



Obama in the Americas: The Politics of Hope and Disappointment

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze what accounted for the hope Caribbean leaders and the general Caribbean population had regarding U.S. engagement in the region with the election of Barack Obama. The paper provides a brief analysis of Obama's foreign policy in the Americas, with particular focus on the small island developing states in the Caribbean region. Utilising public discourse (online discussions and local news coverage), the paper explores the affection and the benefit of the doubt that was given to Obama as president, despite the historical asymmetrical relationship and experience of American foreign policy in the Caribbean and Latin America. The paper draws on the long history and experience of U.S. engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean broadly, but focuses on the smaller island nations of the Caribbean as they generally find themselves in more precarious economic, political, and social situations than their larger mainland counterparts. The paper also provides a review of some highlighted events in the region over the eight years of Obama's presidency, including a discussion on the role of "blackness" in the Caribbean and the Caribbean Diaspora in the United States. The analysis shows that while the Caribbean harbors deep affection for Obama, his policies were no different from his predecessors. His policies toward the region were no more progressive or consultative or less hegemonic and dictatorial than previous American presidents. The affection and benefit of the doubt given to Obama had little to do with policies and more to do with "skinship" on the one hand and the dependent mindset of many Caribbean leaders on the other hand.

Introduction

In March 2015, I was in Kingston, Jamaica when the government announced that United States (U.S.) President Barack Obama would stopover in Jamaica in April 2015, on route to the Seventh Summit of the Americas meeting in Panama. The announcement was followed by a flurry of activities. The University of the West Indies, Mona campus, where Obama would host a townhall meeting, was a buzz with students and faculty alike enquiring how to secure tickets to the townhall event, possibly the only opportunity they would have to see President Obama in person.

The Government of Jamaica set out to cleanse the city, (or least the paths to and from the airport and to the designated destinations), of its more "undesirable" sites. They removed street food vendors from their more or less permanent (though illegal) locations. They relocated

transient and homeless people. They patched, repaved and spruced up select roads. The street leading to the hotel where Obama would spend the night, already a tourist location, was given a refreshed look. To be sure, this fuss would have been made no matter who the U.S. president was, but in a country where more than ninety percent of the population are people of African descent, the efforts were made special because it was for the first black president of the United States. As Girvan [1] articulated, "the psycho-political impact of the Obama victory" cannot be overstated. "That a Black man could be elected to the White House was beyond dreaming—it belonged to the realm of fantasy, like time travel and other kinds of science fiction" [1], and it is with that energy that Jamaicans received him. Obama who was in his second term of office, is revered and "loved," despite having had no positive policy impact on Jamaica [2].

By contrast, a few months later, in September 2015, David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (U.K.) visited Jamaica and though his visit was official, his reception was far less impressive. There was no love fest for Cameron. He addressed the people of Jamaica through a speech in the Jamaican Parliament and there were protestors outside the building with placards. While criticism of Obama was not welcomed, criticism of Cameron was. Cameron for his part announced the gifting of a prison to Jamaica to allow Britain to send Jamaican-born criminals from the U.K. to serve out their sentence in Jamaica. He also refused to address the issue of an apology for slavery or address calls for reparations and very dismissively told citizens that it was time to "move on." Cameron did little to ingratiate himself to the Jamaican people, while Obama effortlessly did; therefore, anyone who dared to criticize Obama was destined to be publicly censured.

This aim of this article is to provide a brief analysis of Obama's foreign policy in the region, exploring the affection and the benefit of the doubt that was given to him, despite the historical experience of American foreign policy in the Caribbean and Latin America. While the paper draws on the history and experience of U.S. engagement in Latin America and the Caribbean broadly, focus is made on the smaller island nations of the Caribbean as they generally find themselves in more precarious economic, political, and social situations than their larger mainland counterparts. The analysis shows that while the Caribbean harbors deep affection for Obama, his policies were no different from his predecessors. His policies toward the region were no more progressive or consultative or less hegemonic and dictatorial

than previous American presidents. The affection and benefit of the doubt given to Obama has little to do with policies and more to do with “skinship” on the one hand and the continued dependent mindset of many Caribbean leaders on the other hand.

The article is organized into two broad sections followed by a conclusion. The article puts Obama’s foreign policy in historical context by first providing an overview of the region in context and U.S. foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean prior to his election. The article then provides a review of select events in the region over the eight years of Obama’s presidency, including a discussion on the role of “blackness” in the Caribbean and the Caribbean Diaspora in the United States.

The Region in Context

The Caribbean is a small but diverse sub-region in the Americas. All the countries were colonized at one point or another. The region includes both independent states and colonial territories of the U.S., the U.K., the French, and the Dutch. Of the independent states, the smallest populations are in the English-speaking Caribbean, while the larger populations are in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, followed by the French-speaking Caribbean. The region is characterized by small developing economies and small internal markets. While some countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, and Guyana have explored natural resources (minerals, oils) and some are classified as upper middle income, such as Dominica, St. Lucia, and Cuba, the region has high levels of poverty and inequality. As island nations, the region is environmentally vulnerable, and experiences extreme weather conditions particularly earthquakes and hurricanes. There are also high levels of crime, violence, and corruption. Politically, the region has been relatively stable; in particular, the English-speaking Caribbean has had a stable democratic history since independence and Cuba has been a stable socialist country since its revolution. Haiti and Dominican Republic have seen their share of political instability, with Haiti’s situation more pronounced.

South and Central America, also former colonies, though most of these countries gained their independence more than a century before much of the Caribbean, is also diverse. The vast majority of the region is Spanish-speaking, followed by Portuguese. Belize, an English-speaking country in Central America, Surinam, a Dutch-speaking country in South America and Guyana, an English-speaking country in South America, are treated as Caribbean and are part of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). South and Central America has had their own turbulent political and economic history. They have endured authoritarian leaders, military coups, corruption, social movements, worker uprisings, and an unrelenting stream of gang related violence associated with narcotrafficking. They have also worked hard to consolidate their democracies in spite of their long histories of authoritarianism and authoritarian tendencies.

The U.S. is a major trading partner for most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is also the largest source of foreign direct investment for many countries, and the largest market for tourism in the region. The United States is the country of choice for many immigrants (legal and illegal) from Latin America and the Caribbean. The region is also a market for American businesses, American goods and services, and a source of cheap labor and cheap primary resources. While both Latin America and the Caribbean operate at the periphery of global politics, in the shadow of American imperialism; the Caribbean, with its small territories and majority black populations, operate at a further disadvantage within the context of globalization and global racism.

The Phenomenon of Obama

Barack Obama’s candidacy emerged at a particular time in history, in the aftermath of an era of global self-awareness that white supremacy and white privilege had not only wreaked havoc on the lives of people of color all over the world, but also had in a sense, retarded the promised potential of the liberal democratic nation-state. As Germain [3] posit:

throughout the West and the former European colonies of Africa, Persia, the Middle East, Asia, and the Caribbean, the notion that Whites have the responsibility to civilize, lead, and rule other “races” is now preposterous, and the marginalization of citizens based solely on racial criteria is unpopular and perceived as antithetical to the modern nation-state”[3] (p. 446).

Barack Obama’s campaign for President of the United States gave left leaning Latin American and Caribbean leaders hope, that under him a new kind of relationship would emerge in the region. They had hope of a new, fresh approach to foreign policy. Erikson [4] points out that there was “all but universal global applause for the election of Barack Obama” (p.101). Fidel Castro, former leader of Cuba, who was no fan of American Presidents, was noted as having “praised” Obama on his election victory, stating that Obama, in comparison with his opponents, was ““more intelligent, educated and level headed””[4] (p. 102).

Obama-mania was evident throughout Latin America and the Caribbean almost immediately upon his election. In Brazil, six candidates running in the municipal elections “legally changed their names to either Barack or Obama in an attempt to capitalize on the local popularity of the American candidate” [4](p. 101). In his enthusiasm for the Obama win, the Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda tried to change the name of his country’s tallest mountain Boggy Peak to Mount Obama [4](p. 102). Martinique, a French territory, re-named a road in Obama’s honor.

Erikson [4] remarked that Obama’s popularity in the region was “striking” considering his minimal exposure to the region and minimal mention of Latin America and the Caribbean during the campaign, except for mentions of Venezuela and Cuba who were mentioned as “adversarial governments that Obama advocated engaging directly” (p. 103). In fact, he departed significantly from the belabored U.S. policy of isolating Cuba, proposing instead to re-engage by relaxing travel and remittance restrictions for Cuban-Americans.

Obama’s first official travel to the region came in April 2009, a few months after taking office. He attended the Fifth Summit of the Americas held in Trinidad and Tobago. “He made some unprecedented statements for a U.S. president, admitting that ‘at times we sought to dictate our terms’” [5](p. 63). The willingness to admit to the lived experiences of the asymmetrical relationship between the U.S. and Latin America and the Caribbean, endeared Obama to the region’s leaders and as Weisbrot [5] commented, raised their expectations on what was possible under an Obama presidency. As we will explore, those possibilities were not realised on the international front.

On the domestic front, Obama’s economic and social policies were a success, despite strong opposition from the Republican Party. “The U.S. economy recovered faster than any of the other major industrial democracies,” the deficit acquired from the bailout of banks in 2009 was significantly reduced, millions of Americans gained access to health care coverage, in addition to “important progress on civil rights for gay Americans and some other minorities” [6]. The Obama administration enacted The Fair Sentencing Act in 2010 to combat unfair imprisonment, which disproportionately affects minorities and amended the automatic sentencing dispensed for crack cocaine as well as released low level drug offenders.

While there were clear wins on the domestic side, Germain [3] cautions that electing a black president does not undo the long-term economic and political disparities people of color find themselves in. Looking at Bolivia, South Africa and the United States, Germain concludes that elections of “presidents of color” can and has translated to “economic gains for racially underrepresented groups” (2010, p. 447). However, those gains are limited by two challenges: “the forces of globalisation” which encourage economic decisions that are against the interests of “racially underrepresented groups,” and the perniciousness of white supremacy in the cultural, social, and economic fabric of the state [3](p. 447). Similarly, it has been argued

that in relation to foreign policy, the forces of globalization and history were more intractable than Obama realized.

U.S. Foreign Policy Pre-Obama: A Cycle of Engagement, Intervention, Neglect

It is important to place Obama's approach to foreign policy in the Caribbean and Latin America in historical context. The U.S. has been the regional hegemon intervening directly and indirectly into the lives, the economic welfare, and political developments of just about every developing country in the region. U.S. influence is felt in regional organization like the Organization of the America States (OAS) and the Inter-American Development (IDB) and in international financial institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The U.S. has been the regional (and global) promoter of a kind of democracy, one partial to American influence and neoliberal economics. The U.S. has very little tolerance for democracies in the developing world that do not prioritize capital, as Winter [7] notes, "when a leader tries to do something for the poor and downtrodden of his country, instead of serving Washington and the IMF and other powers that be, there will be demonising and economic squeezes and coup attempts" (p. 257). There is global recognition that U.S. foreign policy "underwrites" U.S. corporate interests "in its search for natural resources, cheap labour, export markets, and profits from obtaining control of privatized state enterprises and sectors of the economy previously reserved for national capital" [8](p. 20).

Furthermore, Klein [9] argues that neoliberal free market capitalism as advocated by Milton Friedman and his followers has been able to spread because such policies are often instituted when economies are at their weakest, specifically when there is an economic disaster. The type of policies introduced, so-called "shock therapy," are enacted when citizens are least able to coordinate and mount resistance because they are preoccupied with trying to navigate the economic disaster. This allows neoliberal policy makers to exploit the economic crisis to benefit private capital. Where necessary, the U.S. deploys its military as "the guardians" of the world capitalist system [8] (p. 21).

Up to the early 1960s, Latin America and the Caribbean were important to U.S. foreign policy due to Cold War geopolitics.

The region was flooded with military regimes that violently ended revolutionary attempts and eliminated every vestige of democracy, rule of law, and social development. In the few countries where the armed forces and the far right did not seize control of the state, reforms faded from the public agenda under the party-cratic reign of Demo-Christian and Social Democratic regimes. While dictatorships swallowed democracies, U.S. attention shifted away from the region toward other areas of the globe [10](p. 132).

Starting in the mid-1960s, under U.S. President Johnson, the U.S. gradually shifted focus from Latin America and the Caribbean to Southeast Asia. The shift did not prevent the U.S. from orchestrating a number of counterinsurgencies in the region in its effort to contain communism. However, as Chomsky has pointed out, it was not necessarily about containing communism, it was about containing any movement that is antithetical to U.S. interests. U.S. foreign policy and U.S. influence seeks to "prevent the rise of nationalist regimes, which are responsive to pressures from the masses of the population" [11](p. 64). He also argues that "what the U.S. wants is 'stability,' meaning security for the upper classes and large foreign enterprises" [12].

Fidel Castro's overthrow of U.S. aligned Cuban dictator President Batista and his installation of a socialist government in Cuba has been a thorn in U.S. foreign policy since 1959. "The portrayal of Cuba in Western press since the 1959 Revolution has bordered on the ridiculous to anyone who has visited there and talked to the Cuban people. The demonization of Cuba and the Castro brothers has been among the most successful propaganda campaigns in the world over the past sixty years" [7] (p. 250). The U.S. policy toward Cuba has been attempted isolation, an attempt to strangle the economy through

economic and travel sanctions and even accusing the Cuban state of participating in global terrorism, with U.S. President George W. Bush listing Cuba within the so-called "axis of evil."

In 1965, the U.S. invaded the Dominican Republic (they were also invading Vietnam during this time). The U.S. intervened in the Dominican Civil War under the pretext of preventing another Cuba. The U.S. had previously occupied the Dominican Republic (1916-1924) over concerns that the Germans would use the country to launch attacks against them. The U.S. oversaw covert operations in Chile in the 1960s into the 1970s. It orchestrated a military coup in 1973, deposing of the socialist President Salvador Allende and replacing him with U.S. puppet Army Chief Pinochet. U.S. intervention in Colombia has been ongoing for 50 years as part of their "war on drugs" and war on Marxist counterinsurgents. The U.S. invaded and occupied Grenada in 1983 under "Operation Urgent Fury," to protect their interests against economic and social interventions that would have been for the betterment of the Grenadian people. In Jamaica, the U.S. orchestrated a series of covert activities through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to destabilise the country in the 1980s, to undermine the democratic socialist, Cuba-aligned, Prime Minister Michael Manley.

In Central America in the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. interference and military intervention as part of their Cold War containment policy has been devastating. The U.S. endorsed far-right candidates, offered military assistance to authoritarian governments, armed them and trained their military, and remained silent when those trained soldiers formed death squads, committed atrocities and human rights abuses against unarmed civilians. In Panama, the U.S. intervened in 1989 with "Operation Just Cause," under the pretext of maintaining the neutrality of the Panama Canal and safe guarding the lives of Americans, countering drug trafficking and money laundering. In Haiti, the U.S. has occupied (1915-1934), invaded (1994 and 2004), and intervened at will. In the 1994 "Operation Uphold Democracy," the U.S. used the United Nations (UN) Security Council as cover to remove the military regime that overthrew the elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. A decade later, the U.S. orchestrated a coup in Haiti deposing President Aristide who was in his second term of office, and forcing him into exile in Central Africa.

With the end of the Cold War, "migration, drug trafficking, and organised crime, along with democratic intervention ... became the focus of the U.S. agenda; they were approached not as economic problems but as 'security issues'" [10](p. 132). With the advent of the U.S. "war on terror," the region became even less important [13](p. 111-112). Hernandez [10] argues that Latin America and the Caribbean are not priority countries for U.S. foreign policy, there is no coordinated strategy and the interests and relationships "serve particular short-term, country-specific agendas that really reflect not regional or bilateral but global interests" (p. 132).

In the face of this, the region began to look both inwards and beyond the U.S. Internally, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez stepped in to provide ideological leadership with a focus on creating an international system favorable to developing countries. They worked on "deepening subregional integration" through the formation of new institutions, regional trade and investment, multinational corporations, and business networks" [13](p. 112). Chavez offered Venezuelan oil at discounted prices and offered economic assistance throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, in his PetroCaribe Oil Program, which was launched in 2005. "Through the program, nations pay only a small portion of the costs up front for oil and refined products. They finance the rest under generous long-term debt agreements and use the savings for social programs and infrastructure investments" [14].

Externally, the region sought development assistance from China. China has "become one of the Caribbean's largest sources of development projects, trade, and preferential lending" [15]. There is a new power plant in Antigua and Barbuda, a cricket stadium, and

a new school courtesy of the Chinese government. The Bahamas has a new US\$35 million stadium, a gift from the Chinese government. Dominica has a new grammar school, a renovated hospital, and a sports stadium thanks to the Chinese. The Chinese renovated the Prime Minister's official residence in Trinidad and Tobago. A Chinese company invested heavily in sugar in Jamaica and the Chinese government has loaned Jamaica millions of dollars in loans for infrastructure development. While the Chinese provide much needed development aide and loans at favorable interest rates without policy or reform prescriptions, Caribbean citizens have been more cautious and sometimes suspicious about this assistance, much more so than their governments.

The Election of Obama and the Politics of Blackness

In the context of global racism against people of African descent specifically and non-whites generally, the election of Barack Obama as president of a white settler state, with a long and strong history of racial animus toward non-whites, is remarkable. It is within this historical and psycho-social context that we can understand the exuberant response of the Caribbean and Latin America to the election of Obama as U.S. President. Obama emergence was felt as much in the Caribbean as it was in the U.S., where the Caribbean has a sizeable Diaspora population. As James [16] points out "the exuberance had to do with hope as with race, as the Caribbean is on the doorstep of the United States." Furthermore, the 2014 U.S. Census American Community Survey, showed that "there are nearly four million immigrants from the Caribbean living in the United States and more than 90 percent hail from five countries: Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Haiti and Trinidad and Tobago" [17].

A variety of calypso and reggae songs were penned in 2008 by Caribbean artists to support the presidential election of Obama. Since Caribbean citizens cannot vote in U.S. elections, it was clear that the music was meant to motivate those in the Diaspora to vote for Obama. For instance, Trinidadian Calypsonian, The Mighty Sparrow's "Barack the Magnificent," encouraged people to vote for Obama because he would end the war (in the Middle East and genocide in Darfur), would deliver health care, better energy policy, and "clean up Washington overall." Similarly, popular reggae band, Steel Pulse, penned a track repeatedly chanting "Vote Barack." Reggae legend Coco Tea's track claimed the momentum for Obama was beyond race, class, and creed and as such, his bid for presidency should be supported. As Girvan [1] remarked, Obama "inspired people from all races, all backgrounds, all economic classes to do something special... to hope." After his victory, reggae icon Tony Rebel with Nikki Burt and Queen Ifrica, recorded "Blackman Redemption" set to Bob Marley's song of the same title. The track incorporates samples of Obama's speeches during the campaign and declared him the personification of Martin Luther King's dream come to life. Overcoming ancestral challenges, he was the change.

As the son of a white American mother and an immigrant Kenyan father, raised in Hawaii, who spent some of this childhood in Indonesia, Obama has a different cultural and ethnic background from the majority African American population. He does not share in the background of centuries of oppression and systemic discrimination against black Americans in the same way that persons born of African American (and Black Caribbean) parents are. On the road to his presidential bid, Obama is noted as stating that while he is "rooted in the black community" he is "not defined by it" [18], which is not surprising as he had noted in his book that he "knew it was too late to ever claim Africa as my home, and if I had come to understand myself as a black American, and was understood as such, that understanding remained unanchored to place" [19](p. 115). Obama's "racial" experience therefore, is more in line with Black Diaspora issues of intercultural assimilation and integration difficulties – cultural fit and in-group/out group trust – social, economic, political, more than it is based on a history of oppression, though presumably he still faced the same systemic discrimination evident in the

United States. Crouch [20] notes, "other than color, Obama did not – does not – share a heritage with the majority of black Americans, who are descendants of plantation slaves." And while that is true, it did not prevent him from motivating the black electorate, especially the black immigrant population from the Caribbean. He endeared them by recognizing the shared history of colonialism in the Americas and the legacy it created.

The bonds between the United States and the Caribbean remain strong. Both rooted in similar legacies -- of trial and triumph, oppression and liberation -- our narratives have advanced on a similar path of progress, driven forward by our shared dedication to fostering opportunity and forging a brighter future. ... The legacy of Caribbean Americans is one of tenacity and drive; it reminds us that in America, with faith and determination, anything is possible [19].

Gooding [21] points out that while studies have found that "Black immigrants maintain ethnic identities, and political attitudes that are distinct from those of the native Black population (i.e. African Americans)," his research showed that Afro-Caribbean immigrants living in the United States strongly supported Obama's candidacy and presidency based both on racial identity politics and the politics of respectability. In other words, Afro-Caribbean immigrants supported a bi-racial president who identifies as black because he was viewed as respectable (intelligent, eloquent, charismatic etc.). Gooding points out that the respectability of black people nationally and internationally is an important characteristic in shaping the political attitudes of Afro-Caribbean immigrants.

Hollinger [22] maintains that the election of Obama "made it easier to contemplate a 'possible future' that might be called post-ethnic or post-racial" (p. 174). It made it easier to contemplate a future where individuals "devote as much – or as little – of their energies as they wished to their community of descent" [22] (p. 174). A future where public and private entities were discouraged "from implicitly telling citizens that the most important thing about them is their descent community" [11](pp. 175-6). This imagining presumes that those who hold power and have actively racialized others are keen on such a future. Implicit in these musings is an assumption that racialized others, those who have been forced to cling to their "community of descent" for mere survival, are the ones somehow retarding the progression to the post-racial era by their insistence on being seen as they are and treated equitably. Obama for his part, acknowledged that white Americans were attracted to him as a leader because they see him as the personification of a "post racial" era in America. The idea of "post racial" is curious in a country where non-whites regularly experience racism, Obama was therefore cautious of embracing this characterization [23](p. 231-259).

U.S. Foreign Policy in the Region Under Obama

Obama's stated policy preference during his first presidential campaign focused on universalistic policies and a race neutral agenda. Lowenthal [13] noted that Obama set out to refocus U.S. policy in the region, moving away from a policy dominated by international terrorism to one that better reflected issues faced in the region, a focus on "economic growth, job creation, energy, migration, and democratic governance" (p. 114). He also articulated a shift in tactics in the "war on drugs" focusing on treatment for addicts and demand reduction in the U.S. and not just crop eradication and interdictions in Latin America and the Caribbean [13].

Obama advocated for a foreign policy that was based on partnership and multilateralism, and agreements that were based on a principle of an alliance of equals. He seemed to appreciate that "diplomacy, negotiation and winning hearts and minds are more effective means of pursuing American interests than the ready exercise of brute force. And a willingness to see and understand the point of view of 'The Other'" [1]. However, as Girvan noted, Obama still had to "obey the imperatives of America's strategic interests" or he would risk ostracizing himself politically.

Based on the utterances on foreign policy matters during the campaign, there was an expectation for Obama to be not simply a progressive, but a radically different kind of leader compared to his predecessors. This expectation was held both by underrepresented groups in the U.S. and most certainly held and hoped for by leaders in the U.S.'s periphery. But as Girvan [1] highlighted, such expectations were "unrealistic" and "misplaced." Nonetheless, the expectations existed, and Obama seemed to recognize it.

Hoping against the Odds: Obama's First Term

At the Fifth Summit of the Americas held in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009, Obama "won praise for his consultative manner and his interest in multilateral cooperation" [13](111). He stated that he sought to develop a "new relationship" with Latin America and the Caribbean, one in which there was no "no senior partner or junior partner" [13](p. 115). He also stated, as mentioned earlier, that he wished to depart from the policy of dictating to the region. Despite the seemingly fresh approach, Obama dismissed the idea of reintegrating Cuba into the OAS, an issue that was and is of importance to Latin American and Caribbean leaders [8](p. 18). When it came to Cuba, Obama's fresh approach, had limits.

Beyond the OAS issue, Obama maintained Cuba on the state terrorism list, however, he did introduce changes to U.S.'s policy toward Cuba, specifically loosening travel restrictions for Cuban-Americans to travel to Cuba and increasing remittance limits to Cuba. The loosening of travel restrictions almost immediately increased the number of flights available to Cuba out of Florida. The increased flows of remittances were used to finance small business ventures that had already started to spring up in Cuba as part of Raul Castro's economic reforms [15]. Raul Castro responded favorably to Obama's move stating: "We have sent word to the US government in private and in public that we are willing to discuss everything, human rights, freedom of the press, political prisoners, everything"[24]. Castro in turn requested the release of the five Cubans being held in the U.S. for spying and offered to release political prisoners held in Cuba in exchange.

The real test of Obama's foreign policy approach in the region came two months after his appearance in Trinidad and Tobago. In June 2009, Manuel Zelaya, the democratically elected President of Honduras was overthrown in a military coup and flown out of the country. U.S. officials were in contact with military leaders in Honduras up to the day of the coup, supposedly "to try and discourage it" [5](p. 64). The Honduran military were evidently not persuaded as they ousted Zelaya on June 28, 2009. Washington was seen as supportive of the coup and their inaction and statements in the months that followed confirmed for the international community that Obama was no different from his predecessors in their penchant to support extralegal political developments if they served their economic interests.

For at least five months the Obama administration refused to condemn the massive human rights violations committed by the coup regime, despite documentation and denunciations from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and Honduran, European, and other human rights organizations. There were thousands of illegal arrests, beatings, torture by police and military, the closing down of independent radio and TV stations, and even some killings of peaceful demonstrators and opposition activists [5](p. 64).

To observers, the Obama administration did "everything in its power to help the coup government succeed" including not suspending U.S. aid to Honduras and blocking the adoption of a resolution in the OAS to not recognize the elections that were to be carried out under the coup government in Honduras [5](p. 64). "Despite initially calling the coup which brought Porfirio Lobo to power illegal, Obama quickly moved to recognize the regime, praising Lobo for his 'strong commitment to democracy' in 2011" [15].

If Honduras was the test of whether or not Obama's foreign policy approach was business as usual, Haiti was the confirmation that it was. The biggest interventionist efforts in the Caribbean have been in Haiti. The focus supposedly being to help Haiti rebuild, particularly after the January 2010 earthquake that killed more than 300,000 Haitians. U.S. policy in Haiti "has maintained the status quo of empowering international capital at the expense of the Haitian people's livelihood and self-determination," as such the rebuilding efforts focussed on constructing sweatshops while "totally ignoring Haiti's education system" [15].

In Haiti, the Obama administration continued the U.S. policy of political and electoral interference. The Haitian presidential election in November 2010 saw the lowest voter turnout in the region to date, due to the inexplicable exclusion of Fanmi Lavalas, the most popular political party in Haiti at the time. This election also saw the U.S. use its influence within a regional organisation, the OAS, to change the candidate run off results of the election to better reflect their own candidate preference. "The Obama administration then repeatedly threatened ... the government until it reluctantly accepted the change of results, leaving only two right-wing candidates ... competing for president in a country that would never willingly vote for a right-wing president" [5](p. 68). The threats leveled against President Preval were to cut off earthquake relief aid to Haiti and to fly him out of Haiti [5](p. 68), which is to say, to worsen the immiseration of Haitians and kidnap their leader. Weisbrot points out that these were not idle threats when you consider that the U.S. overthrew President Aristide in much the same way. First, they destroyed "the economy by cutting off international aid for nearly four years while funneling money to opposition groups," then flew Aristide out of Haiti and blocked his return [5](p. 69).

The historical pattern of U.S. foreign policy in the Caribbean region, except for Cuba, is aided in no small part by the dependent mindset of its leaders who defer and acquiesce to U.S. authority; they actively play the part of junior partner in U.S.-Caribbean relations. In June 2010, in a high-level meeting between CARICOM states and the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in Barbados, Caribbean leaders highlighted that security was a major challenge, and were therefore seeking assistance from the Americans to address it. St. Lucia's Prime Minister Stephenson King noted that "many of the drugs and guns used to commit crimes in the Caribbean come from various parts of Central and South America," and suggested that the U.S. provide assistance to tackle the issue "at source" since individual Caribbean countries did not have the necessary resources to do so (Antigua Daily Observer, 2010). These types of requests only serve to embolden U.S. interventionist tendencies. A Caribbean leader requesting the U.S. government intervene in Central and South America, to tackle crime in the Caribbean is tone deaf, given the long history of U.S. interventionism and violence in those countries as part of their "war on drugs."

By 2012, 17 of the 23 countries the Obama administration identified as countries contributing to the production and or transit of drugs to the U.S. and beyond were in Latin America and the Caribbean (the list was more or less consistent with prior years). Focussing on the Caribbean specifically, Obama noted that "approximately 5 percent of all drugs destined for the United States are estimated to pass through the majors list countries of The Bahamas, Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Jamaica" [25]. Not surprisingly, he further noted, "the United States and other donors continue to believe that countering the drug trade in the Caribbean is in our national interest, as well as that of the countries themselves" [25]. This position helps to explain why Obama not only continued but expanded on the Bush administration's counter narcotics program in Colombia and Central America by establishing the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) in 2009. The CBSI is focussed on increasing citizen safety, promote social justice, and most importantly reduce drug trafficking in and through the circum-Caribbean.

Despite Obama's rhetoric of mutual respect and an alliance of equals, the region has seen fit to create regional organisations that exclude the U.S. in order to advance talks on regional collaboration and in some instances regional integration. In December 2011, 33 countries in the Americas formed the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), this community excludes the United States and though it cannot yet compete with the structures of the OAS, of which the U.S. is the dominant member, the idea is to create a space where U.S. influence is not a consideration for decision making. There is also the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), with 10 full members from the Caribbean, South and Central America, which was originally launched as Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas in 2004 by Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. Whatever the overall success or failure of these organisations, they show a general need and willingness to create alternatives to U.S. influence in the region.

International observers were generally disappointed in Obama's foreign policy direction they, like leaders in the Caribbean and Latin America, were hoping against the odds, that the Obama administration would chart a new course in U.S. foreign policy.

Obama's campaign rhetoric blended an intention to reassert U.S. power in areas where it had lost influence with a more positive commitment to respectful multilateralism in which the non-military dimensions of foreign policy would underlie U.S. leadership. However, under the directives of Clinton-era advisers, Obama has chosen, as many have noted in puzzlement and regret, to sustain—and in fact strengthen—the security strategies and policies of the Bush administration [8](p.19).

By the end of Obama's first term in office, the priority areas for U.S. foreign policy in the region focussed on promoting economic and social opportunities, citizen security (with a clear focus on drug trafficking and Cuban politics), strengthening democratic institutions and promoting clean energy; not very different from the policy focus of previous administrations. While the general policies were the same, the approach was supposedly significantly different in that Obama's policy approach focussed, at least on paper, on partnership of equals, mutual respect, and shared responsibility [26,27]. In the background of this, Latin America and the Caribbean decentered the U.S. in favour of new economic and diplomatic partners. Obama's position made it more likely that the region would continue to work with and seek out new development partners and pursue regional integration initiatives and organizations that did not include the United States.

Hope Renewed: Obama's Second Term

During the presidential debates between Romney and Obama, "it became apparent that Latin America and the Caribbean was not an area of deep concern for either candidate" [15]. Regardless, Caribbean leaders were relieved when Barack Obama was re-elected. "This relief was not due to any significant or meaningful policy implementations by the Obama administration during his first term but out of fear that Romney's election would have brought a more aggressive and antagonistic stance toward the region" [15]. The Prime Minister of Dominica, Roosevelt Skerrit congratulated Obama on his re-election and remarked "Clearly, the U.S. focus is on anti-terrorism matters and they moved away from issues relating to development in the region. But I am hoping that the new term of President Obama there would be some kind of re-direction towards development issues" [15]. Jamaican sociologist Peter Espeut noted that Obama securing a second term allowed him to "concentrate on foreign-policy matters, like readmitting Cuba into the mainstream of hemispheric affairs, and re-establishing US hegemony in Jamaica and the Caribbean" [2]. U.S. hegemony under President Obama was seen as something positive, whereas U.S. hegemony under other U.S. presidents had been heavily criticized.

The mounting economic and political crisis in Venezuela provided the Obama administration an opportunity to reassert the U.S. on

energy matters in the Caribbean. In 2014, the Obama administration launched the Caribbean Energy Security Initiative to help transform the region's electricity sector. In January 2015, private investors and all Caribbean countries except Cuba, were hosted by Vice President Joe Biden, at the first Caribbean Energy Security Summit in Washington, D.C. The main agenda for the meeting was to discuss how the U.S. could help the Caribbean pursue alternative energy and wean them off Venezuelan oil.

In 1982, Ronald Reagan was the first American president to visit Jamaica, 33 years later, Obama became the second. Reagan went to peddle his Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI) to a willing Edward Seaga, Jamaica's Prime Minister at the time, who had cut ties with Cuba and embraced Reaganomics, "declaring the country open to free enterprise and foreign investments" in exchange for development aid from the U.S. [14]. Charles noted that "many of the issues the region faced during Reagan's 1982 visit to Jamaica — channeling private investment, strengthening security, combating drug trafficking — remain unchanged" in 2015 when Obama visited [14].

Obama's courtesy stopover in Jamaica on his way to the Seventh Summit of the Americas in Panama in April 2015 raised questions on the "real" purpose of his visit. "The White House characterized it as little more than a goodwill excursion in which the president played tourist, but I think there's a little more to it" [28]. News headlines from the U.S., across the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe and China, all honed in on the same reasons — to reassert U.S. influence amid a rapidly deteriorating Venezuela and to promote U.S. capital amid an imposing Chinese presence in the region [29, 30,14, 31]. Obama's visit was seen as an effort to rekindle hope in his good intentions.

The visit comes amid a perception that Obama's interest in the region has failed to materialize. Yet his travels — first to Jamaica, then to the Summit of the Americas in Panama — follow a year of increased attention to the region by the U.S. president. His immigration executive orders, his efforts to slow the influx of Central American minors to the U.S. border, and his diplomatic outreach to Cuba have put a foreign policy spotlight on U.S. neighbors to the south [31].

On arrival in Kingston, President Obama did not make use of some of the roads paved for his benefit, choosing instead to travel by helicopter from the airport. Portia Simpson-Miller, Jamaica's Prime Minister at the time, received President Obama and speaking on behalf of the citizenry, declared their love for him and his wife, Michelle Obama [32]. As Espeut [2] noted, "Jamaicans love President Obama, but not because of his political positions or achievements; in fact, if we believe the polls, most Jamaicans strongly disagree with his stance on homosexuality, gay marriage, and abortion. And few Jamaicans have felt any direct benefit from Obama's presidency — in this regard, a black US president is indistinguishable from a white one."

While Obama was generally greeted with excitement on his brief visit to Jamaica, there are many who were not as thrilled, though they largely kept those views out of the public domain. One young Rastafari reggae artist, Chronixx, seemingly annoyed with all the "love" Obama was receiving amidst the fact that he really had not done anything for Jamaica, publicly (on his personal Instagram account) referred to the visiting Obama as a "waste man." Chronixx captioned a picture of Marcus Garvey: "This man ... still have a criminal record in The United States and we glorifying some waste man!" He went on to imply that black people could not be trusted to do the right or necessary things to move the people forward saying, "race of good for nothings ... that's why black faces don't mean anything to Rasta anymore." The backlash was expected, swift, and dogged. He was criticized for being out of order and disrespectful and many implied that he was putting his U.S. visa status and future bookings in the U.S. at risk.

His statement related specifically to the one repeated request

Jamaica wanted Obama to address, exoneration or pardon of Jamaican born Pan-African philosopher Marcus Garvey, who at independence from Britain in 1962, Jamaica named their first national hero. He is also a significant figure in the Rastafari community.

Garvey was convicted in the U.S. in 1923 for mail fraud. His sentence was commuted in 1927, but he was deported back to Jamaica. Since then supporters have urged his exoneration because, they say, his trial was racially motivated. FBI documents all but acknowledge that [33].

Jamaican Prime Ministers, Jamaican citizens at home and in the U.S. along with a number of U.S. senators and congresspersons lobbied for a pardon but Obama did not address the issue. Garvey is a prominent significant historical figure beyond Jamaica, he is a central figure in Pan-African scholarship. In the American context while he was not

the first black civil rights leader ... he was arguably the first to focus on black pride and self-reliance. The organizations he founded in the early 20th century ... crusaded for everything from black entrepreneurship to the pan-African struggle against colonial rule [33].

It is widely recognized, at least in Caribbean and African communities, that Garvey's teachings inspired many of the freedom movements and leaders in the Caribbean, Africa and the United States. Padgett concedes that Marcus Garvey could have been a "controversial figure" for Obama to consider pardoning. Garvey "had feuds with other early 20th-century civil rights leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, and he was often accused of promoting racial separation. He also made anti-Semitic remarks after his 1923 trial" [33]. Furthermore, Padgett argues that the issue may have been too marginal for Obama to consider, "because outside of Caribbean enclaves like the one in Miami, Marcus Garvey is far removed from the modern American consciousness. Pardoning him, as a result, just wasn't that politically urgent" [33].

According to Cave [34], "[f]or decades, Cuba and the United States have framed their relationship as a conflict of opposites: Communism vs. capitalism; Cuban loyalists vs. Cuban exiles; the state vs. the individual," except it is the U.S. and its media that authored that framing, not Cuba. In March 2016, on his visit to Cuba, Obama attempted to lecture Cubans about their racism and stated "We want our engagement to help lift up Cubans who are of African descent" [7](p. 252). Caribbean observers snickered at the irony of Obama's statement, given the history and state of race relations in the United States. Much of the media coverage in the U.S. played into the propaganda portrayal of a meeting of opposites. They portrayed Raul Castro as being out of his depth in a press conference setting, conversing with a democratic Obama and a free press by way of U.S. media outlets [7]. The rest of the region, those who have had continues relations with Cuba over the last sixty years, saw something different. They saw Castro, a leader who was already engaged in reforms, hearing more of what was possible. Far from being obstinate, Castro was open and polite.

In December 2016, a month before departing office, Obama signed into law, "The United States-Caribbean Strategic Engagement Act (H.R. 4939)," which calls for increase engagement between the U.S., governments of the Caribbean, the Caribbean Diaspora in the U.S. "and the private sector and civil society in both the United States and the Caribbean" (News America, 2016). The Act speaks to:

- State Department and USAID prioritizing U.S. policy towards the Caribbean;
- broadening State Department and USAID outreach to the Caribbean Diaspora in the U.S. to promote their involvement in Caribbean economic development and citizen security;
- outlining an approach to partner with Caribbean governments to improve citizen security, reduce illicit drug trafficking, strengthen the rule of law, and improve the effectiveness of the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI);

- encouraging efforts of the region to implement regional and national strategies that improve Caribbean energy security;
- improving diplomatic engagement with Caribbean governments; and
- assisting Caribbean countries in diversifying their economies, reducing free trade and investment barriers, and supporting the training and employment of persons in marginalized communities (News America, 2016).

Obama attempted to leave office how he started, with a principle of mutual respect, multilateralism, and an alliance of equals, but perhaps it was already too late.

Dashed Hopes, Sinking Disappointment: A Conclusion

Hernandez (2010) argues that although leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean welcomed Obama and his talk about partnership, they had no illusions about their relationship with the U.S. and "scarcely believe in specific agreements." He continued, "most countries do not count on U.S. support in dealing with their internal problems, nor do they look to the North to find a way to international development" (p. 131). They may not do so practically (operationally), but in bilateral and multilateral meetings, they do seek U.S. assistance to solve internal problems and development aid and they seem unbothered that assistance generally caters to the needs of the capital class in the U.S.

Eric Farnsworth, Vice President of Council of the Americas maintained that while it was fair to state that the U.S. was focused elsewhere in the world, he did not agree that the U.S. had "cast the region adrift." He disclosed that while there wasn't high-level political engagement with the Caribbean, there was operational day-to-day engagement that was "quite high in terms of security activities with the Treasury Department or banking regulators, Coast Guard officials, drug enforcement agent types. There is constant engagement at the working levels" [14].

During Obama's eight years in office, his administration launched a series of programs in the Caribbean and Latin America, which accounts for the "constant engagement at the working levels": to encourage investments and collaboration in clean energy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and promote energy security [35]; and to promote youth entrepreneurship development under the Young Leaders of the Americas Initiative. The U.S.'s small business center (SBC) model was promoted and adopted in some English-speaking Caribbean territories with the intent to provide better business support services to micro and small enterprises. U.S. Department of Agriculture provided training in food safety and animal health. The Open Skies Air Transport Agreements increased air travel and shipping options. However, since visa-free travel is mostly a one-sided affair, the primary benefactors are American travellers and American and American allied businesses operating in the region. Under the CBSI, the U.S. seeks to reduce arms and drugs trafficking, to help professionalize law enforcement, justice sector reform, and to promote overall security in the Caribbean [16].

According to Salazar and Furio [36], the CBSI and its Central America counterpart, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) helps to "substantiate" the assertion of:

the growing militarization of the actions undertaken during Barack Obama's two terms ... military bases and other facilities have been expanded under both, in addition to the more or less permanent presence of thousands of U.S. troops and officers in various Homeland Security agencies. There has also been a systematic relocation of U.S. aerial and naval forces in the air space and on the sea, as well as along the coasts of most of the countries in the greater Caribbean region (p. 56).

Similarly, Walt [6] noted that not only did Obama embrace Bush's "war on terror" policies, he expanded on them, "especially in the use of drones and special operations forces." He pursued

“counterterrorism operations in more places than ever before, albeit without apparent success” [6]. Furthermore, James [16] noted that in terms of citizen security, Obama may have left the Caribbean worse off than he found it, in that his administration deported more people to the Caribbean than any other president before him, deporting some 2.5 million people over his eight years in office. “Many of the small economies in the Caribbean blame a rise in crime on deportees from the US” [16].

Re-establishing diplomatic relations with Cuba and removing them from the list of states sponsors of terrorism were perhaps Obama’s greatest achievement. Interestingly, Obama did not close Guantanamo Bay as expected. The advances in Cuba are unfortunately overshadowed by the Obama administration’s egregious actions in Haiti and Honduras, which served to confirm Obama’s lack of respect for the democratic processes in the region, which followed in the bloody footsteps of his predecessors.

It is surprising that given the circumstances on the ground, that more Caribbean leaders and commentators were not critical of Obama and his administration on their visits within the region. Michael Lorne, a Jamaican attorney and Rastafari elder publicly supported Chronixx. He remarked that Chronixx was speaking truth. Obama visited Jamaica, visited the Bob Marley museum, Marley was a prominent Rastafari who gave homage to Garvey and incorporated Garvey’s teachings in his music. Obama visited and laid a wreath at the National Heroes Circle, where Garvey is interred but he did not visit the shrine of Garvey. Lorne [37] argues that any person looking at these developments critically would have an issue but Jamaicans were weak to Obama’s intelligence and charisma. Lorne states, “let’s face facts, for some of the things Obama has done, [waste man] is a mild terminology” [37]. He cites the destabilization of Libya with the U.S. killing of Gadhafi, the increased numbers of killings of brown and black people by drone strikes under Obama and the interference in Venezuela in 2015. “As a black man, he shouldn’t be doing these things” said Lorne.

The disappointment in Obama’s foreign policy in the Caribbean and Latin America, had less to do with deviating from his campaign promises or early stated policy preferences and everything to do with a discomfiture of a black man carrying out the agenda of a white dominant imperialist settler state. “Barack Obama is an intelligent, disciplined, eloquent, upright, patriotic, and wholly admirable man, and in many ways he was an inspirational president” [6]. He took office intending to rebuild and restructure the relationship in Latin America and the Caribbean, and in the world. Many in the Caribbean and Latin America hailed his achievement on becoming the first black U.S. president and anticipated even better relations with the U.S. However, those expectations were not met [38]. Not only had they not been met, political analysts contend that Obama left no policy legacy in the region, just more of the same (developments with Cuba notwithstanding). Walt [6] highlights that Obama faced institutional challenges in enacting his foreign policy. Obama was

co-opted by the existing national security establishment and bought into its mantra that the United States as the ‘indispensable power’ must take the lead in promoting a rules-based world order centered on free markets, democracy, and human rights. ... The Democratic Party’s foreign-policy apparatus was dominated by dedicated liberal crusaders, which meant there was hardly anyone Obama could appoint who agreed wholeheartedly with his foreign-policy instincts.

Thus, by the end of Obama’s first year in office, it was clear that he had backed away from his consultative, alliance of equals policy approach. It was clear that U.S. hegemonic stance in the region would continue, uninterrupted by wishful thinking and nice sentiments. The events in Honduras and Haiti showed how little had changed between Obama and his predecessors and the lengths the Obama administration was willing to go to maintain U.S. hegemonic role in the region. “Haiti has almost nothing of value to U.S. military or

corporate interests” [5](p. 69), and yet the U.S. sought an aggressive policy of intervention in Haiti, violating Haitian sovereignty, crippling its economy and stripping them of their national political leaders through overthrow and manipulating election results. “[T]he State Department see Haiti as just one more pawn in its game of cold war chess in the Western Hemisphere and one that, given Haiti’s poverty and defenselessness, it believes it should be able to capture” [5](p. 69). Chomsky [12] put it more broadly:

No country is exempt from U.S. intervention, no matter how unimportant. In fact, it’s the weakest, poorest countries that often arouse the greatest hysteria ... The weaker and poorer a country is, the more dangerous it is as an example. If a tiny country like Grenada can succeed in bringing about a better life for its people, some other place that has more resources will ask, ‘why not us?’ ... If you want a global system that is subordinated to the needs of US investors, you can’t let pieces of it wander off.”

The low priority status of the Caribbean and Latin America to the U.S. allowed space for China to have expanded economic engagement in the region. In the Caribbean, the Chinese government provided cheap financing for infrastructure development – new roads, bridges, public buildings and cash-strapped Caribbean leaders welcomed it with open arms. Walt [6] contends that had the U.S. been less preoccupied with wars in the Middle East, it could have countered Chinese expansion in the region.

While U.S. foreign policy has been consistently interventionist and destabilizing in the region, the Caribbean has not formed an integrated approach to their interaction with the U.S., beyond dependency. Despite years of attempts at regional integration through CARICOM, it still does not have a cohesive regional foreign policy, despite clear need for cohesion based on similar economic, social, environmental, and political challenges. Girvan [1] rightly argues, the Caribbean (and by extension Latin America) cannot expect Obama (or any other world leader for that matter), to “define and defend” their interests, they must do so on their own. What they could have hoped and worked for was a “more constructive engagement” with Obama, not for him to save them. And in a sense, they were expecting, based on skinship, that Obama would save them, forgetting or overlooking that the U.S. presidency is more than the president and the powers of globalization generally perpetuates inequalities, [3](p. 459). There was always only so much he could have done for the Caribbean and Latin America. The history of challenges faced with Caribbean integration should have served as a caution to Caribbean leaders that skinship of racialized others do not necessarily inform a common policy position and the expectation of racial solidarity between the Caribbean people and the American president was misplaced.

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