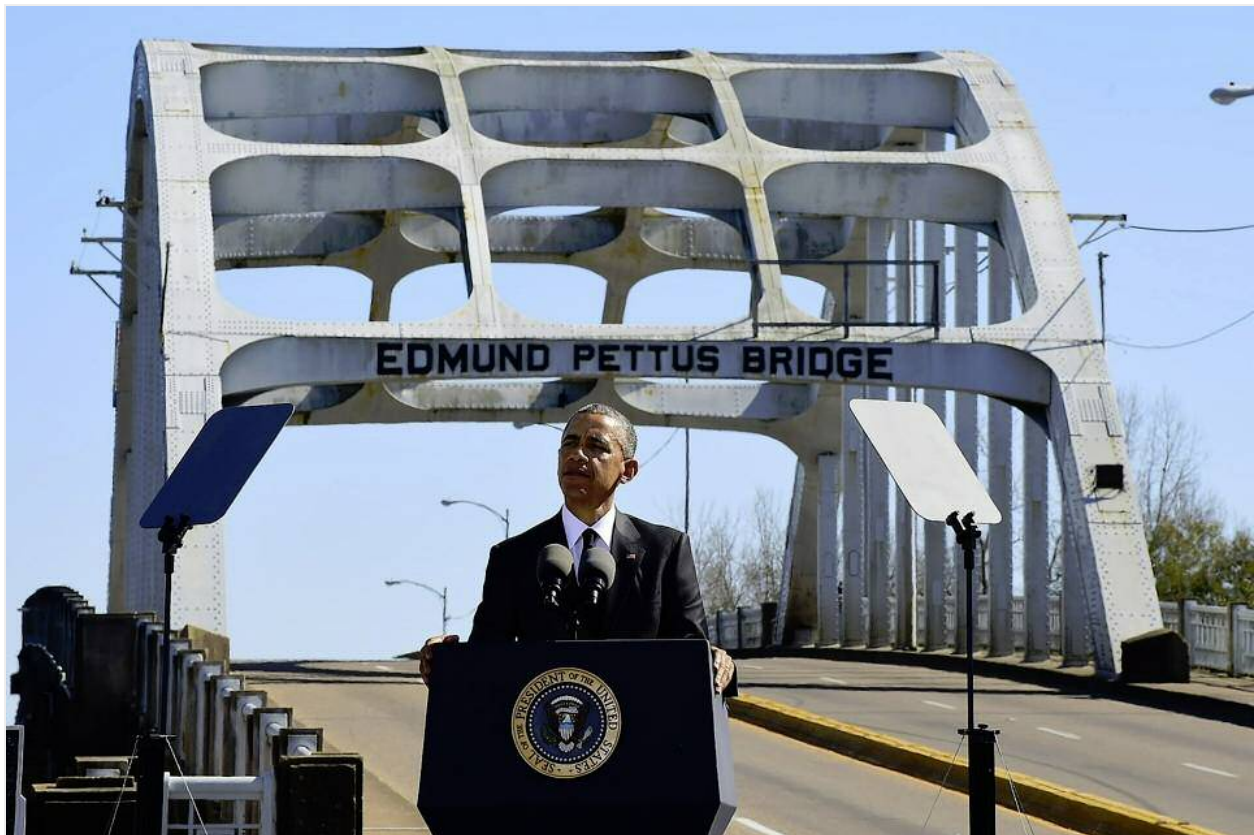


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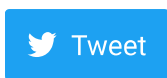
How Barack Obama Failed Black Americans

The country's first black president never pursued policies bold enough to close the racial wealth gap.



Bill Frakes / AP

WILLIAM A. DARITY JR. | DEC 22, 2016 | POLITICS



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Over the next few weeks, The Atlantic is publishing a series of responses to Ta-Nehisi Coates's story "[My President Was Black](#)." Readers are invited to send their own responses to hello@theatlantic.com, and we will post a sample of your feedback. You can read other [responses to the story](#) from Atlantic readers and contributors [here](#).

Born in 1953, I am a child of the waning years of legal segregation in the United States. My parents, on the other hand, spent about 40 years of their lives under Jim Crow, and all of my grandparents lived most of their lives under official American apartheid. At the time of Barack Obama's election to the presidency in 2008, my mother and all four of my grandparents were deceased. But my father was alive and well—and absolutely thrilled to have lived to see the election of a black man as president of the United States. Usually deeply cynical about American politics and politicians, my dad could not comprehend my deep reservations about Barack Obama's leadership. Indeed, he viewed any criticism of Obama as bringing aid and comfort to white supremacists.



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My father hardly was alone among black Americans, across all generations. The near complete unanimity of passionate black American admiration for Obama carried with it an absolute resistance to hearing any complaints about the black president. And, indeed, there was much to admire: an exceptional resume, an attractive family with a black wife who is his professional and intellectual equal, handsome and greying

toward distinguished maturity, a strategically wise moderate progressive political position, and a place as the—sometimes self-professed—messianic fulfillment of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. For many black Americans, the ascent of Barack Obama to the presidency was equivalent to the moment of jubilee.

An extraordinarily disciplined individual, Barack Obama preempted the smallest hint of scandal by admitting that he had smoked pot during his youth. He even crafted a narrative of a rise from adversity—growing up successfully by the efforts of a single parent despite a missing father—albeit a white single mother with a Ph.D. whose own parents were affluent residents of Hawaii. With every

drop of respectability in place, his somewhat icy intellect coupled with his enthusiasm for basketball and for black music across a half century of styles, he was an inordinately appealing candidate, with an ideal combination of the cool and the rational.

For many white Americans his elections confirmed their belief that American racism is a thing of the past. But an underemphasized dimension of each of Obama's campaigns—a dimension patently relevant to the most recent presidential election—is the reality that he only received a minority of votes among whites who cast ballots. In fact, he would have been swept away in a landslide had only whites been the voters. In 2008, 55 percent of white voters cast their ballots for John McCain; in 2012, 59 percent of white voters cast their ballots for Mitt Romney.

Leaders who look like you do not necessarily act in ways that benefit you.

Nevertheless, some of those white voters who did not vote for him took his eight years as president as license to assert that the country is post-racial, even while attacking him with both veiled and overt racial slurs. But racism is organic to American life, and it sits at the core of persistence of racial economic inequality. In his fascinating profile of Obama, Ta-Nehisi Coates refers to the “mark of a system engineered to place one on top of the other”—to place white over black. He offers some examples: the facts that blacks with a college degree have an unemployment rate almost as high as white high school graduates, that completion of a college education leads blacks to carry twice the level of student loan debt than whites four years after the degree, that blacks experience a significantly higher default rate on their loans, that black households have

one-seventh of the wealth of white households, and that black families with \$100,000 or more in income reside “in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than white families making less than \$30,000.”

Sadly, these actually are softer illustrations of “the mark of the system” than findings that have emerged from research I have done with Darrick Hamilton, Anne Price, and other members of the National Asset Scorecard for Communities of Color (NASCC) research team. We find a much higher discrepancy between black and white wealth than the gap that Coates reports. Blacks with some college education actually have *higher* unemployment rates than whites who never finished high school. At each level of education, the black rate of unemployment is twice as high as the white rate. Moreover, the *relative* economic position on virtually all indicators, including the racial unemployment rate gap, has not improved since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Estimates generated from the 2013 round of the Federal Reserve’s Survey of Consumer Finances indicate that black households have *one-thirteenth* of the wealth of white households at the median. We have concluded that the average black household would have to save 100 percent of its income for three consecutive years to close the wealth gap. The key source of the black-white wealth gap is the intergenerational effects of transfers of resources. White parents have far greater resources to give to their children via gifts and inheritances, so that the typical white young adult starts their working lives with a much greater initial net worth than the typical black young adult. These intergenerational effects are blatantly non-meritocratic.

Indeed, the history of black wealth deprivation, from the failure to provide ex-slaves with 40 acres and a mule to the violent destruction of black property in white riots to the seizure and expropriation of black-owned land to the impact of racially restrictive covenants on homeownership to the discriminatory application of policies like the GI Bill and the FHA, created the foundation for a perpetual racial wealth gap.

Blacks working full time have lower levels of wealth than whites who are unemployed. Blacks in the third quintile of the income distribution have less wealth (or a lower net worth) than whites in the lowest quintile. Even more damning for any presumption that America is free of racism is our finding that black households whose heads have college degrees have \$10,000 less in net worth than white households whose heads never finished high school. As we point out in our report, “[Umbrellas Don’t Make It Rain](#)”, studying hard and working hard does not enable blacks to eliminate the racial wealth gap. Doing the right thing is far from enough.

I had a queasy feeling about Barack Obama’s candidacy from the moment I heard his 2004 Democratic National Convention speech that lifted him into national prominence, a speech that Coates summarizes in the profile. Toward the end of the speech Obama observed that black families in urban centers realized “that government alone can’t teach our kids to learn ... that children can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and turn off the television sets and eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white.” “The acting white” libel—a myth that will not die—argues that low school performance for black students is a product of a culturally based black opposition to high academic achievement.

I long have been baffled by the tenacious hold this argument has on the American imagination. After all, black families have fought for education for their children against insuperable odds from slavery times. White students who label their high achievers “geeks” and “nerds” have no less a degree of anti-intellectualism. In fact, they may have a higher degree of anti-intellectualism, since black students from families with a given level of parental income or education get *more* years of schooling and *more* credentials than white students from families with comparable socioeconomic status. In our research for the NASCC project we discovered that black parents who provide some financial support for their children’s higher education have one-third of the wealth of white parents who provide *no* financial support for their children’s

higher education. Black culture, if anything, has been ferociously supportive of education.

The “acting white” libel is symptomatic of a more general perspective—a perspective that argues that an important factor explaining racial economic disparities is self-defeating or dysfunctional behavior on the part of blacks themselves. And Barack Obama continuously has trafficked in this perspective. Of course, there are some black folk who engage in habits that undermine their potential accomplishments, but there are some white folk who engage in habits that undermine their potential accomplishments as well. And there is no evidence to demonstrate that are proportionately more blacks who behave in ways that undercut achievement, especially since it is clear that *blacks do more with less*. Nevertheless, Obama consistently has trafficked heavily in the tropes of black dysfunction. Either he is unfamiliar with or uninterested in the evidence that undercuts the black behavioral deficiency narrative. These tropes, in my view, do malicious work.

I worried that it was possible for the symbolic and inspirational aspects of having a black president would be more than offset by the damages that could be done by the messages delivered by a black president. And it has been damaging to have Barack Obama, a black man speaking from the authoritative platform of the presidency, reinforce the widely held belief that racial inequality in the United States is, in large measure, the direct responsibility of black folk. This has been the deal breaker for me: not merely a silence on white physical and emotional violence directed against black Americans, but the denial of the centrality of American racism in explaining sustained black-white disparity.

Apart from black dysfunction, Obama does acknowledge that ongoing discrimination is a partial factor explaining racial inequality and says that anti-discrimination enforcement is the type of black-specific measure that he can endorse. Of course, anti-discrimination laws do not operate exclusively on behalf of black folk. They really are universal measures intended to contain all forms of discrimination, and, while effective enforcement can improve black

employment opportunities, it will do little to address massive, inherited racial wealth differences.

Obama's general position is racial equality can be achieved—or at least approached—via policies that uplift all Americans experiencing poverty and deprivation. Obama has said that “as a general matter, my view would [be] that if you want to get at African American poverty, income gap, wealth gap, achievement gap, that the most important thing is to make sure that the society as a whole does right by people who are poor, are working class, are aspiring to a better life for their kids: higher minimum wages, full employment programs, early childhood education, those kinds of programs are by design universal but by definition, because they are helping folks who are in the worst economic situations, are most likely to disproportionately impact and benefit black Americans.”

My Brother's Keeper is a program premised on the view that young black men constitute a social problem.

But these particular programs—all, even in their diluted forms likely to be under assault under the new regime—are incremental and display no boldness of spirit. Obama's evocation of the notion that “better is good” and his own acknowledgment that “maybe I'm not just being sufficiently optimistic or imaginative” is testament to his inveterate cautiousness. The timid nature of these policy changes dooms their disproportionate benefit for blacks to be marginal at best.

A higher minimum wage does not ensure individuals, black or white, actually

will have jobs nor does it insure adequate hours of work to generate non-poverty incomes. Full employment policies under the Obama administration have meant old-fashioned Keynesian stimulus policies that rely heavily upon the unpredictable response of the private sector to the prompt of government expenditures. Quality early childhood education for all is wonderful, but the racial achievement gap widens most dramatically during comparatively later years of schooling. Furthermore, none of these policies promise any significant effect on the most pernicious economic disparity—the racial wealth gap.

Admittedly, there is one major initiative that the Obama administration has inaugurated that is black-specific, but it is the exception that proves the rule. It exposes all the issues at play. My Brother's Keeper is a program premised on the view that young black men constitute a social problem and need interventions that will alter their outlook and actions. The focus is on reforming young men rather than directly increasing the resources possessed by them and their families and removing the constraints they face. Again, the underlying ideological motivation is the belief in black cultural deficiency, and, again, this type of initiative is another expression of failure to pursue bold policies that confront the fundamental causes of racial disparity in American society.

The Obama administration never gave serious consideration to aggressive transformative universal policies like a public-sector employment guarantee for all Americans, a federally financed trust fund for all newborn infants with amounts dictated by a child's parents' wealth position, or the provision of gifted-quality education for all children. These are universal programs that can have a significant “disproportionate impact and benefit for African Americans,” in the process of helping all Americans—unlike the types of universal programs endorsed by the president.

And the emphasis on exclusively universal programs yields the spectacle of a black president who opposes the most dramatic black-specific program of all—reparations for African Americans. This opposition ultimately seems to amount to a matter of political expediency. In his conversation with Coates, the

president appears to acknowledge that there is a sound moral and philosophical case for reparations, particularly if—as Coates presses him to concede—incremental changes in existing social programs will not close the gaps, especially the racial wealth gap. The president ultimately takes the position that it is politically untenable to enact a reparations program. If so—and if nothing comparable can be realized—then I contend that it is impossible to close the racial wealth gap.

If black reparations is the right thing to do, then we should work to make it happen, no matter how long the odds.

But why does the president believe it is impossible? He says “it is hard to think of any society in human history in which a majority population has said that as a consequence [of] historic wrongs we are now going to take a big chunk of the nation’s resources over a long period of time, to make that right.” The United States has taken a small chunk of the nation’s resources over a short period of time to try to make right on the World War II incarceration of Japanese Americans. Malaysia’s New Economic Policy has taken a large chunk of the nation’s resources over a long period of time to correct the inferior position of the native Malays. However, the native Malays are a numerical majority in their country who also are the recipients of the wealth redistribution program conducted there.

There is no doubt that the political obstacles to congressional approval of black reparations are significant. But in 1820 in the United States one might not have been able to conceive that American slavery would ever come to an end, yet there were some who advocated abolition. In 1950 in South Africa one might not have been able to imagine that apartheid would ever come to an end, but there

were activists who already had begun to oppose the system. If black reparations is the right thing to do—and I know in the depth of my soul that it is—then we should work to make it happen, no matter how long the odds. We should not bow at the altar of presumed political expediency.

After all, it may be the case that the president simply is wrong about the impossibility of making reparations happen. His deference to achieving “the better” over the determination to achieve “the best” may be a mistake. There are times when the effort to get to “the better”—the marginal change that appears to be an improvement—is so exhausting that its accomplishment becomes a barrier to getting to the best. Mark Gomez at the Haas Institute at Berkeley has said time and again in municipal struggles for minimum-wage increases that the “fight for 15” is easier than a “fight for 10.”

And sometimes Obama’s careful assessments of the political landscape are wrong. For example, he has said repeatedly that you do not win elections by telling the American people that things are going wrong. But that is precisely what Donald Trump did in winning the most recent presidential campaign. Black reparations can become a legitimate policy claim if and when a majority of Americans are convinced that it is an idea with merit. As Obama’s two elections demonstrate it does not necessarily require a majority of *white* Americans to support such a program. The political challenge is to forge that national majority, presumably with approximately 40 percent of white Americans on board.

Having a black president oppose reparations does not help the cause, particularly when that black president makes the case that an important source of black disadvantage is black folk’s own behavior. But black America should have paid attention to the experience of post-colonial black Africa and the Caribbean; leaders who look like you do not necessarily act in ways that benefit you. So be it. The struggle for reparations—and for black lives and justice—must and will continue, with or without Barack Obama in the fold.



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