

“Barack Obama's Problem – And Ours”

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Several years ago I was walking home to my Manhattan apartment from Columbia University, just having delivered a lecture on New York state's notorious “Rockefeller Drug Laws.” The state's mandatory-minimum sentencing laws had thrown tens of thousands of nonviolent drug offenders into state prisons with violent convicts. In my lecture I had called for more generous prisoner reentry programs, the restoration of felons' voting rights, increased educational programs inside prisons, and a restoration of judges' sentencing authority.

A white administrator from another local university, a woman, who I had always judged to be fairly conservative and probably a Republican, had attended my lecture and was walking along with me to go to the subway. She told me that my lecture about the “prison industrial complex” had been a real “eye opener.” The fact that two

million Americans were imprisoned, she expressed, was a "real scandal."

Then this college administrator blurted out, in a hurried manner, "You know, my son is also in prison ... a victim of the drug laws."

In a split second, I had to make a hard decision: whether to engage this white conservative administrator in a serious conversation about America's gulags and political economy of mass incarceration that had collaterally ensnared her son, or whether to pretend that I had not heard her last sentence, and to continue our conversation as if she had said nothing at all. Perhaps this is a sign of generational weakness on my part, but the overwhelming feeling I had at that precise moment was that, one day, the white administrator would deeply regret revealing such an intimate secret with a black person. I might tell the entire world about it. Instead of proceeding on the basis of mutual trust and common ground, transcending the boundaries of color, it would be better to ignore what was said in haste.

All of this occurred to me in the span of one heartbeat. I decided to say nothing. Two seconds later, I could visually detect the signs of relief on the woman's face.

African Americans have survived in the United States for over four hundred years because, at least up to the most recent generation of black people, we have made it our business to study white Americans generally, and especially those who exercise power. This explains why so many African Americans at the very core of their being, express fears that millions of white Americans will be unable to cast ballots for Obama for president solely due to his racial identity. Of course, the majority of them would deny this, even to themselves.

Among the remaining Democratic presidential candidates, former Senator John Edwards has been consistently the most progressive on most policy issues, in my view. On issues such as health care and poverty, Edwards has been clearly to the left of both Obama and Hillary Clinton. But since Edwards probably cannot win the Democratic nomination the real choice is between Clinton and Obama.

We've all heard the arguments explaining why Obama's "not qualified" to be president. Chief among them is that he "doesn't have enough experience in government." As a historian, I think it may be instructive to observe that three of the twentieth century's most influential presidents had *shorter* careers in electoral politics than Obama. Theodore Roosevelt, for instance, served as New York's governor for only two years, and was William McKinley's Vice President for barely six months. Woodrow Wilson served as New Jersey's governor for only two years before being elected president. And Franklin D. Roosevelt, our only four-term president, had served in Albany as New York's governor for four years. None of these leaders was ever elected to Congress.

Obama's seven years in the Illinois State Senate, according to the *New York Times'* Nicholas Kristof, show that "he scored significant achievements there: a law to videotape police interrogations in capital cases; an earned income tax credit to fight poverty; an expansion of early childhood education." To be perfectly honest, there are some public policy issues where I sharply disagree with Obama, such as health care. Obama's approach is not to use

“mandates” to force millions of healthy twenty-somethings into the national health insurance pool. He claims that you won’t need mandates, just lower the price of private health insurance and young adults will buy it on their own. Obama’s children are still small, so maybe he can be excused for such an irrational argument. Obama’s reluctance to embrace health mandates is about his desire to appeal to “centrists” and moderate Republicans.

That brings us back to Barack’s unspoken problem: white denial and voter flight. It’s instructive to remember what happened to David Dinkins, the first (and still only) African American elected mayor of New York City. According to Andrew Kohul, the current president of the Pew Research Center, the Gallup organization’s polling research on New York City’s voters in 1989 indicated that Dinkins would defeat his Republican opponent, Rudolph Giuliani, by 15 percent. Instead, Dinkins only narrowly won by 2 percent. Kohul, who worked as a Gallup pollster in that election, concluded that “poorer, less well-educated [white] voters were less likely to answer our questions;” so the poll didn’t have the opportunity to factor in their views. As Kohul admits, “Here’s the problem – these whites who do not respond to

surveys tend to have more unfavorable views of blacks than respondents who do the interviews.”

So I return to the white college administrator whose son is in prison on drug charges. I made a mistake. People of color must break through the mental racial barricades that divide America into parallel racial universes. We need to mobilize and support the election of Barack Obama not only because he is progressive and fully qualified to be president, but also because only his campaign can force all Americans to overcome the centuries-old silences about race that still create a deep chasm across this nation's democratic life. In the end, we must force our fellow citizens who happen to be white, to come to terms with their own whiteness, their guilt and fears about America's terrible racial past.

If there is any hope for meaningful change inside U.S. electoral system in the future, it lies with progressive leaders like Barack Obama. If we can dare to dream politically, let us dream of the world as it *should be*.

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