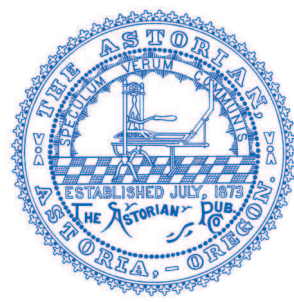


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## OUR VIEW



AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster

President Barack Obama pauses during his final presidential news conference Wednesday in the Brady Press Briefing Room of the White House.

## Obama will be remembered for his dignity, diplomacy

On Friday, a new president of our country will be sworn in and take over duties in the Oval Office. As Donald Trump takes over, you can debate whether Barack Obama was a great president or not. But above all, Obama has always acted with dignity and diplomacy and as we send him off this week into the annals of history, we should take a moment to appreciate his achievements.

We all know his back story by now: Born in Hawaii to a black father and white mother. He grew up abroad in Indonesia and with his grandparents in multicultural Honolulu. He was always fatherless. He was a troubled teen, made plenty of mistakes and struggled with his identity. Yet he endured, and then found strength and ambition. He graduated from the finest schools this country has to offer. He fell in love. He found his political voice among the skyscrapers of Chicago, became a state senator and rocketed up the rungs of political power with unmatched speed.

He became president at a time when the country was mired in two terrible wars, the economy was in utter free fall, and international terrorism was a growing enemy.

Yet he steered the country through.

Certainly, his eight years as the most powerful person in the world was nowhere near perfect. His actions often fell short of his soaring rhetoric.

His speech at Hiroshima was masterful, yet he did nothing to reduce this country's cache of nuclear weapons. He allowed Syria to descend into a hellscape, which precipitated a worldwide crisis. His decision to overthrow Moammar Gadhafi in Libya caused unnecessary suffering and death and made America less safe. His drone policies have resulted in the death of Americans and the bombings of hospitals and civilians.

Here within our borders, many Americans were left behind in his chugging economic recovery programs. His health care law — though an improvement from nothing — was too imperfect to survive. Like most presidents, the mistakes and regrets are numerous.

Still, in everything, Obama acted with dignity and diplomacy. His two terms have come and gone without the whiff of personal scandal. His family and marriage are an aspiration and a sense of pride for many Americans. He has somehow held onto the uncanny ability to joke and cry, talk about sports and music and his own failings — like a real person among a sea of cardboard-cutout politicians. No president has ever been as cool, in the most American sense of the word.

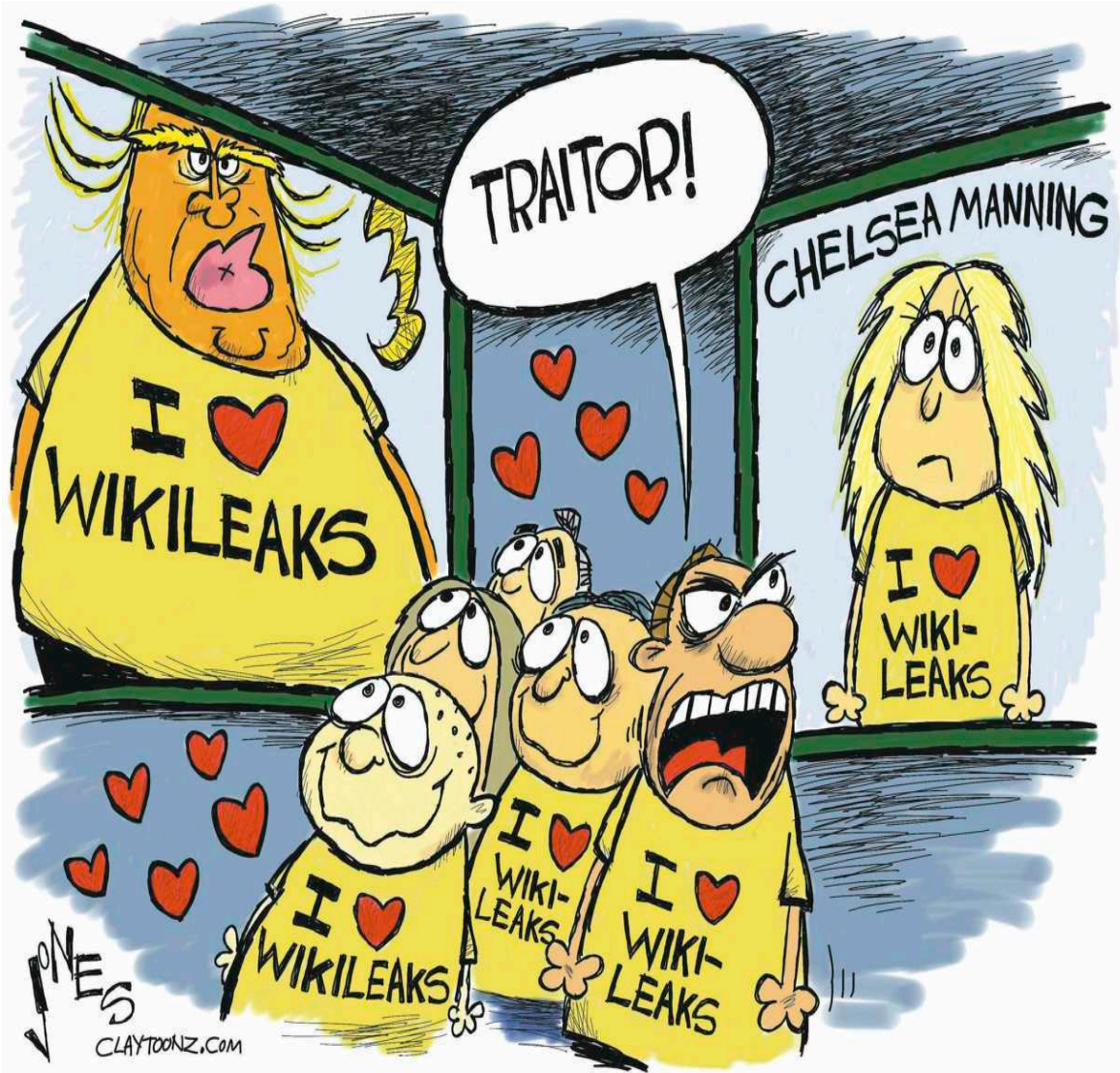
He was always opposed, often viciously and sometimes blindly. Yet Obama kept his head and held his tongue, often to his own disadvantage. You can count his ineloquent words and insults leveled at others on one hand.

President Obama has always seemed a bit like a man before his time. That has never been more clear than now, as he prepares to leave office. Much of his work will be swept away by the opposition and the country has elected a man to succeed him who is his polar opposite.

But if Obama's legislation doesn't last, his words and actions will, as will the narrative of his life. He will inspire and be admired throughout his remaining days and likely long after. Monuments will likely be built in his honor.

That's because no American has started with so little and achieved so much. Barack Obama is the personification of the American dream and this country was great enough to let him live it.

**Barack Obama is the personification of the American dream and this country was great enough to let him live it.**



## The Obama legacy

By ROSS DOUTHAT  
*New York Times News Service*

If you had set out to assess President Barack Obama's legacy four years ago, when he won re-election convincingly over Mitt Romney, the assessment might have gone like this. On foreign policy, reasonably high marks: Osama bin Laden

dead, disengagement from Iraq without disaster, no major wars or catastrophic blunders.

In electoral politics, likewise: a successful re-election that seemed to betoken a sustained realignment for the Democrats. On the economy, lower grades: a depression averted, but record deficits, stagnant growth and stubborn elevated unemployment. On Obamacare, his signature achievement, a grade of incomplete, awaiting its implementation.

What's interesting is that four years later, as the president leaves the White House, several of those assessments could be essentially reversed. His economic stewardship looks more impressive than it did in 2012: The United States hasn't escaped the stagnation trap entirely, but unemployment has fallen well below the levels that even Romney promised to deliver. His foreign policy record, on the other hand, looks worse: The Iraq withdrawal paved a path for the Islamic State, Vladimir Putin repeatedly seemed to outmaneuver the Obamanauts, and globally the Pax Americana is at its wobbliest since the Cold War.

And in electoral politics, instead of the great Obama realignment, we have a Democratic Party reduced to rubble and the staggering ascent of Donald Trump.

The swift shifts should make us cautious about assuming that the landscape of early 2017 can tell us anything too dispositive about how the departing president will be remembered — especially given how much of Obama's policy legacy now depends upon the still-unknown intentions and capacities of President Trump.

But with that proviso, here are a few guesses as to how that legacy will ultimately be judged.

First, the core domestic agenda that Obama actually enacted, from the stimulus to the health care law to the auto bailouts and lesser maneuvers, may be remembered more favorably than most conservatives assume. Its flaws were manifold (I may have written about some of them here and there), and one can spin a happier counterfactual — for the Democratic Party's political fortunes, especially — involving a more modest health care bill, a sharper focus on the middle class and jobs, and some sort of clear outreach to the center right instead of the pushes on cap and trade and gun control and immigration.

But at the same time the U.S. economy did recover, slowly but more robustly than in much of the developed world, and again and again the dooms predicted by

Obama's Republican adversaries failed to materialize. The stock market rebounded and then surged, there was no hyperinflation in response to the Obama deficits and the various monetary easings (quite the reverse), and the much-prophesied debt crisis, in which the United States was supposed to go the way of Greece, never actually arrived.

Meanwhile Obamacare, while a mess in certain ways, is messier on a smaller scale than its critics (myself included) feared: Health cost inflation isn't spiraling and employers aren't dumping people on to the exchanges in huge numbers; there are many losers but the insurance expansion is large enough to matter. And that expansion, and with it the promise of near universal health insurance, will be extremely difficult (morally as well as politically) for Republicans to unwind. The system may look different after the GOP is done with it, but I suspect its coverage guarantee will basically survive. And if so it may well be Obama who gets the long-term credit, not an opposition party that too often answered his flawed proposals with boilerplate and cynicism.

**As is often the case with political lives, in his beginning was his end.**

My guess is that less retrospective credit will be extended to Obama's foreign policy, however. Hawks and doves will bicker about whether he intervened too much or too little, but the reality is that he was simply halfhearted and ineffective in far too many cases, pursuing pre-existing ambitions (Iran, climate change, a settlement-obsessed approach to Israel-Palestine) when the crises of the day required more resolute attention.

He was just hawkish enough to intervene in Libya, to poor effects, and irresolutely dovish in Syria, where the United States ended up as just one more party dripping fuel on this era's Spanish Civil War. He drew unwise red lines and then emboldened adversaries by abandoning them, kind-of-sort-of tried to keep U.S. troops in Iraq but didn't make it a priority, and then had his secretary of state chasing an always-implausible Israel-Palestine deal while the Islamic State was on the rise and Putin was seizing opportunities.

Nothing in all this was as disastrous as the previous administration's Iraq invasion, and his "don't do stupid (stuff)" motto was not as wimpy as its critics charged. (Trump essentially made the same promise en route to winning the supposedly more hawkish party's primary.) But a lot of small failures, no less than one major one, can leave the world less safe —

and there were enough failures that Obama very clearly did.

Not that this will prevent him from being a liberal icon, years or generations hence. If John F. Kennedy's blundering imperilment of world peace was buried under hagiography, there will be a similar forgetting spread over Obama's foreign-policy setbacks. As the first black president, the politician who passed health care reform and the man who personally embodied upper-class liberalism's cosmopolitan self-image, he will almost certainly regain, in what is sure to be an active post-presidency, some of the cult that surrounded him during his ascent.

This will be true regardless of whether Trump's reign pushes America decisively toward a grim post-liberal war of Bannionites against Bernie Bros or ends in some kind of glorious cosmopolitan restoration. If the former, Obama will be remembered by liberals as the last good king, the man who for eight years did battle with the dark heart of white America. If the latter, he will be hailed as the man who saw the liberal future clearly even amid a temporary backlash.

But it is precisely this once-and-future cult that's crucial to understanding Obama's greatest failure, and the part he played in delivering us to Trumpism. Sometimes unintentionally but too often by political design, he took the presidency's already overlarge role in American life and magnified it further — raising, through his own transformational-bordering-on-messianic political style and reluctant-but-substantial embrace of the imperial presidency, both fervid fears and unsupportable expectations.

The fears helped give us both the zeal of the Tea Party and the alienation of the Trumpistas. The expectations gave us a late-Obama left prone to fits of despair whenever they were losing and cultural authoritarianism wherever they could claim the upper hand (the bureaucracy, the universities, the media). They also fed into a persistent sense that liberalism should no longer even engage with its deplorable dead-ender dust-bin-of-history adversaries.

All of these tendencies came together to give us Donald Trump. I would blame a lot of people — Republican leaders and conservative media personalities and the liberal cultural establishment and Hillary Clinton's campaign team and Angela Merkel and more — for Trump's rise more than I would blame Obama. But I still suspect that the Trumpening might have been prevented had Obama promised less grandly, eschewed imperial temptations when stymied in his ambitions, and dressed his technocratic liberalism in less arc-of-history nonsense.

But then again such an Obama, a man of more modest promises and somewhat more Bill Clintonian flexibility, might not have been elected in the first place.

As is often the case with political lives, in his beginning was his end.