Obama's Legacy of Expedient Leadership in the Face of Racism

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Abstract

President Obama's winning of the presidential election in 2008 was greeted with great pomp and circumstance. He became the 44th President of the United States and the first African American to hold the job. The previous 43 Presidents were all of Anglo- Saxon descent and never faced the challenge of coping with racism. Some of the challenges he faces from his detractors are ideological and quite in order for a president of either party to face. But many of the other challenges and criticisms are rooted in racism. Personal attacks and smears go way back to George Washington. But if you compare the attacks on FDR and Bill Clinton, the two recent Democratic Presidents remembered for the criticisms they endured, it has been much, much worse for Obama. The Obama Hate Machine, funded by the Koch brothers, and Senator Mitch McConnell, the head of Senate Republicans vowing that his number one priority was making sure that President Obama would be a one-term President, are a case in point. This article examines the strategies used by Obama to circumvent racism and turn his presidency to a success. Expedient in this article means appropriate and suitable to the circumstances, and does not connote improper or immoral as expounded in some dictionary definitions.

Key Words: Black Leadership**,** Depersonalization, Expedient Leadership, monolithic societies, leadership effectiveness, prototypicality, Racelessness

Introduction

A leader's success is judged by his or her attainment of the goals and objectives that they set out to accomplish. In the case of President Obama, his presidency can be judged to be a great success by many, especially if one takes into consideration the state of the economy when he took office, and the state of the economy as he nears the end of his second term. Unemployment rate is at 5.1% at this writing, down from 10% in October of 2009 after he took office (BLS 2015). Core inflation is at 1.8 % way below the 3% required by the Humphrey Hawkins Act of 1978 (See Roth 1978). Given these encouraging statistics one can argue that Obama has kept the twin evils of inflation and unemployment in check as required by the above Act, and also provided us with a stable economy that has been growing, albeit at slow rate.

His critics on the other hand may not give him such praise, and could use other stringent measures to judge his job performance. Instead of using the unemployment rate, for example, they might choose to use a more stringent measure such as labor participation rate, which would downplay the low unemployment rate number.

Regarding Obama's legacy, Gollom (2015) posits that it might be too soon to tell, in part because we don't know what the impacts will be of a lot of policies he put in place. Gollom goes on to point out that in a span of seven days, after the U.S. Supreme Court handed Obama two key victories, by upholding Obamacare tax subsidies and legalized same sex marriage across the nation, and after the U.S. and Cuba agreed to open embassies in their capitals, Obama's approval rating bumped up five points to the 50 percent mark for the first time in over two years according to a CNN poll conducted the previous week.

These accomplishments are downplayed by Obama's critics who dismiss him as a lame-duck President with less than two years left in his presidency. But to judge Obama"s successes, one would need to look at his total record in his two terms in office.

These successes were not easy to accomplish and required tact and pulling together majorities to overcome racist and divisive forces that wished him to fail.

Obama's Accomplishments and Failures

After President Obama was in office for 3 years, pollsters for *Washington Post* and ABC News asked the question " Obama has been President for 3 years. Would you say he has accomplished a great deal during that time, a good amount, not very much, or little or nothing?" Surprisingly, 52% said the President had accomplished "Not very much" or "Little or nothing."

There is no right or wrong answers in polling, but the truth is that what Obama accomplished in his first 2 years in office is stunning. His record according to Glastris (2015) included healthcare reform, the takeover and turnaround of the auto industry. The biggest economic stimulus in history. Sweeping new regulations for Wall Street. A new set of consumer protections on the credit card industry. A vast expansion of national service. Net neutrality. The greatest increase in wilderness protection in 15 years. A revolutionary reform of student aid. Signing the new START treaty with Russia, and ending "don't ask don't tell." Glastris concluded that Obama had gotten more done in 3 years than any President in decades.

Glastris, Cooper and Hu (2015) wrote an even longer list in their list of top 50 of Obama's accomplishments. The list includes passing health care reform, passing the stimulus, and passing Wall street reform. Ending the war in Iraq, beginning the drawdown of the war in Afghanistan, eliminating Osama bin Laden, turning around the U.S auto industry, recapitalizing banks during the financial crisis, repealing " Don't ask don't tell" and toppling Muammar Gaddafi. The list is long and also includes reversing the Bush torture policies, eliminating catch-22 in pay equality laws, and improving America's image abroad.

Perhaps the most glaring omission from this list of accomplishments is helping African Americans overcome the many social and economic problems that they face in America. Morrison (2015) reported that Jesse Jackson accused Obama of failing black people by not leveraging the full force of federal agencies to target systemic and historic inequalities that keep blacks in the US behind whites in employment, opportunity and wealth.

Kennedy (2014) argues that whereas Obama assured the American people that the problem of race was too important to ignore, he has not done much to address the problem. He argues that for many African Americans, Obama has been a hero, but also a disappointment. On critical matters of racial justice, he has posited no agenda, unveiled no vision, nor set forth any overarching mission to be accomplished.

Stafko (2012) is also critical of Obama's record in helping the black community. He posits that as of June of 2012, the African American unemployment rate was a staggering 14.4%, with Latinos and Hispanics having an unemployment rate of about 11.0%, while the unemployment rate for whites was 7.4%. If these unemployment rates are compared to December 2008, the final month before Obama took office, white unemployment rate was 6.6% and Hispanics rate was 9.2, while that of blacks stood at 11.9%.

In responding to these criticisms President Obama stated that he was not a President of black America, but a President of the United States of America (Maxwell 2012). The President had consistently argued that "a rising tide lifts all boats", and passing financial reform, health care reform, and other pieces of landmark legislation that would impact African Americans more than other groups is of great help to African Americans.

Obama seems to have changed his view about " a rising tide lifts all boats" toward the end of his first term. Lowrey (2013) quotes Obama saying that prosperity does not trickle down, and a rising tide does not necessarily lift all boats. He maintains that the conservative policies predicated on those ideas, amount to a you –are-on your own economics, when the country really needed a we're-in-this-together approach.

Post-racial America: An Illusion or reality

In addressing the question whether Obama's election meant that the United States had become post-racial, Kennedy (2011) argues that the terms under which Obama won the Presidency, the conditions under which he governs, and the circumstances under which he governs, and the circumstances under which he sought reelection, all display the haunting persistence of the color line (Cited in Nuxoll 2011).

After the election of Obama, Bonilla-Silva (2009) asked the question whether liberal and conservative analysts were right when they claimed America had seen the end of racism (D'Souza 1995) or, at least, the "declining significance of race" (Wilson 1978).

The 2008 election of President Barak Obama for some signaled America had begun a post-racial era. Obama's victory in 2008, according to Rich (in Dowdle, Raemdoncy and Moranto eds. 2011) was an election that ran counter to most textbook analysis of race relations. Conventional thinking was that racism was rampant in the US society, and that structural barriers precluded such an outcome. It was not likely for white voters to vote for a black man for the highest office on land, even if he were qualified (Zernike and Sussman, 2008).

According to (Cose, 2002), the racial obstacles today are less obvious but are still omnipresent. All leaders must understand how to compete in America's post-racial society; where the rules of engagement are not the rules of the past nor are they seemingly what they appear to be in the present. The impact of the conscious and sub-conscious perpetuation of negative stereotypical imagery will often determine whether or not the leader in question will be allowed to provide viable leadership. But that does not mean that racism makes it any easier.

The number of African American's in significant leadership roles in both corporate and political environments has grown significantly (Cose, 2002). The old tried and true method of denying leadership opportunities as a result of a lack of credentials and or university pedigree has been effectively removed from the list of obstacles as to why African Americans could not provide effective leadership.

In 2001 Kenneth Chenault was appointed chief executive of American Express, E. Stanley O'Neal was waiting in the wings to be elevated to the C.E.O position at Merrill Lynch, and last but not lease Richard Parsons was installed in the C.E.O. position at AOL Time Warner. The three prior C.E.O 's unanimously stated that race was not a factor in their decision to recommend the three African American executives for the ultimate leadership position (Roberts, 2002)

According to (Roberts, 2002) the new class of African American C.E.O.'s have succeeded in their careers in part as a result of skills, conciliation, bluntness, boldness and their willingness to take risks. In so doing they eliminated race as a major factor in their success. But eliminating race entirely might be utopian, as pointed out by Michelle Obama in her commencement address to graduates at Tuskegee University.

Michelle Obama has been more outspoken on matters of race and racism than her husband. She talks openly about her experience of being viewed and judged through racial prisms.

In a commencement address delivered at Tuskegee University, a historically black school in Alabama, Michelle talked about the "nagging worries that you're going to get stopped or pulled over for absolutely no reason" along with " the fear that your job application will be overlooked because of the way your name sounds." She went on to explain that " As potentially the first African-American first lady, I was also the focus of another set of questions and speculations … Conversations sometimes rooted in the fears and misperceptions of others: Was I too loud, or too angry, or too emasculating? Or was I too soft, too much of a mum, not enough of a career woman?" "Then there was the first time I was on a magazine cover… it was a cartoon drawing of me with a huge afro and a machine gun. Now, yeah, it was satire, but if I'm really being honest, it knocked me back a bit. It made me wonder, just how are people seeing me." (Henderson 2015).

Comedians and political commentators have also been forthright with the issue of racism. For example, Chait (2014) cites Bill Maher explaining to his audience, in his 'Let's get real' moment in his HBO show, that the rise of the tea party was about a black President.

Press (2012) is more outspoken in his book and explains how the media has cooperated and allowed the Koch brothers to fund a relentless assault of hate designed to destroy President Obama. These two multi billionaire brothers are the funders of their front groups FreedomWorks and Americans For Prosperity, which were used to propagate anti-Obama TV ads in the presidential campaigns. Press goes on to show how effective the Obama hate machine has become. He observes that " By year three of Obama presidency, a staggering 67 books, at least had been published that demonized Obama – far more than either Bill Clinton or George W. Bush ever had to contend with – and the number keeps growing." He compares this number to 11 anti-Clinton books and 5 anti -W books, published during their presidencies.

America has come a long way in improving race relations and creating opportunities for all. Thomas and Gaborro (1999) posit that in 1960, less than 2% of all managers in the United States were black. The numbers have gone up tremendously as evidenced by the large number of black executives featured every month in *Ebony* and *Black Enterprise* magazines. But despite this progress, the skills needed to be effective as a black executive are not identical to those of a white executive. A black executive faces the added challenge of managing racism.

In their research on what a black manager needs to make it in the corporate world, Dickens Jr. and Dickens (1991) contend that in addition to the usual academic qualifications that are required for a manager in a corporation, black managers feel a need to develop a higher degree of job skills than their white peers. They give an example of two additional skills that black managers need to develop; the management of racism and the management of conflict. They define management of racism as involving developing unique behaviors to counteract and neutralize demeaning, prejudicial behavior directed toward them by another race or ethnic group.

Dickens and Dickens argue that black managers can survive without managing conflict, but they will not survive for long without managing racism. This argument is even more true at higher levels of leadership as evidenced in President Obama's leadership.

African-American experience in coping with racism

President Obama was not the first African-American leader to deal and cope with racism. He just happens to be the highest ranking, but he learnt well from his predecessors.

To develop a better understanding of how black leaders have dealt with and managed racism, it is important to have a historical background of typologies of black leaders. If we start with Myrdal's (1944, 1962) classic twofold formulation of accommodation or protest, we can understand the latter evolution of black leadership types to the present.

The 1960s as an era in our history was a dynamic and tumultuous period of change, culminating in the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made discrimination in the workplace illegal. During this period, we find a number of studies examining the typologies of black leadership. Such studies as Burgess (1962), Thompson (1963), Ladd (1966) and others. The Myrdal and the Burgess studies capture the essence of these typologies.

Myrdal (1944, 1962) viewed Negro leadership as based on terms of accepting or rejecting the extant race system, originating from slavery. Accommodation required acceptance of the caste system and leaders led only in that context. Protest on the other hand involved a rejection of the caste system. Such protest could include lobbying, litigation and nonviolent protest.

Burgess (1962) in her study of Durham expanded Myrdal's twofold construct to a fourfold typology, which included conservatives, liberals, moderates and liberals. Conservatives are those persons least likely to oppose the caste system and conforms closely to Myrdal's accommodation categorization of "Pleading to whites". Walter and Smith (1999) call these individuals "Black Conservative Leaders". They do not subscribe to the norms, attitudes or behavior of black leaders. They do not have a black constituency, and may be looked on with disdain within the black community because they influence white opinion about black issues. Slay (2003) includes Clarence Thomas, Shelby Steele and Walter White in this category.

Liberals, according to Burgess, are the largest type and use conventional political methods such as lobbying, voting and litigation to protest caste. Moderates are those leaders who subordinate their leadership role to that of community leaders. Radicals on the other hand identify with the masses and their form of protest is through mass demonstrations, patterned after those of Martin Luther King.

Studies by Thompson (1963), Mathew and Protho (1966) and Ladd (1966) identified similar typologies of black leadership and shed more light into understanding black leadership types.

African Americans have also come to view leaders in terms of the expectation of their leadership. At the presidential level, for African Americans, there have been two types of presidencies: low expectations and high expectations presidencies (Rich, in Dowdle, Raemdonck and Moratno, 2011). Low expectation presidencies do not promise African Americans anything in campaigns or in office. African Americans for example, do not expect much from Republican Presidents since the Republican party adopted the southern strategy in 1968. It is common knowledge that Republican Presidents rarely meet with the Congressional Black Caucus (Hulse 2005). High expectation presidencies on the other hand promise fortified policies that target eliminating inequalities and target programs to African Americans.

Expedient strategies for effective leadership

Bonita-Silva (2009) posits that Obama has reached the level of success he has in large part because he has made a strategic move towards racelessness and adopted a post-racial persona and political stance. He has distanced himself from most leaders of the civil rights movement, from his own reverend, from his own church, and from anything or anyone who makes him "too black" or "too political."

He argues that the mainstream media has ghettoized Jessie Jackson and Al Sharpton, because of their focus on the so called "black" issues, which is the same tactic used by right wing minority leaders who have benefitted from being anti-minority. He cites leaders such as Clarence Thomas, Condoleeza Rice, and Bobby Jindal.

One can argue that President Obama is guilty as charged, in the use of racelessness or eliminating race as a way to succeed. In the infancy of his presidential campaign, a strategic decision was made to pursue a state of racial neutrality. The candidate maintained distance from civil rights leaders and certain religious figures in an effort to avoid being portrayed as black. In addition the Obama campaign distanced itself from what heretofore were considered African-American political issues (Silva, Ray 2008). Candidate Obama refused to engage in African American issues for fear of upsetting the majority population. It is clear that leaders make decisions based upon how race will impact their ability to be effective.

It is a known fact that leadership and effectiveness go hand in hand. A leader's success is judged by how effective he or she is in leading. Druker (1967) argued that a leader's job is to be effective, and that effectiveness can be learned.

To be effective, a leader must have consensual prestige or power to influence the attitudes, behaviors and destiny of followers and group members. Hogg (2001) and Hogg & Terry (2000) suggest that there are three processes that influence leadership: Prototypicality, social attraction and attribution. The three processes work conjointly to produce leadership.

Prototypicality consists of similarities in attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. In leadership, this prototypicality is demonstrated by respect for group norms, loyalty, strong sense of in-group superiority, and being "one of us" (Hogg, 2001). Social attraction is not based on individual characteristics but on group membership. People get attracted to each other based on group membership.

If we use the concept of leadership as based on self-categorization and self -identity, then as Hogg and Terri (2000) predict, leadership effectiveness becomes more determined by group prototypicality and less by possession of general leadership qualities. When these leadership postulates are applied to a black leader, it becomes clearer why Dickens Jr. and Dickens (1991) singled out management of racism as crucial for a black manager's survival.

Racism is an impediment to attaining prototypicality, social attraction and attribution. That is why black leaders accede to the leadership types discussed above, and more recently to depersonalization of self. The goal is to take away focus from race and focus on job performance.

Depersonalization of self involves migrating from a self conceptualization to conceptualization as a group member (Hogg, 1990). For example, Chenault is called a "Consummate insider", having spent 20 years at American Express (2002). Colin Powell when faced with the reality of racism during his early days as a soldier, chose to identify his priorities – becoming enraged by racism or being successful in his army career. He determined that his priority was to be an outstanding soldier – in part, because of racism (Powell, 1995 cited in Slay 2003).

In his autobiography, Powell (1995) gives an example of how he learnt to cope with racism. Colonel Brookhart, who had become like a mentor to him, had warned him on how to behave when transferred to Fort Benning in Georgia. He warned him to be careful, because the south was another world. He had to learn not to rock the boat and to be a "good Negro". He was warned not to be like a black general who preceded him named Benjamin O. Davis, who had gotten himself in trouble in the South by failing to know how to be a "good Negro". Being a good negro at the time meant humbling oneself and kow towing the line, and sometimes taking abuse and humiliation without rancor. It involved being seen as nonthreatening and not as an angry Negro who might threaten the establishment. Success for African American leaders during this era involved swallowing one's pride and hoping for change to come.

Michelle Obama's commencement address to graduates at Tuskegee warned the majority African American graduates that they will still face racism in the future. She said that while it is clear that the US has progressed on race relations, the country has further to go. She said that during her own journey to the White House, the media and critics attacked her race and questioned her character. One political sketch showed her with a "huge afro and a machine gun". She was referred to as "Obama's Baby Mama" and one of his "cronies of color" (Laine 2015).

But President Obama has been successful in dealing with racism without going into compromises that earlier African American leaders had to go through.

His success can be attributed to his depersonalization of self in his leadership, and use of post-racial model in his speeches and messages. Fraser, in Marable and Clarke (2009) gives an example of Obama's speech to a large group of supporters in St. Paul Minnesota. Obama did not make reference to the historic fact that he was the first African American to be selected as the nominee of any major political party. He emphasized the postblack message, dedicating the speech to his white grandmother and highlighting the diversity of his coalition.

Shelby Steele (2008) a black conservative and Hoover Institution scholar has portrayed Obama's postracial approach as extortion to exact benefits from whites for not exploiting white guilt. He argues that Mr. Obama's political ingenuity was very simple: "To trade moral leverage for gratitude. Give up moral leverage over whites, refuse to shame them with America's racist past, and the gratitude they show will constitute a new form of black power. They will love you for the faith you show them." (Steele 2008, cited in Dowdle et. al 2011)

Steele's view of the Obama phenomenon fails to recognize depersonalization of self as a modern approach for African Americans to attain effective leadership. Slay's (2003) proposition 10, which proposes that individuals who emphasize social identification as African Americans will experience social attraction in minority (African American) contexts, while individuals who de-emphasize social identification as African Americans will experience social attraction in majority (white) contexts, rings true in most instances.

In Obama's case, emphasizing his social identification as an African American President would reduce his social attraction and make him less effective. The same thing would happen to black CEOs such as Kenneth Chenault, Richard Parsons, and Stanley O'Neal. De-emphasizing their social identification as African Americans heightens their social attraction and facilitates their effectiveness. Roberts (2002) states that neither Parsons nor Chenault nor O'Neal is comfortable with having his enormous professional accomplishment viewed through the prism of race.

If we compare the issues of managing racism which is paramount to a black leader to other paramount issues in leadership, we cannot help to wonder if the energy expended in managing racism would not be better utilized in dealing with other broader issues that lead to better and more effective leadership.

Such issues as improving emotional intelligence can lead to better leadership. This involves the ability to manage one's emotions to make decisions, understand emotions, and perceive and manage other people's emotions (Mayer 2006). Some authors believe that emotional intelligence also includes adaptability and resiliency, achievement drive and initiative, empathy, and the ability to inspire others, which are all issues that are important for effective leadership (Bar-On, Handley and Fund, 2005; Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee, 2002).

Bunker et. al (2010) list four emotional and social competencies associated with superior leadership: Self-awareness, self -management, social awareness and relationship management.

Self- awareness involves knowing one's internal states, preferences, resources and intuitions. Self-management involves managing one's internal states, impulses and resources to facilitate reaching goals. Social awareness involves awareness of others' feelings, needs, and concerns. Relationship management involves adeptness at inducing desirable responses in others. A leader needs to work on all these four areas to excel in leadership. If managing racism, which is a form of social awareness and relationship management becomes such a priority to a black leader and a disproportionate amount of time is spent on managing it, then it means that the black leader is spending less time on the other two competencies. This can lead to making the leader less effective or holding him or her back from being a superior leader.

Conclusion

Expedient leadership may be appropriate and convenient, but in the long run it undermines self awareness and it might not be the best type of leadership especially if the leader wants to cultivate trust in all the groups that he or she will be leading. Racelessness, depersonalizing oneself, and migrating to a group conceptualization, worked well for President Obama, but replicating it in another minority presidential candidate might not work as well.

Cose (2012) expresses his reservation on this strategy in other African-American leaders and asks the question " When U.S Rep. Harold Ford of Tennessee insists on being seen as a leader rather than a "black" leader, does that represent progress? Or is he simply signaling his intention to abandon the "black community" in pursuit of personal ambitions?"

One can endure to be raceless only for so long, before it starts to take a toll on one's self awareness.

In the case of Obama, we see him depersonalizing himself to be elected in the first and second terms, but as his second term progresses, Obama has become more comfortable with his identity and has started to identify more with issues that affect African-Americans and other minorities.

For example, after the fatal shooting of an unarmed African-American teenager named Trayvon Martin, Obama identified with the teenager by stating that if he had a son, he'd look like Trayvon (Condon 2012).

Obama also sent his Attorney General Eric Holder to quell the racial riots in Ferguson, Missouri, after an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer. He also sent his newly sworn in Attorney General, Loretta Lynch to Baltimore, to quell the racial riots after Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American resident of Baltimore, Maryland, died in police custody a week after his arrest. Obama's reaction and quick action to address these racial incidents of police brutality portrayed him as compassionate and caring, especially to those in the "Black Lives Matter" movement, and to African-Americans and others.

As Obama nears the end of his second term, we see him shifting away from depersonalizing himself and his racelessness posture to taking pride in who he is. He recently declared that he is proud to be the first Kenyan-American President during his visit to Kenya (Ohito 2015). Such a declaration would have been political suicide during his first or second presidential campaigns.

But Obama is no longer running for reelection and he can now relax and be comfortable with who he is. At least he has made it clear that he is no longer raceless.

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