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Top Ten Things That Have and Have Not Changed In the Era of Obama

By Bruce A. Dixon
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In the spirit of Bill Clinton's 1992 "the Man From Hope" slogan, Barack Obama in 2008 declared himself the candidate of Hope and Change. So what about it? Are the real changes, if we can find them, at all what Obama voters hoped for?

10 Black America's median household wealth, compared to that of whites, has sharply declined under Barack Obama. That's a change. Just not a good one.

This is a consequence of the foreclosure epidemic which began in 2007 and 2008 and has always been concentrated in black and poor neighborhoods. But the Obama administration has allowed the foreclosure wave to continue without any letup during its first three and a half years, rejecting demands for foreclosure moratoriums or other measures which would make it easier for large numbers of families to remain in their homes. Where the ratio of white to black household wealth four years ago was around 11 to one, today it is greater than 20 to 1.

9 African Americans still make up 12 or 13% of the nation's population, remain more than 40% of its locked down and locked up, No change there at all..

Latinos, who make up another 13%, are about 30% of the nation's prisoners and rising, a slight change, but distinctly for the worse. So seven of every ten US prisoners are from the one quarter of the nation that is black or brown, and that percentage is rising.

8 The fifty-year war on drugs continues. No change for the better at all there.

Like every president since Nixon, Barack Obama has thwarted states that wanted to decriminalize small amounts of drugs, refuses to treat drug use as a medical problem rather than a police one. Like its predecessors, the Obama administration has expanded the frontiers of the drug war into places like Mexico and Colombia, where the US demand for illegal drugs has given birth to vast industries which may be among the largest and most lucrative, and certainly the most deadly, in those countries..

7 "Too big to fail" banksters and other financial criminals are still above the law. No change here either.

Not a single person responsible for crashing the economy in 2007 has seen the inside of a prison. It's just not going to happen. Wall Street insiders give as much, and often more to Democrats than they do to Republicans. So the Obama administration has protected banks and lenders and their co-conspirators from prosecution, and shoveled more than ten trillion more at banksters, including those based outside the US, than the Bush-Cheney gang ever did.

It's worth remembering that when Bush could not pass his own bailout bill six weeks before

the 2008 election, he called Barack Obama into town to spend the week on the phone with Congressional Democrats getting them to switch their votes. So the only change here has been the party in charge.

6 Although governments will create trillions of new dollars to give to banksters and borrow it back from them at interest in the name of “fixing the economy”, it still won't create millions of jobs for the unemployed. No change:

In the 1930s, the federal government addressed the Depression by creating hundreds of thousands of jobs out of thin air. They built roads and subways, parks, recreational facilities, dams and bridges. They did theater and historical research like tracking down and interviewing the last living survivors of slavery. It was called the WPA, or Works Progress Administration, under the administration of Democrat Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The White House could do the same today, creating millions of new jobs, repairing and rebuilding infrastructure, building high speed rail, refitting millions of homes for energy efficiency. But Barack Obama disdains the heritage of his own Democratic party. He sounds more like Hoover than FDR today when he says that it's the exclusive role of the private sector to create jobs.

5 It's still almost impossible to organize a union and fight for your own rights on the job anywhere in the US. No change:

There are laws against firing workers who try, but employers are unafraid to break those laws, while working people are very much afraid to lose their jobs. Candidate Obama did promise to put on his comfortable shoes and walk a picket line. Maybe he just lied. President Obama has frozen the wages and pensions of government workers, and endorsed the traditionally Republican idea that public employee and private pensions and health plans cause economic distress to employees and the economy.

4 The bipartisan corporate-funded drive to “reform” education by breaking teachers unions, turning teachers into Wal-Mart style temps, hi-stakes testing, dissolving public schools and replacing them by privately owned charter schools, exempt from public accountability continues apace. No change there at all.

Bush's Secretary of Education called teachers unions “terrorist organizations.” Obama's Secretary of Education declared that Katrina was the best thing that could have happened to public education in New Orleans.

If anything, the Obama administration's Race To The Top program pushed the envelope further than Republicans would have been able to without sustained resistance. It required states to compete for available federal education funds based upon how many teachers they can fire, how many public schools they can close, how many so-called “merit pay” schemes

and similar atrocities they can inflict. Just as only a vicious warmonger like Nixon could have made the first presidential trip to China, only a black Democrat could have successfully pushed the education policy envelope this far in the anti-democratic directions of charters and educational privatization. If anything, the Obama's heinous education policies provide an even further rightward step-off point for those of Republicans like Mitt Romney. It didn't have to be that way.

3 US troops are in more than 140 countries worldwide, and the US, with under 5% of the world's people, spends more on the military than the other 95% of humanity combined. Not much change there.

On the other hand, in the first weeks of his administration, President Obama received a Nobel Peace Prize. So the pan-European elite, which feared and despised George Bush, loves Obama. That's a kind of change they call a distinction without a difference.

The Afghan war drags on, apparently indefinitely. A hundred thousand US-paid mercenaries remain in Iraq, and the war there too is far from over. On the other hand, Barack Obama has been able to use cruise missiles and drones to kill black and brown civilians including children in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan, among other places. US military forces took part in the invasion and overthrow of the African nation of Libya, and the White House has openly rather than covertly sent unknown numbers of US special forces into nobody knows how many countries of Central Africa. A Bush administration doing this would have been greeted with nationwide street demonstrations. But a black Democrat gets a near automatic pass. Is this what the real "race card" looks like?

2 A US president is still orders torture, murder, indefinite imprisonment without trial, and lets corporations that commit crimes abetting those of government employees completely off the hook. But there is has been a change here.

When the Bush-Cheney gang did all this stuff, they did it as scofflaws. The Obama Administration has rammed through legislation in Congress and asked for court decisions to cloak most of the previously illegal torture, murder, kidnapping, warrantless spying and similar crimes with thin veneers of legality. This is the all-important difference between having an MBA as president as opposed to a professor of constitutional law.

1 Deep, real and significant change here. Black politics, at one time heavily influenced by what Martin Luther King called opposition to the triple evils of racism, militarism, and economic injustice, has shrunken and shriveled under the influence of a new class of corporate funded black political leaders like Corey Booker and Barack Obama.

Black politics ain't about fighting for decent housing or jobs any more. It's not about diverting resources from the war machine to uplifting the downtrodden. It's not about funding education or working for the end of the prison state. It's certainly not about defying

unjust laws in the pursuit of just ends, as the Freedom Movement once routinely did.

People forget that King was murdered in Memphis in the middle of a sanitation workers strike in which the National Guard had been called out to patrol the city, and students had stayed home from high school for days to participate in illegal mass actions.

21st century black politics is about electing black politicians, no more and no less. That, and observing Black History Month.

This is far from an exhaustive list, of course.

We could have mentioned the fact that big oil, big agribusiness, big insurance, and big pharma all continue to get whatever they ask for. We might have pointed out that local and state fiscal crises are constantly being provoked to which the solutions are always “public private partnerships” a standard euphemism for privatizations of public assets like roads, waterworks, generation facilities and public services like payroll, parking and fleet management. We could have pointed out that medical costs are still factors in a majority of personal bankruptcies, and the FCC has essentially abandoned any pretense of regulating the cable and broadcast industries, preferring to simply lease out or auction off the electromagnetic spectrum and leave it all to the “free market”.

Some things have changed the last four years, and some haven't. One thing that seems never to change, as long as our choices are restricted to the two corporate parties, is that while you can squint hard enough to make distinctions between Republicans and Democrats, **there are few important differences.**