

A black and white photograph of Barack Obama in profile, looking towards the right. He is wearing a dark jacket. The background is blurred.

The Curious Presidency of Barack Obama

After two terms in the White House, Barack Obama's Presidency has entered its final year. [James D. Boys](#) assesses his record in office and finds an historic US President who leaves behind a nation more divided than ever.

In 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald published the incredible tale of a man who effectively lives his life in reverse: born old, he grows younger as each subsequent year passes. In many ways, Fitzgerald's *Benjamin Button* encapsulates the Presidency of Barack Obama, a President who has lived his Presidency in reverse.

Tradition holds that a president enters office with as much political capital as he will ever have and that over the course of his presidency (be that one or two terms) he expends it to such an extent that by the end of his tenure, he is a spent force, or rather, a lame duck. Tradition also suggests that as his time in office ends, a period of reflection begins, during which he is lauded for his achievements.

This has not happened, however, in the case of Barack Obama. Instead, he arrived in office garnered in plaudits, but struggled

to achieve concrete goals or to find his presidential voice until late in his second term, when he suddenly hit his stride in terms of foreign policy achievements and his willingness to champion gun control efforts. Passage of 'Obamacare', the signature achievement of his first term, was an important exception to his narrative, but Obama's most definable achievements have come in his second term when he was beyond the will of the electorate and when Vice President Biden had chosen not to seek office. Both aspects reveal telling factors about the Obama Presidency which betray his bold and optimistic clarion call for change that carried him to office in the election of 2008.

Obama's First Term

Barack Obama won the presidency in an election of true historic consequence.

Irrespective of his politics, his race ensured his presidency would be viewed as a turning point in US history, irrespective of what he accomplished as President. Simply being President of the United States was such an achievement for the African American Senator from Illinois that his election was viewed, quite rightly, as a defining moment.

Obama campaigned on a promise of 'change we can believe in', and initially this appeared to be the case, as his race, background, demeanour, politics and personality were diametrically opposite to those of the outgoing President, George W. Bush. Indeed, the perceived reality in 2008 was that Barack Obama had been elected precisely because he wasn't George W. Bush, whose popularity at that point had collapsed to levels not seen since Harry Truman left the White House in January 1953.

This perspective appeared to be confirmed when the Nobel Committee conferred its 2009 Peace Prize on the new President long before he had accomplished anything other than being elected. Obama's acceptance speech in Oslo, however, surprised many by appearing to

refute the principles for which the Peace Prize had been awarded. He revealed an innate realism that specifically contrasted with the idealist notions of the Nobel Committee. It was a stance at odds with the position he had adopted as a presidential candidate and undoubtedly came as a surprise to his supporters, as well as to members of the Nobel Committee. It was an approach that transcended ideology and become formulated as policy in the new administration, which began to bear an uncanny resemblance to the White House of George W. Bush.

Obama's War on Terror

A high-profile Executive Order to prohibit the use of torture was signed shortly after Barack Obama took the oath of office. Yet many of the Bush administration's structures and tactics for addressing terrorism and extremism remained in place under the new regime, despite the fact that the Democrats controlled the White House, the Congress and had a super majority in the Senate following the 2008 election.

Although he campaigned on a promise to close the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, President Obama has been unable to do so, and the complex remains operational as he enters his final year in office. This has been due in part to congressional opposition to moving detainees to super-max prisons in the United States. As a result, a steady stream of inmates has quietly been released, but others remain, likely indefinitely, in a continuous legal twilight zone. Their presence has contributed to the ongoing debate about what to do with enemies of the United States in an era that can best be described as 'not peacetime'. Having been placed in an effective checkmate over the whole idea of prisoners, the White House has not felt inclined to add to a list of inmates. No wonder, therefore, that the debate over 'Kill or Capture' – targeted operations by the US military against individuals in countries such as Afghanistan – was won by proponents of the former rather than the latter.

In the ongoing – but no longer official – 'War on Terror', the Obama administration clearly identified its weapon of choice: drones. Their deployment by George W. Bush



received widespread criticism, but their use under Obama has expanded dramatically and it is easy to see why. They are relatively cheap and without the potential for a repeat of the events that surrounded the downing of the Black Hawks in Somalia; there are no bodies to mutilate, desecrate and humiliate. Like the President who has overseen their expansion, drone technology is cool and detached, 'piloted' remotely with no opportunity for a last minute moral rendering by the crew, ensuring that missions are more likely to result in the delivery of their payload to its planned destination.

With drones being referred to by Senator Diane Feinstein as 'the perfect assassination tool', it is no surprise that their use has expanded rapidly as the White House seeks to reduce cost and increase efficiency, whilst simultaneously withdrawing troops and maintaining a credible posture against its perceived enemies throughout the world. Their implementation has become Obama's most potent political legacy to date.

Foreign Policy

Unlike former American presidents, Obama has not developed a natural bond with any of his fellow world leaders. There are no parallels with relationships of the past, such as Reagan-Thatcher, Kennedy-Macmillan, or Bush-Blair. Obama's cool persona appears to have prevented the establishment of such a rapport. Nowhere was this lack of a rapport more discernible than in dealings with Israel. Obama failed to visit America's chief ally in the Middle East during his first term in office, despite having signalled an intention to intervene early in the Middle East and reverse the apparent indifference of George W. Bush, whose 'Roadmap for Peace' appeared to be an afterthought, not a priority.

Like so many of his presidential predecessors, however, Obama's first year in office was tainted by a sense of hubris; having won the White House in historic circumstances, Obama's self-confidence was at an all time high, leading him to make a series of pledges that appeared unlikely at the time and sound stunningly naïve in

retrospect, none more so than his pledge to deliver peace in the Middle East. To achieve this he named Senator George Mitchell as his envoy to the region, with a mandate to secure the peace. This ideal scenario proved, however, to be a false dawn. Just as Obama's other high profile envoys, including Richard Holbrooke, ultimately failed to achieve the philosophical or practical breakthroughs intended, so too did Senator Mitchell's mission, ending instead in disappointment and recrimination.

Just as problematic have been relations with Russia. Time and again it seemed that the West, and the White House in particular, was being outmanoeuvred by the Kremlin, eager to re-establish Russian credibility on the world stage by exerting influence on its neighbours. The apparent breakdown in relations between Obama and Putin, in stark contrast to previous relations between US-Russian leaders, has been an impediment to improved diplomatic ties and presents the next occupant of the White House with a serious challenge, since any hope of a rapprochement before Obama leaves office appear slight. A true reset is required in the near future, rather than a repetition of the flawed initiative of Obama's first term.

The Arab Spring also proved a difficult proposition for the White House to address as it was caught between the nation's apparent commitment to freedom and democracy, and its national security priorities that advocated the continued status quo. Several years later, initial gains have been stymied with little to show for all of the Obama administration's attempts to apply a 'smart power' policy to the developing situation, including its lamented decision to 'lead from behind'. This, combined with the strategic withdrawal policies in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the President's fluctuating stance on Syria has not presented a robust image of the United States on the world stage, especially given the subsequent rise of ISIS.

Despite this, foreign policy appears to be where Obama's most potent legacy will lie. His moves to end the stalemate with Cuba and to negotiate with Iran, whatever the merits of the final agreement,



are an indication of his administration's willingness to move beyond the quarrels of the past and to negotiate with America's enemies, something that has been lacking in Washington for far too long. It is notable, however, that these developments came in the second term, when Obama was no longer at the mercy of the electorate and when it was clear that his Vice President had

no plans to run in 2016. (Biden may not have announced this until late in 2015, but his lack of a ground game or any campaign team signalled early on that he was never likely to mount a challenge to Hillary Clinton.)

Domestic Affairs

Domestically, the Obama administration's signature achievement came early, unlike so

many of his eventual overseas achievements. The passage of the Affordable Healthcare Act (Obamacare) was a vital component of the administration's legislative aspirations and a goal that had eluded presidents as far back as Truman. Its adoption by Congress, however, owed less to Obama's legislative coercion and more to sheer weight of numbers.

For much of Obama's first two years in office the Democrats held a super majority in the Senate and controlled the House of Representatives, providing a rare opportunity to pass legislation that would otherwise have been defeated due to political opposition. Having implemented the legislation, the Obama administration successfully defended it all the way up to the Supreme Court. The administration's success, therefore, has been not only in passing the legislation, but ensuring it has endured in the face of widespread Republican efforts to repeal it. Had such efforts succeeded, the most significant domestic policy of Obama's entire Presidency would have been erased, leaving a void at the heart of his legacy.

Having secured healthcare in the first term, the most significant domestic reform in his second term appears to involve his limited action on gun control. Obama repeatedly addressed the issue of gun control after each senseless firearms tragedy during his time in office, but also repeatedly failed to act decisively on the issue. On occasion he has wept from one eye and talked of the need for change. Too many tragedies resulted in an absurd pattern of behaviour: outrage, political and media soul searching, followed by...nothing.

Finally, in the last year of his Presidency, Obama has implemented a series of changes through the vehicle of Executive Orders. He has done so in the face of an inability to get meaningful legislation through Congress. This is something, but it is extremely limited. His repeated statements on gun control appear as determined to placate the fears of gun owners as they are to advance meaningful reform. Fear that he may implement serious gun control legislation prompted a spike in gun sales

following his elections in 2008 and 2012, but this was based on emotion, not reality. President Obama did little, if anything, in his first seven years to restrict gun ownership, an area that has witnessed not only political dishonesty but also political cowardice. Four American presidents, as well as high profile senators and towering religious leaders have died at the hands of gunmen, yet Congress has failed to act even when they themselves have been the target. Little wonder that Obama has resorted to the use of an Executive Order, but this could have been done at any stage of his administration, not just as he has begun to pack up his office.

To enact serious reform requires serious political leadership, and this is in short supply in Washington. It takes no leadership to make a statement imploring America to change. If Obama truly wanted to initiate the change of which he has so repeatedly spoken, he would have needed to make gun control a priority for his second term. He did not.

A Nation Divided

Obama's record on the economy has been excellent, with unemployment down to 5 per cent and historically low interest rates. However, perhaps the ultimate reflection on Obama's Presidency can be found in the fact that he sprang to national prominence in a speech decrying the divisions in the nation. 'There are no red states or blue states...only the United States,' he forcefully declared in Boston in 2004. Yet as his Presidency draws to a conclusion, the nation is arguably more divided than when he took office and the signature achievements of his administration – Obamacare, the Iran nuclear deal, the rapprochement with Cuba and the gun control initiatives of January 2016 – have all been achieved without bi-partisan support. This can, and has, been blamed on Republican intransigence, but it is important to note that in the 1990s another Democratic President faced a congress so opposed to him that they impeached him, yet he managed to find a workable consensus on issue after issue. This is something Obama has singularly failed to do, to the detriment of his own political



legacy and to the detriment of the country.

As the curious Presidency of Barack Obama draws to a close, it is clear that his premiership will enter the history books. Having overcome seemingly insurmountable odds to become America's first black president, Obama's administration has proved to be far more conservative than his supporters could have imagined, or than his detractors would concede. His slow start, impacted by the need to focus on economic recovery, has given way to a second term of significant achievements in regard to relations with Iran and Cuba, as well as modest reforms on gun control. Having had little to celebrate for much of his term in office, Obama's supporters can finally point to breakthrough international agreements and significant domestic progress to justify their high hopes for his administration, proving that a presidency lived in reverse can still be a successful presidency. The implications of these policies will continue to impact US foreign and domestic policy long after he leaves office, as his place in the Oval Office is taken by America's 45th President, whoever he or she may be.

*James D. Boys is an Associate Professor of International Political Studies at Richmond University, London and author of **Hillary Rising: The Politics, Persona and Policies of a New American Dynasty** (Biteback, 2016).*