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Misleaders at a Funeral: Bill Clinton and Barack Obama Eulogizing Racial Justice in the Name of John Lewis



John Lewis lying in state at the United States Capitol – Public Domain

New Age Racists

Anyone who thinks it was fine and proper for the Jeffrey Epstein pal Bill Clinton to be a featured speaker at the funeral of John Lewis, a former Black Civil Rights icon, ought to read Elaine Brown's brilliant 2002 book The Condemnation of Little B. In this classic radical Black text, Brown — a former chair of the Black Panther Party — tried to explain how the city of Atlanta, including its prominent Black citizens, had unjustly condemned a poor 14-year-old Black boy, Michael Lewis, for the murder of a white man visiting a

well-known drug haven in one of that city's Black ghettos. Brown showed how Lewis's conviction was "effectively predestined" by the "comfortable New Age racism of white liberals and middle-class blacks alike who have abandoned the cause of civil rights and equal opportunity."

The most biting chapter in Brown's bitter volume was titled "The Abandonment." There Brown demonstrated how a host of Black bourgeois elites (her list included William Julius Wilson, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Colin Powell, Vernon Jordan, most members of the Congressional Black Caucus and, of course, Oprah Winfrey) aligned themselves with the insidious, "post-racial" neoliberal racism of the Clintons.

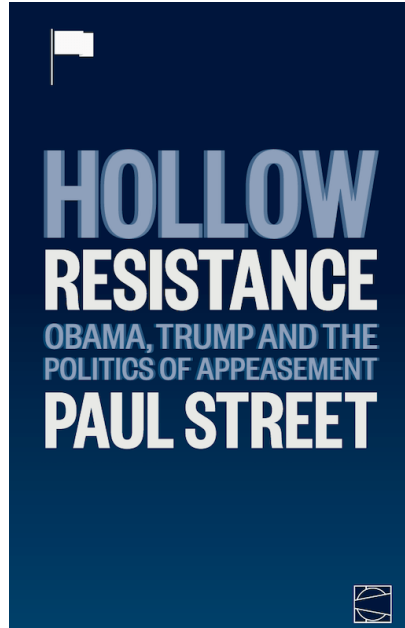
These Black misleaders, Brown showed, had joined the Clintons and other white elites in:

- + Smearing and trying to delete the Black radical tradition.
- + Backing Bill Clinton's removal of millions of poor Black women and children from the welfare rolls.
- + Supporting the Clintons' vicious corporatist hit job on efforts to provide national governmental health insurance as a human right to poor Black and other Americans.
- + Backing Bill Clinton's racist mass-incarcerationist "three strikes" crime bill.
- + Blaming the Black poor for their own oppression. Black bourgeois elites applauded as President Clinton "audaciously admonished" Black Americans "for creating the deplorable state of Black America," Brown wrote.

Sociopath Bill Clinton: "Too Far Towards Stokely"

How pathetic but predictable it was, then, to see the racist and rapist Bill Clinton invited to speak at the John Lewis funeral last week. True to his longstanding socio-pathological and lane-crossing form, Clinton (who seems to think of himself as a Black insider) thought the assignment gave him license to shit on the historical legacy of the great Black freedom fighter Kwame Ture (1941-1998), previously known as Stokely Carmichael. "There were two or three years there where the [mid-1960s Civil Rights] movement went a little bit too far towards Stokely," Clinton opined, "but in the end, John Lewis prevailed." For this remark, Clinton got and deserved an eloquent slap in the face from the Black historian Barbara Ransby:

“Who is Bill Clinton to weigh in on whether or not Ture went ‘too far’ when he was at the helm of SNCC? And how dare he poke jabs at a Black Freedom Movement leader who has been dead over 20 years, at a memorial service for another. Too far toward what, ‘freedom’?”



“Kwame Ture was a Trinidadian-born former Howard University student, powerful orator and brilliant intellectual. He drew inspiration from Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Fannie Lou Hamer, and by the late 1960s, he an unapologetic revolutionary.”

“Ture made enormous personal sacrifices toward his vision of liberation. He believed that the systems of capitalism, white supremacy, imperialism and paternalistic white liberalism had to be undone in order for true human freedom to flourish.”

“After he left SNCC, Ture worked briefly with the Black Panther Party, then moved to West Africa and founded the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party. He wrote, traveled, agitated and organized, never garnering much fame and never earning much money. He had been jailed, harassed and threatened during his work in the South. He had become close to some of the fiercest freedom fighters in Mississippi and Alabama, and later to heroic anti-colonial leaders throughout the African continent.”

“For some of those early years he fought alongside John Lewis, and then the two men took different paths.”

Bill Clinton's presence on the Lewis funeral stage – and his despicable shot at Kwame Ture – was no less offensive than that other Epstein buddy Donald Trump's failure even to pay his respects by visiting Lewis's casket.

Equally inappropriate as a Lewis eulogizer last week was a George W. Bush – the man who let Black New Orleans drown while spending billions of dollars that needed to be invested in meeting the vast needs of the nation's ghettos on the arch-criminal, mass-murderous, and racist invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Barack Obama Failed a Black America Whose Existence He Denied

Rev. Wright Under the Bus

But what about the funeral's most illustrious and highly advertised speaker, Barack Obama, famously and all too accurately described by the great Black revolutionary Dr. Cornel West as "a brown-faced Clinton"? As the nation's first Black president, his featured role at the Lewis funeral was foreordained. But Obama too was ill-suited for the celebration of a onetime leader in the great 1960s struggle for Black equality. He was a deeply conservative Sixties-dissing president, after all, who saved his 2008 primary campaign candidacy by throwing his Black minister (Jeremiah Wright) under the bus for being too righteously angry over America's deeply rooted racism (and its imperialism).

90/10 Percent: "Beyond" Race with Barack

The soft-McCarthyite abandonment of Reverend Jeremiah Wright was made official in a white-heralded, Israel-defending oration that treated American racial oppression as little more than a lingering overhang from the past. The speech came after interviews in which Obama had admonished Wright for "analyz[ing] public events in the context of race." It came one year a speech in which Obama absurdly told a Black audience in Selma, Alabama, that Blacks had come 90 percent of the way to equality in the U.S.

After John Edwards accurately told a South Carolina debate audience in early 2008 that Black American families had "a net worth of 10 percent of what white families have," "post-racial" Obama reprimanded the media for having "focused a lot on race as we moved down to South Carolina." While "race is a factor [!] in our society," the officially post-racial Obama deigned to concede, he was "convinced that white, Black, Latino, Asian, people want to move beyond our divisions..."

Blaming Black Victims, Not White Oppression

Obama's tendency to downplay the role of systemic racism and to emphasize the role of Black personal and cultural responsibility in the creation of the nation's stark racial

inequalities lasted into his presidency. As the brilliant Black scholar William A. Darity, Jr. noted in an incisive December 2016 essay titled “How Barack Obama Failed Black Americans,” President Obama trafficked heavily in the white-supremacist claim that Blacks’ economic difficulties were the result of Blacks’ own “self-defeating or dysfunctional behavior.” In one of the many examples of this recurrent Obama narrative that Darity noted, Obama told the 2013 graduates of historically Black Morehouse College that young Black men had “no excuses,” and placed blame for Black difficulties in America at the feet of absentee fathers.

Darity wrote with barely concealed disgust about what he had seen and heard from a technically Black president who refused to advance policy solutions to the numerous and interrelated barriers to Black advancement and equality posed by the nation’s deeply embedded structural and institutional racism:

“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.”

Darity noted the deep irony in the one and only Obama program designed specifically for Black Americans—a program rooted in the idea that racial disparity is largely about Black behavior:

“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” (emphasis added).

Setting Up People He Failed to Protect for Attack

Obama’s failure to fight meaningfully for Black equality and racial justice beyond the symbolic reality of his technically Black presence in the White House was all the more

depressing in light of the unpleasant fact that his presence in the nation's top job sparked a white racist backlash that could be counted on to target Black Americans who did not share the Obamas' elevated economic status and protections. Obama did nothing or close to it to advance or protect Black Americans while setting them up for intensified hatred and assault from whites who sadly but predictably and absurdly took Obama's presidency to mean that Blacks and other non-whites had moved ahead of Caucasians and were now "taking over the country." That was a ridiculous belief that Donald Trump was more than happy to fan and exploit.

"The Most Powerful Tool We Have"

Obama's funeral speech last week nothing to write home about from a social justice perspective. In a polished 40-minute oration eulogizing Lewis before a mostly Black audience, Obama spoke passionately against how "those in power...are doing their darnedest to discourage people from voting by closing polling locations, and targeting minorities and students with restrictive ID laws, and attacking our voting rights with surgical precision – even undermining the Postal Service in the run-up to an election that's going to be dependent on mail-in ballots so people don't get sick." Obama also spoke with anger and eloquence against how "we can witness our federal government sending agents to use tear gas and batons against peaceful demonstrators."

But Obama still could not bring himself to mention Donald Trump by name and failed to mention the Trump paramilitaries' use of deadly rubber bullets and other "impact munitions." Obama could not use the F-word – fascism – that he had rightly applied to Trump in his private conversation with Tim Kaine in October of 2016 (more on this below). Obama naturally said nothing about the remarkable popular anti-fascist uprising that seems to have forced a paramilitary retreat in Portland. Kwame Ture would not have been so timid.

Obama badly devalued the significance of social movements and protest beyond the election cycle – the very kind of political engagement that brought John Lewis on to the stage of history in the first place – by telling his audience that "the right to vote" is "the most powerful tool we have" and that voting is "the most important action we can take on behalf of democracy." That is simply false, as the broad sweep of American history clearly shows (the best introductory primers on this are Howard Zinn, A People's History of the United States, Jeremy Brecher, Strike!, and Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, People People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail).

In the Year 2220

Obama's speech ended with vapid references to the gradual and supposedly forward march of American history toward "a more perfect union." Obama took gradualism to a new level when he suggested that it might take "two hundred years" before we get that "more perfect union."

Two hundred years? Has the former president looked at any climate data lately? As the left historian and journalist Terry Thomas writes me, "The planet will be a smoldering archaeological project for aliens by then."

Thanks, Obama.

"Private Chats" vs. Public Obama

The New York Times reported that "Mr. Obama lacerated his successor, though not by name" in his funeral oration. Lest mentioning Obama's doggedly persistent failure to name Trump might make the former president sound too tame, Times reporters Maggie Astor and Shane Goldmacher added that "in recent private chats with Democratic donors, Mr. Obama has hit Mr. Trump more directly, accusing him of campaigning by stirring up 'nativist, racist, sexist' resentments..." Astor and Goldmacher had nothing to say about the continuing and telling difference between (a) the more candid, direct, and forceful things Obama says about Trump to wealthy elites in private and the milder and (b) the more indirect things he says about the unnamed (by Obama) forty-fifth president in public.

"Private chats" (with elites) indeed. Here's what Obama said to the lame corporate Democrat Hillary Clinton's vice-presidential candidate Tim Kaine in the last month of the 2016 presidential campaign: "Tim, remember, this is no time to be a purist. You've got to keep a fascist out of the White House." (Leaving aside the noxious advice not to be too leftist [that was the meaning of "no time to be a purist"],, Obama was correct to describe his successor as a fascist (something that an onrush of mainstream Democratic political commentators are belatedly grasping in the wake of Lafayette Square and Portland). Contrast that with what Obama said to the American people (with a smile across his face and a grinning Joe Biden over his right shoulder) less than a month later, one day after Trump was elected to the most dangerous office on Earth:

"Now, everybody is sad when their side loses an election. But the day after, we have to remember that we're actually all on one team. This is an intramural scrimmage. We're not Democrats first. We're not Republicans first. We are Americans first. We're patriots

first. We all want what's best for this country. That's what I heard in Mr. Trump's remarks last night. That's what I heard when I spoke to him directly. And I was heartened by that. That's what the country needs—a sense of unity; a sense of inclusion; a respect for our institutions, our way of life, rule of law; and a respect for each other. I hope that he maintains that spirit throughout this transition, and I certainly hope that's how his presidency has a chance to begin....The point, though, is, is that we all go forward, with a presumption of good faith in our fellow citizens—because that presumption of good faith is essential to a vibrant and functioning democracy. That's how this country has moved forward for 240 years. It's how we've pushed boundaries and promoted freedom around the world. That's how we've expanded the rights of our founding to reach all of our citizens. It's how we have come this far.”

“And that's why I'm confident that this incredible journey that we're on as Americans will go on. And I am looking forward to doing everything that I can to make sure that the next President is successful in that. I have said before, I think of this job as being a relay runner—you take the baton, you run your best race, and hopefully, by the time you hand it off you're a little further ahead, you've made a little progress. And I can say that we've done that, and I want to make sure that handoff is well-executed, because ultimately we're all on the same team.”

“America[ns] First”! These creepy and cringeworthy comments, horrifying to read three and a half years into Trump's predictably apocalyptic and neofascistic presidency, epitomized Obama's standard bromide-laden oratory ever since he rose to prominence with a Democratic National Convention speech (please review [my real-time response, titled “Keynote Reflections”](#)) which proclaimed that “There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America — there's the United States of America.”

“It was as If...”

Obama's Rose Garden speech the day after the orange fascist malignancy was elected hammered away at the purported “democratic” greatness of America and the shared visions and values of all Americans regardless of race, color, creed, gender, nationality, class, and party. These were the same tired nostrums Obama and many of his fans had been confusing with Lincolnesque eloquence ever since he arrived on the national political stage in the summer of 2004. Reflecting on Hillary Clinton's equally accommodating 2016 concession speech, the splendid Russian expatriate [Masha Gessen](#)

wrote a cutting critique that could be easily applied to Obama's Rose Garden post-election oration:

"It was as though Donald Trump had not, in the course of his campaign, promised to deport US citizens, promised to create a system of surveillance targeted specifically at Muslim Americans, promised to build a wall on the border with Mexico, advocated war crimes, endorsed torture, and repeatedly threatened to jail Hillary Clinton herself. It was as though those statements and many more could be written off as so much campaign hyperbole and now that the campaign was over, Trump would be eager to become a regular, rule-abiding politician of the pre-Trump era" (emphasis added).

Regarding Richard Hofstadter's First and Best Book

John Lewis was a lovely man. I ran into him (an unmistakable presence) once at an airport (either Reagan or Hartsfield) and asked him some questions about the history of the Civil Rights Movement. (I was teaching a class on post-WWII U.S. History at the time.) He kindly took time to answer and reflect and wished me and my students well.

It's a shame John Lewis got all wrapped-up in the great corporate-imperialist ruling class crime syndicate that is the Democratic Party.

At one point in his John Lewis funeral oration, the sociopath Bill Clinton noted that as a young activist Lewis kept in his backpack a copy of the esteemed American historian Richard Hofstadter's classic 1948 text The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It. As Clinton may not know and certainly would not say if he did, that book – Hofstadter's first, best, and leftmost publication – argued that leading U.S. statesmen and presidents on both sides of the nation's shifting binary party systems – Jeffersonians v. Hamiltonians, Whigs vs. Democrats, Republicans vs. Democrats – shared a vision of the good society and "democracy" that was strictly bounded by the narrow prerogatives of concentrated wealth, property, and power – in other words by rapacious, racially oppressive and expansionist (imperialist) capitalism. I read Hofstadter's magisterial (for its time) monograph as a 19-year old college freshman at the "little red schoolhouse on the prairie" (the once significantly Marxist history department of Northern Illinois University) in a U.S. History survey taught by the great New Left American colonial and revolutionary era historian Alfred Young. It was, for me, a radicalizing read (ironically enough, given Hofstadter's later conservative reaction to the rise of the New Left). It helped put me on the path towards respecting Kwame Ture's path far more than John Lewis's path.

The Clinton⁴² and Obama⁴⁴ presidencies validated Hofstadter's 1948 thesis no less than the Reagan⁴⁰, Bush⁴¹, Bush⁴³, and Covid⁴⁵ presidencies. They are no small part of the Weimar-like background for how we got in the deadly brownish-orange mess we are in right now.

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