of a 'change presidency'. Tony Smith's essay on President Woodrow Wilson's strategic role in *secularising* biological racism into cultural superiority and evangelical zeal into a sense of national mission helps understand the continuing significance of social Darwinism in American life, the *generalised power of deeply-held convictions* no longer palatable to the majority of Americans let alone world opinion. As Smith argues, through Woodrow Wilson's 'democratizing ambitions, what formerly had been racial and religious beliefs became secular and modern convictions that gave to American foreign policy a self-confident and self-righteous identity capable of undertaking acts of progressive imperialism ...' Smith's view is that these deep-seated convictions – that imperial creed (Barnett, 1973) – blossomed after the Cold War's end in the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and of Barack Obama.

Other articles in this issue pick up on and explore in depth several of Smith's themes. Heavily implied therein is the inextricably linked character of America's domestic ethno-racial-cultural and political identities and its foreign and national security policies. Although practically all scholars of international politics pay lip service to this, this approach is fully exemplified in analysing the character of American power in the Obama era in this special issue. Srdjan Vucetic's contribution, for example, explores the ways in which the Obama presidency negotiates, critiques and *reproduces* the racial, religious, linguistic and economic-institutional sources of American imperial identities. His argument is that, despite Obama's racial minority origins, there are deeper impulses of a secularised racial-religious order that continue to exert substantial influence in American life, politics and, therefore, foreign relations.

In an historically informed inter-disciplinary article, Mark Ledwidge shows the numerous consequences of the rise of Barack Obama to the presidency, including the conservative attempts to link Obama to 'Islamic fundamentalism' and Black 'extremism', the latter through a brief foray into the Jeremiah Wright affair. Ledwidge suggests that 'mainstream responses to Obama were couched in coded, neo-racial language aligned with a conservative agenda pertaining to domestic and foreign affairs'. Going even further, Ledwidge argues that 'the controversy concerning Obama's religious identity and alleged radicalism were tactical ploys aimed at questioning the wisdom of electing a candidate with non-WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) credentials'.



Obama was portrayed by many – especially on the political Right – as the ultimate ‘outsider’, the ‘un-American’, whose loyalties were suspect. Claims that the election of Obama marked the dawn of a ‘post-racial’ phase in US politics and foreign policy are placed under a microscope and found wanting. Indeed, there are echoes in the rhetoric of post-racial politics of President Ronald Reagan’s ‘color-blind’ approach to race, society and politics that, in the context of deep-seated racial inequalities, merely served to increase the inter- and intra-racial polarisation of ‘life chances’ (Phillips, 1991). Placing Obama in the context of a complex of historical, racial and international factors, Ledwidge argues that Obama permits America to present to the world a new, more cosmopolitan face – as the United States moves ever closer to transforming into a ‘minority-majority’ nation.

Kevern Verney, in an article that closely complements Ledwidge’s analysis, explores Obama’s victory in November 2008 in the context of previous African-American political campaigns, including Jesse Jackson’s. Why did Obama win when others had failed? Verney is persuaded that Obama won because he is *an exceptional candidate in exceptional times*. That is, as Obama pollster, Cornell Belcher, noted, without such exceptional circumstances and personal qualities, a Black American would find it impossible to win election to the White House.⁴ This explains why Obama’s victory was not, in comparative electoral terms, by a landslide. Although racial factors may well have diminished in American life, Obama’s election neither reflected nor called into being an era of post-racial politics in America.

Lee Marsden – examining the inter-connections between race, religion and notions of American ‘exceptionalism’ – argues that Obama’s foreign policy is influenced by his Christian faith and a prevailing discourse of American identity that is determined by foundational myths and civil religion that has significant elements of continuity with previous administrations, including that of George W. Bush. The article, which investigates the work of American religious missionaries, among other things, revisits notions of manifest destiny, ‘innocent nation’ and civil religion, arguing they have been, and are, instrumental in constructing an American identity capable of unifying disparate American nations domestically although promoting US power abroad. ‘Promoting God and capitalism’, Marsden argues, influences and constrains Obama’s foreign policy. ‘US hegemony under Bush and Obama’, Marsden concludes, is ‘non negotiable and although presentational style differs the prevailing orthodoxy, underpinned by civil religion and foundational myths, remains unchanged’.

Stuart Croft’s article on American religious *identities* suggests that there is greater flux and change underway that open up the possibilities of alterations in America’s overseas behaviours. Croft considers the issue through detailed analysis of two specific communities, one identified principally as ‘racial’, the

other as 'religious' – First Peoples (Native Americans) and Asian-Americans, respectively. Racially identified people are suspect whereas faith-based communities are 'acceptable' to the American family – *the boundaries of which are world-wide*. Croft concludes that 'forms of faith are still embedded in notions of national identity, to be explored, valued and expanded as appropriate And in this mutual constitution, the American can be found globally; by sharing the values of the evangelical, anyone can be part of this newly developing community, whether they hail from Argentina, Austria or Afghanistan'. Evangelising Americans show that 'The hard and fast boundary at the edges of the United States no longer acts as a barrier to identity construction and reconstruction (if it ever really did). Evangelicalism in the United States is making new Americans on a local basis, and is finding them on a global basis', Croft concludes.

Croft's findings, as well as those of Marsden, Ledwidge and Smith add ballast to Richard Jackson's and Mike Boyle's and Maria Ryan's contributions to the ways in which Obama's national security policies continue on essentially the same lines as those of his Republican predecessor in the White House. According to Jackson, Obama's underlying message of change to the Middle Eastern world is embedded in the same cultural grammar of 'exceptionalism' as deployed by Bush. Obama's 'failure' to use the crises in Iraq, Afghanistan and the global economy to institute 'crisis-driven' policy change, Jackson argues, indicates he 'is not a norm entrepreneur but rather an agent of the US foreign policy consensus'. Jackson further adds that the war on terror has developed *bureaucratic power, political salience and popular-cultural authority*. Needless to say, it will not last forever, but its institutional embeddedness and rhetorical utility suggests the war on terror is set to last for some time. Complementarily, Boyle argues that the framing of the responses to 9–11 as between 'freedom and fear', the hardening of the pre-existing consensus between neo-conservatives and liberal internationalists on democracy promotion, and an increasingly influential 'democracy bureaucracy', combine to ensure significant continuity between the Bush and Obama presidencies. Maria Ryan's contribution breaks new ground in more thoroughly exploring the global war on terror 'in countries we are not at war with', as the Pentagon Quadrennial Review of 2006 noted. Ryan's article considers the war on terror waged by US Special Forces in the Philippines, in Georgia and the Caspian area, and the Horn and Saharan Africa. Rather than challenging the Bush administration's definition of the character of the 'terrorist threat', Ryan argues, President Obama has embraced it in all but name. Writing before the release of secret US embassy cables by the Wikileaks organisation, which confirmed that Obama was continuing if not escalating operations in countries such as Yemen and Somalia (Parmar, 2011), Ryan accurately concludes that 'Obama's record so far demonstrates that intervention ... is ongoing ... and its



continuation seems certain'. Indeed, the Obama administration budgeted US \$300 million to anti-terrorism and other military operations across Africa.

Giles Scott-Smith and Moritz Baumgartel interrogate the Obama administration's ideas of 'network power', as exemplified by the work of its director of policy planning, Anne-Marie Slaughter. Slaughter claims that network-power is the new twenty-first century reality in world politics, and that the United States is the most networked-nation, giving it a natural advantage in extending and consolidating its power. Part of its networks derive from its immigrant communities that retain strong links with the 'Old Country'. The world is open to American influence through new network formations of non-governmental, inter-governmental and international associations for addressing global concerns – failed states, health pandemics, climate change – constituting US-led 'global governance', based on the universalisation of US values. Scott-Smith and Baumgartel argue that Slaughter misunderstands the concept of network and is somewhat naïve in suggesting that extant global networks, even those supportive of a US-led world order, will readily comply with America's ambitions. The Obama administration's change agenda, then, falls foul of its deeper attachments to American preponderance and desire to perpetuate the 'American century'.

The United States, according to the articles in this special issue is neither post-racial nor post-imperial and post-religious/evangelical in pursuit of its self-proclaimed historic mission. Even more, there are deep-seated and long-term processes that will, it is claimed, thwart an ambitious change agenda. The Obama administration, according to the articles in this issue, is proving more continuous with the past than some of its supporters, and detractors, care to admit.

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Notes

- 1 For full analysis of PPNS (Parmar, 2009).
- 2 The 'Watergate scandal' comprised of the political fall-out resulting from a series of break-ins at the Democratic National Committee's headquarters authorised by supporters of President Richard Nixon with his knowledge.
- 3 According to ABC News, large majorities in France, Canada and elsewhere supported an Obama victory at the polls in November 2008; 'Could an Obama Win Restore America's Global Image?' abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=6118357&page=1, accessed 6 July 2010.
- 4 Belcher argued, before the November 2008 presidential elections, that he did not 'think a black man can be president of the United States of America. However, I think an exceptional individual who also happens to be black can be president...' in Marc Ambinder (2009).

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