

OBAMA'S LEGACY | The First Black President

The racist backlash Obama has faced during his presidency

Barack Obama has always been a polarizing figure, but how much of this comes from a political and ideological disagreement versus racial hostility?

By Terence Samuel April 22, 2016



Barack Obama's presidency will always be tethered to the history of race in America. It has, so far, been offered as Exhibit A of how far the country has moved toward overcoming its ugly racial past. Others use it, with equal force, to make the opposite point, that race-based antagonism is so endemic to the American way of life that it will take more than the election of a black president to move the country beyond its long traditions of racism and discrimination.

Obama is generally in the first, more optimistic camp. In a 2015 interview for the podcast "WTF With Marc Maron," he said: "I always tell young people, in particular, do not say that nothing has changed when it comes to race in America, unless you've lived through being a black man in the 1950s or '60s or '70s. It is incontrovertible that race relations have improved significantly during my lifetime and yours."

Incontrovertible, indeed.

But from the very beginning, Obama's ascendance produced a huge backlash that was undeniably racist in nature, tied to what he has described euphemistically as his "unique demographic."

In the days before the 2008 election, a life-size likeness of the candidate was found hanging from a tree at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. In the town of Wolfeboro, N.H., an elected member of the police commission was forced to resign in 2014 after he acknowledged and refused to apologize for publicly referring to Obama as a "nigger" while in a local restaurant. Robert Copeland was head of the town's three-member police commission when a relatively new resident of Wolfeboro heard him use the slur to describe the president. When she learned who Copeland was, she complained to town officials, who confronted the 82-year-old Copeland. He expanded on his feelings about Obama: "I believe I did use the 'N' word in reference to the current occupant of the Whitehouse," Copeland wrote in an email to the other police commissioners. "For this, I do not apologize — he meets and exceeds my criteria for such."

The previous summer, organizers of the Missouri State Fair barred a rodeo clown with an Obama mask after complaints that it was racist. Fair organizers called the clown display "inappropriate and disrespectful."



A clown wears a mask intended to look like President Obama at the Missouri State Fair in August 2013. (Jameson Hsieh/Associated Press)

Many who support the president, particularly many African Americans who feel a deep racial pride in his achievements, feel that he has been subject to an unprecedented level of ridicule, which they attribute to race. In an interview with the BBC, Oprah Winfrey said: “There is a level of disrespect for the office that occurs. And that occurs, in some cases, and maybe even many cases, because he’s African American.”

Former president Jimmy Carter told “NBC Nightly News” in 2009: “I think an overwhelming portion of the intensely demonstrated animosity toward President Barack Obama is based on the fact that he is a black man.”

Obama has suggested, in his typically oblique way, that race may be driving some of the fierce opposition he has faced. In an interview with NPR, he said: “If you are referring to specific strains in the Republican Party that suggest that somehow I’m

different, I'm Muslim, I'm disloyal to the country, etc., which unfortunately is pretty far out there and gets some traction in certain pockets of the Republican Party, and that have been articulated by some of their elected officials, what I'd say there is that that's probably pretty specific to me and who I am and my background, and that in some ways I may represent change that worries them."



Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) shouts out "you lie!" during Obama's address to a Joint Session of Congress concerning health care in September 2009. (Melina Mara/The Washington Post)

The list of affronts famously includes Rep. Joe Wilson (R-S.C.) yelling "you lie!" at the president as Obama addressed a joint session of Congress in 2009; then-Arizona governor Jan Brewer sticking a finger in his face during a heated discussion about immigration on an airport tarmac in Phoenix in 2012; and then-House speaker John A. Boehner's decision in 2015 to invite the Israeli prime minister to address Congress about the dangers of dealing with Iran without informing the White House.

But Obama has been a broadly polarizing figure, and one of the big questions in trying to assess the legacy of his presidency is how to untangle the fierce political and ideological disagreement he evoked from the race-based hostility that his presidency aroused.

Even some of those willing to acknowledge their racial animus toward the president say that the opposition is driven by ideological or political differences, not race.

Noted white nationalist Jared Taylor has explained the backlash against Obama as an overall failure of the integrationist ideal, saying that people of different races were not meant to live together and that many people were simply reverting to the norm by turning against the idea that Obama's election was somehow racially transformative. Taylor's racial prejudices are on open display; he believes America should be a white country and that the Obama presidency is just another milestone in the wrong direction.

But many of the president's supporters see a direct line between those prejudices and the rodeo clown, the n-word references and Wilson's "you lie" moment. "That racism inclination still exists," Carter said. "And I think it's bubbled up to the surface because of the belief among many white people, not just in the South but around the country, that African Americans are not qualified to lead this great country."