The other side of the American enlightenment

REVIEW BY SHANE WHITE

ESSAYS

We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy

TA-NEHISI COATES

HAMISH HAMILTON, $35

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For near a decade, Ta-Nehisi Coates has been a correspondent for The Atlantic. Aged 42, he is part of a generation of black writers who came to prominence during the Obama administration. Tellingly, his lodestar is his teenage son. Coates' bleak view of race relations, centring on the persistence of white supremacy in American history, became a surprising bestseller.

We Were Eight Years in Power collects eight of his Atlantic essays, one from each year of the Obama administration, covering subjects such as Bill Cosby, the legacy of Malcolm X, the black family in the age of incarceration, and the Obamas. To Coates' credit he has done more than exploit his fame and only reprint the pieces – he offers commentary on each of his essays, commentary that is part memoir and part critique of the original pieces. The result is a particularly satisfying account of the education of a young man as he learned his country's history and became, however reluctantly, a black public intellectual.

Although he attended Howard University, a historically African American institution, he never completed his degree and there is something of the autodidact to his writing. In effect, Coates annotates the reading list that allowed him to discover detail, totally new to him, of the African American past. Unlike many other public intellectuals, Coates not only does the hard work of reading widely and intensively, he also acknowledges by name the historians who have influenced his thinking. Unsurprisingly, many of his biggest fans are historians.

The best essay in the collection is The Case for Reparations. Here he is concerned not just with the impact of slavery on African Americans but with the active discrimination of the federal government since the end of the Civil War. Perhaps most important was the mid-20th century “redlining” of districts ensuring black people were unable to secure mortgages to buy housing and destroying the possibility of investment wherever black people lived. He makes a powerful case and when the article was published it turned around many people's thinking on the subject of reparations.

Coates also shrewdly assesses Barack Obama and race. He is sensitive to Obama's position, writing that “he was phenomenal – the most agile interpreter and navigator of the colour line I had ever seen”. But he was also very critical of the way Obama “hector[ed] black people on their alleged shortcomings”. Obama's dilemma was that he lived in a country “enlightened enough to send an African American to the White House, but not enlightened enough to accept a black man as its president”.

The contrast with the current president is laid bare in a scathing epilogue. Coates argues that Donald Trump's very political existence depends on the fact of a black president, that the whiteness of the presidency was always assumed but only became an issue after Obama had held office. Trump's “ideology is white supremacy in
all of its truculent and sanctimonious power” – and this was written well before Charlottesville.

Coates insists that Donald Trump “must be called by his correct name and rightful honorific – America's first white president”. And who would argue with that?

Shane White is Challis Professor of History at Sydney University.

“Racism is not a tumour that can be isolated and removed from the body of America”

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