

Book Review: The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America by Michael Eric Dyson

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Recommended Citation

Davis-Sowers, Regina () "Book Review: The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America by Michael Eric Dyson," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 93 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol93/iss2/7>

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Dyson, Michael Eric. *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Harcourt 2016. Xvi + 346 pages. Paperback. \$27.00.

As the nation grapples with a resurgence of white nationalism and racial divisiveness unseen since the early twentieth century, this book is as timely as it is necessary. In *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race*, Michael Eric Dyson extends the research on race in America, particularly the politics of race in the era of a black president. He critically examines the Obama presidency, never hesitating to criticize Obama's faults or extol his virtues. Dyson presents a well-rounded book that does not fully excuse Obama for his lack of action on behalf of the black voters who overwhelmingly helped in his historic win, presenting a portrait of a man who "gives African legs to the Declaration of Independence and a black face to the Constitution" (p. xii). This is the story of the sustaining power of race in America, told by a scholar who is a renowned wordsmith on the issues of race and politics in America. The book gives us an account of eight years that should have changed American race politics, creating a true post-racial America, and explains with candor and scholarship why that alteration did not happen.

One of the strengths of the book is Dyson's more than two-decade relationship with Obama from his days of community planning to after he became the president, including the author's work on the campaign to elect the first black president. He relates many of the occasions when he spoke directly to President Obama before and during his presidency. The closeness to the president lends an authenticity to the book that would be lost otherwise. However, that closeness does not blind him to the faults and miscalculations of Obama, and he does not offer excuses for Obama's decisions. Indeed, he is often scathing in his rebuke of the president.

A second strength of the book is Dyson's excellent knowledge of racial projects spanning the many white presidential administrations before Obama, the divisiveness of black leadership across generations, and the limitations of race rhetoric for a man attempting to be viewed as not just the president to black people. In examining Obama's reluctance to speak on the struggles of blacks in America, Dyson scrutinizes Obama's failure to address white privilege or denounce the beliefs among working-class and middle-class whites that they do not benefit from their whiteness. Indeed, one of the most interesting aspects of the book is Dyson's observations of what he calls "the scold of black folk."

In Chapter 5, he dissects the meanings of how Obama "in the worst way possible, targeted black people, not for support but instead for moral reproach" (p. 168). It is a problem that I grappled with throughout Obama's presidency, and it was refreshing that Dyson not only addresses the behavior but does a great job of explaining the behavior even as he condemns it. Readers will appreciate the in-depth look at this phenomenon and the racial politics behind it. It is one of the best chapters in a book that is easy to read and astonishing in its depth of understanding of how this behavior felt to blacks who had high hopes for racial progress during the Obama presidency, hopes that, according to Dyson's thinking, went for the most part unfulfilled.

A third strength of the book is the history of race politics that covers a great swath of American politics, particularly of the use of race rhetoric. In Chapter 3, he deftly explains the black religious traditions that Obama relied on heavily to influence black voters. Dyson's explanations of the positives and negatives of Obama's black speech further enhances understanding of the difficulties for black politicians who must appeal to both blacks and whites. In this chapter is also a wonderful summary of the split between Obama and his spiritual mentor, Reverend Dr. Jeremiah Wright, whose sermons were used as weapons against Obama during his first presidential campaign. Dyson does a great job in explaining Obama's dilemma.

A weakness of the book may be the closeness of Dyson to Obama and to many of Obama's detractors and supporters. He examines the intents and purposes of criticism of Obama, while at the same time critiquing Obama's reasoning and rhetoric. He includes instances where he has been attacked for supporting Obama. He argues that he has "offered principled support for the president in tandem with far more sustained criticism" (p. 29). However, this weakness does not detract from the overall picture of a black man trying to be all things to all people and failing in many ways, mainly because of the politics of race in America.

The book is a great combination of sociology, political science, rhetoric, and history that will keep people talking and thinking about the Obama presidency and, hopefully, understanding the man himself. The last chapter is beautifully written as Dyson ends the book on a high note for the Obama presidency: Obama's singing of "Amazing Grace" during the eulogy of Reverend Clementa Pinckney. It was one of the moments when Dyson demonstrates pride in Obama and when he seems to assert that Obama finally embraced his blackness.

The book would be a welcome addition to undergraduate and graduate classes in race and ethnic relations and in political science courses. The Notes section alone is profitable to scholars in so many disciplines as it contains a rich variety of scholarly texts and articles. I highly recommend it.

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