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President:
How Barack Obama personifies the anxieties and aspirations of America

By Gary Younge

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GARY YOUNGE is an author, broadcaster and award-winning columnist for The Guardian, based in Chicago. He also writes a monthly column for The Nation magazine and is the Alfred Knobler Fellow for The Nation Institute. He has written three books: Who Are We – and Should it Matter in the 21st Century?, Stranger in a Strange Land: Encounters in the Disunited States and No Place Like Home: a Black Briton’s Journey through the American South. He has made several radio and television documentaries on subjects ranging from the Tea Party to hip hop culture. In 2009 he won the James Cameron award for the ‘combined moral vision and professional integrity’ of his coverage of the Obama campaign.
Rorschach President: How Barack Obama personifies the anxieties and aspirations of America

Thank you very much Baroness Blackstone. Thank you Philip Davies, who has done all the work behind the scenes to get me here. And thank you for coming.

I know that these Douglas Bryant lectures have a proud history of the spirited exchange of opinions between Europe and America in general, and Britain and America in particular, and I’m very honoured to be included in it.

But I come not just in the tradition of the transatlantic but also the Black Atlantic. That diaspora that has shuttled between Africa, the Americas and Europe either through coercion, as my forbears did as slaves, or through voluntary migration, as my parents did from Barbados. So I have got one foot in the perspective of the likes of Alexis De Tocqueville, that great French observer of American mores; but the other with the mindset of the likes of CLR James, that great Trinidadian intellectual who wrote on everything from the politics of cricket to the Haitian revolution.

So when I arrived in the United States with that perspective, it was with great bemusement that I found myself having to absorb abuse, particularly from white, right-wing Americans, who badgered me as though their own reference points represented the sole prism through which global events could possibly be understood. As though the struggle for moral superiority between Europe and the US could have much relevance to someone whose ancestors were slaves, and whose parents and grandparents lived through the war under European colonization. In the run-up to the Iraq war one white American said to me: ‘If it wasn’t for us you would be speaking German.’ ‘No,’ I told him. ‘If it wasn’t for you, I would probably be speaking Yoruba.’

So it was with that perspective that I witnessed the rise of Barack Obama. First in the Senate race, then in his campaign for the presidency, and then
finally the presidency itself. And from the very earliest moments of his appearance something struck me not so much about Obama himself, but about the way that people related to him. For it seemed as though almost no sensible conversation relating to the man was possible. The cup was never just half-empty or half-full. It was either overflowing with hope and admiration or had nothing in it at all. It seemed as though some people would prefer to smash the cup, in fact, lest we imbibe the poison it almost certainly contained.

I remember on the night of Super Tuesday in 2008, at a results watching party, one woman argued that the fact that he was mixed-race inherently made him more progressive. I offered her a list of mixed race people who were anything but progressive, but she would not budge. A few years later I was speaking to a Tea Party supporter in Colorado and I asked him if he could think of anything, anything at all, that Barack Obama had done that he would say was any good. ‘Well, he’s boosted the sale of guns and ammunition,’ he told me with a straight face. ‘My friends are stocking up.’

On the left some branded him a sell-out before he even had anything to sell. On the right they insisted he was a Muslim with a fire-breathing pastor, even though Muslims don’t have pastors. And gradually it dawned on me that they were not actually talking about Obama at all. They were talking about themselves. ‘The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe,’ wrote John Berger in *Ways of Seeing*. ‘The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.’

The ascent of a black, mixed-race politician born to a white mother and an absent Kenyan Muslim father at a time of war, economic crisis, demographic transition and shifting geopolitical power relationships forced a reckoning between what people saw, what they knew – or thought they knew – and what they believed. The notion that people would project their hopes and fears on to a political leader is neither unique to America nor Obama. But the particular confluence of events, identities and his political trajectory, I will argue over the next half an hour, have made the discrepancies between who he is and who people think he is, particularly acute.

Hence the title: ‘The Rorschach President.’ The Rorschach test was created by Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach in the early 20th century. In the test, the psychologist presents patients with a series of elaborate inkblots and asks them to talk about what the blots mean to them. It’s used to detect
underlying thought disorder as the patient filters each blot through the prism of their own preoccupation. The blot is the same for everyone. But everyone sees something different in it.

Now Obama has never described himself as an inkblot per se. But he has always understood this to be, if not a vulnerability, then at the very least a factor. In his second book *The Audacity of Hope*, he writes: ‘I serve as a blank screen on which people of vastly different political stripes project their own views. As such, I am bound to disappoint some, if not all, of them.’ Back then – the book was written after he’d joined the Senate but before he’d decided to run for president – he put it down to him being a relative newcomer on the political scene. But familiarity, I believe, has not attenuated the problem. If anything it’s accentuated it. And Obama, I will argue, is no mere passive recipient in this process. While he does not control it, he does at times, try to leverage and game it.

Moreover, the nature of these projections, perceptions, presumptions and assumptions about Obama do not emerge from a clear blue sky. They, like Obama, are a function of their time and place. ‘Men make their own history,’ wrote Karl Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, ‘But they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under given circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past.’

The circumstances Obama inherited as a president – a massive economic crisis, deep political polarisation and two failing wars – helped in some ways to define him to many people. Those who perceived Bush as belligerent, parochial, indifferent and oafish welcomed the arrival of a man who seemed conciliatory, worldly, curious and refined. He was the antithesis of his predecessor: the anti-Bush. Add to that the soaring rhetoric, and the expectation among much of his base was very high indeed.

So some now look on his record as a disappointment. It is not the function of this lecture to assess that record and to see whether that is right or not. But it has always seemed to me that the nature of that disappointment is of an infatuated suitor scorned: ‘I loved you, I followed you, I believed in you and this is how you repay me: me, personally.’ They saw him as a transformative radical. But he never said he was a transformative radical. He never ran as a transformative radical. Now I’m not arguing here either
that he should have the benefit of the doubt. He’s the president of the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world; I think he has enough benefits as it is. But while Obama must take responsibility for the many things he’s done that may have disappointed, his spurned lovers must take responsibility for their selective hearing. Just one example would be his decision to escalate the war in Afghanistan. Now I believe that was wrongheaded. But to qualify as a betrayal, as some have said it was, he would have had to have promised something else, when the truth is that that is one pledge that he really did keep.

I was in a bar on the South Side of Chicago on election night when he won. And I was with a cameraman and at one stage he panned over to a woman who was screaming Obama’s name – everybody was screaming Obama’s name – and she said, ‘My man is in Afghanistan, and now he’s coming home.’ And I thought, ‘That’s not true; that’s not true. And you relating your happiness at Obama’s victory with that prospect is a very good example of the Rorshach test. You have been hearing what you want to hear, and you have been seeing what you want to see.’

After re-reading The God That Failed, the book in which six prominent ex-communists related their disillusionment with communism, the late Palestinian intellectual Edward Said asked: ‘Why as an intellectual did you believe in a God anyway? And besides, who gave you the right to imagine that your earlier disbelief and later disenchantment were so important?’ I think when it comes to Obama, people have to some extent got to own their disappointment because quite often – not for everything, but quite often – their disappointment begins and ends with them.

But to get a broader sense of how Obama is misunderstood, we have to go back to the circumstances that put his life and ascent in context. Obama was born in 1961 – the year a group of black and white freedom riders made international news as they travelled through the Deep South to challenge segregation and were beaten severely for their efforts. It was four years before Congress would insist on African Americans’ right to vote and six years before the US Supreme Court formally recognised interracial marriage as a nationwide civil right.

That same year, 1961, Bobby Kennedy said: ‘There’s no question that in the next thirty or forty years, a Negro can also achieve the same position
that my brother has as President of the United States.’ A few years later in his essay, ‘The American Dream and the American Negro’, James Baldwin scoffed at Kennedy’s claims. ‘That sounded like a very emancipated statement to white people,’ he wrote. ‘They were not in Harlem when this statement was first heard. They did not hear the laughter and bitterness and scorn with which this statement was greeted. From the point of view of the man in the Harlem barbershop, Bobby Kennedy only got here yesterday and now he is already on his way to the Presidency. We were here for 400 years and now he tells us that maybe in 40 years, if you are good, we may let you become president.’ So in the year that Obama was born, commentators were arguing about what his meaning would be.

By the time Obama goes to secondary school some of the biggest names in civil rights – Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Bobby Kennedy – had been shot. In his twenties he would have seen Jesse Jackson rouse a rainbow movement and go down to defeat in the primaries. In 1988, the year Obama starts his law degree and visits Kenya for the first time, Jackson wins the state of Michigan and then mounts a serious challenge in Wisconsin during the Democratic primaries. In The New York Times, columnist E. J. Dionne writes, ‘Let it be recorded that for at least one week in American history, in a middle-sized, mid-western state, a broad range of white voters took the presidential candidacy of a black man with the utmost seriousness.’

By the time Obama came of age, there was no civil rights movement to emerge from. But thanks to the gains of the civil rights era he could attend the nation’s best universities (Columbia and Harvard) and then transition into politics – not through the church, as would previously have been likely for a black politician, but through academia. He’s not alone. The beginning of this century saw a new generation of black politicians in America emerge from the Ivy League to positions of power via the academy and business. Among them are the Massachusetts governor, Deval Patrick (Harvard); the Newark mayor, Cory Booker (Yale); the former Tennessee congressman, Harold Ford Jr (University of Pennsylvania); and the Maryland lieutenant governor, Anthony Brown (Harvard).

So while Obama’s rise may have been meteoric, he did not come from nowhere. The context in which Obama emerged intimately, I believe, informs the manner in which he is understood and misunderstood. Now
some of these misunderstandings are comic. Take his name, for example. When he applied for his community organising job in Chicago the interviewers could not make out his ethnicity from his name but assumed he might be Japanese. Once he was in Chicago and people heard his name they thought he was likely to be Irish – O’Bama. Later in life his name would resonate with darker assumptions. During the 2008 election some Republican critics liked to emphasis his middle name – Hussein – carrying with it the implications of both a Muslim identity and some subliminal connection to Saddam Hussein.

I am very familiar, as a black Briton, with this problem of mistaken identity. I remember when I was at university, somebody who was on a university court approaching me and asking me, ‘Mr Younge, where are you from’. And I said Stevenage. ‘Oh. Well, where were you born?’ And I said, ‘Hitchen’. And so he said, ‘Well, before then.’ There was no before then.

And so it is with Obama that something as simple as how he looks, and where he is from, becomes complicated. Many of these misunderstandings are rooted in the complexity of race in America. First off, not everyone sees him as black. One Zogby poll in 2007 showed that after being told his parents’ race and nationality more than half (55%) of whites and 61% of Hispanics classified Obama as biracial, while two-thirds (66%) of blacks regarded him as black. They are all hearing the same thing, but are seeing something different. The answer of course is that he’s both. He is black and bi-racial.

Many refer to him as African American which he both is and is not. When it comes to ethnicity in America people generally hyphenate one country with American: Italian-American, Japanese-American, Polish-American. But the term African American came into common usage to describe a particular experience for the descendants of slaves who lived through segregation, who cannot lay claim to a specific country because they cannot, with any certainty, pinpoint where their forbears came from. In Democracy in America de Tocqueville described their condition thus: ‘The Negro transmits to his descendants at birth the external mark of his ignominy. The law can abolish servitude, but only God can obliterate its traces.’ Obama bears the mark, but he does not have those traces. He is Kenyan-American, certainly, and Kenya is in Africa. But that does not make him African American in the way that term has become understood.
Now that is neither better, nor worse; but it is different. As a black male in America he still faces discrimination. I don’t think Zimmerman’s suspicions of Trayvon Martin would have been any different if Trayvon’s parents had been from Jamaica. So it’s not better or worse, it’s just different. But that difference is not just academic. Unlike other black immigrants, African Americans have had nowhere else they can call home and have seen generations of other immigrants leapfrog them in social status even as they were denied the most basic rights of American citizenship. A few years ago there was an intense debate over the fact that two-thirds of the black students admitted to Harvard – some of whom were beneficiaries of affirmative action – were the descendants of Caribbean or African immigrants as opposed to African American slaves. Harvard sociology professor Mary Waters said: ‘You need to have a philosophical discussion about what are the aims of affirmative action. If it’s about getting black faces at Harvard, then we’re doing fine. If it’s about making up for 200 to 500 years of slavery in this country and its aftermath, then we’re not doing well. And if it’s about having diversity that includes African Americans from the South or from inner-city high schools, then we’re not doing well there either.’

So while the election of a black president was a significant breakthrough, its relationship to America’s historical racial cleavages is, at the very least, complicated. Commentator Stanley Crouch wrote in 2007: ‘If we end up with him as our first black president, he will have come into the White House through a side door – which might at this point be the only door open.’

This can work both ways for Obama. Unlike African Americans he can appeal to America’s immigrant sensibilities. In his speech to the Democratic Party convention in 2004, that propelled him to the national stage, he evoked the immigrant dream of how his father came from Kenya to America and he called it ‘a magical place’. Now it is difficult to imagine the father of most African Americans describing the US as a magical place in 1959 – a period when civil rights protesters filled Southern jails if they were lucky and were murdered if they were not.

On the other hand, no-one has ever asked Jesse Jackson to produce his birth certificate. Obama’s Kenyan heritage was enough to prompt the suspicion among many – at times more than a third of the country and
a half of all Republicans – that he was not born in America and therefore not the legitimate President of the country. The accusation levelled against many a black leader has long been that they were un-American. The charge against Obama was that he was not even American.

But that did not stop some, both conservatives and liberals, from locating Obama directly within the lineage of African American history. ‘Obama is what comes at the end of the bridge in Selma,’ said Congressman John Lewis, who was a civil rights activist in the sixties. Well, yes, in so far as in Selma they were fighting for racial equality. And no, in so far as Obama did not inherit those inequalities that are passed on from generation to generation. ‘Obama embodies and preaches the true and vital message that in today’s America,’ wrote Stuart Taylor Jr. in National Journal. ‘The opportunities available to black people are unlimited if they work hard, play by the rules, and get a good education.’ Well, no. Obama’s ascent does not address the historical roots of racial discrimination in America since that is not where his personal history lies. It does not mean there is not a relationship between those two. But he is not the example that you would use in order to make that case.

This difference was occasionally noted, but not necessarily understood. In an edition of ‘Hardball’, an influential political cable television show, the host Chris Matthews tried to get to the heart of Obama’s appeal, at least to him. ‘I don’t think you can find a better starting gate personality than Obama as a black candidate,’ he said. ‘I can’t think of a better one. No history of Jim Crow, no history of anger, no history of slavery. All the bad stuff in our history just ain’t there with this guy.’ This, of course, is nonsense. Obama’s mother is a white woman from Kansas. Of course he has a history of Jim Crow and slavery in his family. Black people didn’t enslave and segregate themselves. And Obama has said that he actually has ancestors who did in all likelihood own slaves.

But the point – as far as this lecture is concerned – is that when Matthews looked at him, that’s what he saw. And this has worked in a number of ways. On the one hand you have the people – and they emerged with force after 2009 – who really do fear or venerate his blackness. But on other hand you have those who, because of his complicated relationship to the African American story, question his authenticity. In an interview with CBS’s Steve Kroft in 2007, the line of questioning went as follows.
Kroft: Your mother was white. Your father was African?

Obama: Right.

Kroft: You spent most of your life in a white household?

Obama: Yeah.

Kroft: So you grew up white.

Obama: I’m not sure that would be true. I think what would be true is to say that I didn’t have the typical background of African-Americans . . .

Kroft: But you were raised in a white household?

Obama: Right.

Kroft: Yet at some point, you decided that you were black?

Then there’s African American professor, Cornel West, who last year argued: ‘I think my dear brother Barack Obama has a certain fear of free black men. It’s understandable. As a young brother who grows up in a white context, brilliant African father, he’s always had to fear being a white man with black skin. All he has known culturally is white … When he meets an independent black brother, it is frightening to him.’

Obama’s inability to fit neatly into any single racial designation is discomforting for some but provides solace to many others in a country where traditional racial categories are coming under significant strain. Recently, a Pew research report revealed that more than one in seven new marriages in the US is between people of a different race or ethnicity. The research revealed that mixed-marriages now comprise 8.4% of all marriages in the US in 2010, more than double the proportion of 1980. The 2010 census showed an increase of around 50% of respondents marking more than one race on their census forms in the first ten years that such an option was available. But not only is there more mixing, the mix itself is under a dramatic transformation. Half the children born the year Obama was elected were non-white. In four states – New Mexico, Hawaii, Texas and California – non-Hispanic whites are already a minority. In a further
six – Nevada, Arizona, Mississippi, Georgia, Maryland and Florida – white children under the age of eighteen are a minority. At current rates, by 2042 whites will be a minority in the country as a whole.

So for some, Obama embodies the aspiration to an almost utopian future in which race no longer matters. Indeed, when he won his primary in South Carolina, a state where blacks are almost three times as likely to live in poverty and five times more likely to go to prison than whites, that was precisely what the crowd chanted – ‘Race doesn’t matter’ – over and over again. Ultimately, for all of us, unfortunately, racism still does matter.

But Obama’s shape-shifting identity is also the source of great anxiety for those, particularly on the right, who have yet to find an organising model or political trajectory that can move beyond the old categories and galvanise the new. They mourn the certainties of the past and are insecure about what this new future might look like and quite where their place in it will be. When activists from the Tea Party, which is overwhelmingly white, insist, ‘We want our country back’ this is partly, I believe, what they are referring to, albeit usually implicitly, and maybe even unconsciously. But their anxieties go way beyond race. I have spoken a lot about race. But I believe that in all of this, race is really a signifier for a far more deep-seated insecurity playing out at a national and international level.

For example, the US may have been one of the principal motors of neoliberal globalization, but its citizens often see themselves as its victims. From 47 countries polled by Pew in 2007, Americans showed the sharpest decline in their support for foreign trade and had the least positive view of it. By roughly 2030 China’s GDP will overtake America. You see this on the campaign trail all the time. Newt Gingrich has a line where he says, ‘I look forward to the day when a US President will no longer have to bow to a Saudi prince.’ And there is a range of metaphors in there. But the idea is that we are not the country that we used to be. They call it declinism. And it has taken a very feverish hold on the Republican psyche at the moment.

To the sting of economic vulnerability has been added the indignity of geopolitical decline and the erosion of the myth of invincibility that lay at the heart of America’s post-war national self-image. Shortly after Obama’s election, the National Intelligence Council, which coordinates analysis from all US intelligence agencies and assesses America’s role in the world,
concluded: ‘Owing to the relative decline of its economic and, to a lesser extent, military power, the US will no longer have the same flexibility in choosing among as many policy options.’ The report acknowledged that while the US would remain the single most powerful force in the world, its relative strength and potential leverage are waning.

This trajectory was in no small part aggravated by failed wars against predominantly Muslim countries that followed terrorist attacks by Islamic fundamentalists. A national furore was sparked by plans to build an Islamic community centre in Lower Manhattan. There were protests against the ‘9/11’ mosque which was not a mosque and several blocks from the scene of the 9/11 terror attacks on the world trade center. At the height of the controversy one in three Americans said a Muslim should not be allowed to stand for president and more than one in four believed Muslims should not be eligible to sit on the Supreme Court. In a referendum in 2010 more than 70% of Oklahomans voted to ban the introduction of Sharia Law in a state where Muslims comprise less than 0.2% of the population.

And it is in this political, economic and demographic period that the country elected a black president, with an African name and a foreign father who was a non-practising Muslim. Obama – to many – does not only personify a world they don’t know but one they don’t like, and maybe even one they fear.

Now lest anyone believe I’m making a partisan point here the first attempt to parlay these features of vulnerability for political gain came from within Hillary Clinton’s campaign. In an internal memo her chief strategist, Mark Penn, argued: ‘All of these articles about his boyhood in Indonesia and his life in Hawaii are geared towards showing his background as diverse, multicultural and putting that in a new light. Save it for 2050,’ he says. ‘It also exposes a very strong weakness for him, because his roots to basic American values and culture are at best limited. I cannot imagine America electing a president during a time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values. How we would give some life to this contrast without turning negative?’ Penn asks Clinton rhetorically. ‘Every speech that Hillary makes should contain the line you were born in the middle of the country, to the middle class in the middle of the last century...Let’s explicitly own ‘American’ in our programs, the speeches and the values because he doesn’t. Make this a new American
Century, the American Strategic Energy Fund. Let’s use our logo to make some flags that we can give out. Let’s add flag symbols to the backgrounds.’

But what Penn didn’t figure out is that it was precisely this cosmopolitan element that appealed to some people – particularly the young and the educated. ‘With his multi-ethnic family and his globe-spanning childhood, there is a little piece of everything in Obama,’ gushed *The New York Times* conservative columnist David Brooks. Among the young, pollster John Zogby has labelled those in the 18-29 age group the First Globals: ‘[They are the first generation] to bring a consistently global perspective to everything from foreign policy to environmental issues to the coffee they buy, the music they listen to and the clothes they wear,’ he claims. A quarter of them think they’ll end up living for some significant period in a country other than America. Having lived their entire adult life with their nation at war they are more likely to believe in multilateral global solutions and to be more resistant to unilateral military intervention. In his book *The Way We’ll Be*, Zogby says, ‘I like to tell audiences that while First Globals might not be more able than other cohorts to point to Darfur on a map, they at least know there is a Darfur and they care what’s happening there.’

Since Obama’s arrival on the national political scene the challenge has been to try and separate the symbolic nature of his candidacy and presidency from the substantial consequences of both. It is the tension between these two elements that makes conversations about him so fraught. For while symbols should not be mistaken for substance that does not mean they are insubstantial, and in the words of George Carlin, you shouldn’t leave symbols to the symbol-minded. Black, biracial, African American, African, Muslim, immigrant, cosmopolitan, radical, moderate, socialist even – if you’re trying to discover what ails, scares, inspires, divides and comforts America you could do worse than go to a mall, hold up a picture of Obama to a range of Americans and ask them what they see.

In many ways I think he is America’s future come just that bit too early. Some look at it, embrace it, and believe it couldn’t have come too soon. Others could no more look at it than they could look at the sun, and fear for what this new world will mean for them. They are all looking at the same thing, but are all understanding that thing differently.
In the words of the late Kurt Vonnegut: ‘We are the sum of the things that we pretend to be. So we must be careful what we pretend to be.’

Thank you.
Questions and Answers

Question: My question really relates to class. There is an impression – and I’d love you to disavow me of it – that there is a class of black Americans – well-educated, well-off – who are not particularly interested in helping their brothers up. And I am wondering where Obama sits in that dialogue? If you feel he ignores it? Or, does he try to encourage those that are not trying to help their brothers up, to help them?

Answer: That’s a good question. First of all, one interesting fact about Obama’s presidency is that one of the groups – in fact, I think the group – that has done worse under Obama is African Americans. The wealth gap between black and white has actually grown under his presidency. And this is where conversations about Obama get fraught; because what I am not saying necessarily is that those two things are causal. They may well be coincidental. But it is nonetheless true. And yet, African Americans are by far his most loyal base and, paradoxically, feel as though they are doing better, even though they are not. And I think that is another Rorschach example. They look at Obama and see that this thing is possible. Even if it is not possible for them, they understand it is possible in the outside world.

I think that what happens after the civil rights movement is that you get African Americans having the right and the opportunity to be as selfish as everybody else. If we turned that question around and asked how are wealthy, white Americans helping poor, white, Americans we’d be, ‘Steady on!’ We are already in socialist territory there, which is incredibly dangerous! So to the extent that they still vote Democrat, arguably they still identify with the same party. But yes, the civil rights movement meant that you no longer had to all live in the same area. Some people could get better jobs. And some people could then move out. I don’t know the stats on things like volunteering and so on, but my guess would be that African Americans and evangelical Christians – who made the base of 2000 – would be doing the most charitable work. That is just a guess. If you are African American, in all likelihood you are no more than two generations away from the South and from poverty. In all likelihood not all of your family has come with you, so you have some relationship to poverty. In terms of Obama’s record, he certainly hasn’t done any worse than any other Democratic president. I would not say that he has done an awful lot better either. It is a good example of him being actually a very middle of the road Democrat.
Question: The point you seem to be making is that people misinterpreted Obama, by trying to read things into what he said. But the other side of that, of course, is that the things that he said did not animate people enough to be interested in those issues. That he did not promote himself strongly enough – for example, on the issue of race – to try and resolve any of these problems. So isn’t there a case to take a step back and say, ‘Well, why is it that the personal is political at this scale?’ That people can’t relate to politics in a way that relates to the issues. Instead they try to relate to the person. And, self-consciously, the Obama campaign were very clear on this issue of pushing the story of the President to make his personality come across. So when Palin came along, they said, ‘Well, she might be difficult because she has this story.’ And on Romney they are saying he’s not a problem now because he can’t really talk about himself. And so there is a much bigger thing than what people read into it. And that is: what politics seems to have become reduced to.

Answer: Yes. I mean to some extent in America, and I would say to a lesser extent here, politics at that level is a performance. It’s which candidate would you prefer to have a beer with? Which candidate comes across in a certain way? And it’s a rare candidate – George W Bush being one of them – who doesn’t stand on their story. Clinton was the boy from Hope. The trouble with George W Bush – and I’m not being snide here – is that he didn’t have much of a story until he was in his mid-40s, and then to some extent there was his finding God. With Reagan there was a cowboy element. Jimmy Carter was the peanut farmer. So in all sorts of ways, millions of dollars are spent on framing and marketing these people to sell them like cereal. Think back to Al Gore’s earth-toned shirts and so on.

So, we can have a conversation about whether performance should matter. But I don’t think there is much of a conversation about whether it does matter. Certainly how they are perceived and how they come across does matter. And that has been a problem for Romney for this last little while. The issue is whether those conversations can be made substantial. Sometimes they can. For example, conversations about Mitt Romney’s wealth can prompt an interesting debate about venture capitalism as opposed to manufacturing, or something else. They don’t always, but they might. There is a lecture that could be given about Obama’s record. But actually one of the things I find interesting about Obama is not actually his record; that could be done quite quickly, and it is quite chequered. For
me it is about how Obama serves as about a million and one metaphors for how the country is changing: what its fears and what its hopes are. And so for me he is an interesting way of talking about the country. He is an interesting and useful way to discuss what is going on in America. But actually as President? Then you are looking at what he has and hasn’t done. I think you could make up your mind about that. I don’t know that it would be particularly revelatory. If it would be, those revelations wouldn’t come from me.

**Question:** If 2008 was about extreme hope – and for others just relief that the Bush years were coming to an end – and 2010 was about anger and disappointment, what do you think is going to motivate the 2012 election from now until November?

**Answer:** Money. This will be the most expensive campaign in the history of the country by a long, long way.

It is difficult because the Republican race is still dragging on interminably. But it is going to be about the economy. Unless the Republicans choose to make it about something else – like contraception, or gay marriage, which can be winning issues by the way – then it will be about the economy. That is certainly what the Republicans wanted it to be about.

And it will be about government: how much, and what can it do.

Both of these are extensions of 2010. But now we are in a situation where the trajectory has changed. The economy is nudging up. I think – I think – that the Obama campaign might pitch their tent as the hopeful party; the party of the future; things are looking better; stick with us; we’re on our way. They’ve tried that, they’ve actually road-tested that and it didn’t do very well. And they would try and portray the Republicans as the party of the past; the party that keeps looking backwards and saying things were better way back when. And Mitt Romney sometimes sounds like he wants to go back to the fifties. Rick Santorum sometimes sounds like he wants to go back to the eighteenth century. So, I think one of the polls to watch will be if people think things are getting better or if America is on the right track or not. I think that will be a far better indicator to trust than Obama’s opinion rating.
Question: You mentioned if the Republicans should take up another issue. Well, I would say one of the other issues lingering somewhere in the background is Iran. There is a general belief in the intelligence community in the United States and in Israel that the Iranians are not developing a nuclear programme. There seems to be a political impetus in parts of Europe and in the United States towards a war agenda. Do you think that this is likely to have a profound impact either before or after the election? If it happens before the election it is certainly the death knell for Obama. If it happens after the election it is certainly going to be a disaster for the American economy.

Answer: I don’t know that it will be a big issue before the election. Obviously, I can’t predict whether someone is actually going to bomb Iran or not. But I wouldn’t be so certain that if a war does start that that is the death knell for Obama. In times of war, Americans tend to stick with their presidents rather than dump them. I think the way in which it is important is the way in which it is framed. The Republican line is that Obama runs around the world apologising for America: he is weak. And so the Iranian question is framed for the Democrats as, ‘I’m a steady hand on the tiller. I’m watching this. I’ve got this covered. And remember, I killed Bin Laden.’ For the Republicans it is, ‘Here’s another bit of the world that is spinning out of control. And this man is not a leader. And what America needs is leadership. Someone who will go out and bat for America and not apologise for it.’ So to the extent that that issue continues – and we know it is not going away – it’s about consistency for the Democrats, and weakness for the Republicans.

Question: Thank you for that. And thank you for your reporting. Can you say a bit more about how you feel as a black Briton reporting on the States back here, with the special relationship. How have you felt that you have been part of that?

Answer: Well, it gives you ins, in certain places or in certain ways. There are things that I can cover, where I am unobtrusive, which is how I like to do my reporting – with my notebook in my back-pocket kind of thing. I think the easiest way is just to tell you how I do it in general, because it is fairly comic and it also works. So, what I usually do is walk up to people and say, ‘Hello, I’m English.’ Because first of all it kind of completely interrupts whatever it is that they think they are doing. Secondly, if I go
up to people and say, ‘Can I ask you a question?’ they usually think I am going to ask them for money. So, I say I am from England. And we usually have a little chat about England; and about the Queen, sometimes. And then from there we can go on to politics and policies. I would say there are some issues that I cover for which I have a sensitivity – or have an interest in, maybe – that white journalists might not. In the same way that Latino journalists would have certain interests. But at the end of the day, you’ve still got to file. You’ve got to send the stories that they want. But that is my MO: a slightly toffier accent than I actually have and front-casing my Englishness, which generally I find Americans find quite disarming. Unlike the rest of Europe, who think we are hooligans, Americans don’t understand that yet.

**Question:** I’m just wondering what personal interactions you’ve had with Obama? And also how much attention the Administration pays to voices like *The Guardian*, in your experience.

**Answer:** So, I’ve had no interactions with Obama, which is – it’s not deliberate in so much that he’s been calling me and I haven’t been calling him back! But it’s deliberate in so far as I made a decision quite early on that there was very little point in even trying to get an interview because I find the closer you get to politicians, the less you see. And so I didn’t want to go on his plane, which was an option at one stage with *The Guardian*. I could see the value in terms of telling my grandchildren. But actually as a piece of reporting, I generally find those reports very, very dull. You’re told where to go. You’re told what you can see. And then you produce what you see, which is actually what you could see on TV. I had to do it once in 2005 with Blair, and I was just bored, quite honestly: Blair and William Hague. I thought it was dull.

So even on election night – and this is also part of my MO – I was with a videographer and I said look, let’s not go to Grand Park (which is where the big celebrations were), everybody else is going to be there. Let’s find somewhere on the South Side of Chicago where they are watching it and watch it with people and get that. To me, I am then contributing something to the news cycle, as opposed to just being part of it.

I also have only been to one convention – and this is my fifth election – for the very reason that conventions are organised for the media. So why
would I go? So, I haven’t had any interactions with Obama. It’s not that I don’t hope to, or that I would run away from him. But the amount of effort that it would take to get that kind of interaction is just not worth it.

In terms of the Administration and the campaign team – and this I do think is interesting – people who do cover the White House, to a person, say that it’s a much more closed media operation than even George W Bush’s. Much more closed. The Economist, I know, has been struggling to get an interview, or just a look around the offices. But they don’t like journalists and they feel like they don’t need them because of their direct contact with their supporters through social media. So, it is a very media-savvy and media-resistant campaign.

Question: Richard Neustadt years ago wrote a book called The Power of the Presidency, where he summed up the power of the presidency essentially as that of persuasion. Much of the criticism of Obama that I’ve read suggests that that is the area in which he has failed: he hasn’t actually mastered the ability of the president to persuade. I would be interested in your comment on that.

Answer: I think there is something to that. The way that Obama generally operates – this is how he operated in the primaries and in the presidential election; all national considerations aside – he is like one of those Kenyan long distance runners who holds back and then at the last lap, kills it. Everybody wrote him off against Hillary; ‘Why isn’t he doing anything?’ But he is a late finisher and a late closer. He lets things play out quite often. That’s what he did with the healthcare debate and I think it was a mistake. But his reasoning was, ‘I’m going to have to see where the balance of forces lie at the end of this discussion and then I will intervene.’ And so he did. And so there is a problem with almost an absenteeism in him; where you think, ‘What the hell is he doing about this? When is the President going to show up?’

Connected to that, though, is a problem. And that is that he has not been dealing with adults for quite some time. The Republican Congress has, even by their own standards, been like kids throwing their toys out of the pram. And so at certain stages – and this has happened a couple of times – the Leader of the House thinks he has a deal. He then presents that deal to Obama and then when he gets it he finds that all his troops are standing
in a circular firing squad. And so there has not been much for him to negotiate with.

The way that the Republican House seems to have worked – not the Senate, but the House – has been kind of apocalyptic. With the debt ceiling it was, ‘We’re gonna take this thing right to the edge’. And it is quite difficult to see what anybody can do in that situation. But it has made Obama look weak. This has kind of turned around since he made his jobs speech last year. But before then a lot of his supporters were like, ‘This guy’s pathetic…’ (and this comes back to the performance point) ‘...He needs to man-up. And kick some butt. And get in there and knock some heads together.’

And I don’t know if you remember a black woman – I can’t remember her name now – who challenged Obama in a town meeting? And she said, ‘I went out and I fought for you. And I convinced my friends to vote for you. And I’m losing faith.’ This was in a televised town hall meeting. And I interviewed her in October. And she is still an Obama voter. But she said, ‘You know at the end of the day, while it is true that the Republicans are being obdurate, he is the head and he has to find a way. You know, when the results come in for some kind of company, they don’t want excuses. They want results.’ And they are not getting the results.

Now what we have seen lately is the Republicans – who have a 12% approval rating in the House – realising that actually they have had a couple of apocalypses too many. And they have to kind of row back, pull in their four horsemen, and try and work something out because there is the possibility that the Republicans could lose the House. And that speaks to the volatility of the country. It was the biggest swing since 1948 in 2010, and there is the possibility that it could swing all the way back; particularly if Romney turns out to be a very weak candidate.

**Question:** In your opinion, how has foreign policy changed under Obama’s administration? Why did he win the Nobel Peace Prize? And if Zimmerman is not prosecuted, how much political capital will Obama lose from the murder of Trayvon?

**Answer:** You’ll have to ask the Nobel Prize people why he won it. But it does speak to – in my opinion – the Rorschach thing: that Europeans see
Obama as a more peaceful president, even though foreign policy hasn’t changed an awful lot. I mean, there has been a drawdown of combat troops in Iraq. And after the escalations in Afghanistan, there is now a drawdown there too. But there’s no saying that would not have happened anyway. The appetite in the country is not there for those wars. I don’t know that a Republican president would… they might say different things. But I don’t know they would do that much different on Iran, or Israel, or on any of the others things that are the touchstones of the presidency. The drones are still flying. Rendition still carries on. Guantanamo Bay is slightly more complicated because he actually can’t get the authorization from Congress to shut that down and they can’t find anywhere to take some of the prisoners. But the fact remains that he promised to close it and it’s still open.

So, actually, there hasn’t been as big a shift in foreign policy as people think. But what there has been is a shift in presentation – and we are back to the performance thing. And Libya is an example of this: Obama hangs back, he waits for some kind of agreement from the Brits and the French and from the Arab League. But America still runs the show; they still do it in the end. But it doesn’t look like Iraq. And for that Obama takes heat: ‘Why are you following other countries into war? They should be following us into war...’

On Trayvon Martin, are you saying what would happen to Obama if his...

Question: I guess what I am asking is if Zimmerman is not prosecuted, how much political capital does Obama lose?

Answer: He doesn’t lose any. Newt Gingrich tried to make a big thing out of what he said about Trayvon Martin and it backfired and made him look ridiculous. Obama is very canny when it comes to race. He doesn’t mention race very often. I wrote a piece just before he did come out and talk about Trayvon Martin, asking when is he going to do this. And he kind of had to do it. You can argue that he might have to do it as leader of the country – although these situations are not rare, it has to be said – it’s public, but not rare.

But Obama has managed to leverage the symbolic value without actually talking about race very much. So when he wins in Iowa and stands up
and says, ‘They said this day would never come...’ he doesn’t have to say anything about being black. He looks like change. He doesn’t have to talk about change. I would be surprised if there is a front of house substantive intervention from Obama after the one that he’s just made. I would also be surprised if behind the scenes Eric Holder – the Attorney General – and others aren’t trying to push the Florida judicial system to do something. But nobody would hold Obama responsible for this guy not being arrested. And if race is on the table in that way, that does not hurt Obama. What it does is actually mobilise black people to go to the polls in the swing states. If there are riots, then all bets are off the table.

Thank you.
INSIDE BACK COVER -
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