



## Obama: Transforming America



by VICTOR DAVIS HANSON October 1, 2013 4:00 AM @VDHANSON

From energy to foreign policy to the presidency itself, Obama's agenda rolls along.

*"We are five days away from fundamentally transforming the United States of America."*  
— Barack Obama, October 30, 2008

*"We are going to have to change our conversation; we're going to have to change our traditions, our history; we're going to have to move into a different place as a nation."* — Michelle Obama, May 14, 2008

There certainly is no question that Barack Obama wants to change the United States. And there clearly is no doubt that such fundamental transformation is difficult, given our tripartite system of government — even though Obama entered office with large Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, an enthralled media, and a closely divided Supreme Court.

So to what degree, after nearly five years in office, has Obama succeeded in changing the United States?

**Federal spending.** We are \$6 trillion more deeply in debt. And there are record numbers of Americans on food stamps, unemployment insurance, and disability insurance, or simply disengaged from the work force. Obama has also fundamentally changed Americans' ideas about the redistributive state.

Whereas, under Clinton and Bush, the argument centered on whether federal subsidies eroded the work ethic, created dependency, and led to a permanent underclass, now the discussion is quite transformed beyond the safety net. Fairly or not, Obama is seen as expanding entitlements in part as a political tool, quite apart from the question of their efficacy in eliminating poverty.

The problem is not just that his critics accuse Obama of trying to create a permanent constituency, a loyal "47 percent" dependent on state money, but rather the way in which Obama himself envisions these programs as reminders of his them/us faultlines. After 2009, the regulations governing food stamps and welfare were liberalized and politicized as never before. These payouts were judged not just on whether they hurt or helped people, but also, in the Greek and Roman sense, of increasing the number of recipients so as to change political realities.

**Taxes and debt.** Democrats usually wish to raise them, Republicans to shrink them. Nothing new there. But under Obama, there is now a twist. Higher taxes are not a means to achieve a balanced budget, as under the Clinton-Gingrich deal of 1997. Indeed, the return of a 39 percent-plus federal income-tax rate on higher incomes will result not in a balanced budget as before (even with congressionally imposed sequestration). We will still have huge annual deficits of two-thirds of a trillion dollars or more.

Because nearly half of Americans will continue to pay no federal income taxes, and the old Clinton rates were imposed only on the upper brackets, we have the worst of both worlds: high taxes on job creators, along with continuing huge

deficits. That paradox raises the question of whether Obama sees deficits not just as necessary to prime the economy, or as a tolerable consequence of huge increases in federal spending, but also as a mechanism to serially raise taxes on the upper brackets, as a desirable redistributive end in and of itself. Taxes are seen now not just as a way to fund expenditures, but as a punitive tool — hence the new phraseology of 1 percent, fat cats, corporate-jet owners, you did not build that, no time to profit, at some point you've made enough money, etc. A more equal but poorer America appears to be preferable to a more affluent but less equal nation.

**Health care.** Little need be said about Obamacare, an orphan now disowned by most of its parents. The purpose of this vast new entitlement was not to ensure all Americans better health care (if it had been, then pro-Obama business owners, unions, and congressional staffers would have wanted in), but instead a sort of health-care TSA bureaucracy, with more dependents, more federal workers, and higher redistributive taxes — in short, larger government.

**Interest rates.** Ostensibly, de facto zero interest rates are used as a stimulus for a moribund economy that so far seems oblivious to all the traditional liberal priming tools of massive borrowing, growth in federal spending, and more entitlements and public hiring. Yet almost nonexistent interest rates have sharpened the class divide. The very wealthy have benefited enormously as capital streamed into the stock market in desperate search of almost any return. The very poor do not depend on interest on savings as a hedge against inflation or as central to retirement.

That leaves the middle class, who so far have not felt the upside of zero interest rates — the interest on their credit-card debt remains sky-high, their student loans are steep, and their mortgage interest for the most part is not all that low. The banks loan at high interest and pay almost nothing on deposits; Wall Street welcomes in cash without much worry about competition to produce returns; and the poor are the beneficiaries of the vast federal borrowing that goes some way toward explaining why interest rates cannot climb, given that servicing the ever-rising federal debt would become almost unsustainable.

**The presidency.** An imperial presidency is not new. But rule by executive fiat that escapes audit from the media is. We live in an age when a president can arbitrarily nullify a law, like Obamacare's employer mandate; ignore it, like the Defense of Marriage Act; or simply create it, as with partial blanket amnesties. Various wars — on coal, guns, non-union businesses, and political opponents — are waged by executive action. For now, the logic is that the president's means are justified by the exalted ends that he professes. Obama has set the precedent of a president creating, ignoring, or defying laws as he sees fit to forward a progressive agenda.

**Scandal.** Bill Clinton gave us plenty of scandals; but, as in the case of the Nixon administration, the media galvanized public attention to the danger of a sometimes lawless administration. But whether it is the Benghazi deception, the IRS scandal, the NSA disclosures, the AP monitoring, or Fast and Furious, a new precedent has been established that the public is supposed to weigh two considerations in assessing scandal: the truth versus the damage that the truth can do to a progressive vision of a fairer America. So far the truth has lost.

**Politics.** In his political style, Obama seems to operate on the medieval concept of exemption. Through lofty spoken abstractions, he excuses low behavior. Praising "civility" allows you to call your opponents veritable terrorists; talk of unity means energizing supporters to get in their opponents' face; advocacy of a campaign of principles reduces Romney to a veritable ogre. Plenty of presidents have proved vicious, but few so adept in attributing their own base behavior to others. Damning fat cats and corporate-jet owners allows a president to hold serial \$50,000-a-head fundraisers. Ridiculing Romney's elevator seems to make vacationing in Aspen, Costa del Sol, Vail, and Martha's Vineyard perfectly natural.

**Energy.** Before Obama, natural gas and nuclear power were seen as preferable alternatives to oil and coal. If new restrictions on reactors and a de facto end to the new federal leasing of land for oil and gas exploration are any indication, neither energy source is now acceptable. Had Obama opened up federal lands

for fracking and horizontal drilling, built the Keystone Pipeline, and encouraged natural gas as a transportation tool, power bills would not have climbed and gasoline prices would not have doubled. The U.S. would have enjoyed an even brighter energy future than what private enterprise alone has provided.

Obama's view of energy — whether we cite former energy secretary Steven Chu's lunacy on the desirability of raising U.S. gasoline prices to European levels, or candidate Obama's own promises to bankrupt coal companies — is elitist to the core. His signature energy achievement is to change the terms of the debate: The chief energy issues for the Obama administration are not national security, not energy independence, not greater competitiveness for American business, not savings for the American consumer, and not jobs. Instead, whether a fuel might heat the atmosphere seems the sole concern.

**Race.** Had Condoleezza Rice or Colin Powell been elected president, race would have been incidental rather than essential to their governance. Nothing in Barack Obama's past suggests that such a statement could ever have been true of his presidency.

From the beer summit to “punish our enemies” to the two occasions of pop editorializing about Trayvon Martin, and from Eric Holder's “my people” to “nation of cowards,” the Obama administration has sought at opportune times to emphasize racial differences, mostly to secure the base for Obama's own reelection and for midterm elections.

The result is that race relations have become more polarized than at any other time in the last 30 years. Under Obama's leadership, celebrities, political analysts, and politicians traffic more in racial animus than at any other time in our recent history. Obama has had an uncanny ability to energize the Black Caucus to voice unusually inflammatory charges. How did it happen that suddenly Chris Rock and Jamie Foxx sound racially biased? When did the post-election commentary of pundits (e.g., “too old, too white, too male”) become so race-based?

From the trivial — dropping his g's and clumsily transforming his cadences — to the fundamental — weighing in in mediis rebus on pending court cases — the president's goal has often been division, not unity. We have reached a surreal situation of reading daily accounts of black-on-white crime in the media, reported by politically correct journalists who dare not mention the perpetrator's race, followed by enraged readers' comments that are the most patently racist in modern memory.

**Illegal immigration.** Before Obama, the debate over illegal immigration was mostly an argument between two schools that transcended politics and ideology: literalists who believed the law had to be enforced to its full extent, postfacto as well as preventatively, and realists who agreed in theory but felt that many of the 11 million who resided illegally in the U.S. could be given a pathway to citizenship, so long as they have no criminal record, have avoided public assistance, and could claim long residence — contingent on closing the border.

Not now. Under Obama, illegal immigration has become a political if not a racially charged issue. Supporters of blanket amnesty saw an evolving demographic process of fundamentally transforming the electorate of the American Southwest, resonating with Obama's own unfortunate lead, as in his advice to Latinos to "punish our enemies." Perhaps this vision was best summarized by ACORN's former CEO, Bertha Lewis. She recently urged African-Americans to support increased immigration on the following rationale: "We got some Latino cousins, we got some Asian cousins, we got some Native-American cousins, we got all kind of cousins. . . . Cousins need to get together, because if we're going to be [part of the non-white] majority, it makes sense for black people in this country to get down with immigration reform. . . . Everyone, even all white folks in this country, acknowledge that in a minute, [the] United States of America will be a new majority, will be majority minority, a brand-new thing. . . . For the first time ever in history, African-Americans outvoted white Americans. Pooh. That's the fear of the white man. That could change everything. That's why [immigration] should matter to us."



**Foreign policy.** What is the common theme to the euphemisms about terrorism and radical Islam, the failed reset with Russia, withdrawal from Iraq, confusion in Afghanistan, lead-from-behind in Libya, pink lines and pseudo-“game changers” in Syria, the faux deadlines with Iran, mesmerization with Turkey, peace feelers to Nicaragua, Cuba, and Venezuela, as well as the rhetorical tropes found in the Cairo speech, the U.N. addresses, and the Al-Arabiya interview?

Just as, in Obama’s worldview, the 1 percent exercise undue influence in the United States, so too abroad America has exercised exceptional power and influence that either are not warranted by its traditions and history, or do not contribute to stability and social justice in the world at large. Fundamentally transforming the role of the U.S. means tilting toward countries that are suspicious of the Western tradition, and favoring groups and countries like Turkey, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Palestinians that have supposedly legitimate grievances against the United States. The goal? Probably, the transformation of the U.S. into something like the EU, whose democratic socialism is manifested abroad with soft-power lectures.

**Guns.** There is no new restrictive legislation on firearms; and yet never has the ability to buy reasonably priced ammunition and firearms in quantity been more curtailed. In loudly threatening to enact more gun control after each publicized tragic shooting, the Obama administration has created a climate of fear, which has prompted hoarding, shortages, panic buying, and paranoia, which have accomplished what the federal government could not.

To what degree these changes will be reversed or institutionalized depends on the 2014 and 2016 elections. For now, Obama’s transformations are not to be found only in his legislative record, but far more in his use of the presidency to change the way we envision and talk about America.

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