

Ode to Obama

Charles M. Blow JAN. 11, 2017 | NY Times

The dark clouds of the coming administration rolled in this week with a fury, producing a flood of strange and worrisome news.

There was the utterly terrifying confirmation hearing of Jeff Sessions as our next attorney general, at which he signaled in no uncertain terms his hostility to the protective posture that the Justice Department has taken to safeguard vulnerable populations over the last eight years.

There was the long-awaited news conference conducted by the president-elect that, predictably, turned into a circus of boasting, hubris, hostility, distraction and deflection.

And then there was the release of the [unsubstantiated intelligence report](#), with its nausea-inducing claims, which I don't know what to do with.

But there was a calm in the midst of the storm, a rock of familiarity and stability and strength: On Tuesday night, President Obama delivered his farewell address in his adopted hometown, Chicago, as a forlorn crowd looked on, realizing the magnitude of the moment, realizing the profundity of its loss.

As the old saying goes: You don't know what you've got till it's gone.

Whether you have approved of the Obama presidency as a matter of policy or not, it is impossible to argue that Obama was not a man of principle. Whether you agree with individual decisions or the content of his rhetoric, it is impossible to argue that he did not conduct himself with dignity and respect and that he did not lead the country with those values as a guiding light.

I have not always agreed with the president's positions or tactics, and this feels normal to me. Freethinking people are bound to disagree occasionally, even if a vast majority of their values align.

I was particularly frustrated with what I believed was his misreading and underestimation of the intensity of the opposition he faced, and his approach of being a gentleman soldier in a guerrilla war. I was harsh in my critique; some would say too harsh. In 2009, [I wrote](#): "The president wears outrage like another man's suit. It doesn't quite fit." In 2011, [I called him](#) "a robotic Sustainer-in-Chief."

But none of those differences in opinions about strategy injured in any way my profound respect for the characteristics of the man we came to take for granted: bracingly smart, exceptionally well educated, literate in the grand tradition of the great men of letters. He was scholarly, erudite, well read and an adroit writer.

And he was an orator for the ages. We got so used to elegant, sometimes masterly speechifying, that I will admit I sometimes tuned it out. We had an abundance of riches in that regard.

But listening to the president's farewell address, I was hit with the force of a brawler that the decency and dignity, the solemnity and splendor, the loftiness and literacy that Obama brought to the office was extraordinary and anomalous, the kind of thing that each generation may only hope to have in a president.

In a way, it was the small things, the way he made [reference to Atticus Finch](#) from “To Kill a Mockingbird” in his discussion of race relations in this country. It was the ease of confidence that comes from having read the book and not just the speechwriter’s script.

That made me think of the two presidents who will bracket Obama: George W. Bush, who Karl Rove claims was a voracious reader, but whose articulation and disposition betrayed a man struggling for intellectual adequacy, and Donald Trump, a man who comes across as possessing more anger than acumen and whose [ghostwriter said of him](#): “I seriously doubt that Trump has ever read a book straight through in his adult life.”

Even more impressive is Obama’s skill for raising and parsing delicate issues like race, so that all of the people involved feel respected and represented, so that all participants in the debate feel that they have been truly heard and seen.

He hasn’t always gotten this right. No human being has always gotten everything right. Holding him to that impossible standard hardly seems fair. But he started from a very strong and respectable position and has grown even more steady and sure from there.

So as the end of his presidency draws close, America is confronted with the reality of what is being lost. It is no wonder that a [Quinnipiac University Poll](#) released Tuesday found that “American voters approve 55–39 percent of the job President Barack Obama is doing, his best approval rating in seven years.” For comparison, Trump’s approval rating as the president-elect is only 37 percent.

Obama wasn’t perfect, but neither is anyone — you or I — and neither was any other president. But Obama is a good man and a good president. Some would argue that he was great on both counts.

We will remember that — and miss it — when Trump’s whirlwind of scandal, conflict, crudeness, boorishness and vindictiveness barrels into Washington.