

# PLEASE, STOP PUTTING OBAMA ON A PEDESTAL

*By Ainslie Toombs*

The election of Barack Obama in 2008 marked a historic moment in American history. In a country built on the systemic subjugation of Black people, a Black man had become president and would remain so for eight years. Many thought they'd never see such a thing occur in their lifetime, but almost half the population would go on to rank him as one of the greatest US presidents of all time.<sup>1</sup> While this was indeed a huge step forward for the country, the reality of his legacy— and his actions while president - tell a vastly different story. After all, we're talking about someone who led the world's greatest imperial, economic and military superpower of all time. It shouldn't be surprising that Obama's not all he's cracked up to be.

Compared to his successor Donald Trump, an outright white supremacist known for manufacturing "alternative facts", Obama looks pretty good. His administration legalised gay marriage, and led the way on healthcare reform, and he himself holds a Nobel Peace Prize. But instead of going on violent Twitter rants, his actions were more discreet; he sanctioned Venezuela almost to death, attacked press freedoms, and vastly expanded the United States' covert military powers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Obama Tops Public's List Of Best President In Their Lifetime, Followed By Clinton, Reagan". 2020. Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2018/07/11/obama-tops-publics-list-of-best-president-in-their-lifetime-followed-by-clinton-reagan/>.

<sup>2</sup> "CIA Tactics In Pakistan Include Targeting Rescuers And Funerals". 2020. The Bureau Of Investigative Journalism. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2012-02-04/cia-tactics-in-pakistan-include-targeting-rescuers-and-funerals>.



Many people remain unaware of these facts, evidenced by his enduring popularity, and it's easy to understand why. Due to the extreme behaviours of Trump, and the widespread publicity he craves from the media, Obama has become revered for his 'integrity' and 'scandal-free' administration by even conservative political commentators such as David Brooks.<sup>3</sup> But this perspective is entirely ahistorical due to what is omitted from the conversation.

A prime example of a 'scandal' that occurred under the Obama administration was the Justice Department's abrupt seizure of Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper *The Associated Press'* phone records in 2013, which included two months-worth of its internal lines, and even some of their journalists' home and cell phones. No notice or reason was given. The A.P.'s Chief Executive denounced the Justice Department for making themselves 'the judge, jury and executioner in secret.' The most insidious part though? The incident was fortuitously timed with The A.P.'s investigation of CIA activities in Yemen. This act, only one among many, begins to undermine Brooks' claim about the president's 'integrity.'

To further stress Obama's troubling interference with US press freedom we can look to his regular invocation of the draconian Espionage Act 1917. This act was ostensibly designed to protect US national secrets from the eyes of volatile 'foreign actors,' but has primarily been deployed to stifle citizens' free speech.<sup>4</sup> The Obama administration has used the law to lay charges against journalists and their sources.<sup>5</sup> According to a 2019 article by *The New Yorker*, the Act is 'blind to the difference between whistle-blowers and spies.'<sup>6</sup> While defending the publication of the Pentagon Papers, *The Times'* Washington bureau chief Max Frankel argued that without press freedom, "there could be no adequate diplomatic, military and political reporting... between the Government and the people."<sup>7</sup> To date, Obama prosecuted more journalist's sources under the Espionage Act than the preceding 43 presidents combined,<sup>8</sup> and created a precedent for further crackdowns under the Trump administration.

Moreover, Obama's use of economic sanctions against Venezuela was an almost death sentence. The infant mortality rate of the country soared after the March 2015 sanctions were imposed.<sup>9</sup> Obama's decision was condemned by the UN who stated that they precipitated the crippling "economic and humanitarian crisis" Venezuela faces today.<sup>10</sup> What was advertised as 'sanctions against [official] individuals' by the US government affected, in reality, the most marginalised of the general population.<sup>11</sup> This was due to the fact that, after the sanctions, financial institutions shied away from lending to the

<sup>3</sup> "Head Of The A.P. Criticizes Seizure Of Phone Records", 2020, *Nytimes.Com*. [https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/business/media/head-of-the-ap-criticizes-seizure-of-phone-records.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/20/business/media/head-of-the-ap-criticizes-seizure-of-phone-records.html?_r=0).

<sup>4</sup> Kiriakou, John. 2020. "Obama's Abuse Of The Espionage Act Is Modern-Day Mccarthyism | John Kiriakou". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/aug/06/obama-abuse-espionage-act-mccarthyism>.

<sup>5</sup> "Obama Used The Espionage Act To Put A Record Number Of Reporters' Sources In Jail, And Trump Could Be Even Worse". 2020. *Freedom Of The Press*. <https://freedom.press/news/obama-used-espionage-act-put-record-number-reporters-sources-jail-and-trump-could-be-even-worse/>.

<sup>6</sup> Jaffer, Jameel. 2020. "The Espionage Act And A Growing Threat To Press Freedom". *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-espionage-act-and-a-growing-threat-to-press-freedom>.

<sup>7</sup> "Trump Rails Against Leaks. But What Exactly Are They?". 2020. *Nytimes.Com*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/business/media/are-leaks-illegal-explaining-history.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Maass, Peter, and Peter Maass. 2020. "Obama's Gift To Donald Trump: A Policy Of Cracking Down On Journalists And Their Sources". *The Intercept*. <https://theintercept.com/2016/04/06/obamas-gift-to-donald-trump-a-policy-of-cracking-down-on-journalists-and-their-sources/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Infant Mortality Rate For The Bolivarian Republic Of Venezuela". 2020. *Fred.Stlouisfed.Org*. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SPDYNIMRTINVEN>.

<sup>10</sup> "Venezuela's Collapse Is The Worst Outside Of War In Decades, Economists Say". 2020. *Nytimes.Com*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/17/world/americas/venezuela-economy.html>.

<sup>11</sup> "- DEEPENING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN VENEZUELA: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTER- ESTS AND THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE". 2020. *Govinfo.Gov*. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114shrg96257/html/CHRG-114shrg96257.htm>.

Venezuelan government, which effectively deprived the import-dependent country of the money required to supply its 29 million people with food, medical supplies, and other essential goods.<sup>12</sup> It's hard to argue that Obama—who holds a Nobel Peace Prize—enacted these policies in good conscience.

A final point to contend with is the expansion of the military under Obama. That the US invests heavily in counterterrorism programs is well known; they do, after all, have a global defence budget of around \$579 billion – almost as large as the next <sup>14</sup> countries' defence budgets combined.<sup>13</sup> Obama chose to pivot the US' counterterrorism efforts away from the deployment of troops though, relying instead on 'light-footprint' military operations that employ remote tactics such as cyber-attacks and drone strikes.<sup>14</sup> Superficially, 'light-footprint' sounds like a better alternative, doesn't it? Much nicer than having 'boots on the ground' and receiving the bodies of dead American soldiers in return, all the while avoiding innocent civilian casualties. But this perspective, again, ignores the reality of Obama's actions; tactics like drone strikes were not, as he claimed, 'exceptionally surgical and precise' compared to armed conflict.<sup>15</sup> In fact, a 2014 story by *The Guardian* uncovered data collected by Reprieve, a human rights organisation, which showed that 'attempts to kill 41 men' in drone strikes had also 'resulted in the deaths of an estimated 1,147 people.'<sup>16</sup> When you add to this the fact that Obama simply changed the definition of a 'military combatant' to any 'military-age males in a strike zone'<sup>17</sup> manipulating the already unreliable government statistics on civilian deaths caused by US intervention, it's clear that the anti-war president Obama promised to be was, in truth, a lie.<sup>18</sup>

However, my criticism of Obama shouldn't imply that I agree with other presidents. In fact, that's the very problem with debates such as these: they're often interpreted as Democrats vs Republicans, Left vs Right. No, I'm judging Obama based on his actions, not on his political affiliations or because of opinions I hold about a specific political party. However, I understand why, in the era of Trump, people yearn for a 'leader' who is even *slightly* less terrible. But, while Trump truly is awful, that doesn't mean Obama is a saviour, and it's high time the world reckoned with that truth.

<sup>12</sup> "Trump's Other 'National Emergency': Sanctions That Kill Venezuelans". 2020. *The Nation*. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/venezuela-sanctions-emergency/>.

<sup>13</sup> 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/02/09/this-remarkable-chart-shows-how-us-defense-spending-dwarfs-the-rest-of-the-world/>.

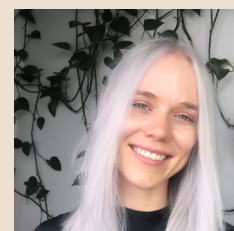
<sup>14</sup> 2020. *Law.Yale.Edu*. [https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/goldsmith\\_and\\_waxman.pdf](https://law.yale.edu/sites/default/files/goldsmith_and_waxman.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> "US Claims Of 'No Civilian Deaths' Are Untrue". 2020. *The Bureau Of Investigative Journalism*. <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2011-07-18/us-claims-of-no-civilian-deaths-are-untrue>.

<sup>16</sup> Ackerman, Spencer. 2020. "41 Men Targeted But 1,147 People Killed: US Drone Strikes – The Facts On The Ground". *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2014/nov/24/sp-us-drone-strikes-kill-1147>.

<sup>17</sup> "Secret 'Kill List' Proves A Test Of Obama's Principles And Will". 2020. *Nytimes.Com*. [https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1).

<sup>18</sup> "As Candidate, Obama Carves Antiwar Stance". 2020. *Nytimes.Com*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/26/us/politics/26obama.html>.



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