

Journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates' love letter to Barack Obama

Niles Niemuth, David Walsh**21 December 2016**

Ta-Nehisi Coates, national correspondent for the *Atlantic*, recently wrote a lengthy piece for that publication, "My President Was Black." It is a love letter to Barack Obama.

Coates is the author of *Between the World and Me*, which gained him the 2015 National Book Award for Nonfiction. Last year he received a "genius" grant, worth \$625,000, from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

"My President Was Black" is a piece that takes sycophancy and prostration before authority to extraordinary new heights.

The *Atlantic*—for many years the *Atlantic Monthly*—was founded in Boston in 1857 as a journal of cultural commentary. It was initially an organ of leading New England literary circles (James Russell Lowell, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Harriet Beecher Stowe, etc.), which at the time had some substance to them, including opposition to slavery. Presumably, even in its present state, the publication views itself as a commentator on and critic of the American cultural and political scene.

But the *Atlantic*'s "national correspondent" openly expresses admiration and even awe for the top politician in the country, his wife and the people around them. It is not necessary to be a socialist, one need only be someone with democratic sentiments, to see that this is an intellectual and moral conflict of interest. Would it not have raised eyebrows if the *Atlantic* had employed a journalist who met regularly with and was so clearly and self-admittedly in the back pocket of Bill Clinton or George W. Bush?

If the reader thinks we exaggerate, let us provide a small sampling from "My President Was Black."

Describing a White House party attended by wealthy celebrities (including himself) in October 2016, presented by Black Entertainment Television, Coates writes: "This would not happen again, and everyone knew it. It was not just that there might never be another African American president of the United States. It was the feeling that this particular black family, the Obamas, represented the best of black people, the ultimate credit to the race, incomparable in elegance and bearing."

After retroactively lauding the future president's keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Coates continues, "Over the next 12 years, I came to regard Obama as a skilled politician, a deeply moral human being, and one of the

greatest presidents in American history."

Discussing an "off-the-record" conversation he and a number of other journalists held with the president at the White House, Coates writes self-deprecatingly, "My efforts were laughable and ineffective. I was discombobulated by fear—not by fear of the power of his office (though that is a fearsome and impressive thing) but by fear of his [Obama's] obvious brilliance."

Remarkably, the final "chapter" of Coates' essay—about the Obamas' impending departure from the White House—is titled, "When You Left, You Took All of Me With You," a line from a Marvin Gaye love song. The *Atlantic* national correspondent concludes his 16,000-word article by describing how he had felt "seeing Barack and Michelle during the inauguration, the car slow-dragging down Pennsylvania Avenue, the crowd cheering, and then the two of them rising up out of the limo, rising up from fear, smiling, waving, defying despair, defying history, defying gravity."

What can one say? "The Ascension of the Obamas." This is hagiography of an almost unhinged variety.

Coates is a representative of a privileged layer of African Americans that has emerged and prospered on the basis of the American ruling elite's Affirmative Action and "black capitalism" strategy over the last several decades, i.e., the deliberate cultivation of a section of the black petty bourgeoisie who would identify with and come to the defense of US capitalism. Black intellectuals of an earlier period—Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and others—would have been organically incapable, whatever the immediate state of their political views, of producing this sort of worship of state power.

Seeing society in racial terms is pernicious and leads *in every single case* in a foul political direction. One must say bluntly as well that Coates' perpetual insinuation that no one in history has suffered except African Americans, and, more especially, Ta-Nehisi Coates, is repulsive. The self-pity of well-to-do social layers on the make for more is never a pretty thing to encounter.

Coates' occasional references to the conditions of working class African Americans are entirely hollow. Otherwise, he could not be so entirely blind to the right-wing character of the

Obama administration, whose policies have led to the worsening of conditions for tens of millions, black, white and immigrant.

Because of his fantastical presentation of the Obama administration's policies as "progressive," Coates is obliged to blame Donald Trump's victory on the supposed accumulated resentment of white people against America's first black president.

"Whiteness in America," he writes, as is his wont, "is a different symbol—a badge of advantage." According to Coates, "For eight long years, the badge-holders [that is, the white majority] watched him. ... The badge-holders fumed. They wanted their country back. And, though no one at the [October 2016 White House] farewell party knew it, in a couple of weeks they would have it."

Coates never coherently explains how Obama was elected—and re-elected. One has the impression reading the *Atlantic* piece that Obama's 2008 victory was simply the opportunity for the racist majority to gather itself and prepare a counter-offensive. But then, Coates writes blandly, "Yet in 2012, as in 2008, Obama won anyway." How?

This is the best he can offer: "Pointing to citizens who voted for both Obama and Trump does not disprove racism; it evinces it. To secure the White House, Obama needed to be a Harvard-trained lawyer with a decade of political experience and an incredible gift for speaking to cross sections of the country; Donald Trump needed only money and white bluster." Truly wonderful arguments. The white population was merely waiting for the occasion to reveal its heart of darkness, an opportunity temporarily thwarted by the "brilliant" Obama, but provided by the "blustering" Trump. This is not political analysis, but self-serving sophistry.

There was no rush to Trump in 2016. There was a fall in the Democratic Party vote in important regions, including in numerous inner city areas, because of the miserable, widely hated policies of the Obama administration and Clinton's promise of more of the same.

In multiple, apparently intimate conversations, according to his own account, Coates gave Obama a free hand to list the "accomplishments" of his administration without offering serious criticism or challenge.

"[D]espite this entrenched racial resentment, and in the face of complete resistance by congressional Republicans, overtly launched from the moment Obama arrived in the White House," Coates gushes, "the president accomplished major feats. He remade the nation's health-care system. He revitalized a Justice Department that vigorously investigated police brutality and discrimination, and he began dismantling the private-prison system for federal inmates."

What country has Coates been living in for the last eight years? On numerous occasions the Justice Department under Obama whitewashed rampant abuse and racism in police departments across the US and argued in defense of the use of

force by police every time the issue came before the Supreme Court. The Obama administration supported the suppression of protests over police killings in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland, and continued funneling military-grade equipment to police departments throughout the country. It has deported some 2.5 million impoverished undocumented workers.

The Affordable Care Act, also known as Obamacare, Obama's single major legislative achievement, was designed to increase corporate profits by destroying the health benefits won by workers over decades of struggle, while channeling billions of dollars into the coffers of the health insurance companies.

Coates does not refer once to Obama's foreign policy. The 2009 Nobel Peace Prize winner will have the distinction of being the first resident of the White House to have been at war every day of his two terms. How many hundreds of thousands of people—or more—have died as the direct or indirect result of Obama's policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia?

Obama, Coates' "deeply moral human being," presided over "kill lists" and expanded the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, known as drones, to rain death and destruction on far-flung parts of the planet.

Behind the backs of the American people, the Obama administration has pursued a foreign policy that has set the stage for devastating conflicts with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

Coates' silence on these matters is not an error, but indicates his support for the global operations of the American military.

Nor does he have anything to say about the trillion-dollar bailout of Wall Street and the halving of auto workers' wages, two of Obama's first actions in office.

Coates' essay is disgraceful and revealing. His deplorable racialism is certainly not incidental, but, in the end, his work reflects, above all, the degree to which a considerable section of the American upper middle class "intelligentsias" of every ethnicity has been integrated into the state and now functions largely as a propaganda unit of the White House, Pentagon and CIA.

The authors also recommend:

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates: The dystopian vision of racial politics
[15 October 2016]



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