

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مېباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مېباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY PAUL STREET

24.10.2020

Ex-President Obama: Ten Ironies



Photograph Source: Jakehonig – [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

The irony on Thursday morning cable news was too delicious not to savor. MSNBC anchor Halle Jackson could barely contain her glee over how former president Barack Obama had finally “taken the gloves off” and gone after Donald Trump by name while campaigning for Joe Biden the previous day.

I have no idea if Obama really did “take the gloves off” on Wednesday. I have my doubts. But whatever he did, he may have answered the bell too late. Earlier in her broadcast, however, Jackson noted in passing that the Senate Judiciary Committee had just recommended Senate confirmation of the far-right Christian cultist Amy Coney-Barrett for the U.S. Supreme Court. The Handmaid jurist will be voted on to the appointed-for-life high court by the majority Republican Senate tomorrow.

Donald Trump and his allies have jammed Coney-Barrett through in near-record speed so that she can cast a deciding vote when the court rules on Trump’s final challenge to Biden’s likely Electoral College victory early next year. Five of the nine voters will vote for Donald

Trump in the 2020-21 presidential election: Clarence Thomas, Sam Alito, Neal Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney-Barrett.

All hail the Great American Democracy.

Consistent with Obama's all-too-private October 2016 characterization of Trump as "a fascist," the incumbent president, vice-president, and attorney general have demonstrated beyond serious doubt that they intend to use both constitutional and extra-constitutional means to cripple and steal the contest. The methods include racist and partisan voter suppression in key battleground states, replete with the sending of armed "poll-watchers" into minority precincts; attacking the legitimacy of the mail-in ballots that are required by the very pandemic that Trump has multiplied across the nation; deploying an army of right-wing lawyers to contest the Electoral College slates in states that go for Biden; jamming through a far-right Supreme Court nominee (Coney-Barrett) who can be expected to join 4 or 5 other Republican-appointed judges to in signing off on the at once constitutional and extra-constitutional theft of the contest; preparing violent mobs to suppress anti-coup protests; preparing to declare martial law and putting in the streets paramilitary forces (from the Department of Homeland Security, especially ICE and Border Patrol) accountable only to Trump. As *Salon's* Chauncy de Vega [recently observed](#):

"Donald Trump continues to make it clear that he does not intend to leave office peacefully if he is defeated... Trump considers any election in which he is not the 'winner' to be null and void. Trump's appointment of Amy Coney Barrett to the United States Supreme Court is an obvious *quid pro quo* to secure his 'reelection' if his attorneys and other agents can sufficiently sabotage the vote on Election Day and beyond....During his debate with Biden, Trump...[commanded white supremacist paramilitaries to be prepared to attack](#) his and their 'enemies' if he loses on Election Day or is otherwise removed from office...Trump also wants Joe Biden and other leading Democrats imprisoned and perhaps even executed because he deems them to be guilty of 'treason' and a 'coup' attempt against him. Trump and his Attorney General William Barr have also threatened to use the United States military against the American people if they dare to protest the outcome of the 2020 Election if Trump somehow finds some extra-legal (if not outright illegal) way to stay in office.

Hey, Obama: you were right about Trump four years ago. It's a little bit late and a little bit Weimar to be stepping into the ring against the "fascist" just now.

Thinking about this irony, I realized that my new book *Hollow Resistance: Trump, Obama, and the Politics of Appeasement* (CounterPunch Books, October 2020) is, among other things, a study in the rich ironies of ex-president and president Obama. Nine ironies, to be exact (to add to the one just mentioned):

+1. Popularity Burnished by the Monster He Helped Hatch.

Ex-president Obama's [high-popularity](#) has been driven largely by the almost unimaginable real-lite dystopian awfulness of the Trumpenstein, which Obama helped create and usher into

power, Weimar-like. How ironic: *Obama's image is burnished by the monster he did a lot to hatch*. For more on how and why Obama's vapid and [neoliberal presidency](#) (consistent with vapid neoliberal [pre-presidency](#)) gave rise to the Trump nightmare, see ironies number 4, 5, and 7 below.

+2. “America[ns] First”

Obama told Tim Kaine in October of 2016 that the Hillary Clinton campaign had to “[keep a fascist out of the White House](#).” The 44th President of the United States had an accurate understanding[1] of Trump as a malignant, authoritarian, and far-right existential menace to the republic and the world. Less than a month later, Obama ironically and perversely [said this](#) to the American people after Trump defeated Obama's [dismal, dollar-drenched](#) Goldman Sachs and Council on Foreign Relations candidate:

“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... we all go forward, with a presumption of good faith in our fellow citizens [that] is essential to a vibrant and functioning democracy.... I'm confident that this incredible journey that we're on as Americans will go on.... 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...ultimately we're all on the same team (emphasis added).

The last three years and ten months have shown beyond the shadow of any serious doubt that Obama's private assessment four years ago was correct. The Trump administration has been a proto-fascistic nightmare. After the child separations at the border, the concentration camps, the kids in cages, Charlottesville, the forced sterilizations of detained immigrants, the pardoning of racist war criminals, the El Paso slaughter, the Tree of Life massacre, Soleimani, calls for “civil war” and “tough guys,” non-jokes about being “president for life,” the insane genocidal-racist fanning of the coronavirus, “Free Michigan,” the Khashoggi vivisection, the Dershowitz defense, Lafayette Square, Trump calling Black Lives Matter protesters “terrorists” and hate-mongers, Portland, the “white power” tweet, Kenosha, “Stand By,” calling Kamala Harris a “communist,” the presidentially sparked and approved fascist plot to kidnap the governor of Michigan, the unfolding rolling coup that Trump and his personal attorney general are executing against the 2020 election, and so much more (the list goes on and on[2]), it's [absurd](#) and embarrassing (shameful in fact) to deny the malignant proto-fascism of Trump and much of his base[3]. Obama has of course never gone public with his privately expressed and all-too accurate October 2016 understanding of Trump.

+3. Is it “the Apocalypse” Yet?

Check out Obama's statements to younger White House personnel and *The New Yorker's* editor [David Remnick](#) after Trump won: “this is not the apocalypse...*I don't believe in the*

apocalyptic – until the apocalypse comes. I think nothing is the end of the world until the end of the world.”

Hey, Barry: with 220,000 plus dead from the Trump Virus; with the death count heading to half a million by next January; with tens of millions without jobs or health care; with a Christian fascist Handmaid jurist about to round out a 6-3 hard right Supreme Court; with long lines of masked and frightened people outside food pantries, testing sites, and polling places; with nuclear weapons and environmental regulations torn to shreds; with mass evictions on the horizon; with no new financial supports coming for people out of work; with even your neoliberal corporate Affordable Care Act on the chopping block; with little green Trump militia men gunning down civil rights protesters in the streets; and with a rolling coup being waged by the Trump administration on the nation’s highly flawed “electoral democracy”....hey, Obama, is it “the apocalypse” yet? What do you say, 44? *And isn’t it a bit late to “believe in the apocalyptic” only when “the apocalypse” comes? Wouldn’t we try to make efforts to avert the apocalypse before it arrives?*

+4. “It Doesn’t Take a Lot of Courage to Aid Those Who are Already Comfortable”

Fewer than five months after “handing the baton” of “democracy” to a sub-human, demented, and arch-authoritarian oligarch (a “feral wild animal” in the words of David Cay Johnstone, one of Trump’s most distinguished biographers) he (privately) knew to be a “fascist,” Obama received a “Profiles in Courage” award from the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation in Boston. “We live,” Obama said in his acceptance speech at the Kennedy Library, “in a time of great cynicism about our institutions...It’s a cynicism that’s most corrosive when it comes to our system of self-government, that clouds our history of jagged, sometimes tentative but ultimately forward progress, that impedes our children’s ability to see in the noisy and often too trivial pursuits of politics the possibility of our democracy doing big things...It actually doesn’t take a lot of courage,” Obama observed, “to aid those who are already powerful, already comfortable, already influential.”

Nobody in the tuxedo- and evening gown-wearing crowd stood up to tell “Wall Street Barry” that the U.S. had no “system of self-government,” no real “functioning democracy” to speak of. Nobody rose to observe that, as the mainstream political scientists Martine Gilens and Benjamin Page had shown six years into Obama’s presidency, the nation had for decades been “an oligarchy” where wealthy “elites” and their corporations “rule” and “ordinary citizens have virtually no influence over what their government does.” Nobody stood up to note that “Wall Street Barry” Obama’s Citigroup presidency had been dedicated to serving and lining the pockets of “those who [were] already powerful, already influential.” Or that his service to the rich and powerful fed the very cynicism he claimed to denounce, helping thereby to pave the way for Trump.

+5. “You Have to Tend to This Garden of Democracy”

In December of 2017, Obama gave his first major public address since Trump's election at the posh and corporate Economic Club of Chicago—a fitting setting, given how his political rise had depended on his connections with Chicago's wealthy elite. "You have," [Obama told](#) his well-heeled business class audience during a Q&A after the talk, "to tend to this garden of democracy. Otherwise," Obama warned, "things can fall apart fairly quickly." By "fall apart fairly quickly," Obama meant that the country could descend into authoritarianism and even, though he did not use the word, fascism. The former president made a somewhat awkward and indirect but unmistakable reference to the rise of Adolph Hitler's Third Reich. "We've seen societies where that happens," Obama said, adding this: "*Now, presumably there was a ballroom here in Vienna in the late 1920s or '30s that looked pretty sophisticated and seemed as if it, filled with the music and art and literature that was emerging, would continue into perpetuity. And then 60 million people died. An entire world was plunged into chaos...So you got to pay attention—and vote!*" It was quite an historical reference, rendered more ominous by Obama saying, "here in Vienna."

Nobody in the audience stood up to point out the obvious: the corporate neoliberal globalist [Barack Trans-Pacific Partnership Obama](#) had spent his eight years in the White House *poisoning the so-called garden of democracy*, helping render his party's progressive and democratic pretense transparently inauthentic in ways that demobilized Democratic voters and thereby paved the way for the virulently racist fake-populist Trump.

+6. Phantom Counterpunch

During Obama's presidency, the former South Side Chicago "community organizer's" Oval Office was adorned with a portrait of young Muhammad Ali standing over the prone body of Sonny Liston, who Ali (then Cassius Clay) had supposedly just knocked out (the punch seems to have been a phantom). During Obama's ex-presidency, as during his presidency, "No Drama" Obama has had no real counterpunch when it comes to responding to the right. He has stuck to the historical norms of post-presidential behavior, saying incredibly little about or against his fascist successor even as Trump has plunged the nation into ever deeper madness and misery.

Until Wednesday, with two weeks to go before the election, ex-president Obama has almost never mentioned or directly criticized Trump by name. He has never called out Trump's fascism or (even) authoritarian white nationalism. Meanwhile, Trump has broken countless presidential norms, including the convention of not trashing one's predecessor. Trump has spent his years in the White House obsessively condemning Obama, blaming Obama for every national malady under the sun, and attacking Obama's signature programs (the Affordable Care Act, the Paris Climate Accord, the Iran Nuclear Deal and more) with constant obsessive and racialized glee. I document Obama's astonishing failure to fight back in *Hollow Resistance's* third chapter, titled "Where's Obama?" Muhammad Ali he is not.

There's a curious parallel with young Ali's "phantom punch" against Liston: American journalists repeatedly exaggerating the extent to which Obama has punched back. Again, and again, in researching this book, I found reporters, pundits, and talking heads engaged in wishful thinking, imagining that Obama had launched a counter-offensive when he really hadn't.

+7. A Disaster for Black Equality

Sadly, but predictably, Obama triggered a white-nationalist Amerikaner backlash (starting with the Tea Party and morphing into Trumpism) simply by virtue of his skin color. At the same time, his ascendancy to the White House proved to be the last nail in the coffin of many white Americans' already weak willingness to acknowledge that racism still posed serious obstacles to Black advancement and equality. It was all very ironic. Also as predicted, the "vacuous to repressive neoliberal" Obama did nothing as president to substantively advance the struggle for Black equality during his presidency, which saw Black net worth decline and an epidemic of murders of Black people by white police officers. Obama's technical Blackness made him less likely than a white Democratic neoliberal (Hillary Clinton) or semi-progressive (John Edwards) president would have been to launch pro-Black initiatives since Obama and his advisers determined that they'd already antagonized white voters already triggered by the simple fact of a Black man's presence in the White House. Prone to giving Black people lectures on their own supposed personal and cultural responsibility for their disproportionate poverty and incarceration, the white-pleasing Obama's refusal to attack institutional and systemic racism in any significant measure helped demobilize Black voters in battleground cities like Milwaukee, Detroit, Philadelphia, Charlotte, and Miami in 2016. Obama's tepidness and silence on racial and social justice has continued under Trump, whose constant attacks on Obama's record have been fueled by barely hidden racism. Ironically enough, Obama did little to advance the status of Black Americans, something that helped Trump become what Obama's clownish presidential nominee Joe Biden (a man with a deeply racist political record) absurdly calls "America's first racist president").

The ascendancy of a Black man to the White House in the land of cotton slavery was arguably a disaster for the struggle for Black equality, in ways that helped bring a virulent racist into power. How ironic

+8. "Progressive" Obama Enters the Plutocracy

The corporate centrist Eisenhower Democrat Obama's branding as a "progressive" friend of the poor and working-class Many in their struggle with the wealthy Few was always deeply deceptive. The fraudulent marketing of Obama as a progressive has become even more ironic as he has cashed in on his many years of dedicated not-so public service to the corporate and financial ruling class by entering the American Oligarchy himself. As I detail in Chapter 4 of *Hollow Resistance*, titled "Cashing In," Obama's deferred payment (in the form of book contracts, speaking fees, a Netflix deal and more) from the nation's unelected dictatorship of

money has catapulted him into the upper reaches of the One Percent. The newly minted oligarch and longtime sports nut Obama is angling to become a part owner of a National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise, some context perhaps for him recently convincing LeBron James and other NBA players to call off a threatened strike in solidarity with the George Floyd-Breonna Taylor-Jacob Blake Black Lives Matter protests.

9. “Vote, Vote, Vote” ...for Whom?

Obama is a high priest of electoralism. Further highlighting the ironic absurdity of Obama’s “progressive” branding, Obama as ex-president has trashed his (all too brief) “community organizer” past by continuing to absurdly tell people that “the best way to protest is to vote” (Urbana, Illinois, September 2018) and that “voting is the most important action we can take on behalf of democracy” (Obama’s funeral oration for John Lewis this summer). He couldn’t praise the remarkable George Floyd Rebellion without getting in his claim that voting is the real way to change things or without taking another one of his longstanding shots at the supposedly excessively radical 1960s.

Obama’s advice is bullshit. As Howard Zinn explained in an April 2008 *Progressive* essay titled [“Election Madness,”](#) penned as Obamania spread across America:

“The election frenzy...seizes the country every four years because we have all been brought up to believe that voting is crucial in determining our destiny, that the most important act a citizen can engage in is to go to the polls and choose one of the two mediocrities who have already been chosen for us. It is a multiple-choice test so narrow, so specious, that no self-respecting teacher would give it to students...Historically, government, whether in the hands of Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals, has failed its responsibilities, until forced to by direct action: sit-ins and Freedom Rides for the rights of black people, strikes and boycotts for the rights of workers, mutinies and desertions of soldiers in order to stop a war. *Voting is easy and marginally useful, but it is a poor substitute for democracy, which requires direct action by concerned citizens*” (emphasis added).

Who, by the way, does “progressive” Obama want Americans to vote for, specifically? For *actually progressive* Democrats like Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who *run in accord with majority progressive public opinion* for desperately needed and widely supported programs like Single Payer national health insurance, currently supported by 7 in 10 Americans? Not at all. Of course not. As I show in Chapter 5, titled “Vote! – For Who?,” ex-president Obama’s biennial candidate endorsement lists are heavily centrist, consistent with his longstanding “Eisenhower Republican” identity as a Third Way Democrat in the neoliberal Clinton-Tony Blair-Emanuel Macron mode. Obama has worked “behind the scenes” to undermine Sanders in the last two election cycles. We owe corporate clown and warmonger Biden’s presence on the center of stage of history in the current perilous moment to Barack Obama.

Whence the ironies and absurdities of Obama? In his prodigiously researched 1078-page [biography of Obama](#) *Rising Star* (1460 pages with endnotes included), the Pulitzer Prize-winning author David Garrow attributes Obama's failures to confront concentrated wealth and power to the 44th president's "hollow" narcissism and psychological weakness. Without completely discounting Garrow's analysis, the final chapter of *Hollow Resistance* advances a less psycho-historical and more Gramscian interpretation emphasizing young Obama's indoctrination and socialization at Columbia University and Harvard Law. Obama was an eloquent, fully minted Clintonite with "special qualities" that equipped him for remarkable ruling class service (full-on American System re-branding after the George W. Bush disaster) when he rolled off the elite professional class assembly line at Harvard Law in the early 1990s. If ex-president Obama is a "hollow" man (Garrow, apologies to T.S. Eliot), he's a hollow man full of deeply conservative ruling class and imperial ideas. He's the same imperialist Obama I tried and failed to warn liberal and progressives about starting in (strangely enough) the summer of 2004 and up through December of 2008, when I got canceled/de-platformed from *Democracy Now!* with half an hour to go from a scheduled interview on my book *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (Routledge: March 2008) in lower Manhattan[4].

Endnote

[1] The best early description of Trump as a fascist by far is Adam Gopnik, "Going There With Donald Trump," *The New Yorker*, May 11, 2016: " 'How the hell do I know what I find incredible?' a bemused philosopher asks in Tom Stoppard's play 'Jumpers.' 'Credibility is an expanding field ... and sheer disbelief hardly registers on the face before the head is nodding with all the wisdom of instant hindsight.' This is a now familiar emotion, a recognizable expansion. The unimaginable happens—Donald Trump, fool, oaf, and sociopathic liar, becomes the nominee of a major American political party—and within minutes what ought to be a shock beyond understanding becomes an event to savor, accept, and analyze. The desperate efforts to normalize the aberrant begin: he's actually a Rockefeller Republican with orange hair; he wasn't humiliated by President Obama's mockery at that dinner in 2011 but responded as a lovable, gregarious good guy; even his birtherism wasn't the vile racist sewage anyone could see it to be—he was genuinely unsure about where exactly it was the President was born. Trump tells one wild ranting lie after another on Sunday-morning television—we are the most heavily taxed nation in the world; he always opposed the Iraq war—and Chuck Todd can't do much more than nod and say 'Gotcha!' ... This is the kind of desperate response to the rise of fascism one might expect to find in a decadent media culture. Neocons have made a fetish of 1938; in retrospect they would have done better looking hard at 1933. There is a simple formula for descriptions of Donald Trump: add together a qualification, a hyphen, and the word 'fascist.' The sum may be crypto-fascist, neo-fascist, latent fascist, proto-fascist, or American-variety fascist—one of that kind, all the

same. Future political scientists will analyze (let us hope in amused retrospect, rather than in exile in New Zealand or Alberta) the precise elements of Poujadisme, Peronism and Huck Finn's Pap that compound in Trump's 'ideology.' But his personality and his program belong exclusively to the same dark strain of modern politics: an incoherent program of national revenge led by a strongman; a contempt for parliamentary government and procedures; an insistence that the existing, democratically elected government, whether Léon Blum's or Barack Obama's, is in league with evil outsiders and has been secretly trying to undermine the nation; a hysterical militarism designed to no particular end than the sheer spectacle of strength; an equally hysterical sense of beleaguerment and victimization; and a supposed suspicion of big capitalism entirely reconciled to the worship of wealth and 'success.' It is always alike, and always leads inexorably to the same place: failure, met not by self-correction but by an inflation of the original program of grievances, and so then on to catastrophe. The idea that it can be bounded in by honest conservatives in a Cabinet or restrained by normal constitutional limits is, to put it mildly, unsupported by history." This was and remains a brilliant passage.

[2]. "The enormity and variety of Mr. Trump's misdeeds," *The New York Times*' Editorial Board observed last Sunday, "can feel overwhelming. Repetition has dulled the sense of outrage, and the accumulation of new outrages leaves little time to dwell on the particulars." ("A Man Unworthy of His Office," New York Times, October 17, 2020, Sunday Review, p.2).

[3] For an empirical and ideological analysis of Trump's base, see Paul Street, "The Trumpenvolk," pp. 48-65 in Christopher Ketcham, ed., *Unflattering Photos of Fascists: Authoritarianism in Trump's America* (Chico, CA: AK Press, September 2020).

[4] True story. But for progressive "cancel culture" (literally – lol), I would have gone on "the American Left's" top television show in a key moment – between the first Obama election and inauguration – to predict the entire trajectory of the Obama presidency and its likely aftermath, including a far-right white-nationalist backlash that would bring to power viciously racist politicians who would assault a populace that Obama had set up for attack and done nothing to protect. *Not that this would have made the slightest bit of difference.* (I got a very frosty response to my left criticism of Obama from a different left talk show host in Manhattan New York City the day before. I headed back to a snowed-in Second City with my tail between my legs after an epic flu survived in Montclair, New Jersey). Nearly four years later, I did go on Al Jazeera television with the great radical-democratic humanist, socialist, and anti-fascist Dr. Cornel West to make a critical assessment of the corporatist, imperialist, and objectively white-supremacist Obama presidency I had predicted five years earlier.

OCTOBER 23, 2020

Paul Street's new book is [The Passive Resistance: Obama, Trump, and Politics of](#)