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From dreams to drones: who is the real Barack Obama?

As the latest US attacks kill 17 and threaten to destabilise Pakistan, the president could be the cruellest political hoax of our times

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Barack Obama, according to Foreign Policy magazine, "has become George W Bush on steroids". Armed with a "kill list", the Nobel peace laureate now hosts "Tuesday terror" meetings at the White House to discuss targets of drone attacks in Pakistan and at least five other countries. The latest of these killed 17 people near the border with Afghanistan today .

Unlike the slacker Bush, who famously disdained specifics, Obama routinely deploys his Ivy League training in law. Many among the dozens of "suspected militants" massacred by drones in the last three days in northwestern Pakistan are likely to be innocent. Reports gathered by NGOs and Pakistani media about previous attacks speak of a collateral damage running into hundreds, and deepening anger and hostility to the United States. No matter: in Obama's legally watertight bureaucracy, drone attacks are not publicly acknowledged; or if they have to be, civilian deaths are flatly denied and all the adult dead categorised as "combatants".

Obama himself signed off on one execution knowing it would also kill innocent family members. He has also made it "legal" to execute Americans without trial and expanded their secret

surveillance, preserved the CIA's renditions programme, violated his promise to close down Guantánamo Bay, and ruthlessly arraigned whistleblowers.

Not only [is Cornel West, Obama's most prominent black intellectual supporter](#), appalled, but also the apparatchiks of Bush's imperial presidency such as former CIA director Michael Hayden. Perhaps it is time to ask again: who is Barack Obama? And how has Pakistan featured in his worldview? The first question now seems to have been settled too quickly, largely because of the literary power of Obama's speeches and writings. His memoir, [Dreams From My Father](#), was quickened by the drama of the self-invented man from nowhere – the passionate striving, eloquent self-doubt and ambivalence that western literature, from Stendhal to Naipaul, has trained us to identify with a refined intellect and soul. Not surprisingly, Obama's careful self-presentation seduced some prominent literary fictionists, inviting comparisons to James Baldwin.

Later biographies of Obama, published after he became president, have complicated the picture of him as the possessor of diversely sourced identities (Kenya, Indonesia, Hawaii, Harvard). [David Maraniss's new biography](#) shows that at college the bright student from Hawaii's closest friends were Pakistanis, and he carried around a dog-eared copy of [Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man](#).

But Obama also began early, as one girlfriend of his reported to her diary, to "strike out", "shedding encumbrances, old images". "Do you think I will be president of the United States?" he asked a slightly bemused Pakistani friend, who then witnessed "Obama slowly but carefully distancing himself from the Pakistanis as a necessary step in establishing his political identity".

"For years," Maraniss writes, "Obama seemed to share their attitudes as sophisticated outsiders who looked at politics from an international perspective. But to get to where he wanted ... he had to change." Obama's Pakistani friend recalls: "The first shift I saw him undertaking was to view himself as an American in a much more fundamental way."

In an incorrigibly rightwing political culture, this obliged Obama to always appear tougher than his white opponents. During his 2008 presidential debates with John McCain, Obama often startled many of us with his threats to expand the war in Afghanistan to Pakistan. More disquietingly, he claimed the imprimatur of Henry Kissinger, who partnered Richard Nixon in the ravaging of Cambodia, paving the way for Pol Pot, while still devastating Vietnam.

It can't be said Obama didn't prepare us for his murderous spree in Pakistan. It is also true that drone warfare manifests the same pathologies – racial contempt, paranoia, blind faith in technology and the superstition of body counts – that undermined the US in Vietnam.

The White House has been used before to plot daily mayhem in some obscure, under-reported corner of the world. During the long bombing campaign named [Rolling Thunder](#), President Lyndon Johnson personally chose targets in Indochina, believing that ["carefully calculated doses of force could bring about desirable and predictable responses from Hanoi"](#).

But of course "force", as James Baldwin pointed out during Kissinger and Nixon's last desperate assault on Indochina, "does not reveal to the victim the strength of his adversary. On the

contrary, it reveals the weakness, even the panic of his adversary and this revelation invests the victim with patience".

The last US personnel in Vietnam had to be evacuated from the roof of the American embassy in Saigon, and this may yet be the fate of the western mission in Afghanistan. The Taliban, it is clear, won't be killed and mutilated into submission. A weak Pakistan, its rulers bribed and bullied into acquiescence, is the easier setting for a display of American firepower. In ways his Pakistani college friends couldn't have foreseen, their country now carries the burden of verifying Obama's extra-American manhood, especially at election time.

Obama was quick to say sorry to Poland last week for saying "[Polish death camps](#)" rather than "death camps in Poland" in a speech. But he refuses to apologise for the [American air strikes that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers in November last year](#). Widespread public anger has forced Pakistan's government to block Nato's supply routes to Afghanistan; any hint of infirmity on the sensitive issue of sovereignty is likely to strengthen some of the country's nastiest extremists. Thus, the few possibilities of political stability in a battered country are now hostage to Obama's pre-election punitiveness.

Certainly, Obama's political and personal journey now evokes less uplifting literary comparisons. For, nearly four years after his ecstatically hailed ascension to the White House, Obama resembles Baldwin much less than he does Kipling and other uncertain children of empire who, as Ashis Nandy writes in *The Intimate Enemy*, replaced their early identifications with the weak with "an unending search for masculinity and status". These men saw both their victims and compatriots "as gullible children who must be impressed with conspicuous machismo"; and who suppressed their plural selves "for the sake of an imposed imperial identity – inauthentic and killing in its grandiosity".

"We're killin' 'em! We're killin' 'em all!" Bush exulted, according to Bob Woodward, during his last months in office. And now another man sits in the White House, surveying his own kill lists and plotting re-election, after having already pulled off the cruellest political hoax of our times.