

Obama as the “New JFK”: “Pragmatic Liberalism in the Service of Corporate Capitalism”

By [Paul Street](#)

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As the anniversary of President John F. Kennedy’s assassination approaches, the media will be awash with comparisons between JFK and Barack Obama. The two do, indeed, have much in common. “President Obama has moved in the same doctrinally and politically imposed corporate and imperial grooves as Kennedy.”

Explaining why his hero Barack Obama was not invited to a liberal rally honoring the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington last August 24th (four days before the exact anniversary date of August 28th), leading black Democratic Party activist and MSNBC talk show host Rev. Al Sharpton explained that Obama is “the new John F. Kennedy (JFK), not the new [Dr. Martin Luther] King.”[1]

“A lot of the media is trying to make [Obama] the new King,” Sharpton said around the same time, adding that “he’s the result of King. He’s the President Kennedy of today, the President Johnson of today.”[2]

Sharpton’s analogy was more substantively correct than he knew, but in ways he would not likely go far to admit.

“Pragmatic Liberalism in the Service of Corporate Capitalism”

Let’s take a look back at the real and original President Kennedy. It is an apt moment for such a retrospective, as liberal Kennedy worship and nostalgia spikes anew with the coming 50-year anniversary of JFK’s assassination in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 2013.

The major problem with Sharpton’s comparison is his instinctive liberal assumption that it’s a good thing to be “the new John F. Kennedy.”

“The role played by twentieth-century Presidents,” political scientist Bruce Miroff noted 37 years ago, “has been characteristically conservative. ‘Liberal’ as well as ‘conservative’ Presidents...have bent their strongest efforts, not to alter, but to preserve America’s dominant institutions. Whatever their professed sympathies, their actions have served, not to redistribute wealth and power, but to perpetuate existing inequalities... [serving as] central figures in the maintenance of established [hierarchical] socioeconomic arrangements.”

As Miroff demonstrated in his forgotten classic *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (1976), the liberal icon JFK was no exception to the rule. He lined up consistently on the conservative, that is, power-friendly side of each of what Dr. King called

“the triple evils that are interrelated”: racism (deeply and institutionally understood), economic exploitation (capitalism), and U.S. militarism.

More than a decade before neoliberal Democrats emerged to explicitly steer the Democratic Party to the corporate center, JFK’s frequently declared sympathies for the poor and working class took a back seat in his White house to “the real determinants of policy: political calculation and economic doctrine.” As Miroff explained, political calculation “led Kennedy to appease the corporate giants and their allies in government.” Economic doctrine “told him that the key to the expansion and health of the economy was the health and expansion of those same corporate giants. The architects of Kennedy’s ‘New Economics’ liked to portray it as the technically sophisticated and politically neutral management of a modern industrial economy. It is more accurately portrayed as a pragmatic liberalism in the service of corporate capitalism” (Miroff, 1976) Further:

“His wage guidelines, and other efforts at *terminating labor-management conflict over the distribution of income*, fit neatly with business’s longstanding objective of holding wage costs steady. His liberalization of depreciation allowances furnished business with a tax break which it had sought unsuccessfully from the Eisenhower administration. His proposed reduction in corporate income and personal income taxes in the higher brackets approached tax reductions earlier proposed by the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Corporate executives may not have had Kennedy’s ear, but the functional result was not so different than if they had. Economic doctrine and political calculation were enough to make him respond more often to business desires than to those of the economic constituencies that actually supported him” (Miroff, 1976).

The regressive nature of JFK’s “New Economics’ was cloaked by his recurrent, much-publicized spats with certain members of the business community (the executives of U.S. Steel above all), his repeated statements of concern for labor and the poor, and his claim to advance a purely “technical” and “pragmatic” economic agenda that elevated “practical management” and administrative expertise above the “grand warfare of ideologies” (Miroff, 1976).

Caucasian-Friendly Caution and Calculation

JFK inhabited the same centrist, cautious, cunning, and “pragmatic” place on racism, the first of Dr. King’s “triple evils.” He found it politically useful to intervene on Dr. Martin Luther King’s behalf during the latter’s jailing in the election year of 1960 and, later, to wrap himself in the aura of racial progress and equality by offering some partial and belated federal protections to the Civil Rights Movement (CRM). But the Kennedy administration worked hard to divide and dilute the CRM, seeking to channel it into to staid and narrow legal and electoral grooves. It gave some elementary shelter to activists and southern blacks only when John Kennedy and his brother and Attorney General Bobby Kennedy calculated that rabid white southern reaction was undermining their ability to sell the United States’ capitalist and imperial concept of “democracy” in Washington Cold War contest with the Soviet Union for the allegiances of the predominantly non-white Third World.

Subsequent silly and elitist “Mississippi Burning” revisionism notwithstanding, the Kennedy administration was no great friend of the struggle for black equality. Its response to the Freedom Movement was dominated by the tension between two competing political calculations: (i) the threat of politically alienating white Americans, above all traditionally Democratic white Southerners; (ii) the risk of losing Third World hearts and minds in the

supposed U.S. struggle to advance “freedom and democracy,” falsely conflated with capitalism and subjugation to U.S. influence, against supposed Soviet-sponsored “communism” (national independence and social justice in the “developing world”). The experience and struggles of black Americans were not an especially relevant concern. When southern racist authorities managed to defeat the black struggle for equality without politically problematic and embarrassing violence (as in Albany Georgia, in 1962), the Kennedy administration was happy to withhold protection from King and his fellow activists. Along the way, the Kennedy brothers were inordinately obsessed with alleged Communist connections to King and the CRM and approved racist FBI director J. Edgar Hoover’s regular and relentless police state surveillance, smearing, and infiltration of the movement. (Sitkoff, 1981; Garrow, 1986)

Deadly Imperial Arrogance

JFK’s foreign policy record is militantly imperial and militarist, contrary to subsequent liberal hagiographers’ curious effort to re-invent him as a peacenik. That record includes the Kennedy administration’s decision to dramatically and dangerously escalate the international arms race after Kennedy campaigned on the deceptive claim that the U.S. was on the wrong side of a mythical Soviet-American “missile gap.” Kennedy’s nuclear machismo helped bring the world to the literal brink of annihilation on at least one occasion, to be examined in some detail in the next section of this essay.

Referring to the U.S. as “watchtower on the walls of [global] freedom,” JFK undertook numerous provocative actions meant to overthrow the popular revolutionary government of Cuba. He imposed, equipped, and otherwise supported numerous Latin-American dictatorships and oligarchies in the name of “democracy.” As Noam Chomsky noted in his important 1993 study *Rethinking Camelot: JFK, the Vietnam War and US Political Culture*, “One of the most significant legacies left by the [Kennedy] Administration was its 1962 decision to shift the mission of the [U.S.-funded, equipped, and trained] Latin American military from ‘hemispheric defense’ to ‘internal security,’” leading, in the words of Kennedy’s top Latin American counter-insurgency planner (Charles Maechling) to “direct [U.S.] complicity” in “the methods of Heinrich Himmler’s extermination squads.” The shift to deadly internal repression was a natural corollary to Kennedy’s export-promoting” Alliance for Progress “development program,” which primarily benefited Latin American elites while drastically increasing Latin American unemployment. (Chomsky, 1993).

When he was assassinated, the CIA and JFK’s advisers were working with his approval to overthrow a democratically elected government and install a fascist military dictatorship in Brazil. The plan was carried out months later. As Chomsky notes, “Brazil had a moderately populist-democratic government in the early 1960s. The Kennedy administration organized a military coup that imposed a neo-Nazi national security state that was the first of the plague that then spread throughout the continent to Chile, Argentina, Central America and then became one big massacre” (Chomsky, 2007).

A U.S.-sponsored coup in Chile (overthrowing the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973) was left to Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. It might well have occurred under Kennedy’s successor Lyndon Johnson but for the Kennedy CIA’s effort to subvert the 1964 Chilean elections since, as Kennedy’s National Security Council (NSC) explained, “We are not prepared to risk a Socialist or FRAP [Allende] victory, for fear of nationalization of U.S. investments.”(Chomsky, 1993)

Kennedy epitomized the conditional nature of “democracy” as a U.S. foreign policy objective when he remarked that while the U.S. would prefer democratic regimes abroad, it will choose “a [pro-American dictator] Trujillo” over “a [“anti-American” dictator] Castro” if those were the only choices. “It is necessary only to add,” Noam Chomsky noted in 1991, that Kennedy’s “concept of ‘a Castro’ was very broad, extending to anyone who raises problems for the ‘rich men dwelling at peace with their habitations,’ who are to rule the world according to [Winston] Churchill’s aphorism, while enjoying the benefits of its human and material resources.” (Chomsky, 1991).

Meanwhile, Kennedy “raised the level of [U.S.] attack [on Indochina] from international terrorism to outright aggression in 1961-62,” justifying the use of U.S. airpower to napalm social revolutionaries, defoliate Vietnamese countryside, and “kill a lot of innocent peasants” (Roger Hillsman) with the false claims that “we are opposed around the world by a monolithic and ruthless [Soviet-Marxist] conspiracy” and that failure to stop “Communism” in Vietnam would open the gates to Soviet world domination. Contrary to subsequent myths trumpeted by JFK-worshippers like Oliver Stone and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Kennedy had no intent of pulling back from his mass-murderous assault until full U.S. “victory” was attained (Chomsky, 1993).

One Minute to Midnight

Perhaps the most nauseating claim made by members of the liberal dead Kennedys cargo cult holds that JFK heroically saved humanity from nuclear annihilation during the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962. It is true that many in President Kennedy’s inner NSC (“ExComm”) circle favored responding to the Soviet Union’s placement of missiles in Cuba in ways that might well have sparked World War III. But Kennedy’s aggressive arms escalation and his utter disregard (inherited from the Eisenhower administration) for Soviet efforts towards disarmament provoked the volatile Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev’s mad nuclear gambit in the first place. And Kennedy’s determination not to look weak (a key political calculation in the wake of his Bay of Pigs humiliation the previous year) and to defend America’s supposed right to surround the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons brought the world *One Minute to Midnight* – the title of a leading recent history of the crisis, penned by *Washington Post* correspondent Michael Dobbs.

Considerably more aghast than Kennedy was at the prospect of thermonuclear obliteration (JFK coolly calculated the chances for WWII at 50%), Khrushchev did far more than his American counterpart to end the crisis. So, for that matter, did Soviet submarine flotilla commander Vasili Arkhipov. Under the waters of the western mid-Atlantic Ocean, Arkhipov blocked the surrounded and exhausted Soviet submarine captain Valentin Savitsky’s determination to launch a tactical nuclear torpedo at the U.S. Navy in the early evening of Saturday, October 27, 1962. Arkhipov’s fateful action came as Kennedy continued to dither in responding to Khrushchev’s offer much earlier in the day (at 10:18 AM) to dismantle and withdraw Russia’s missiles if the U.S. agreed not to invade Cuba and to remove its nuclear Jupiter missiles from Turkey (obsolete weapons the U.S. already planned to scrap). The sticking point for Kennedy and his team was that the U.S. would appear to have been humiliated and countermanded by the Soviets – and by global public opinion, which seemed likely to perceive Khrushchev’s proposed trade as elementarily fair – if it publicly agreed to take down its warheads in Turkey (Dobbs, 2008).

Civilization is lucky to have survived the delay. In the lethal interim between Khrushchev’s offer, Kennedy’s counter (excluding a public retreat on Turkey but including a private and

“confidential” assurance on removing the Jupiters), and Khrushchev’s acceptance (at 2 AM, October 28th, Washington time):

- * Arkhipov pre-empted the firing of a tactical nuclear weapon from an ailing diesel Soviet submarine south of Bermuda
- * A U.S. U2 spy was destroyed, its pilot (Rudolph Anderson) killed, over Cuba, by a Soviet missile.
- * Another US pilot (Chuck Maultsby) mistakenly crossed into Soviet airspace, sending Russian fighter jets into the skies.
- * The U.S. conducted a massive nuclear bomb test in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.
- * Dozens of U.S. bombers loaded with high-yield thermonuclear weapons roamed the skies at all times; their pilots had full technical capacity to launch World War III on their own accord.
- * The full giant U.S. giant nuclear arsenal was placed on the highest and highly accident-prone alert, with 162 nuclear missiles and 1,200 airplanes carrying 2,858 nuclear weapons “cocked” and “ready to fire.” (Dobbs. 2008).

Behind ExComm fears that Khrushchev’s offer amounted to “diplomatic blackmail” lay *the real Kennedy administration determination: threatening to blow up the world in order to defend and preserve the United States’ right to keep on the Soviet Union’s border missiles they had already decided to take down.* That’s some interesting context for the concluding sentence of Michael Dobbs’ widely heralded account: “The real good fortune is that men as sane and level-headed as John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev occupied the White House and the Kremlin in October 1962.” (Dobbs, 2008)

Right.

“JFK in Sepia”

While it’s hard to see a nuclear crisis like October 1962 in his future (even though he has done his part to provoke Russia around missile-related issues and other matters), President Obama has moved in the same doctrinally and politically imposed corporate and imperial grooves as Kennedy, proving along with George W. Bush that Miroff’s assessment of U.S. presidents, both “liberal” and “conservative” (“their actions have served, not to redistribute wealth and power, but to perpetuate existing inequalities”), holds for the current millennium as well as the last century. This is something a large number of authors and commentators (me included) have documented at great length. I will not burden readers here with the depressing details.

There is nothing new about the Obama-Kennedy analogy, of course. Michael Hureaux, the black Seattle-based Left poet and activist, sensed the dark side of the Kennedy-Obama analogy from the start. The Obama candidacy, Hureaux noted nearly a year before the Obama White House ascendancy, was about “restor[ing] faith in the imperial project” by putting an eloquent black leader at its nominal head, to function as a “JFK in sepia.” As Hureaux observed in the comments section attached to a haunting *Dissident Voice* essay by Juan Santos, titled “Barack Obama and the End of Racism:”

"I'm watching all kinds of people who I'd previously thought had some critical thinking skills cave under this Obamania business. I had a hunch this was coming when I watched his speech at the [Democratic Party] convention four years ago, my wife and I both sat and took it in and looked at each other and said, almost word for word, 'He's good, *he's very good.*' The rakish JFK style jabs, the clearly studied rhetorical grace. What *better gift to the empire than JFK in sepia?* All last year, numerous discussions with people from the old new left who told us, 'He'll never get a shot at it because of racist US etc.,' to which we maintained, 'But what better figure to have out there than one to restore faith in the imperial project, but someone with a black face?'"(Santos, 2008)

Last Spring, the eminent left historian Perry Anderson noted of Obama that "Once invested with the authority of office, looks and aplomb have generated a celebrity ruler—color relaying style to yield a JFK for a multi-cultural age, attracting much the same kind of *engouement* in the local intelligentsia and its counterparts abroad... Attempts by enthusiasts to talk of the [Obama] administration's achievement as a second New Deal miss the comparator. Its egalitarian sheen belongs with the callisthenic gauze of the New Frontier." (Anderson, 2013).

Besides also being a relatively young, agile, telegenic, articulate, Harvard-educated, and popular with the intellectual community that Republican presidents have tended to disdain, Obama has, like JFK, shown a remarkable ability to combine outwardly progressive and idealistic rhetoric with steady and calculated service to the unelected and interrelated dictatorships of money and empire. Beneath his clever, fake-progressive branding, he has functioned on the cunning, power-serving side of each of King's "triple evils" – and of other and related evils as well (including the ever more pressing scourge of capitalist-generated environmental catastrophe). Like all his predecessors, Obama has "bent [his] strongest efforts, not to alter, but to preserve America's dominant institutions." A classic example is health care, which he managed to keep under private financial and corporate command with a "market-oriented" "reform" that keeps the giant insurance and drug firms and their Wall Street backers in core cost-inflating, deficit-fueling control of the nation's health care system.

Of course, Obama is a "pragmatic" multi-cultural faux-progressive president for the neoliberal era, in a period of American decline. This is different from Kennedy's fortuitous positioning at the twin peaks of the corporate-liberal New Deal era and American global power. "In the early 1960s," Chomsky noted in 1993, "the US remained the world's dominant power and could afford to flaunt prospects of 'great societies at home and grand designs abroad' (Walter Heller); 20 years later, the great societies would have to go" (Chomsky, 1993). Fifty years later, the "pragmatic" political considerations and economic doctrine imposed by concentrated wealth combine with the continuing costs (for the many) and profits (for the few) of empire to mean that a first only half-white president atop the party of Franklin Roosevelt governs to the right of Richard Nixon and is enlisted in the neoliberal assault on both the New Deal and the Great Society. The enlistment is consistent with his "deeply conservative"[3]world view and background, clear from the start to those willing to look beneath the standard populism-manipulating campaign rhetoric and candidate marketing. This has not prevented him from being celebrated as a chosen man of peace and justice by liberals and progressives who have projected peace and justice fantasies onto him in the present as many of them often do onto JFK in the past.

"Really Good At Killing People"

It is offensive that Barack Obama spoke last summer at the exact same time on the exact same day (August 28th) in the exact same place (the steps of the Lincoln Memorial) occupied by King when the great American democratic socialist civil rights leader delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech in 1963. Having the nominal head of the state-capitalist and white-supremacist U.S. empire speak, accompanied by former imperial commanders-in-chief and fellow leading corporate neoliberal Democrats Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, in the symbolic same slot as the great peace and justice activist Dr. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was a deep insult to the grassroots Civil Rights, antiwar and anti-poverty movements of the 1960s. Adding further affront to the insult, Obama used his time in King’s space to continue his longstanding practice of blaming poor blacks for their own position at the bottom of the U.S. socioeconomic order.

In a fascinating statement on the part of a Nobel Peace Prize winner, Barack Obama rightly told his aides last year that drones make him “*really good at killing people*”[4]. He had a point. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the CIA drone program has conducted 378 strikes in its ten-year history. Of those attacks, 326 (87 percent) were ordered under the current president and are classified as “Obama strikes.” The total number of people killed by drones is estimated to be between 2,528 and 3,648. Civilian casualties are conservatively estimated to have run as high as 948 [5], making the president “really good at killing” noncombatants.

Defiling History

John F. Kennedy would never have been invited to the speakers’ podium on August 28, 1963, for good reasons. Fifty years later, the “new John F. Kennedy” – a man who has relentlessly served the very evils King dedicated his last years to resisting, in accord with his job description atop the nation that King rightly identified in 1967 as “the leading purveyor of violence in the world today” (the description still holds) – had no business pretending that he and his fellow Democratic presidents could appropriately wrap themselves in the robe of the great peace and justice leader.

Sharpton was right to note that the far better 1960s Obama analogy is JFK (and even LBJ), not MLK. But if he really grasped or cared about the full extent of the differences between the presidents (both dead and living) and the activist, if he really sensed how vile those presidents and the system they represent (including its deceptive “one-party, two-faction candidate-producing mechanism” [Chomsky, 1993]) are, he would not have been content merely to leave “the new John F. Kennedy” off the list of invitees to his August 24th rally. He would also and more importantly have led a march against the August 28th Obama-Carter-Clinton commemoration/desecration, which so defiled the memory and meaning of the March on Washington.

Paul Street is the author of many books including *The Empire’s New Clothes: Barack Obama in the Real World of Power* (Paradigm, 2010). His next book is *They Rule: The 1% v. Democracy* (2014).

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Notes

1. <http://m.staugustine.com/news/national-news/2013-08-27/king-anniversary-puts-spotlight-obama-civil-rights>
2. <http://washingtonexaminer.com/al-sharpton-obama-is-the-new-kennedy-because-of-dr.-king/article/2534813>
3. Larissa MacFarquhar, "The Conciliator: Where is Barack Obama Coming From?," *The New Yorker* (May 7, 2007). As MacFarquhar concluded after extensive interviews with Obama and research into his past, "In his view of history, in his respect for tradition, in his skepticism that the world can be changed any way but very, very slowly, Obama is deeply conservative."
4. Jay Busbee, "New Book: Obama Told Aides that Drones Make Him 'Really Good at Killing People,'" *Yahoo News* (November 4, 2013), <http://news.yahoo.com/new-book-obama-told-aides-that-drones-make-him-really-good-at-killing-people-144734667.html>
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