

The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America. By Michael Eric Dyson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). Pp. 346. Hardcover, \$27.00.

In *The Black Presidency*, Georgetown sociologist Michael Eric Dyson interrogates the nuances and dichotomies surrounding the presidency of Barack Obama. In a narrative more critical than laudatory, Dyson assesses the meaning of the Obama presidency through a racial lens. It is entirely appropriate for him to do so, for as Dyson points out, President Obama earned nearly unanimous black support, yet spent his time in the White House largely unwilling to confront the entrenched white supremacy that plagues black communities. Indeed, Dyson argues that the racial neutrality that Obama displayed was born of a political calculation to avoid “white ire” while “he has worried little about losing black support” (5). *The Black Presidency* is Dyson’s scholarly effort to bring race to the center of our understanding of the Obama years by elucidating the president’s challenges, successes, and shortcomings. While he is mostly very successful in this endeavor, Dyson’s analysis tends to gloss over the unprecedented obstructionism that President Obama faced during his two terms, leaving the reader with the distorted sense that the president simply lacked the willpower or courage to improve black America’s position in the United States.

Dyson’s core contention, puzzlingly buried in the center of the monograph, is that Obama’s view of racial politics has three interrelated features: a *strategic inadvertence*, whereby policies are designed to help all Americans with universal programs; a *heroic explicit*, whereby black America is chastised for its own failings; and lastly, a *noble implicit* in which Obama refuses to make white people uncomfortable by identifying whites as responsible for black suffering (156). In concatenating these pieces, Dyson eludes to the possibility that Obama’s policies are rooted purely in political calculation. Indeed, Dyson goes so far as to refer to Obama as “anti-ideological,” which he suggests is “the very reason he was electable” (XIV). Using this construction, *The Black Presidency* weaves a wide variety of primary sources together with both personal anecdotes and well-sourced scholarly theory to take the reader on a journey through the racial landscape of Obama’s presidency.

Of course, Dyson is only one of several scholars to ruminate on the meaning and significance of race with respect to Obama. One of the first scholars to tackle the subject was the Hoover Institution’s Shelby Steele in his 2007 polemic, *A Bound Man: Why We Are Excited About Obama and Why He Can’t Win*. Steele saw Obama

as a racial opportunist who used his charm and mixed ancestry to present himself as the face of the future in stark contrast to his 2008 opponent John McCain, an elderly white man who allegedly represented the past. Steele saw Obama as the beneficiary of a guilt-ridden white populous that felt compelled to support a black politician, though also a man whose shortcomings would ultimately prevent him from earning the presidency. As Dyson points out in an endnote, Steele's prediction of an Obama loss "was fundamentally wrong then, and is more wrong now" (288).

More serious and scholarly attempts at examining Obama's conception of race are Thomas Sugrue's *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* published in 2010 and Randall Kennedy's *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* published in 2011. Both works cover much of the same conceptual ground and offer similarly appropriate criticisms of the Obama presidency. Where Sugrue focused on the formation of Obama's conception of race from his days as a community organizer through the start of his political career, Kennedy focuses on the culmination of Obama's understanding of race and how it informed policy decisions from the Oval Office. The works dovetail nicely with Dyson's, even as Dyson takes a more critical stance overall. In their own way, each of the authors sees Obama as the beneficiary of a radical Civil Rights legacy subsequently eschewed in favor of post-racial universalism. In this regard, Dyson's work reigns superior to both in so far as no other scholar has so thoroughly explored the entire Obama presidency through reference to all the speeches, events, and policies of the Obama presidency respecting race.

Indeed, in *The Black Presidency* Dyson reminisces most heavily on the major episodes in which race was at the center of national discussion: the killing of unarmed black men by white police officers, the anniversary of the March on Selma, the Reverend Wright and Professor Henry Louis Gates affairs, and Dylann Roof's attack on black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina. Throughout, Dyson is critical of Obama's unwillingness to "own" his blackness and speak to white America in the same paternalistic tone that he reserves for black America. The sense that Obama's success as a Democratic president was borne largely of his failure to be a president to black America is palpable in this book. It is not until the final chapter, where Dyson refers to a week of June 2015 as "the greatest week of Obama's presidency, and one of the greatest weeks any president had ever had" that Dyson's praise for Obama is not laced in a broader criticism (255). Sadly, the event prompting this acclaim was the

president's speech honoring the fallen South Carolina senator and preacher Clementa Pinckney, who was murdered by Dylann Roof.

The Black Presidency is as much about America's response to President Obama as it is about the presidency itself. In particular, Dyson confronts the quandary that black leaders and intellectuals faced when determining how to critique the president's shortcomings. On the one hand, black Americans have obvious reasons to be protective and laudatory of Obama; on the other hand, Obama's failure to systemically improve the social well being of African Americans left many frustrated with him. This tension is realized both in Dyson's writing and in his life.

In April 2015, Dyson published a long criticism documenting the rise and "fall" of Princeton scholar Cornel West in the *New Republic*, a milestone in the far-too-public falling out of Dyson and his former mentor. Ostensibly, the reason for this attack was Professor West's vociferous critiques of President Obama, which Dyson took exception. Carrying this animus into *The Black Presidency*, Dyson spends an inordinate amount of space, especially in the early chapters, differentiating those black leaders and thinkers whose criticisms of the president and his supporters he deems worthy, such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Jelani Cobb, and those whose criticisms he deems unworthy, such as Cornell West and Tavis Smiley. According to Dyson, the problem with the latter group, especially West, is that they resort to vituperation and "hateful personal attack" in lieu of the more "substantive, even sharp criticism" offered by the former group (29). This is the right distinction to make, yet one that seems almost contrived given the strained personal relationship between Dyson and West. Combined with Dyson's proclivity to include himself in the narrative, *The Black Presidency* occasionally veers too close to autobiography rather than maintaining scholarly distance.

There is, unfortunately, an ambivalence in Dyson's criticisms of president Obama that is difficult to square with the moralistic and authoritative tone of Dyson's writing. For instance, early in *The Black Presidency* Dyson chides President Obama for his belief that successive generations of Americans have made progress on race, arguing that this sentiment "may not be borne out by the facts" and "can't be the basis of honest racial conversation" (13). However, Dyson later states that "The distance from [Martin Luther King Jr.] King's assassination to Obama's inauguration is a quantum leap of racial progress..." (85). It is difficult to parse out the difference between Obama's allegedly *dishonest* sense of racial progress and Dyson's own

statement. One gets the sense that Dyson was reading naiveté into the president's optimism only to criticize him for a view that he too holds.

Another example of an unfair criticism of the president lies in Dyson's cynical take on healthcare reform. Arguing, "Obama's ideas about race neutrality and public policy are philosophically and politically flawed," Dyson suggests that the Affordable Care Act was the sort of one-size-fits-all program that fails black America (161–165). Yet, what more could President Obama have done given the fact that the bill, even as construed to help all Americans, passed without a single Republican vote? Would the president's strategy be less "politically flawed" if he failed to get a bill past his own party? This, of course, is the position of the current president, Donald Trump, whose efforts at repealing the ACA fell short in March and July 2017 as he has been unable to secure enough Republican votes to overcome having no Democratic support.

Despite these criticisms, *The Black Presidency* is one of those rare gems that seamlessly meld complex concepts appropriate for graduate studies with clear writing that makes the work accessible to a larger audience. This monograph will find its way into course syllabi in a variety of disciplines and should not be passed over by historians. Its insights are both broad and nuanced and the book makes a powerful intervention in our understanding of the Obama years by analyzing how race permeated the president's supposedly anti-ideological presidency. No other work so meticulously weaves the documentary record of Obama's handling of race with the existing scholarly literature of race and politics. As illuminating and successful as Dyson is in this endeavor, *The Black Presidency* does tend to overemphasize Obama's shortcomings while underemphasizing the unprecedented levels of obstructionism that he faced in office. It will be up to other scholars to balance the political record as Dyson has done for the racial record.

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