I guess you could say I’m a Doubting Thomas. Back in 2008, I was sure that Barack Obama would never be elected president of the United States. I even said so on a local TV show. This time around I was also certain President Obama would not be reelected. A stalling economic recovery, a stark increase in anti-black hatred (see, for example, an October 2012 Associated Press poll) and a multi-billion dollar fundraising machine, all seemed to presage the end of the Obama era. And then Mitt Romney had a run of self-inflicted wounds so unprecedented that it has commentators still shaking their heads.

In late July Romney began an international trip designed to showcase his statesman-like demeanor. Instead he insulted the London Olympic organizers, earning the public ire of London’s mayor and Britain’s Prime Minister, both Conservatives, by the way. Then he picked Congressman Paul Ryan whose proposed budget slashing Social Security and Medicare made him a singularly unpopular Congressman in the most unpopular Congress in history. And then a September surprise. In a grainy, cell phone video released by Mother Jones Romney blithely dismissed “47% of the country” as “victims” who are “dependent upon government.” “My [job],” Romney went on to say, “is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives.” While some commentators dismissed it as a verbal gaff, Romney stood behind the general sentiments, a move I respected because in fact he meant them. Romney merely said out loud what many of his ilk think about the people who clean their toilets, fight their wars, and make their cars.

Obama nearly erased the advantage Romney gave him in that bizarre first debate, but eventually he found his footing, winning a resounding victory. He did so by running a smart and focused national campaign using technology and local volunteers to turn out the Democratic vote. And while I’m grateful every single day that President Obama will be in office long enough to see the full implementation of the Affordable Care Act and appoint a Supreme Court Justice or two, I remain uneasy. A look at two Obama campaign themes, one domestic, the other international, may explain why.
Cynthia A. Young  
Associate Professor, Dept. of English & Program in African and African Diaspora Studies

On the domestic front, Obama’s campaign buried the concerns of the unemployed and working poor under an avalanche of rhetoric about the “vanishing middle class.” Don’t get me wrong. The middle class has been hit hard by stagnant wages, declining home prices, and high consumer debt. But if the middle class has a cold, the poor have pneumonia. According to the latest Census figures the percentage of black children living in poverty rose to 38.2%; that’s higher than all other racial groups and up nearly 5% since the last Census.\(^1\) The formal unemployment rate in the black community (a measure that notoriously undercounts the problem) jumped from 9% in June 2007 to 14.5% in August of 2012. And black, teen joblessness is at a staggering 40.5%.\(^2\) It’s not so much that President Obama has failed to put forward anti-poverty initiatives; rather, it’s that he has failed to use his office as a bully pulpit to draw attention to the tragedy of entrenched and growing urban poverty. Amidst a wealth of new research on the devastating impact of poverty on children, the Obama had the opportunity to highlight the problem and possible solutions and he failed to do so. According to a New York Times Magazine cover story, Obama did not dedicate even one speech to the issue during his first administration.\(^3\)

On the international side, the Obama campaign touted his credentials as a Commander-In-Chief winning the so-called “war on terror.” Proof of this was the summary execution of an unarmed Osama Bin Laden in May 2011. Less well known are the other methods President Obama has deployed over the last four years. Keeping in place and expanding the CIA’s covert drone program begun under George W. Bush, President Obama has used drones to conduct surveillance and kill without regard to national borders or the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. Working from “kill lists” that are assembled by Obama, himself, the CIA uses drones to kill individuals, including U.S. citizens

---


like the cleric Anwar-al-Alwaki, and target “suspicious” gatherings of people – these are called “crowd kills” – including those attending funerals and weddings. According to an independent report by the London-based Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the Obama administration has conducted at least 363 drone strikes, killing and wounding thousands of civilians in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia, without the need to definitively or even tenuously link them to terrorist activities.4 “No president,” writes Greg Miller in the Washington Post, “has ever relied so extensively on the secret killing of individuals to advance the nation’s security goals.”5

I, personally, expect more from a former Constitutional lawyer raised by a single mother. I hope that this second term will bring a sea change in Obama. I’m waiting to see Obama give a voice to those who are languishing in the streets of our urban ghettos and the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula. It doesn’t take an oracle to see that if what’s past is prologue, I may be waiting in vain.

---