**10 Historians on What Will Be Said About President Obama's Legacy**

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*As President Barack Obama*[*wound down*](http://time.com/4632036/bush-sisters-obama-sisters/)*his eight years in the White House and President Donald Trump took office, TIME History asked a variety of experts to weigh in on a question: How do you think historians of the future will talk about on his time in Office? Where will he fit in the ranks of presidents past?*

*While all agreed that his presidency was historic—and that there's a lot we can't know until time passes—opinions differed on what his most lasting legacy will be. Below is a selection of the answers they submitted by email and phone:*

**Laura Belmonte, head of the history department at Oklahoma State University and a member of the U.S. Department of State's Historical Advisory Committee on Diplomatic Documentation:**

Throughout his presidency, Barack Obama’s extraordinary capacity to tap people’s deepest aspirations collided with domestic political divides that severely limited his ability to build an enduring legislative program comparable to the New Deal, the Great Society, or the Reagan revolution.

Historians’ assessment of Obama’s presidency will be mixed. While he will be lauded for guiding the nation off the precipice of a global economic catastrophe and for extricating America from two protracted, inconclusive wars, Obama’s aggressive use of executive power in the face of congressional obstruction imperils his biggest achievements in restructuring health care and the financial sector, immigration reform, environmental protections, labor policy and LGBT rights. Expansive executive actions also undergird more troubling aspects of his presidency such as drone warfare, deportations and domestic surveillance. His successors inherit an emboldened regulatory state that can be used to dismantle or weaken Obama’s initiatives—a reality that underscores the fragility of Obama’s political legacy.

**~~H.W. Brands, professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin:~~**

~~The single undeniable aspect of Obama's legacy is that he demonstrated that a black man can become president of the United States. This accomplishment will inform the first line in his obituary and will earn him assured mention in every American history textbook written from now to eternity.~~

~~For all else, it's too soon to tell~~.

**Doris Kearns Goodwin, presidential historian and author of bestselling biographies:**

In the near-term, he brought stability to the economy, to the job market, to the housing market, to the auto industry and to the banks. That's what he’s handing over: an economy that is in far better form than it was when he took over. And you can also say he'll be remembered for his dignity, grace, and the lack of scandal. And then the question is in the longer term what have you left for the future that will be remembered by historians years from now. Some of that will depend on what happens to health care.

People will see enormous progress in the lives of gay people, and a president helps sometimes those cultural changes take place or at least he gets credit when it happens. In terms of foreign policy, he ended combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. How did that affect the Middle East? That's something the future will have to figure out. And I suspect one of the signature international agreements was the climate change agreement in Paris, which would be a marker perhaps of the first time the world really took action together to slow climate change. The question will be what happens to that agreement now again under Trump.

Syria will probably be a problem for him. He himself told me, when I interviewed him, that that was the decision that haunted him the most—not that he had had two decisions and made the wrong one, but he said maybe there was some other decision out there that he didn’t have the imagination or the inventiveness to figure out.

**James Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association:**

Ranking presidents requires a certain amount of hubris, if not arrogance. I take seriously historian E.P. Thompson’s admonition about “the enormous condescension of posterity,” knowing that our political principles and moral certainties will seem less obvious to scholars of future generations. So I approach this assignment with the same trepidation that I had when I commented the morning after Election Day 2008 on the “historic significance” of that election. It remains tempting to paint Barack Obama’s election as a step toward healing the nation’s great wound of racism, even if not the expiation of what George W. Bush referred to as our “original sin” of slavery at the opening of the National Museum of African American History & Culture.

It didn’t happen. Obama’s election ironically had the opposite effect. The President’s opponents questioned his legitimacy from the beginning. The leader of the opposing party declared that the highest priority—more important than the public good—was to make sure Obama would not be reelected. This imperative failed, but the racism that runs so deep in American culture was unleashed as it had not been for two generations. The bandages have been ripped off the sores, which are now open and festering in public culture.

Was Obama then a failure? No. American public culture has failed. We were not ready for a black president. He cedes power on Friday to the very people who questioned his legitimacy and denied him the right to govern. They have already begun to demolish his accomplishments. But historians eventually will also calculate the benefits of the Affordable Care Act, look back on the results of the opening to Cuba, appreciate his admittedly belated environmental activism, and notice that his Administration was virtually scandal free.

**Lori Cox Han, professor of political science at Chapman University:**

Presidential legacies can be complicated and nuanced, yet simple when it comes to the basics: Win two terms in office, get big things done on your policy agenda, and keep your party in power. Barack Obama accomplished the first, with impressive wins in 2008 and 2012 based on an optimistic message of “hope and change.” Obama’s strategy on the campaign trail brought together a diverse coalition of voters that suggested a dramatic shift in public policy priorities. Yet, the Democratic dominance was short-lived. As Obama leaves office, the Republican Party is stronger than it has been since 1928 and will control the White House, both houses of Congress, a large majority of governorships and state legislative houses. Time will tell how long Republicans can hold this majority, but the GOP is nonetheless poised to undo many of Obama’s accomplishments. The irony is that Obama leaves office with a solid approval rating and more popular than President-elect Donald Trump. Unfortunately, Obama’s personal popularity could not transform the hyper-partisan environment that dominates so much of our political process.

**Timothy Naftali, Clinical Associate Professor of History and Public Service at New York University and former director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum:**

President Obama, with laser-like focus, tried to change the way we thought about what our government does for us at home and what it does abroad. In so doing, he strengthened and broadened the social safety net and redefined the American engagement with the world. We will see in the coming years what the American people want to preserve of those changes. One thing we don’t have to wait to conclude is that President Obama avoided the second-term curse that afflicted too many modern presidents. He’ll leave office scandal-free. That’s a key part of the Obama legacy because of his presidency's unusual symbolic importance. President Obama, by virtue of being elected, had already secured the first sentence in any future historical account of his life: “He was the first African-American president.” And then as president he showed his determination to be more that a breaker of barriers. Nevertheless it is impossible to exaggerate the importance of that single achievement, and the care he took to leave it untarnished, and for that we don’t have to await the verdict of history.

The other thing I might add is that President Obama is among those presidents most aware of history. I look forward to reading what he has to say about his legacy.

**Barbara A. Perry, Director of Presidential Studies and Co-Chair of the Presidential Oral History Program at the University of Virginia’s Miller Center:**

Obama’s most lasting policy legacy will be saving the American economy from the “Great Recession." As he entered office, the U.S. financial structure was in free fall, nearly bringing the nation’s banking, investment and credit systems to a halt. The "misery index” (unemployment plus inflation rates) soared to almost 13% in 2009. President Obama righted the ship through a stimulus package (including infrastructure improvements), expanded relief of failing banks and investment firms, and the bailout of the American auto industry. The “misery index” has been cut in half (6.29%) as he completes his two terms, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which had sunk to 6,000 in 2009, is now just shy of 20,000.

Moreover, nothing can ever repeal the landmark election of Barack Obama as the nation's first African American president. The dignity and grace that he and his family brought to the White House will constitute his most enduring legacy.

**Katherine A.S. Sibley, professor of History and director of the American Studies Program at St. Joseph’s University.**

As our first African-American president, re-elected by wide margins, Barack Obama’s ascent into office was path-breaking. Though many profess their ironic sense that race relations have become more fraught during his tenure, it was Obama who provided the opening for a long-needed national conversation on this topic—a conversation he started in 2008 in Philadelphia where he spoke of a “racial stalemate” that “reflected the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through.”

I find him reflecting in some ways both John F. Kennedy and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Obama’s relative youth and the inspiring hope for change his often-soaring rhetoric has offered certainly echo Kennedy’s attributes; further comparisons may be seen in legislation from healthcare to civil rights. In addition, both had First Ladies who were significant assets to their administrations. But President Obama’s often incremental and pragmatic approach, as well as his habit of borrowing from the opposing party’s policies, also show him to resemble Eisenhower. In contrast to both of those predecessors, however, he had to deal with a starkly oppositional Congress bent on undermining his agenda, and that situation has certainly affected his initiatives.

**Nikhil Pal Singh, Associate Professor in the Departments of Social and Cultural Analysis and History at New York University:**

Barack Obama became President after years of attritional warfare, and in the midst of a financial crisis that posed systemic risks to the U.S. and world economy. In the face of these obstacles, he avoided scandal, faced down right-wing brinksmanship, refused to debase common political discourse and achieved a measure of success in areas of foreign and domestic policy, including economic recovery, the Iran nuclear deal and the expansion of health insurance provision. The significance of Obama’s standing as the nation's first black chief executive should never be dismissed. Though racial inequality and racist animus persists, Obama’s success signals longer-term normative and generational shifts favorable to displacing the long historical precedence of white racial nationalism in American life. But, with respect to other pressing issues—reducing widening economic inequality, moving beyond overly militarized approaches to foreign policy and confronting the ecological damage of climate change—Obama made only marginal, even negligible gains, and did not achieve the progressive, political breakthrough he promised. His soaring oratory and dignified bearing will be fondly remembered for its vision of a more perfect union—one that President Obama was decidedly unable to deliver.

**Julian Zelizer, professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University:**

In terms of legislation, Obama achieved some big things: health care, the economic stimulus, financial regulation and more. Those are big changes in what government does and the kinds of activities it undertakes. He expanded the social contract. Taking it all together, in a polarized era, that’s a pretty substantial record. After 2010, he used executive power to move forward on immigration policy, climate change and a historic nuclear deal with Iran. The question is, does it last? We just don’t know that. His legacy is also leaving the Democratic Party in pretty bad shape, so that puts his legacy at even greater risk. He’s not like FDR—FDR accomplished a lot in policy but he left the party in a strong position by the time that his presidency ended. He’s more like Lyndon Johnson in that he got a lot of things on the books but his party might have been in weaker condition when he left office than when he started.