

'90 Days' and No Good Reasons

The incoherence, petulance, and desperation of "90 Days" documents the decline of a presidential cult.

Gene Healy | October 16, 2012

During the last presidential election cycle, a McCain campaign ad titled "The One" mocked the messianic vibe surrounding Barack Obama's candidacy. "It should be known," the voice-over began, "that in 2008, the world will be blessed: They will call him 'The One.'" Faced with a tightening race and waning liberal enthusiasm, lately, President Obama is finding out that "One" is the loneliest number.

To get a sense of Obamaphiles' current mood, I spent the last couple of days slogging through the 60-odd pro-Obama essays posted at "90 Days, 90 Reasons" (the things I do for you people). Dave Eggers, the author of "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" and Jordan Kurland, a band manager, started the project in July in the hopes that they might "re-inspire the grassroots army that got Obama elected in the first place."

Eggers and friend sought contributions from "a wide range of cultural figures," including actors, directors, various unfunny comics, singers from twee little indie bands with names like My Morning Jacket and a gaggle of self-described "writers." The end product gives the lie to the old adage that "writing is thinking." Staggering genius this ain't -- for the most part, you can find more clarity and insight in Miss America contestants' perennial calls for "world peace."

A few examples: "Life is short, very short, and what are we doing here if not trying to become more generous and loving?" writes creative writing professor George Saunders. "President Obama is a body surfer ... He has a profound respect for nature," notes musician Jack Johnson. Fulfilling the ideal of government for the people "means that transgender men get to work alongside fratboys at an investment bank," write director Tom Gilroy and musician Michael Stipe.

"What Obama did -- and continues to do -- is expand the lungs of our ongoing sense of identity," gushes author Colum McCann. Only a narrow-lunged bigot would deny the significance of that achievement.

Not a few contributors ring the changes on "hope and change": "I believe in the power of hope," writes rapper Dee-1. "President Obama is more genuine than Romney. Has Romney heard of Jay-Z?" "Obama teaches us to believe hope can lead to real change," writes Roxane Gay.

As the days go on, there's a fatalistic, going-through-the motions aspect to much of "90 Days." And on and on it goes -- with more in the way of juvenile insults than Obamaphiles engaged in back in the days of Hope and roses. "[S]hort of electing a born-again monkey with downs syndrome [sic], anyone who replaced Bush would be considered 'a change,' " writes comedian David Cross. Obama's "not Romney. He plays basketball. Romney sucks at basketball. He doesn't believe in wearing magical underwear, like Romney does," comments comedian Reggie Watts. Director David Lynch notes that if you scramble the GOP candidate's last name, you get "R MONEY. I believe Mitt Romney wants to get his Mitts on R Money. He would like to get it and divide it up with his friends, the Big Money Bunch." No wonder "Twin Peaks" didn't make any sense.

The incoherence, petulance and desperation of "90 Days" documents the decline of a presidential cult. That's a welcome development: Partisan fervor and cults of personality are the enemies of sober judgment. It's skepticism, not passion, we need when evaluating potential presidents, lest we get swept away and wind up ashamed of ourselves in the morning.

In one of "90 Days"' rare flashes of common sense, author and screenwriter Sherman Alexie observes that "the liberal messiah does not exist." True -- and a good thing, too.