

Actor Matt Damon repudiates criticisms, embraces Obama

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Well-known American film actor Matt Damon, who made a series of critical comments about President Barack Obama starting in 2011, has had a change of heart.

In early 2011, for example, Damon—who strongly supported Obama in 2008—told television talk show host Piers Morgan that he was disappointed in the president. He commented: “A friend of mine said to me the other day, I thought it was a great line, ‘I no longer hope for audacity.’ ” He told Morgan that the president has “misinterpreted his mandate” and has “doubled down on a lot of things.” He was especially critical of Obama’s education policy, which tied teachers’ salaries to students’ test scores.

Later that same year, he told *Elle* magazine, “I’ve talked to a lot of people who worked for Obama at the grassroots level. One of them said to me, ‘Never again. I will never be fooled again by a politician.’ ” Damon told the magazine, “You know, a one-term president with some balls who actually got stuff done would have been, in the long run of the country, much better.”

In August 2013, Damon told BET (Black Entertainment Television) that Obama “broke up with me.” He went on: “There are a lot of things that I really question: the legality of the drone strikes and these NSA revelations [made by Edward Snowden]. Jimmy Carter came out and said ‘we don’t live in a democracy.’ That’s a little intense when an ex-president says that, so he’s got some explaining to do, particularly for a constitutional law professor.” Speaking of Obama, Damon said, “We no longer see eye-to-eye.”

In the same month, Damon came out publicly in support of whistleblower Edward Snowden, explaining to the host of the BBC’s Arabic television program “Alternative Cinema” that “On balance, I think it’s a

great thing he [Snowden] did.”

These may not be the sharpest possible comments, but they came as a breath of fresh air in the context of Hollywood public opinion, which for the most part has been slavishly uncritical toward Obama.

The criticisms may not have been incendiary, but they were apparently too much for Damon to sustain.

In the course of a recent interview carried by the *Hollywood Reporter* (September 30), a journalist reminded Damon of those earlier comments:

“Damon once was a vocal critic of President Obama for straying from a liberal agenda. But he now says that Obama’s moves since the last congressional election have restored his faith. He went to the White House late last year to screen *The Monuments Men* (along with co-stars George Clooney and Bill Murray) and found himself seated next to the first lady. Later, Damon spoke to Obama about what the actor had said.

“‘We talked about it, and look, even when I was giving him shit, he’s somebody who thinks so deeply about everything he does,’ he says. ‘I don’t ever question that it’s coming from the right place with him. He’s a remarkable human being and shockingly easy to be around. He’s incredibly approachable and doesn’t beat you up with his station, though he could.’ ”

The *Hollywood Reporter* account went on: “He [Damon] says he supports Hillary Clinton on the Democratic side: ‘I love Elizabeth Warren, but she’s not running for president.’ He also likes Joseph Biden and Bernie Sanders and wavers when pressed to choose among them, before coming down for Clinton. ‘I’m supporting Hillary,’ he affirms, noting she’s the only candidate to whom he has given money this go-around.”

Damon did not mention the “moves since the last congressional election” he had in mind. In terms of

drone strikes, the persecution of Snowden and the continued attacks on democratic rights, the administration continues to pursue its deeply right-wing policies. The ongoing slaughter in Yemen, the recent murderous attack in Kunduz and the heightening of tensions in Syria, which threaten a new world war, are only the latest fruits of White House policy. The “rationing” of health care at the expense of the population and presided over by the White House continues apace. Social inequality and poverty in America, already at disastrous levels, are only deepening.

The Obama administration, in fact, has not altered its reactionary course one jot. Damon has merely rethought his criticisms. Why?

Money and social position no doubt play a role. For his recent participation in *The Martian*, for example, Damon reportedly received \$25 million. For three films released in 2013 and 2014, *Elysium*, *Interstellar* and *The Martian*, he was paid \$53 million. The studios, of course, potentially make enormous sums out of these pictures and Damon is not responsible for the present economic set-up. However, the vast amounts of cash involved help to isolate and insulate the Hollywood elite from the interests and feelings of wide layers of the population and *inevitably* bring them closer to the political establishment.

Damon has appeared in public service announcements for Feeding America, the nationwide network of food banks, and sits on its Entertainment Council, along with Ben Affleck, 50 Cent, Sheryl Crow, Courtenay Cox and other celebrities. Such activities may indicate a social conscience, but they do not make a dent in the conditions of social misery that afflict tens of millions, much less get to the root causes of poverty and hunger, in the capitalist profit system.

As Oscar Wilde once noted in regard to similar efforts in his time: “They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor. But this is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible.”

The image of Damon visiting the White House in the company of George Clooney, a strong supporter of US intervention in Africa, and Bill Murray, sitting next to

the “first lady,” Michelle Obama, and later chatting with the president is distasteful in the extreme. Here one begins to get a sense of the social and psychological pressures working on Hollywood celebrities.

It seems likely that the principal component of Damon’s climb-down from his criticisms of Obama is the desperate need for recognition and acceptance, the desire to be acknowledged, to be praised, to be in the limelight. For Damon and others, the thought of *not* getting the invite to the White House, when a fellow performer might have the possibility of conversing one-on-one with the president of the United States, is probably almost unbearable.

That Damon considers Obama “a remarkable human being,” “shockingly easy to be around” and “incredibly approachable” does not speak to his insight or profundity as a human being, but the issue is not the actor as an individual. It is a more general problem, in America in particular. As we noted in 1999, at the time of Hollywood’s honoring of Elia Kazan, filmmaker and informer, “An irony is surely at work here. The US is famously the land of individualism, yet perhaps nowhere else is there such an intense, unrelenting pressure to conform.”

Damon, like Clooney, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and many others, has been co-opted, corrupted and transformed into something tame. Others, however, will look reality honestly in the face and take a principled stand.



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