

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES

DONALD TRUMP AND BARACK OBAMA

IDENTITY AND POWER IN 21st CENTURY AMERICA

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CANTERBURY CHRIST CHURCH UNIVERSITY'S
CANTERBURY CAMPUS
POWELL BUILDING: Pf06

Donald Trump and Barack Obama: Identity and Power in 21st Century America

The Domestic context

In 2009 when Barack Obama assumed the presidency of the United States, the public, academic and intellectual discourse on the left, hailed the election of America's first African American president whose prophetic rise was seen as an exemplar of the (reductionist account) of Dr King's American Dream. Conversely the Conservative alarmist's on the right seemed confounded by the meteoric rise and triumph of this liberal black man, who despite the choppy racial and religious waters traversed during the WOT had managed to win a presidential election in a country that had legally sanctioned the enslavement of his and his wife's African forbears and seemed outwardly at odds with Islam and significant aspects of Obama's own personal identity.

For African-American's, Latino's, women and other social groups consigned to the fringes of American society, Obama seemed like the perfect candidate to remedy the extremes and bellicose character of the Bush administrations war on terror and the corresponding financial crisis that accompanied it. Thus, it was that two thematic extremes have emerged during and after the Obama presidency. Firstly, the cosmopolitan professorial Obama whose Dreams were allegedly inspired via dreams of his African father and the socially liberal rearing of his white mother. In short it was assumed that Obama the new face of American power would resolve America's domestic and foreign affairs in regards to domestic race relations and the narrow nationalistic and ethnocentric brand of US foreign policy. Conversely Donald Trump the outspoken flamboyant and controversial corporate and somewhat politically ambiguous celebrity icon carved out a socially, culturally conservative public profile which mounted the crest of criticism that morphed into the birther's racially coded claims that Obama was both anti and not American.

Trump also basked in the bigoted moonlight of the Tea Party movement which was similarly anachronistic in that it longed for the good old days of white hegemony when African American's and other so called minorities knew their place in the American order. Ultimately Trump skilfully positioned himself as America's great conservative white hope that would solve immigration and economic problems by prosecution and America first business deals that would make America great again. Surprisingly, despite a plethora of insults, ridicule and front roster shaming, Trump succeeded Obama as the corporate and divisive face of American power that would take no political prisoners within and outside the confines of the domestic sphere.

Foreign affairs

At the beginning of his presidential tenure Obama was referred to as the new face of US foreign policy. He was viewed as someone who could restore America's flagging global image; Due to the fact that some critics saw the Bush administration's 'war on terror', as an ethno-religious war against Islam and Muslims. Here Bush and the Vulcans lack of diplomacy and poor use of language-undermined America's Soft Power. Alternatively, when Obama came to office, some assumed that his ethnic identity and his professorial background would lead to more nuanced and better foreign policies.

Arguably the Obama administration toned down the WOT rhetoric but did Obama really differentiate his policies from those of the Bush administration? In actuality Obama did not manage to close down Guantanamo Bay, he increased US troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and he increased the number of drone strikes during his presidency. In short despite Obama's unique identity profile one recognises that the Obama administration maintained core facets of the previous administrations policies. There were significant continuities! Perhaps this was inevitable, given that many of Obama's staff had also served under the Bush and Clinton administrations. In terms of Syria and the US's reluctance to engage in direct military action, we could either argue the world was made safer by the Obama administration or it wasn't.

Significantly it has been suggested that ISIS exists because of the vacuum that was created when Saddam Hussein was removed in Iraq and with the removal of Gaddafi in Libya. The burning question underlined by the Obama and Trump presidencies given that Trump could be considered the antithesis to Obama is whether identity of the president is less important than the requirements of the American security apparatus and the bipartisan worldview of the foreign policy establishment. Bearing in mind the unique chaotic leadership style of the Trump administration and his interesting political appointments are panellists will consider issues related to the aforementioned identity thesis (and beyond). In addition the panellists will postulate regarding what we can expect from the Trump administration in both domestic and foreign affairs and should we expect more of the same despite outward differences? Also the symposium will begin to question whether contemporary trends related to the Bush, Obama and Trump presidencies represent a deepening crisis in the American liberal order?

Thursday 22 June 2017
Room Pf06

Event Programme

Timetable

- 11.25am **Introduction to the Event**
Dr M Ledwidge (Canterbury Christ Church University)
- 11.30am **Roundtable I commences**
Title: Notes on Obama, Donald Trump, a Neo-liberal nightmare or a return to American primacy?
Chair: Professor Louise Wilkinson (Canterbury Christ Church University)
Participants:
- 11.30am Dr Andrew Wroe (University of Kent)
- 12.00pm Dr Mark Ledwidge (Canterbury Christ Church University)
- 12.30pm Questions and Answers / Discussions.
- 13.00pm Roundtable I finishes
- 13.00pm **Lunch**
- 14.00pm **Roundtable II commences**
Title: American Identity, presidential politics and a country in crisis?
Chair: Dr. David Grummitt, Head of Humanities
(Canterbury Christ Church University)
Participants:
- 14.00pm Professor Stephen Burman (University of Sussex)
- 14.25pm Professor Lee Marsden (University of East Anglia)
- 14.50pm Professor Inderjeet Parmar (City University of London)
- 15.15pm Questions and Answers / Discussions
- 16.00pm Roundtable II finishes
- 16.00pm **Closing**
Dr Mark Ledwidge
- 16.10pm **Event ends**