

The Obama "Legacy"

We need to take on liberal-media myth-making

by Conrad Black

As there is an incessant crescendo, still gaining in volume each week, about President Obama's "legacy," I thought it appropriate to try to identify this legacy, which his supporters believe history will honor. I have written here and elsewhere that, apart from breaking the color barrier and disposing of bin Laden, I am hard pressed to think of anything useful in his legacy. I have never been an Obama hater or someone who disputed his patriotism. I do think that Mr. Obama is rather subdued about the tired pieties of "American exceptionalism," and that this is not unjustified given his background and the fact that that exceptionalism is now almost exclusively a matter of the economic scale on which the country operates. The United States is not now one of the world's better-functioning democracies, though it is certainly the premier democracy, as the indispensable nation in the triumph of democracy and of the free market in much of the post-colonial and post Cold War world.

I don't detect a lamentable lack of national pride in Mr. Obama, though Mrs. Obama's infamous comment that her husband's elevation was the first instance of her feeling pride in America was irritating and perhaps portentous. I always thought the birther controversy was unutterable nonsense, a disgraceful preoccupation, and indicative of the president-elect's weakness for silly theories, of a piece with his citation of the *National Enquirer* in linking the father of Senator Cruz with the assassination of President Kennedy. He will presumably outgrow such sources on the last leg of his astonishing progress to the White House.

I was prompted to examine the Obama record through the eyes of

one of his most articulate supporters by my sharpish exchange with the editor of *The New Yorker*, David Remnick, on Fareed Zakaria's television program two weeks ago. Mr. Remnick said that he thought he was "hallucinating" when he heard me say that Donald Trump is neither a racist nor a sexist, and I replied that I had a similar sensation when I saw President Obama in the ten days before the election telling large crowds that Trump was an admirer of the Ku Klux Klan. I looked at Remnick's very lengthy review of the Obama presidency and description of the president's response to Trump's election in *The New Yorker* of November 28. Mr. Remnick makes no secret of his unwavering and unlimited admiration for the president. The grief-stricken elegies of Abraham Lincoln, even unto Henry Ward Beecher, the toadying chronicles of the great liberal hallelujah chorus for Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the mawkish potboilers mass-produced by the Kennedy entourage could be ransacked in vain to find a rival to the body of Mr. Remnick's works of ultra-secular canonization in laudation of Barack Obama.

In his book and many articles about Barack Obama, he makes a strong case that his subject is a convivial, very intelligent, articulate man, unpretentious if somewhat desiccated. He is attractive and the fact that he is of both African origin and, as he points out in the November 28 piece, "Scottish-Irish," is generally reflected in the comprehensive perspective that he seems to have of the complex American national character. There is much to like in him as a public person and a leader, which makes the great mandate he received eight years ago very understandable, and I believe makes his mediocre performance as president a great disappointment. He steadily receives a 50 to 55 percent approval rating, 10 to 20 points below (F.D.) Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon pre-Watergate, Reagan, and, for the untroubled parts of his time, Bill Clinton. But this is a levitation produced by his unusually fluent but detached personality, given that for the last six years two-thirds of Americans polled have steadily thought the country

was going "in the wrong direction."

David Remnick explained on November 28 that a stagnant impasse for the Obama administration was ended in June of last year when, in the same week, the Supreme Court determined that Obamacare was a constitutionally acceptable tax and approved what Remnick breezily calls "marriage equality" (gay marriage, again, like *Roe v. Wade* and Obamacare, probably the right decision but for spurious reasons); and when the president sang "Amazing Grace" at the funeral for nine African Americans murdered in Charleston. This, Remnick wrote, brought the elusive legacy to the fore. The legacy is: avoiding a depression, "rescuing the automobile industry," Wall Street "reform," Obamacare, marriage equality, "banning torture," the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, the end of the Iraq War, "heavy investment in renewable-energy technologies," the appointment of Justices Sotomayor and Kagan to the Supreme Court, killing bin Laden, the Iran nuclear deal, the opening of Cuba, the Paris agreement on climate change, and two terms "long on dignity and short on scandal."

So this is the legacy the president and his media-ubiquitous clique are clangorously raising heavenwards like a messianic effigy. A depression was avoided by doubling 233 years of accumulated national debt in seven years to get an annual economic-growth rate of 1 percent, as 15 million people have dropped out of the work force. The auto rescue could have been much better designed and even Chapter Eleven for Chrysler and General Motors would not have repudiated corporate bonds altogether, would have provided a pittance for the equity-holders rather than nothing, and would not have handed control of much of the industry to the self-destructively greedy United Auto Workers who were at least half the problem in the first place. Wall Street "reform" has meant stifling red tape, a witch hunt among traders and fund managers but continued fiscal subsidization of those who substitute velocity of money-transactions in place of activities that add value,

precisely the practice that Obama denounces elsewhere in Remnick's article as creating the menace of increasing unemployment and income disparity, dangers that this administration has done nothing to allay.

"Banning torture" means stopping waterboarding, which is frightening but not painful and may, in some conditions, be justifiable in counterterrorism. "Marriage equality" is a state-by-state matter and the legalization was by the Supreme Court, and the whole issue is the applicability of the word "marriage," not the right to same-sex civil union. Lilly Ledbetter, for the 99 percent of readers who would not know, involves the Supreme Court decision allowing limitations on claims of discriminatory pay-scales to begin at the last paycheck – hardly a ground-shaking tweak of the law, though a respectable reform. Sotomayor and Kagan are acceptable judges but no better than most confirmed under recent presidents of both parties. The whole court has gone to sleep while the Bill of Rights has putrefied and there is no sign that Kagan, an ex-solicitor general, will do anything about it. "The end of the Iraq War" was thoughtlessly hasty and spawned the Islamic State, handed 60 percent of Iraqis to the overlordship of Iran, and helped generate an immense humanitarian crisis (a fact that Trump and Sanders were the only presidential candidates to acknowledge). The "opening of Cuba" just legitimized the Cuban seizure of American assets and accomplished nothing for anyone, least of all the victims of the Stalinist Castro regime. The Paris climate-change agreement was unspecific piffle about an unproved threat. Two relatively scandal-free terms could be said of all 13 previous two-full-term presidents except Grant and Clinton. The elimination of bin Laden is conceded as a fine achievement, and Obamacare, "heavy investment in renewable-energy technologies," and the Iran nuclear deal are all almost unmitigated disasters.

The mountain of Remnick's adulation gives birth to a tiny,

squeaking mouse. His explanation of Trump's success, the tedious screed about Trump the psychotic, extremist dumbbell, is just a jangling echo of the Democratic campaign: a coast-to-coast, wall-to-wall smear job in the absence of any argument for the reelection of the Democrats. It would have been no less fair for the Republicans to have tied Obama hand-and-foot to Bill Ayers and Jeremiah Wright.

Trump won because the United States has had the 15 worst years of misgovernment by all branches and both parties, and the only period of absolute and relative decline, in its history. The new president will have a clear mandate for reform of taxes, spending, health care, immigration, and campaign financing; for a workfare program to address decrepit infrastructure; and for a redefinition of the national interest between George W. Bush's mindless interventionism and Obama's Panglossian crusade to make friends of America's enemies. Donald Trump is the oldest and wealthiest person elected president, the first not to have had a public office or high military command, the first to pay for his own campaign, and the first since Washington to waive his salary. He has defeated the Clintons, the Bushes, the Obamas, and almost all the dishonest, myth-making national media (including David Remnick). The national political media have declined even more precipitously than the political class, and the president-elect was elevated despite the animosity of both, a signal achievement whose significance those who have been vanquished show no signs of grasping.

First published in