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Inderjeet Parmar, City University London, and Mark Ledwidge (CCCU): “... ‘a foundation-hatched black’: Obama, the US Establishment, and Foreign Policy”

Abstract: US foreign policy *has* a largely unacknowledged racial dimension due to the racial characteristics of the US foreign policy establishment, and in shared mindsets in a soon-to-be ‘majority-minority’ nation. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) racial-ethnic and class factors produce managed change through socialisation in an attenuated meritocratic order, adapting to challenges to elite dominance by incorporating rising talent, without altering broader patterns of power. The greatest success of such a system would be the assimilation of the most elite minority individuals, even as the bulk of those groups’ members continue to experience discrimination. Such success would be compounded by election to the highest office of a minority US president extolling the virtues of post-racial politics. President Barack Obama represents a ‘Wasp-ified’ black elite, assimilated into the extant structures of power that remain wedded to a more secular, non-biologically-racial, version of Anglo-Saxonism or, more broadly, *liberal internationalism*. Hence, it should occasion little surprise that there has been so little change in US foreign policies.

Key words: race; establishment; Anglo-Saxon; WASP; liberal internationalism; elite socialisation

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The election to the White House of Barack Obama in 2008 was hailed by many as symptomatic of a new era of ‘post-racial’ politics (Pinderhughes, 2009, 3). Whether or not this turns out to be the case domestically, US foreign policy *has* a largely unacknowledged racial dimension which has long been evident in the racial characteristics of the overwhelming majority of members of the US foreign policy establishment, and even more so in their shared mindsets. Those shared mindsets will continue to be fundamentally important as the US evolves into a ‘majority-minority’ nation (Bonilla-Silva, 2007). Yet, changes must be understood in a context in which White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) racial-ethnic *and* class factors combine to produce continuity or rather managed change through sophisticated and deep forms of socialisation in an imperfect meritocracy. Such a system tends to produce evolutionary change in the membership of the establishment to adapt to new political environments, especially challenges to elite dominance at home and ‘threats’ from abroad (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1998). It is argued here that Barack Obama is the epitome of the greatest strengths of this system in its racialised context (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, 213): a system able to absorb and incorporate new, rising talent from the “wrong” background, without fundamentally altering broader patterns of power and inequality .¹

In this article, I analyse the indirect impacts of ‘race’ on policy culture or climate of policy opinion which does not ‘cause’ policy outcomes but conditions the environment within which policy is thought about and formulated. The impact of ‘race’ consists of deep structures of inter-generationally transmitted but evolving thought, acting as a powerful socialiser of individuals and conditioner of the policy environment. The greatest success of such a system would be the assimilation of the most elite minority individuals, even though the bulk of minorities continue to experience gross inequality (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1998, 1991; West, 2001, 54-61). Such ‘success’ would be compounded by election of a minority to the highest office of a minority US president extolling the virtues of colour-blind or post-racial politics, and delivering broad continuities in US foreign policy (Smith and King, 2009; Isaac, 2010, 734).

I argue that President Barack Obama is the embodiment of that form of ‘racial’ impact in US foreign policy, representing a ‘Wasp-ified’ black elite, assimilated into the extant structures of power that remain wedded to a more secular, non-biologically-racial, version of Anglo-Saxonism or, more broadly, *liberal internationalism* (Hobson, 2012). Given the incorporative and ‘inclusive’ character of postwar Anglo-Saxonism, it should occasion little surprise that, despite Barack Obama’s stewardship, there has been so little change in the character and content of US foreign and national security policies (Tate, 2010; Mead, 2007; Bonilla-Silva, 2010, 224-5).

In addition, it is well-known that Obama struggled over many years over his own identity, and it is likely that such ‘status anxieties’ continue to play an important if intangible role.² Not only is he a black man at the pinnacle of a mainly-white power structure, he became financial-crisis hit America’s CEO without any previous governing experience, and commander in chief without a military background who inherited two long-drawn out wars. Clearly, there are several sources of status anxiety for any White House incumbent. But does Obama’s racial identity and status anxiety trump all other sources? That is difficult to discern and we will need to wait for release of post-administration records to hazard a judgement.

This article is divided into four parts: first, I show how biological Anglo-Saxonism morphed into superficially *culturally-inclusive* but deeply hierarchical categories and how we may recognise the racial origins and significance of new nominally cultural hierarchies, putting flesh onto Mead’s assertion that WASP mindsets became a template for elite selection rather than a biologically exclusive category. Second, I argue that such racialised-cultural categories have been central to US foreign policy establishment mindsets, and that Obama’s elevation is intimately linked to his socialisation and incorporation in establishment institutions; thirdly, I show how that impacted on both his appointments to high office and policy outcomes. Finally, I conclude that Attlee’s vision of an inclusive, but hierarchical, Anglo-Saxonism was prophetic, given his reference points in 1944 were the transformation of empire into commonwealth and the ‘melting pot’ view of the USA. I conclude that, as American society heads towards ‘minority-majority’ status, and probably a de-centred world order, we should expect a more racially-diverse Establishment, better able to cope with US relative decline to mere ‘primacy’ without any fundamental revolution in foreign policy principles.

From Biological to Cultural Anglo-Saxonism

Anglo-Saxonism has become a selectively inclusive but hierarchical mind-set and world view, morphing from its extreme biological underpinnings to latter-day ‘Anglo-spherism’ that makes room for non-white English-speaking peoples, i.e., elites, including Jamaicans and Indians.³ The self-concepts of Anglo-Saxonism remain: at a personal level modesty, moderation, pragmatism, and an ideal of public service;⁴ at a broader level attachment to freedom, the market, rule of law, a rules-based international order, universalism.⁵ At its even broader level, in effect Anglospherism forms the core concepts of the dominant theory and rationale underlying the US-led world system today – liberal internationalism (Vucetic 2011; Vitalis, 2000).

British prime minister, Clement Attlee, had long been associated with the formal shedding of Anglo-Saxonism’s overtly racial connotations, influenced by George Catlin, author of several books on Anglo-Saxons’ racial-cultural superiority (Catlin, 1941).⁶ Hence, as Deputy Prime Minister, Attlee joined several US-British cultural societies and it was at the meeting of one of them for a Thanksgiving event in November 1944 that he gave a speech that marked a ‘change-moment’ in the transformation of Anglo-Saxonism into a cultural system that would be racially-inclusive but would remain hierarchical. It was Anglo-Saxon characteristics and leadership - with the United States, Britain and the dominions at the core – that would create a new post-Nazi order, formally non-racial but racialised and inclusively hierarchical nonetheless. The American nation, he argued, formed out of an Anglo-Saxon matrix and its state structures were brought by English Pilgrims. The Bretton Woods system was, in effect, the embodiment of key elements of this Anglo-Saxon world order. Attlee rejected the Herrenvolk racism of the Nazis as a “cast iron racial ideology” in contradistinction to Anglo-Saxonism’s universality and proclivity to defend the rule of law. Attlee was advancing Anglo-Saxonism as a template for universal application and assimilation – an English-speaking-people-led world order to “bring up” all peoples and to defend against enemies of freedom.⁷

De-colonisation, economic development and aid to the ex-colonies were the logical corollaries of this new order. It resulted in “racism without racists”: formally culturally inclusive but hierarchical language and power structures with none of the stigma of overt racism but with fundamentally similar outcomes. Such racism without racists is based on an abstract liberalism which places the blame for racial inequality on the inadequacies of the poor and blacks themselves (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; 2010). Michael Hunt’s seminal *Ideology and Foreign Policy* similarly established how eighteenth and nineteenth-century racial

thought persisted in American foreign policy after 1945 (Hunt, 1987). The distinction in applying these concepts in US foreign policy is that abstract liberalism calls for various forms of intervention in the affairs of the ‘culturally inadequate.’

Scholars such as Uma Kothari trace imperial thinking in post-colonial discourses of development. After 1945, peoples previously referred to as “racially-backward” were transformed into culturally deficient or economically underdeveloped, as opposed to developed. A whole series of hierarchical dichotomies developed to denote the relative positions of former colonisers and colonised: responsible/irresponsible; modern/traditional; rational/irrational; progressive/stuck in history (Kothari, 2006a, 2006b).⁸ The deepest structure to note here is *hierarchy*.

The dynamic at play within postwar discourses, however, means that the membership of such categories becomes fluid, especially due to anti-racist and anti-colonial resistance and the rise of multicultural societies. What were racially exclusive binaries are impacted by the increasingly non-racial and neutral language prevalent after 1945. The new racialised but secular system becomes a template for the assimilation in theory of all peoples/groups but in practice to relatively small numbers of the ‘best’ qualified members of minority groups. This represents an advance towards ‘diversity’ and equality of opportunity – but a highly symbolic one. As Bonilla-Silva suggests, it may well be that Obama’s ascendancy indicates processes of Latin Americanisation of US racial politics and society – a society in which everyone is *American* yet not equal but unable to articulate an racial discourse for fear of sounding racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, 225-226).

US Foreign Establishment

The US foreign policy establishment has long been characterised as dominated by Wasps – White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (Baltzell, 1964; Barnett, 1972; Hodgson, 1973) – a term that captures key truths about its character (religio-racial in particular) but omits an element – elitism - that is also central. Yet, its racist character is well documented.⁹ Stephen Walt argues that the Wasp establishment prevented Obama’s foreign policies from being more radical (Hunt, 1987; Ledwidge, 2012). The argument here, however, is that Obama is a *part* of that establishment and shares its elitist, secularised religio-racial-in-origin mindsets. Either way, the power of Establishment socialisation and cooptational processes is fundamental.

According to Godfrey Hodgson, the establishment's defining characteristics are demographic (privately educated elites from the worlds of Wall Street, Ivy League universities and the federal executive) but also its mindsets. The underlying assumptions of the establishment, he argues, place the rightness of American global leadership at its core and doing all that that requires, at home and abroad. At home, that meant removing the most obvious discriminations associated with 'Jim Crow' racism because they were embarrassing the US in cold war competition for hearts and minds in newly-independent Asian and African states (Dudziak, 2000, 1988). It is in part the long term effects of those global imperatives that set in train the domestic-reform processes that, decades later, led to the election of Barack Obama to the presidency, part of the new post-Civil Rights era black middle class (West, 2001, 58).

That points up the "genius" of the establishment and what differentiates it from a caste: its ability to manage change by absorbing individuals with "the wrong family pedigree" (Holand, 1991) which produces outcomes such as the election of Barack Obama, or the elevation of Condoleezza Rice to national security advisor. Although it remains Wasp-dominated, despite claims to the contrary (Baltzell, 1964; Brookhiser), the establishment is open to the most talented minorities – exhibiting a formal commitment to a superficial but important *visible* 'diversity' – who share, or *can learn to share*, their mindsets.

The Education of Barack Obama

President Obama's establishment credentials are impressive indicating a fairly gradual elevation from white middle class grandparents via a series of elite educational institutions as well as a spell as a foundation-sponsored "community" organiser all the way to the White House. Adolphus Reed noted in 1996 that Obama was a *foundation-hatched black leader ready for complete assimilation into the white elite power structure*.¹⁰ This is a key observation of an entire generation of black leadership following the 1960s (Marable, 2009). Domhoff and Zweigenhaft examined programmes such as A Better Chance, funded by the federal government and by the Rockefeller Foundation, a whole raft of programmes designed to *re-engineer* inner city youth in elite white culture and create an assimilated minority leadership. Domhoff and Zweigenhaft identify 5 key factors for success in such programmes – which were and are run in all of the schools Obama attended as a scholarship student – Punahou, Occidental, Columbia, and Harvard.

The first factor, Domhoff and Zweigenhaft argue, is an ability to manage act in ways that make whites comfortable. Second, being of middle class origin aids future upward mobility. Third, possessing higher degrees from elite universities such as Harvard is persuasive proof that they are like “us”. Fourth, being a black with lighter-coloured skin, reducing the negative salience of US racial history for ‘both’ sides (Keith and Herring, 1991). Finally, being an immigrant black increases the chances of upward elevation because one is not part of the psychological matrix of America’s scarred racial past.

These factors strongly apply to President Barack Obama – lighter-skinned, white mother, immigrant father, raised by middle class white grandparents, partly in Hawaii and outside the mainstream racial matrix of the US. He started as a ‘half-Wasp’, in effect, causing various adolescent identity crises but also a pathway to their ‘resolution’. His father studied at Harvard and was senior economist in Kenya’s ministry of finance (Maraniss, 2012, 194).

Obama gained the elite educational credentials required for assimilation, directly or indirectly funded by federal and elite foundation grants, a process worthy of lengthy analysis not only because it conferred upon him academic credentials and legitimacy but also assimilation into a pragmatic-realist establishment mindset. Barack Obama attained a scholarship-funded place at the oldest and most prestigious private school in Hawaii, precisely at the time that, as a result of urban black revolts (Haines, 1984), government, corporations and elite foundations began funding programmes to elevate black teenagers into elite white prep schools,¹¹ creating a new elite of future black leaders assimilated to the American dream (Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1998).¹²

From Hawaii Obama secured a scholarship to Occidental College in Los Angeles, a ‘progressive’ institution committed to ‘diversity’, via its Upward Bound programme.¹³ Obama transferred to Columbia University in 1981 for the final two years of his bachelor’s degree in politics and international relations. He read voraciously, according to reports: read Marx and Nietzsche and Niebuhr, among others, having already delved into Malcolm X and black power. Taking Edward Said’s post-colonial literature class but rejecting him as a “flake” (Maraniss, 2012, 450), Obama later (probably at Harvard) adopted his pragmatic philosophy for which he appears to owe a debt to one known as “the establishment’s theologian,” Reinhold Niebuhr – one of his “favourite philosophers” (Brooks 2007).¹⁴

Obama’s linkages with liberal foundations were renewed in Chicago where he worked as a ‘community organiser’, consultant and instructor for the Gamaliel Foundation, loosely based

on the *pragmatic and realistic* teachings of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, although Gamaliel broke away from Alinsky on the grounds that he was too confrontational (Maraniss, 2012, 520). In a project that sounded like a throwback to the 1960s strategies of modernisation in the *third world*, Obama worked on the Developing Communities Programme to train in civic responsibility African-Americans in Chicago's south side (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). And then, finally, to Harvard Law School to become the first African-American editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. According to Kloppenberg, Harvard deepened Obama's pragmatic philosophical bent (Kloppenber, 2012).¹⁵

Obama, then, is a product of many tendencies including government, corporate, and foundation-funded programmes of black assimilation through elite education (Marable, 2009). And it is noteworthy that black graduates of such elite white school programmes were more likely, with on average lower grades, to enter the most selective colleges and universities. Adolphus Reed has offered a unique insight into the incubation and education of Barack Obama that requires not just deeper investigation in his case but more research to understand the breadth and depth of foundation and federal programmes of black assimilation through educational engineering at historically-white elite schools.

Obama *managed his identities* such that, despite his adolescent struggles, he was classified in the language of opinion pollsters as a "no-demands black", one more readily accepted by whites as he 'fit in', as reported in *The Atlantic* in 2009 (Ambinder, 2006, 65).¹⁶ That is, as Domhoff and Zweigenhaft argue, upwardly-mobile blacks exhibit behaviours characteristic of other high-achieving and aspirational-assimilating minorities – like Jews and women who, as they rise up the ladder, drop their 'Jewishness' or femininity and adopt more 'Wasp' or masculine traits (Zweigenhaft 1998). Obama's rejection of black nationalism as a political and economic way forward, in *Dreams From My Father*, also indicates his already well-developed pragmatic-realism – by refusing to go down a political 'dead-end', however psychologically satisfying and historically-excusable such approaches might be (Obama, 1995; Alba and Moore, 1982). He managed his racial identities in such a manner as to make white voters comfortable, including through the Jeremiah Wright affair when he was accused of supporting a church and pastor whose sermons constituted radical critiques of America and its global power (Ledwidge, 2011). Ultimately, Obama jettisoned Wright, weaving his narrative around the multiple stories of America and the need for reconciliation. But for black voters, Obama played upon his (paid) 'community organiser' background in Chicago's poor black districts, although it was his theory of power – based on Alinsky's teachings – that

‘community organizing’ was fundamental to energising a collective spirit to force political and economic reform. Somewhat prophetically, Obama was realistic enough to recognise that getting elected was often of only “symbolic effect” because elected leaders were “in the awkward position of administering underfunded systems neither equipped nor eager to address the needs of the urban poor and being forced to compromise their interests to more powerful demands from other sectors” (Obama, 1990).

Obama has also assimilated the ontological religio-racial categories characteristic of the American establishment, which is clear even in the language he deployed as early as 1990 in regard to *Chicago’s* black communities. The need to build “indigenous leadership” in black communities, via foundation-funded mobilisation and politicisation of black churches and pastors, linked with electoral politics, is not a far cry from the kinds of “modernising elites” programmes being funded by USAID and elite foundations, like Ford, in the Third World (Gilman, 2003; Ekhblad, 2010).

His election to the presidency has seen that approach develop further, especially in regard to his support of development programmes in Africa. Empowering Africans, developing communities, sustainability, etc.. are the buzzwords of the administration. Yet the details of such programmes as the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) demonstrate the technocratic, top-down philosophy that characterises American interventions in Africa – combining the initiatives of the Gates and Rockefeller Foundations and the profit-making corporation, Monsanto, in a programme whose rhetorical focus on the interests of small holders recognises some of the stark lessons of the 1960s Green revolution in Asia: that there will be largescale displacement of small holders from the land in favour of larger, hi-tech driven farms and farming methods using expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and an exodus into already overcrowded city slums (Parmar 2012, 263). Obama has assimilated the culturalised religio-racial and elitist mindsets of the foreign policy establishment. The only difference between Obama and previous presidents who have inherited crises of confidence in American power, like Jimmy Carter, is that Obama’s racial status – face, name - permits a more radical-sounding admission of America’s past wrongs in the Middle East and elsewhere, with a view to the denial of its continuing significance (Obama 2009). At a more fundamental level, Obama has acted to maintain ‘business as usual’, suitably adapted to the times.

This is further underlined by the Obama administration's embrace, and subversion of, the concept of "Ubuntu diplomacy". Ubuntu thought – claimed, by many, to be an authentic African world view or philosophy – is a label placed on Obama's administration, especially after his speeches in Cairo and Oslo, by many African leaders.¹⁷ In practice, a caricatured and domesticated version of ubuntu is being advanced by the State Department that is aligned to US power concepts of alliances, partnerships, stakeholders.

Ubuntu literally means "that a person is a person through other people," a "nebulous concept of common humanity, oneness"¹⁸ which has become prominent across a range of fields (Hailey 2008, 2). According to the State Department, Ubuntu diplomacy is the new paradigm for greater global harmony and interconnectedness. It claims that the United States cannot 'go it alone' but must act as a "catalyst" for public-private collaborations, a "collaborator" with others, a convenor, and a partner. It is time to cast aside "worn out preconceptions, and our outdated modes of statecraft."¹⁹ These themes were further elaborated by the newly-appointed special representative for global partnerships, Elizabeth Frawley Bagley.²⁰ Bagley noted that building global partnerships was "a platform for smart power" that deployed "all the elements of our national power – and leveraging all of our strength."²¹ There is clear synergy between these ideas and the work of Princeton scholar, Anne Marie Slaughter, who stepped down as head of State's Policy Planning Staff in 2011.²²

Hillary Clinton clarified the position in a speech to the Council on Foreign Relations – in July 2009. The issue is not whether the United States should lead the world but by what means, at a time when problems multiplied and "old formulas don't apply." "We need a new mindset about how America will use its power to safeguard our nation, expand shared prosperity, and help more people in more places live up to their God-given potential." President Obama, Clinton noted, "has launched a new era of engagement based on common interests, shared values, and mutual respect." It is time, therefore, to "exercise American leadership to build partnerships and solve problems that no nation can solve on its own..." This is no simple "intellectual exercise" – it is an approach towards a results-oriented foreign policy that aims to move from "a multi-polar world.. toward a multi-partner world."²³

Ubuntu – an African 'world-view' – transformed into Anglo-Saxonism, all the more authentically via an African-American president (Mazrui, 1995).

President Obama's Appointments to High Office and Policy Outcomes

It is clear that Obama's election campaign-period foreign policy advisors and subsequent appointments to high office reflected relatively long-term developments in the ideological tendencies and strategies fusing liberal hawks, conservative nationalists and neoconservatives (Parmar 2009; deGraaff and Apeldoorn 2010). However, there is little in-depth and systematic elite analysis of Obama's *foreign and national security* appointments which is required to show the main reason for substantive policy continuity as well as Obama's own establishment-oriented mindset (Dye 2014, 207).

This section of the article presents new research on 24 leading appointments made by President Obama in key departments and agencies: Defense, State, National Security Council (NSC), and CIA: appointees are overwhelmingly white, male, hold at least two university degrees, with considerable government experience in both Republican and Democratic administrations, including that of Obama's immediate predecessor, George W. Bush. They are steeped in the world of Washington, DC, think tanks, with a quarter of them holding membership of the bipartisan Council on Foreign Relations. In short, Obama's appointees display little obvious differences in backgrounds from those of previous administrations.²⁴ The highest level Obama appointees in this analysis contradict press reports suggesting that Obama has "dramatically" privileged liberal think tanks,²⁵ and others that mourn the decline of the WASP establishment.²⁶ But as Richard Brookhiser argues, and Mead confirms, Wasp culture has assimilated other minorities, especially Jews and Catholics, to such an extent that they "are Wasp-ified and indistinguishable from their Protestant neighbours."²⁷ This may well apply to President Obama himself (Ledwidge 2014, 4).

*Detailed Breakdown of Obama Appointees*²⁸

Of the 24 upper echelon appointees to Defense, State, CIA and NSC, 23 are white, 18 male, and 6 female. Of 38 State department appointees, however, just over one-third (13) are female, although two-thirds (26) are white.²⁹ There are just over twice as many registered Democrats (7) than Republicans (3), indicating something of Obama's attempts to create bipartisan support for his foreign and national security policies. Those Republicans were secretary of defense, Robert Gates, secretary of the air force, Mike Donley, and secretary of the army, John McHugh. This makes it very clear that President Obama hoped to secure not only the tacit support of congressional Republicans, and the broader electorate, but also to maintain strong continuity of policy, and its *underlying principles*, with the George W. Bush administration. Whatever the reason – Obama's unfamiliarity and lack of experience in

foreign affairs, or his greater passion for change on the domestic front (Dueck 2011) - there was bound to be affinity between Bush and Obama's policies, undermining at a very fundamental level his election-time claims of radical change.

In total, the 24 appointees under consideration here had 52 affiliations with a wide variety of think tanks, although the appointees were largely clustered in just a handful of prominent ones. For example, think tanks included everything from Heritage Foundation and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA) on the 'right' to the Center for American Progress (CAP) on the centre-left. The largest number of appointee-affiliations are with the bipartisan Council on Foreign Relations, although there are 9 connections with CAP, but just two memberships. Over 50% of affiliations (28), however, are with bipartisan organisations including Project on National Security Reform (5), Brookings (5), Center for Strategic and International Studies (4), the Atlantic Council (4), and the Princeton Project on National Security (2). Affiliations at these organisations are so interlocked that there is a clearly demarcated organisational complex – an epistemic community or foreign policy establishment – that shares ideas, membership and strategies, that marks and polices the boundaries of respectable and thinkable thought on foreign affairs.

Godfrey Hodgson noted that the foreign policy establishment was made up of interlocking groups and individuals from Washington, DC, Ivy League universities and Wall Street lawyers and bankers, and connections with those overlapping spheres of contemporary life remain powerful. One-third of Obama appointees are lawyers, 6 emerge with military backgrounds, while the 24 under consideration held 21 academic posts at leading universities. The Ivy League claimed the highest number of student registrations among the 24 – with Harvard (7), Yale (4), Princeton (2) and Columbia (2) leading the way. Of the overseas universities attended, the University of Oxford claims 5 students, including US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, the only African-American appointed to a senior position but who is criticised by some in the Congressional Black Caucus as (too) thoroughly assimilated into the Washington establishment. Brookhiser might call her "Wasp-ified". Alongside such elitist educational backgrounds is the reinforcing evidence of academic postings at prestigious institutions – with Harvard (5) in the vanguard, and Yale, Princeton, Chicago, MIT, and Georgetown featuring strongly too. In addition, three posts were held at the National Defense University and one at the US Army War College.

Wall Street – as a metaphor – stands for the world of corporate power, which is a key part of any establishment in mature democracies. Along with 8 lawyers, the 24 Obama appointees claim at least 52 corporate directorships, including 6 with arms firms and consultancies like Boeing and Raytheon. Although Obama is no corporate executive, he candidly admits that meeting and mixing with corporate, “the top 1%”, as he noted, narrowed his vision and influenced him: in his views, Obama states, “I became more like the wealthy donors I met.” (Obama, 2007, 113-4).

Further reinforcing the cohesion, and bipartisan character, of the 24 appointees is the information that the 24 held 9 posts in the George W. Bush administrations, and 9 posts in previous Republican administrations, going back as far as the Reagan presidency. 15 posts had been held by the 24 in the Clinton administrations. In their prior executive experience, the 24 indicate a strong emphasis on defense and NSC – which jointly claim 26 posts, with another 5 posts in the CIA and three in as secretaries of the Army and Air Force, and at the joint chiefs of staff.

President Obama has appointed to high public office men and women who strongly resemble the traditional US foreign policy establishment in their demographic characteristics and who, even more significantly, are steeped in the mindsets and institutions that nurture and rear, and intellectually and politically develop modern American leadership.³⁰ Although change was the banner under which Obama reached the White House, the meaning of change did not extend to making appointments to high positions in the foreign and national security apparatuses that differed in any significant way from those made by the Republican George W. Bush or the Democratic Bill Clinton.

Therefore, the stage was set for broad policy continuity – the structures of power and the principal agents exhibited few, if any, significant differences with previous administrations.

According to critical terrorism scholar, Richard Jackson, Obama has continued, in all essential aspects, Bush’s post-9-11 war on terror. After painstaking research and analysis, Jackson concludes that “President Obama accepts most, if not all of the central narratives of the war on terror, such as the argument that the 9/11 attacks were unprovoked and completely unrelated to any foreign policy actions by the United States, the essential justice and necessity of a ‘war’ on terrorism, America’s historic call and duty to lead the war on terror, the ‘new’ threat posed by WMD terrorism and rogue states and the need for *new* tools to fight

them, the duty to promote America's universal values internationally, the right of pre-emptive action against terrorists, the need to prevent the emergence of terrorist safe havens in collapsed and failed states, the likelihood of a long war against terrorism and the inevitability of American victory – among many others.” In practice, the war on terror remains the Obama administration’s dominant framework (Jackson 2011). More recently, the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has brought back to the fore the language of the war on terror – wholly barbaric Islamists versus wholly civilised Americans.³¹

In a far cry from the response to the widely (and justifiably) criticised elections in Iran, Obama endorsed Hamid Karzai's rigged re-election in Afghanistan and, more recently, endorsed the deeply flawed election to office of Ashraf Ghani. Mr Karzai, whose supporters dominated the nominally Independent Electoral Commission at the very heart of corruption allegations, was declared winner despite gaining less than 50 per cent of the national vote, as stipulated by an Afghan constitution drafted after America's defeat of the Taliban in 2001. At around 2 million voters, only 15 per cent of the electorate actually participated in the elections. American troops are now the principal prop of a corrupt and illegitimate regime that tramples underfoot the rights of its people in general and of its women in particular. Similarly, Ghani’s victory is still contested, his ‘government’ has no agreed programme, and is made up of corrupt self-interested groups and powerbrokers, according to observers on the ground in Afghanistan.³²

On the matter of Israel, nothing appears to have changed under President Obama. Indeed, the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, was so frustrated by American backtracking on new Israeli settlements on the West Bank and in Jerusalem that he threatened to resign and withdraw from the nascent peace process. Despite Obama's Nobel Peace Prize, nominations for which had closed a mere two weeks after his inauguration in January 2009, he remained silent on Israel's bombing of Gaza in 2008-09, which killed over 1,000 civilians and decimated an already weak infrastructure and economy and indeed, offered only lukewarm criticism of Israel’s military intervention in Gaza in 2014.

The current administration, like its Republican predecessor, shares an interest in expanding American power through assertive ‘democracy promotion’. The expanding role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is a case in point. Obama appointed Ivo Daalder as US ambassador to the organisation. Daalder, a well-known promoter of democracy from the leading think tank Brookings, has argued for years – with the neo-conservative Robert Kagan

– that NATO should become a global alliance for democracy. Daalder believes that, while the organisation used to define its operations as ‘in area’(i.e. in the north Atlantic region) and ‘out of area’, in a global, interconnected world ‘in’ and ‘out of area’ no longer make sense; now everywhere is in NATO's ‘area’.

Yet, those were inherited problems and crises, it is frequently suggested, so any incoming president would have problems ‘changing course’. While this is understandable, we must also ask about the ‘directions’ of change Obama has inaugurated to inherited policies and those have not always been towards alteration of course: on Bagram, for example, Obama *opposed* extending constitutional protections to inmates; his administration has increased to far higher levels drone attacks – in effect, targeted assassinations – in Pakistan; and passed more draconian laws in regard to police surveillance powers in the US (Ralph 2013). And on new issues that have arisen since Obama’s inauguration, there is little to suggest any overall change of direction, other than rhetorical and stylistic. On Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain – the frontlines in the ‘Arab spring’ – Obama’s policies have remained loyal to historically established policies and definitions (Hassan, 2011). Indeed, the Libyan case represents a reversal – embrace of coercive regime-change after such a strategy had been rejected in the Iraq case. On the Wikileaks case, especially the matter of detention and treatment in military custody of Pfc Bradley Manning, who passed on 250,000 confidential State Department cables to a whistle-blower organisation – Wikileaks – the Obama administration attracted the attention of the UN and Amnesty International on allegations of “cruel and unusual punishment” amounting to torture (Parmar 2014).

Conclusion

In their haste to explain the continuities of foreign policies from Bush to Obama, most commentators remain attached to a few reasons: Obama's legacy of wars and financial crises; his lack of experience in foreign affairs; his personal insecurities as commander-in-chief but having served in no wars. None of those arguments are without some merit but they remain wedded to arguments suggesting had this or that been different, Obama would have transformed US policy and power. This is patently problematic. The argument pursued above is that President Obama represents the fruition of decades of post-civil rights era political and social development, of the ‘new’ black politics of incorporation, of working from the inside. He is a fully assimilated black elite member of the American Establishment who is practically

indistinguishable in office from his presidential predecessors. And, perhaps, part of a long-term process of Latin Americanisation of US society and racialised politics.

In his second term (2012-16), Obama should have been able to break free from anxiety and inexperience and speak with his own voice, if the usual critics had it right. That he is not doing so is not because he is obtuse: it is because he buys the programme.³³ And that programme is a bipartisan Establishment programme that Obama bought into bit by bit over many decades from his private school education in Hawaii, in California, at Columbia and Harvard universities, married to a deep-seated personal mission to assimilate into mainstream society. Whatever ‘minority’ characteristics Obama exemplified and struggled with during his youth have gradually been cast off as he has risen up the American power structure.

¹ Max Holland, “The American Establishment: Citizen McCloy,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Autumn 1991, pp.22-42. R.R. Reno argues that Obama represents, given his elitist credentials, precisely the end result of 1960s protest-driven Establishment-run ‘diversity’ programmes that were designed to “reinvent” the old Establishment’s tarnished credentials; Reno, “The Return of the Best and Brightest,” *FIRST THINGS*, February 2009; at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/01/001-the-return-of-the-best-and-brightest-41>; accessed, 15 April 2012. See also, H. Winant, “Just Do It: Notes on Politics and Race at the Dawn of the Obama Presidency,” *Du Bois Review* 6:1 (2009), 49-70.

² “Exclusive: Barack Obama is ‘aloof’ says British ambassador,” at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/3125120/Exclusive-Barack-Obama-is-aloof-says-British-ambassador-to-US.html>.

³ India is included because it has a strong English-speaking (colonial) tradition, with over 100 million speakers.

⁴ Richard Brookhiser, *The Way of the Wasp*. Interestingly, Andrew Sullivan, writing on his Atlantic Monthly blog noted Obama’s less attractive ‘Waspish’ characteristics; <http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2010/06/what-does-modo-want/186354/>; accessed 11 April 2012.

⁵ Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). Note Niall Ferguson’s notion of ‘Anglobalisation’ in “British imperialism revised: the costs and benefits of ‘Anglobalisation’,” *Development Research Institute Working Papers*, NYU Stern Business School, No.2, April 2003.

⁶ George E. C. Catlin, *One Anglo-Saxon Nation: The Foundation of Anglo-Saxony as a Basis of World Federation* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1941).

⁷ Clement Attlee speech, untitled, attached to letter, GE Millard (Foreign Office) to KC Turpin, 21.11.44; Folder 220-222, Box 15, Clement Attlee papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁸ Uma Kothari, "Critiquing 'race' and racism in development discourse and practice," *Progress in Development Studies* 6, 1 (2006), pp.1-7; Kothari, "An agenda for thinking about 'race' in development," *Progress in Development Studies* 6, 1 (2006), pp.9-23.

⁹ Michael Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Mark Ledwidge, *Race and US Foreign Policy* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁰ Adolphus Reed, *Class Notes*; quoted in James T. Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Maraniss, p.265. Punahou was considered by college admissions officers to be the tenth best American high school in the early 1970s; Maraniss, p.320.

¹² Domhoff and Zweigenhaft.

¹³ Occidental College website, *Upward Bound*, <http://college.oxy.edu/upwardbound/about>; accessed 31 March 2012. Oxy, as it was known, was among the first colleges to state a commitment to diversity in its mission statement; *What They Say About Us*, at <http://www.oxy.edu/x2360.xml>; accessed 31 March 2012; its website states that Oxy has an endowment of almost US\$300 million

¹⁴ David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel and Verse," *New York Times*, 26 April, 2007.

¹⁵ James Kloppenberg, *Reading Obama*

¹⁶ Marc Ambinder, "Race Over?" *The Atlantic* January/February 2009, p.65.

¹⁷ "Obama 'exemplifies ubuntu': Zuma," *SouthAfrica.info*, 12 October 2009, at http://www.southafrica.info/pls/procs/iac.page?p_tl=696& [check est of url]; accessed 21 July 2011.

¹⁸ Nkem Ifejika, "What does ubuntu really mean?" *The Guardian*, 29 September 2009, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2006/sep/29/features> [check rest of url address]; accessed 21 July 2011.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of State, "Ubuntu Diplomacy," at <http://www.state.gov/s/partnerships/ubuntu/index.htm>; accessed 29 June 2011.

²⁰ U.S. Department of State, Media Note, "Ambassador Elizabeth Frawley Bagley Sworn In As Special Representative for Global Partnerships," at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/06a/125278.htm>; accessed 21 July 2011.

²¹ U.S. Department of State, "Remarks at Swearing-in Ceremony of Special Representative for Global Partnerships Bagley: Opening Our Doors to the Private Sector," 18 June 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/s/partnerships/125074.htm>; accessed 29 June 2011.

²² Direct reference is made to Slaughter's work in Robert Tice Lalka, "Toward a Multi-partner World," U.S. Department of State. The Global Partnership Initiative, *State Magazine*, September 2009, p.38. Slaughter, "America's edge: power in the networked century," *Foreign Affairs* 88, 1, Jan-Feb 2009, pp.94-113.

²³ U.S Department of State, "Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Relations," by Hillary Clinton, 15 July 2009, at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/july/126071.htm>; accessed 21 July 2011.

²⁴ Sources for this empirical analysis included biographical data supplied on official Obama administration webpages, profiles in newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, on the website <http://www.whorungov.com>, on the *Washington Post*'s Head Count webpages tracking Obama's appointments at <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/2009/federal/appointments/>; accessed June 2010. According to analysis of 413 Obama appointees, the *Washington Post* website indicates: 113 were Clinton administration postholders, 71 had attended Harvard, just 16 were associated with organized labour, and just 5 with the liberal pro-Obama Center for American Progress think tank headed by John Podesta.

²⁵ Dan Eggen, "Groups on the Left Are Suddenly on Top," *Washington Post* 4 June 2009, at <http://washingtonpost.com/wp/dyn/content/article/2009/06/03/AR2009060303396.html>; accessed 17 June 2011.

²⁶ Robert Frank, "That Bright, Dying Star, the American WASP," *Wall Street Journal* 15 May 2010. The son of the so-called "Chairman" of the establishment, John J. McCloy, suggests that the US is the poorer for the establishment's demise.

²⁷ Brookhiser was speechwriter to George HW Bush, and author of *The Way of the Wasp: How it Made America* (New York: Free Press, 1991); cited in Christina Lamb, "America's Wasps lose their sting," (London) *Sunday Times*, 11 July, 2010; Mead, *God and Gold*, p.46.

²⁸ I am indebted to Mr. Nikhil Parmar for research assistance in gathering some of the data on Obama appointees' backgrounds and elite affiliations.

²⁹ This particular data is derived from the *Washington Post*'s analysis and data base at <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/2009/federal/appointments/>; accessed 30 July 2011. Their data base also showed there were 5 black, 4 Hispanic, and 2 Asian appointees to State.

³⁰ "Obama's cabinet Diversity Record 'Embarrassing as Hell'," *DiversityInc*; at <http://www.diversityinc.com/diversity-and-inclusion/obamas-cabinet-diversity-record-embarrassing-as-hell/>; accessed 24 October, 2014; <http://beforeitsnews.com/obama/2013/03/clinton-and-bush-still-lead-obama-in-black-cabinet-appointees-2448516.html>; accessed 24 October, 2014.

³¹ "How not to tackle Islamic State"; <https://richardjacksonterrorismblog.wordpress.com/>; accessed 4 October, 2014. See also, Ahmed Rashid, "ISIS: What the US Doesn't Understand," NYRblog, at <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2014/dec/02/isis> (accessed 2.12.2104).

³² Public Discussion: "Prospects for Afghanistan: Challenges to Political Stability"; participants included Michael Keating of Chatham House, and former UN deputy envoy to Afghanistan, and Mohammad Jalil Shams, former Afghan minister of economy and deputy minister for water and energy; remarks at Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 21 October 2014.

³³ In December 2014, Obama extended by another year America's military mission in Afghanistan, reversing a promised withdrawal by the end of 2014; and had ordered US forces back into Iraq. For a useful structured agency approach to Obama's leadership, LR Jacobs and DS King, "Varieties of Obamaism: Structure, Agency and the Obama Presidency," *Perspectives on Politics* 8, 3 (September 2010), 793-802.

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