

"Racializing Obama"
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Despite Barack Obama's strenuous efforts to present a "post-black campaign" that transcended racial identification, the Clintons' race-conscious tactics in South Carolina and in other states increasingly "racialized" the Illinois Democrat. Any faint hopes that Obama may have held about completely transcending race were obliterated with the controversy surrounding the explosive videotaped speeches of his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ.

Trinity Church's motto, "Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian" places Obama's church firmly within the tradition of black liberation theology. Yet even before the controversial videos of Rev. Wright surfaced, white conservatives had attempted to equate Trinity Church's theological teachings with those of the Nation of

Islam. Media conservative Tucker Carlson, for example, declared in 2007 that the church "contradicts the basic tenets of Christianity," and was racially "separatist."

Conservative journalist Erik Rush even equated the church with the white supremacist "Aryan Brethren Church," and asked if congregants "consider themselves Americans?"

Rev. Wright's message of black pride, personal responsibility and progressive politics was twisted and distorted by seizing upon the most provocative seconds taken from many hours of videotaped sermons.

Obama's response to the Rev. Wright controversy was a masterful address, "A More Perfect Union," delivered in Philadelphia's Constitution Center. Obama began by reminding his audience that American democracy was "unfinished" at its founding in 1787, due to "this nation's original sin of slavery." Obama declared that despite his rather unusual personal history and mixed ethnic background, "seared into my genetic makeup [is] the idea

that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one."

Obama's great strength is his ability to discuss controversial and complex issues in a manner that conveys the seeking of consensus, or common ground. His Philadelphia address reminded whites that "so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery" and Jim Crow segregation. But he also acknowledged the anger and alienation of poor and working class whites, people who do not live especially privileged lives, who feel unfairly victimized by policies like affirmative action. Obama criticized Rev. Wright's statements as "not only wrong but divisive, at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems ... that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all."

The other astute dimension of Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech was his repeated referencing of U.S. racial history, while simultaneously refusing to be defined or restricted by that history. For blacks, Obama asserted, the path forward "means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past ... it means binding our particular grievances – for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs – to the larger aspirations of all Americans." In the context of electoral politics and public policy, Obama's argument makes perfect sense. In America's major cities, for example, there's no explicitly "Latino strategy" for improving public transportation, or a purely "African-American strategy" to improve health care. That's not to suggest that racial disparities in health care, education, employment and other areas don't exist. It does mean, however, that any real solutions must depend on building multiracial, multiclass coalitions that can fight to achieve change.

After the positive response to Obama's successful address, and following a series of embarrassing mistakes by Hilary Clinton's campaign, the Illinois Democrat once again gained national momentum. As we head into the crucial Democratic primaries of Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Indiana, the candidate who wins two out of three races will be at an advantage. If Obama wins at least two of these races, Clinton probably will quit the contest. If Clinton somehow manages to win at least two to these elections, she will undoubtedly hang in the race through the June Puerto Rican primary, and perhaps even longer, delaying the process of building unity within the Democratic Party.

What remains clear is that the "blackening of Obama" is just beginning. If he emerges, as is likely, as the 2008 Democratic presidential candidate, a host of racist and reactionary advertisements supporting Republican candidate John McCain will flood the media before Labor Day. Some will project Obama as a greater danger to white folks than O.J. Simpson and Louis Farrakhan combined. Other political

commercials, with greater sophistication, will regurgitate many of Hilary Clinton's smears – that Obama's "too inexperienced," that he's not "prepared" to be commander in chief. This will be accompanied by an unofficial, race-based whisper campaign, accusing Obama of being anti-Semitic, anti-Hispanic, and unsympathetic to the problems of white workers.

Obama's effort to avoid "racialization" in certain respects restricts him from answering questions about racism honestly. For example, at the well-publicized San Francisco fundraiser, when Obama was asked why low income whites failed to vote for him, the candidate resorted to a complicated, sociological explanation, why many rural whites feel "bitter" and alienated. Because Obama tries to avoid "race-based" answers, he failed to say what was true: that millions of low income whites simply won't support him simply because he's black.

Obama's greatest challenge in avoiding "racialization" is to maintain confidence and enthusiasm among a crucial

sector of his core supporters – the African-American electorate. The first rule of politics is to secure your core base first, then reach out to other groups. The Obama campaign since early 2007 reversed this process, avoiding any discussion about race for months, and failing to consolidate the vast majority of the black vote behind him for more than a year. Obama's popularity among young whites and middle-to-upper class whites is based, in part, because he has an image that "transcends race." But will these same groups stay loyally committed to him when the Republican race-baiting machine starts its racial attacks against Barack Obama this fall?

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