

Obama Negative

That's just who he is.

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Perhaps you too have been wondering why it is that President Obama is always, always telling us who we are as Americans and who we are not. Obviously, why he does this is a complicated question. And I guess “always” is an exaggeration. Frequently, though—he does it very frequently.

To pull one little item from the Google hopper: He was asked earlier this year about football players and the concussions they always (frequently) seem to be getting. There are few subjects the president won't comment on.

“We have to change a culture that says you suck it up,” the president said. At the same time, he went on, football will continue to be, even after we stop sucking it up, “fundamental to who we are as Americans.” Boola boola.

The little clump of words about who we are as Americans pops out of the president's mouth so often it's easy to miss it, even when he says it twice on the same occasion, a few sentences apart, as he sometimes does. It's not necessarily annoying. Often when he tells us who we are the phrase has a nice, friendly lilt to it, as though the president were giving us a pat on the back. You hear him at the 9/11 museum saying, “Nothing can ever break us. Nothing can change who we are as Americans,” and you think, Thanks, Obama!

Unfortunately, Americans might also get confused about who we are, assuming we're paying attention to our president. It's easy to lose track.

“That's who the American people are—determined, and not to be messed with,” the president said again last summer. So, number one, we're bad ass. This is probably related to our being football fundamentalists. But make no mistake: We have a gentler side. All the Christmas parties, Seders, and Muslim religious ceremonies the president hosts at the White House “are an affirmation of who we are as Americans.” So, number two, we're religious, without overdoing it.

“Values,” he said on another occasion last year, “make us who we are as Americans.” He decided not to get too specific about which values make us, so we may conclude simply that, unlike other people, we are people with values. That's number three. “National monuments,” he said a few years ago, “tell the story of who we are as Americans.” Number four: We're monumental. The Bowe Bergdahl affair, from last summer, does the same thing that national monuments do. It shows that “an ironclad commitment to bring our prisoners of war home” is what “makes us who we are as Americans.”

“We shape our destiny . . . that's who we are.” So, number five, we are destiny shapers who always go get our prisoners of war, even if we have to let loose a bunch of Taliban first. Remember the underwear bomber? He proved that “we will be guided by our hopes, our unity, and our deeply held values. That's who we are as Americans.” So we're hopeful, united, and festooned with those values, unspecified. Extending unemployment benefits past 99 weeks is “who we are as Americans.” We're big spenders when it comes to public funds. Income inequality “challenges the very essence of who we are as a people.” We can all make lots of money, as Americans, but not too much.

Sometimes the president teams up with his wife, who uses the word clump when she's talking about her national exercise and diet programs. She has talked about “the many cultures and faith traditions that make us who we are as Americans.” When they set about to decorate the White House for Christmas, Mrs. Obama said last year, “We tried to tell a story about who we are as Americans.”

I could go on and on with many more examples, but you'd hate me.

The phrase, you'll notice, carries a vaguely therapeutic air. Our language everywhere shows the smudgy hand of the therapist, the life coach, the counselor, the facilitator. People nowadays say they “reach out” to people that they just used to talk to, and “share” things when they just used to say things, and talk of themselves, of their feelings and impressions and habits, without ceasing. It is the mission of the therapists and life coaches to enable you to find yourself, “to discover who you really are as a person,” to decant the authentic *you*. I suppose it was inevitable that the seductive language of therapy would migrate into the language of politics.

And who we truly are is often obscured, in national life as in personal life, beneath layers of self-deception, pretense, and misunderstanding. The politician and his codependent audience, like therapist and patient, have penetrated America's true self and returned to deliver the news to everyone else. This makes it a perfect trope for a certain kind of rhetoric, in which unexceptional, even banal, sentiments (“hope,” “change”) are

cast as moral insights that transcend the “false choice” that befuddles a politician’s opponents.

“Who we are” serves other purposes. It allows the president’s followers to absorb the jingoism of less sophisticated people—all those vulgar crowds chanting USA! USA!—and refine it into the moral vanity they more highly prize. (Self-flattery is who they are.) Democrats have been bedeviled for decades by the canard that they are somehow less patriotic than conservatives. “Who we are” allows them to turn the tables, so long as who we are is Democrats. If, for example, you think that 99 weeks of unemployment insurance payments is about all we can afford, then you’re not just wrong, you’re un-American. You’re not who we are. It’s super-patriotism for the passive-aggressive. If we still had a House Committee on Un-American Activities we could rename it the House Committee on Activities of People Who Are Not Who We Are as Americans.

Indeed, *not who we are* is as important to the president as who we are. Lately he has been using his word clump in a negative formulation. When Ebola briefly became the crisis of the decade a while ago, the president stood tall. “I put those on notice who think that we should hide from these problems,” he said. (It’s not clear who those people were—I’d need to see some direct quotes.) But the president made it clear who we were not: “That’s not who we are.” And people who oppose large subsidies for windmills and solar energy—maybe they think they’re Americans. No: “That’s not us. That’s not who we are.” Same goes for all those people who want to “eliminate health insurance for millions of Americans who are poor and elderly or disabled” just so they can give tax cuts to rich people—though again, I’d like to see a show of hands from the people who want to do this. Anyway: that’s who we are . . . *not*.

Theologians used to speak of the *Via Negativa*—a philosophical method that tries to define God by ticking off all the things he isn’t, in a process of elimination. It turns out that even the president’s positive affirmations of “who we are” are essentially negative. The president and his supporters have embarked on their own *via negativa*, defining true Americans by eliminating, rhetorically, the ones who disagree with him. It’s an odd mission for a man who as a candidate told us there was no blue America or red America, only the United States of America. But that’s not who he is as a president.

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