

Obama's Essay on Protests: Maintaining the Status Quo

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Former President Barack Obama has weighed in on the current civil unrest and ongoing racial injustice. While most people recognize his intelligence, especially when compared to the irrational blustering of his successor, his calm, measured opinion on how the nation should move forward only perpetuates the current injustices.

We will look at the most troubling aspects of his essay in some detail.

- “The overwhelming majority of participants have been peaceful, courageous, responsible, and inspiring. They deserve our respect and support, not condemnation — something that police in cities like Camden and Flint have commendably understood.

“On the other hand, the small minority of folks who’ve resorted to violence in various forms, whether out of genuine anger or mere opportunism, are putting innocent people at risk, compounding the destruction of neighborhoods that are often already short on services and investment and detracting from the larger cause.”

This is overlooking the base issues, and blaming the victim. As this writer has noted elsewhere (see [this](#)), many of the people protesting, especially in the inner cities, have been marginalized and disenfranchised for generations. They see what others have, and know that such things are beyond their reach simply because they are Black. If their anger lashes out in violence and looting, they cannot be blamed. The racial injustices in the United States do not only manifest themselves in the murders of innocent people like George Floyd. They impact every aspect of the lives of people of color who are disproportionately poor in the U.S. Education and employment opportunities for them are far more limited than for whites. The ability to escape poverty is extremely difficult for anyone in the United States, but for people of color, there are more barriers than for whites. Police in the inner cities constantly harass Black and brown people in an apparent belief, at least ostensibly, that doing so will keep them from any criminal activity. As a result, ‘crimes’ for which whites will never be accused (selling ‘loosies’ – individual cigarettes), or seldom be accused (possession of small amounts of marijuana or cocaine) will result in anything from jail time to execution for people of color. And once there is a criminal record, opportunities for employment and higher education are limited.

- “Second, I’ve heard some suggest that the recurrent problem of racial bias in our criminal justice system proves that only protests and direct action can bring

about change, and that voting and participation in electoral politics is a waste of time. I couldn't disagree more. The point of protest is to raise public awareness, to put a spotlight on injustice, and to make the powers that be uncomfortable; in fact, throughout American history, it's often only been in response to protests and civil disobedience that the political system has even paid attention to marginalized communities. But eventually, *aspirations have to be translated into specific laws and institutional practices* — and in a democracy, that only happens when we elect government officials who are responsive to our demands."

Obama encourages citizens to vote, an activity from which he certainly benefited, but makes no mention of the ongoing voter suppression targeted mainly at the poor and people of color, the very same people who take to the streets when blatant, murderous injustices occur. He also doesn't mention the fact that lobbies contribute large amounts of money to candidates, thus thwarting the will of the voters.

Survey after survey indicate that people want sensible gun laws; student debt relief; affordable medical care and many other rights and protections, yet these are not offered because they do not benefit large corporations. Who does Obama suggest that people vote for to bring about these changes?

- "But the elected officials who matter most in reforming police departments and the criminal justice system work at the state and local levels.

"It's mayors and county executives that appoint most police chiefs and negotiate collective bargaining agreements with police unions. It's district attorneys and state's attorneys that decide whether or not to investigate and ultimately charge those involved in police misconduct."

The problem of racism exists in every corner of U.S. society, but the murders of innocent, defenseless Black men, women and children seem to occur mostly in the cities. Is Obama suggesting that the mayors of the nation's major cities aren't every bit as beholden to their corporate backers as are senators and members of the House of Representatives? Does he believe that a dedicated minority attorney can go door-to-door and be nominated for district attorney or state attorney without the backing of powerful party leaders and interest groups? And it is no secret that in order to secure that backing, candidates must sell their souls, leaving behind the people who need them most.

- "Unfortunately, voter turnout in these local races is usually pitifully low...." Yes, it is, and that is the result of people voting and seeing nothing change, and voter suppression, as mentioned above. Voter suppression takes many forms including limiting the number of polling places; making them more difficult to access by only having them in cities, leaving rural citizens without transportation out of luck; demanding photo identification which is often a driver's license, which not everyone has, and many others. This is done in the name of preventing voter fraud, of which there is no evidence of being a serious problem.
- "Finally, the more specific we can make demands for criminal justice and police reform, the harder it will be for elected officials to just offer lip service to the cause and then fall back into business as usual once protests have gone away."

This does nothing to address systemic racism in the nation. Laws can be passed at the local level, just as civil rights laws were passed five decades ago; they are barely a step above meaningless. What must be done is clear:

- Enforcement of laws. For example, when a child (Tamir Rice) is playing with a toy gun and he is shot and killed by a police officer, that officer must be charged with murder. When a man (Philandro Castile) is stopped because his taillight has a burned-out bulb and is summarily executed, the police officer who killed him must be charged with murder. How will the election of local and state officials impact this?
- Racial profiling must stop. This writer cannot imagine how many times he has driven with a taillight out, or some other small infraction, and yet he has never been stopped for it. Why not? He is white, so is not subject to harassment. All the elections in the world will not change this. It must be made completely unacceptable. Police officers who have a disproportionate number of arrests of people of color must be fired.
- Police harassment of people of color must stop. There are enough problems in inner cities without complicating people's lives with constant harassment. In the George Floyd case, it is alleged that he passed a counterfeit bill. He may have done so, but he may have had no idea that it was counterfeit. But regardless of that, even if he'd printed it in his basement an hour earlier, the penalty is not being tortured to death. Nothing in Obama's pretty words would impact this issue.
- The criminal 'war on drugs' must end. This is a trillion-dollar boondoggle that has had no impact on drug use in the United States. All it has accomplished is the incarceration of millions of people, mostly Black, thus leaving families and communities without needed citizens. But the for-profit prison system is booming. Obama's suggestions do nothing to address this problem.

The entire problem, Obama says, can be resolved through voting in people at the local and state levels who are receptive to what is needed. He conveniently overlooks the fact that doing so is next to impossible. Interference by outside donors and other special interests prevents people of integrity from getting too far in the electoral process. The 'war on drugs' and the for-profit prisons for which it supplies prisoners make too much money for too many people to ever see it change due to an election. And institutional racism is inherent at all levels of governance, and within too many corporations, and is all just considered 'business as usual'.

Trump has suggested that states use the military to 'dominate' the protesters, something one would expect any dictator to demand. But what must be done is the reverse; the protesters must dominate the cities and the military must join the protesters. Otherwise, Obama's words notwithstanding, it is only a matter of time, and probably a very short amount of time, before we are all once again carrying signs with the name of another Black victim of police violence spelled out across it.

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