Obama’s Achievement was Whitewashing Permanent Warfare with Eloquence

Judging from how the mainstream media has characterized the legacy of Barack Obama so far, the outgoing president will be most remembered for his many rousing aspirational speeches and well-timed shows of emotion.

His talent as a persuasive public communicator and the strength of his personal brand, bolstered by years of apple-shining from liberal magazines and newspapers, has been Obama’s most valuable asset.

This perception of Obama that has been propagated from the top, the view that he is essentially a benevolent figure with deep integrity or the personification of a modern liberal-statesman, is a stunning smokescreen.

The contradiction between the high-minded rhetoric of the president in contrast to the actual policies pursued by his administration has been stark and utterly scandalous.

To hear Obama wax poetic about ‘the politics of hope’ and ‘how ordinary Americans can steer change’ feels deeply perverse coming from a figure that has institutionalized a vast, unaccountable permanent warfare state.

In the face of Obama’s global covert assassinate program, his numerous secret wars without congressional approval, a mass electronic surveillance capability unprecedented in history, the speeches reveal themselves as little more than banal platitudes and vapid sloganeering.

As the sun sets on Obama’s presidency, to say the press has given him a pass is a grand understatement. Some outlets have occasionally run criticism of Obama’s drone policies or inconvenient relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Contrary to his predecessor, Obama had a firmer grasp on the political risks inherent in the large-scale deployment of US troops in sustained military campaigns, but his strategic objectives differed little and his belief in American exceptionalism was total.

Rather than ‘shock and awe’, Obama proffered ‘leading from behind’, culminating in NATO support and air power for insurgents that toppled the Libyan government on the pretext of defending human rights, turning the country into a cauldron of rival fiefdoms and lawlessness.

The Obama administration and the CIA fuelled a proxy war on Syria with arms and training for insurgents, many of whom took up arms with ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliated groups. The US military’s presence in Syria and support for non-state actors abjectly violates international law and John Kerry’s leaked comments make clear how the administration cynically leveraged the threat of ISIS against the Syrian government.

Not only did Obama fail in his promise to close the Guantanamo Bay torture facility, he effectively replaced enhanced interrogation with an unaccountable covert assassination complex, endowing himself with the roles of judge, jury, and executioner.
By virtue of his suave and benevolent public persona, top-tier entertainers and figures of the liberal intelligentsia were largely willing to acquiesce to the precedent set by Obama’s unrestrained executive powers, exercised in near-complete secrecy.

They believed Obama would use the entrenched military and surveillance capacities of the US government judiciously. They swallowed the Democrats’ rhetoric of social inclusion and focused their political energies largely on identity issues.

Liberal figures didn’t protest against the president’s ability to spy on countless Americans suspected of no crime, nor did they organise against the president’s extrajudicial assassinations of American citizens and non-Americans without trial or due process.

Liberals hardly spoke out against the thousands of civilians killed by Obama’s drone bombings. Oddly enough, many seemed more outraged at Trump’s campaign rhetoric against Muslims and Mexicans than the reality of President Obama engaging in military hostilities against seven Muslim countries and deporting more people than any president in history.

Frankly, far too many Americans have been utter cowards in the face of the outgoing Democratic presidency. Obama will soon leave office as the only president in American history to serve two complete terms at war.

Despite his tense relationship with the Israeli prime minister and token opposition to the expansion of settlements, Obama signed the single largest pledge of bilateral military assistance to Israel in history, enabling the cancerous Israeli occupation and further brutalization of Palestinians.

As the Saudi military ceaselessly bombarded towns and cities across impoverished Yemen, the Arab world’s poorest country, in a botched attempt to reinstall an ousted proxy government, the Obama administration offered muted criticism and a $115 billion arms deal.

Obama’s administration has in fact brokered more arms sales than other since the second world war. And despite campaigning on the building ‘the most transparent administration in history’, he has waged a war against whistleblowers and official leakers, invoking the 1917 Espionage Act more than all previous presidents combined.

Obama spoke of his dramatic commitment to building a nuclear weapons-free world on the campaign trail. Once in office, he committed the country to a trillion-dollar modernization of US nuclear production facilities and weapons, including warheads with adjustable yields that, according to the New York Times, make the weapons “more tempting to use”.

One of the most consequential international developments to occur under Obama’s watch was the deterioration of US-Russia relations and the revival of Cold War antagonisms, marked by the covert American role in the 2014 coup in Ukraine that brought to power a crude, corrupt and pervasively anti-Russian regime.

The largest military build-up on Russia’s borders since the second world war has unfolded under Obama’s watch, and the White House has moved in lock-step with the US intelligence community to propagate the anti-Russian line that has now captured American politics.

His administration’s pivot to Asia policy aimed to transfer 60 percent of the US naval presence to the Asia Pacific region by 2020, while the now-botched Trans-Pacific Partnership sought to – in the words of Senator Charles E. Schumer – “lure” other countries “away from China”.

On the domestic front, there have hardly been any clear-cut achievements for President Obama. He has overseen an obscene transfer of wealth from the middle class to the billionaire class, becoming the first two-term presidency that has failed to post a 3% GDP growth on an annualized basis over two terms.

The much-touted streak of job recovery rests on the proliferation of insecure part-time and temporary jobs with low protections characteristic of the gig economy, while the share of workers in temporary jobs has risen from 10.7 percent to 15.8 percent under his watch.

Wall Street banks hoarded funds fueled by the quantitative easing policies of the Federal Reserve to triple the size of stock values. Corporate profits reached an 85-year peak under Obama while the total compensation of employees’ wages and salaries slipped to levels last recorded in 1929. The wealth of the richest 400 Americans increased from $1.57 trillion in 2008 to $2.4 trillion in 2016.
The market-driven Affordable Care Act, Obama’s primary domestic initiative, did extend medical coverage to segments of American society, while millions of others were forced to pay higher premiums for substandard care. This shifted health care costs from employers and the state to working individuals in a move that effectively amounts to a bailout for private insurers.

And finally, there is the obscene proliferation of police brutality that has unfolded under Obama’s watch, with offending officers rarely held to account for their actions. African-American males were found to be nine times more likely to be killed by police officers in 2015 than white men of the same age.

But despite Obama’s troubled and deeply hypocritical track record, he remains a figure that many Americans continue to admire and respect, especially as the country moves rapidly toward a new and highly divisive political era.

A great deal of Americans, especially those in African-American communities, desperately and sincerely want to believe in the hope that Obama inspired in them. Unfortunately, Obama’s key achievement has proven to be his skillful usurpation of progressive rhetoric in the interest of an extreme militaristic and pro-corporate political agenda.

While many fear the spectre of Donald Trump’s incoming presidency and the new forms of authoritarianism and state violence that will inevitably accompany it, none should forget that it was President Obama who set the precedent for the extreme executive authority that President Trump will soon enjoy.

Nile Bowie is a political analyst based in Malaysia who has written for a number of publications, his expertise lies in a number of areas, with a particular focus on Asian politics and geopolitics, especially for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.