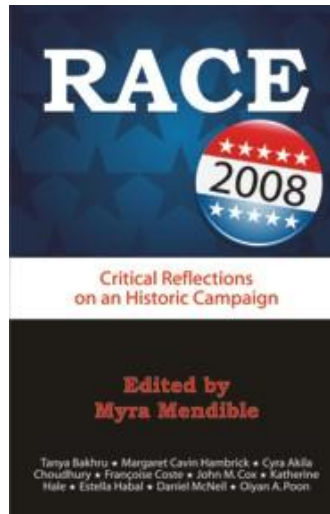


“From Rev. Wright to ‘Joe the Plumber’: Racial and Class Anxieties in the 2008 Elections”

In Race 2008: Critical Reflections on an Historic Election

Myra Mendible, editor, published May 2010



The 2008 presidential electoral campaign, which culminated in the election of the nation’s first African-American president, registered the genuine progress that African Americans have achieved over the last half-century, but also revealed the persistence of structural and individual racism and the widespread acceptance of anti-Muslim bigotry. This essay examines the convergence during the 2008 campaign of racial anxieties among whites; levels of distrust and misunderstanding that continue to plague U.S. race relations; the intersection of anti-Muslim with anti-Black prejudice; and, related to these, the deep confusion that abounds in this country over issues of class.

American voters looked for and “found” whatever they wanted in Barack Obama: He was all things to all people, and thus his campaign served as a magnet for the dreams or fears of various sections of the population. Progressives and liberals believed that he was one of them, and that the election would herald a new age, or at least a definitive break from the dismal years of the Bush-Cheney administration. Liberals and the moderate left could at least cite some evidence, however ambiguous, to support their hopes in Obama. In

contrast, the right wing became increasingly delusional and desperate as Election Day approached. Taken together, these factors made Obama's campaign, and the opposition to it, an unusually revealing barometer of Americans' complex attitudes toward race, as well as toward class and religion. Some of those attitudes—in particular racial beliefs—have evolved in a progressive direction over the last half century, yet certain stereotypes, misunderstandings, and anxieties persist, and are even in danger of taking harsher forms, as demonstrated by a handful of domestic terrorist incidents perpetrated by far-rightists in the months following Obama's inauguration.¹

"Making a Pit bull look tame": Race and Racism in the 2008 Election

There was never much doubt that Obama's opponents would, sooner or later, exploit the racist sentiments that many white Americans cling to, consciously or not. Several months before the post-convention showdown with McCain, Hillary Clinton had made explicitly racial appeals, courting the vote of the "white working class." In the last month of the presidential campaign, the racial tension that was never far below the surface exploded into full force, beginning with rabble-rousing speeches by Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in Clearwater and Estero, Florida in early October. The next two weeks witnessed a crescendo of ugly racist incidents at Palin and McCain rallies, many of which were recorded and publicized through YouTube, the Huffington Post, and other Web sites. A woman attending a Republican rally in Ohio told a reporter, "I'm afraid if he wins, the blacks will take over. He's not a Christian! This is a Christian nation! What is our country gonna end up like?"² In Johnstown, Pennsylvania, a McCain-Palin supporter merrily brandished "a stuffed monkey doll with a Barack Obama bumper sticker wrapped across its forehead."³ In Clearwater on October 6, Palin's supporters —

¹ The best-publicized of these attacks were the May 31, 2009 murder of physician George Tiller, long a target of anti-abortion extremists, and the June 10, 2009 shooting at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum by a far-rightist. Paul Harris, "Far-right shootings raise fear of hate offensive in America," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/14/rightwing-extremists-racists-us> (accessed July 4, 2009).

² David Niewert, "McCain/Palin supporters let their racist roots show," *Crooks and Liars*, October 16, 2008 <http://crooksandliars.com/david-neiwert/mccainpalin-supporters-let-their-rac> (accessed July 9, 2009).

³ Scott Conroy, "Man At Palin Rally Displays Monkey Doll Donning Obama Sticker," *CBS News.com*, October 11, 2008

whipped into a frenzy over the supposed animosity of the “liberal media” toward their candidate—“turned on reporters in the press area, waving thunder sticks and shouting abuse. Others hurled obscenities at a camera crew. One Palin supporter shouted a racial epithet at an African-American sound man for a television network and told him, ‘Sit down, boy.’”⁴

Inevitably, anti-Black racism converged with anti-Muslim bigotry. A few hours after the Clearwater rally, in nearby Estero, Palin was introduced by the local sheriff. In full uniform, Sheriff Mike Scott bellowed, “On Nov. 4, let’s leave Barack Hussein Obama wondering what happened” –in the process running afoul of the 1939 Hatch Act, which proscribes partisan political advocacy by civil servants. The invocation of Obama’s middle name had already become a cheap but common practice of right-wing radio personalities and others—a handy way to suggest that there was something vaguely foreign and mysterious about the Democratic candidate, with the further advantage of linking him with both Islam and the deposed Iraqi tyrant, Saddam Hussein.

Wildly, erroneously, and irresponsibly –given the emotionalism and the possibility of violence—Palin pressed on, linking Obama to terrorism. She declared in her Clearwater speech that Obama had “launched his political career in the living room of a domestic terrorist!,” former Weather Underground member Bill Ayers. Two days earlier, Palin had accused Obama of “palling around with terrorists” (note the plural form). In a short time, Obama had evolved from a community organizer – an appellation that drew much mirth at the Republican convention, further testament to the contempt for poor and Black Americans that pervaded the nearly all-white gathering – to a terrorist.⁵ And the implication was clear: You don’t “pal around with terrorists,” launch your career in the living room of a terrorist, hope for the defeat of American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan (another accusation hurled Obama’s way by the Republican campaign), unless you are not only a friend of terrorists, but a terrorist yourself. The McCain-Palin campaign disingenuously shied away from

<http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2008/10/11/politics/fromtheroad/entry4515246.shtml> (accessed July 9, 2009).

⁴ Dana Milbank, “Unleashed, Palin Makes a Pit Bull Look Tame,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2008, Page A03.

⁵ Fewer than two percent of Republican delegates were African Americans. Jill Lawrence, “Study: Sharp Drop in black GOP delegates,” *USA Today*, September 2, 2009
http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-09-01-diversity_N.htm (accessed July 9, 2009).

the full import and potential consequences of its propaganda, but within the underworld of far-right Web sites—and the equally sordid world of message boards on mainstream daily newspapers—racist delusions about Obama proliferated. Commenting on the not-so-subtle efforts of the Republican campaign to indirectly link Obama to terrorism, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich concluded,

This sleight of hand at once synchronizes with the poisonous Obama-is-a-Muslim e-mail blasts and shifts the brand of terrorism from Ayers's Vietnam-era variety to the radical Islamic threats of today. That's a far cry from simply accusing Obama of being a guilty-by-association radical leftist. Obama is being branded as a potential killer and an accessory to past attempts at murder. "Barack Obama's friend tried to kill my family" was how a McCain press release last week packaged the remembrance of a Weather Underground incident from 1970—when Obama was 8.⁶

The nature and extent of Obama's connections to the former aspiring terrorist? Ayers "hosted a fundraiser for Obama in 1996 and contributed \$200 to his state senate campaign in 2001," and the two simultaneously served on the board of the Woods Fund, a grant-making foundation that "was at the forefront of the movement to reform Chicago's public schools," from 1999 to 2002.⁷ Little noticed in mainstream news media coverage was John McCain's friendship with G. Gordon Liddy and his association with anti-choice extremists Paul Schenck and Marilyn Shannon.⁸

⁶ Frank Rich, "The Terrorist Barack Hussein Obama," *The New York Times*, October 11, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/12/opinion/12rich.html> (accessed July 3, 2009).

⁷ Ari Berman, "Obama Under the Weather," *The Nation*, May 19, 2008. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080519/berman> (accessed July 3, 2009). The board only met four times a year, to review grant applications, according to Berman.

⁸ Carl Bernstein wrote, "During the same period that Bill Ayers was a member of the Weather Underground, Gordon Liddy was making plans to firebomb a Washington think tank, assassinate a prominent journalist, undertake the Watergate burglary, break into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, and kidnap anti-war protesters at the 1972 Republican convention." Carl Bernstein, "Ayers and the McCain-G. Gordon Liddy Symbiosis," *The Huffington Post*, October 13, 2008 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carl-bernstein/ayers-and-the-mccain-g-go_b_134256.html (accessed July 9, 2009). For Shannon, see "Countdown With Keith Olbermann," October 8, 2008 <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27102333/> (accessed July 9, 2009). McCain's own history of bombing civilian targets in Vietnam, an activity for which he has never shown remorse (to the contrary, he has

The effort to associate Obama with terrorism did not cease until the very end of the campaign. In its dying days, Republican strategists decided to focus on Rashid Khalidi, a highly respected and prolific scholar of modern Arab studies at Columbia University. The professor's crime? He is a forceful and effective advocate of the Palestinian national cause, and he and Obama spoke at the same fund-raising dinner in 2004. Conveniently forgetting that, under McCain's own stewardship, the International Republican Institute had once given a \$448,000 to Khalidi's Palestinian-studies center, the Republican candidate went so far as to compare Khalidi to a "neo-Nazi." As news-media analyst Eric Alterman acerbically commented, "This modern-day McCarthyism seems to rely much more on the fact that Rashid Khalidi's name is Rashid Khalidi than [on] any concrete allegations of wrongdoing."⁹

Islamophobia: the acceptable prejudice

Obama's skin color (as well as alleged Muslim faith) made it easier to label him a "terrorist" or friend of terrorists. The apparent connection between militant, Black Power-style activism and Islamic terrorism was illustrated in an ill-considered attempt at satire by *The New Yorker*, which adorned its July 21, 2008 cover with a cartoon that depicted Barack and Michelle Obama as heavily armed, fist-pumping, flag-burning militants—Michelle a Black Panther, Barack an Arab. The image was replete with a portrait of Osama bin Laden hanging on the wall of the Obamas' home.¹⁰ The cover was a poorly conceived attempt at irony; according to the editors, the cover intended to show the absurdity of persistent right-wing claims that Obama and his wife, Michelle, were 1960s' radicals as well as Muslims. But the cartoon was "too clever by half," as various commentators opined. And while the *New Yorker* editors might have found that issue's cover to be the height of parody, the editorial staff should have known that, for many Americans, any advocacy on behalf of Blacks that exceeds that of

publicly used racist epithets against the Vietnamese people), was, needless to say, not a topic for debate in respectable discourse.

⁹ Eric Alterman, "John McCain's Witch Hunt," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2008/oct/31/mccain-obama-rashid-khalidi> (accessed June 19, 2009).

¹⁰ This image is available here: <http://www.newsweek.com/media/62/new-yorker-cover-obama-michelle-joke-vl.jpg> (accessed July 10, 2009).

the NAACP in its forcefulness is irresponsible, frightening, and potentially violent.¹¹

Unwittingly, *The New Yorker* connected anti-Black racism with anti-Muslim bigotry, which is perhaps the most acceptable form of prejudice in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement rendered explicit anti-Black racism unacceptable, at least in mainstream public discourse, and the racial patterns discussed above operated at a relatively subtle level (although racism was expressed more harshly in the netherworld of right-wing Web sites and radio talk shows). Yet anti-Muslim prejudice can be articulated with little embarrassment or restraint, as it finds a receptive audience. A poll conducted by ABC News in early 2009 concluded that “48% of Americans have an unfavorable opinion towards Islam, the highest since 2001.”¹² And anti-Muslim hysteria is sufficiently strong to sustain the rumors that Obama is secretly a Muslim. Dismayingly, a March 2009 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 11 percent of its respondents continued to believe that Obama was a Muslim—only marginally lower than the percentage the previous October.¹³ (As it happens, Obama has been a more regular churchgoer than many major politicians, dating to and including Ronald Reagan, who loudly trumpet their Christian credentials without bothering to attend church.)

Unfortunately for this nation’s six million Muslims, they have few friends or allies: Self-professed liberals are not much more enlightened than conservatives on these issues. Barely less ignorant than right-wing Islamophobes, many liberals’ opinions on these matters are formed by impressions gleaned from news reports that show the very worst face of Islam:

¹¹ The composition of the magazine’s editorial staff helps to explain its obliviousness. “*The New Yorker* doesn’t publish a masthead, but based on conversations with sources and available published information, the magazine has a pool of some 130 editors, critics, copy editors, fact checkers, editorial assistants and outside contributors—of whom 11 are people of color.” Lizzie Ratner, “Vanilla Ceiling: Magazines Still Shades Of White,” *The New York Observer*, January 15, 2006.

<http://www.observer.com/node/51746#> (accessed July 5, 2009). The left-liberal *The Nation* has an equally poor record; according to the same 2006 article, it “lists eight people of color among its 99 writers, editors, editorial-board members and Nation Institute fellows.”

¹² <http://blog.beliefnet.com/cityofbrass/2009/04/poll-48-unfavorable-towards-is.html> (accessed July 8, 2009). The poll can be found here:

<http://abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/1088a5ViewsofIslam.pdf>.

¹³ Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, “No Decline in Belief That Obama is a Muslim,” April 1, 2009 <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1176/obama-muslim-opinion-not-changed> (accessed July 7, 2009). The poll was conducted between March 9 and 12, 2009.

harsh persecution of women and gays in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Afghanistan; “honor killings” in Pakistan and parts of the Middle East and Africa; and female genital mutilation in eastern Africa and elsewhere. Most of these practices have their origins in pre- or non-Islamic ethnic traditions, and are perpetuated by village patriarchs and local or regional authorities who cynically invoke Islam to justify practices that have little if any Qur’anic basis. Few liberals hold the faith of Christianity responsible for all the crimes committed under its banner, or blame the oppression of the Palestinians on the Jewish faith, rather than on more tangible political forces. The *New Yorker* cover was only one of the more egregious examples of the difficulty of liberal America in overcoming its prejudice toward Islam.

For its part, the Obama campaign feared the consequences of any association with Islam, and— rather than adopt a principled stance, which might have helped combat Islamophobia—went to great lengths to deny the slightest affinity for the faith or its two billion practitioners. The campaign spurned the offer of Minnesota congressman Keith Ellison—the first Muslim to be elected to Congress—to campaign for Obama at a mosque in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, calling Ellison and telling him, “We have a very tightly wrapped message.”¹⁴ Obama spoke at numerous temples and Christian churches, but never appeared at a mosque, and declined repeated invitations to meet with Muslim organizations. Unsurprisingly, campaign staffers applied this strategy overzealously at times; in June 2008, “two Muslim women wearing head scarves were barred by campaign volunteers from appearing behind Mr. Obama at a rally in Detroit,” reported *The New York Times*.¹⁵ Asked to comment on the campaign’s strategy, Keith Ellison said, “A lot of us are waiting for him to say that there’s nothing wrong with being a Muslim, by the way.”¹⁶ Instead, Obama’s campaign Web site categorized as a “smear” the inferences that he is a Muslim.¹⁷

¹⁴ Andrea Elliott, “Muslim Voters Detect a Snub From Obama,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2008 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/24/us/politics/24muslim.html> (accessed June 6, 2009).

¹⁵ Elliott, “Muslim Voters.” In fairness, Elliott also reported, “After the episode in Detroit last week, Mr. Obama telephoned the two Muslim women to apologize. ‘I take deepest offense to and will continue to fight against discrimination against people of any religious group or background,’ he said in a statement.”

¹⁶ Elliott, “Muslim Voters.”

¹⁷ This page was still on the campaign Web site several months after the election, despite the negative attention it drew from Muslim organizations in 2008. <http://fightthesmears.com/> (accessed June 9, 2009).

"Divisive" ministers

The hysteria over Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright of Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ, further illustrated the limitations of America's confrontation with its history of racial strife and oppression and the fact that much of white America is not yet ready to seriously consider Black perspectives on the nation's troubled past. In March 2008, ABC News—after painstakingly reviewing many hours of speeches by Wright—released a video that contained brief excerpts, taken out of context, from addresses the former pastor had given in 2001 and 2003. Reverend Wright can be heard saying "God damn America," among other provocative statements.¹⁸ The story was then picked up and reported in virtually all the major news media outlets. The response from other presidential candidates was predictable and swift. On March 25, Hillary Clinton, still in a heated primary contest with Obama, piously intoned, "You don't choose your family, but you choose what church you want to attend." Later the same day, during a press conference, Clinton spoke on her personal preference in a pastor: "I think given all we have heard and seen, [Wright] would not have been my pastor."¹⁹

Wright was now front-page (or front-blog) news. Leading newspapers and television networks saw fit to devote enormous attention to the "ravings" of the retired pastor. As media specialists Edward S. Herman and David Peterson reported:

From the jingoistic right the denunciations were unrestrained: "anti-American, racist rantings" (*National Review*); "venomous and paranoid" (Ron Kessler); "grievance-mongering preacher animated by the voracity of hate" (Michelle Malkin) "black hate speech" and "racist rants" (Charles Krauthammer), ... "fatuous clerical rantings," "black chauvinist rhetoric," "foaming pastor," "conceited old fanatic" (Christopher

¹⁸ The full quotation, which was rarely is ever included in televised excerpts of this sermon, was, "The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to sing 'God Bless America.' No, no, no, God damn America, that's in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme." Brian Ross and Rehab El-Buri, "Obama's Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11," ABCNEWS.com, March 13, 2008 <http://a.abcnews.com/Blotter/DemocraticDebate/story?id=4443788&page=1> (accessed July 4, 2009).

¹⁹ Alex Mooney and Peter Hamby, "Clinton: Wright would not have been my pastor," <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/03/25/clinton.wright/index.html> (accessed June 18, 2009).

Hitchens); “stuck in a late-Sixties time warp” (Stanley Kurtz); among countless others like them.

But these were often matched and sometimes surpassed by the language of liberals: “histrionics of a loony preacher from the South Side of Chicago” (Bob Herbert); ... a “self-centered jerk” who believes “It’s all about me” and whose “self-indulgent antics” belong on the *American Idol* television show (Rosa Brooks); the “jibberjabber from the crazy ex-minister” (Patricia Williams) “weirdness, wrath, insult, blowhardiness, vanity, paranoia, divisiveness and trouble” (Katha Pollitt).²⁰

The principal charge against Wright was that his oratory was “divisive.” According to one study, the term “divisive” or “divisiveness” was applied to Wright 906 times between February 27 and June 1, 2008 in U.S. daily newspapers; those terms were used to refer to Pat Robertson or John Hagee (see below) thirteen and seventeen times, respectively.²¹

Wishing to extend his fifteen minutes of fame, the reverend held several widely publicized talks, including a news conference at the National Press Club on April 29 that resulted in ever more indignant condemnations. Bill O’Reilly attacked Wright for “preach[ing] anti-white and anti-American rhetoric, all the while making money off it.”²² At this point, Senator Obama deemed it expedient to make a definitive break from his former minister.

²⁰ Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, “Jeremiah Wright in the Propaganda System,” *Monthly Review*, September 2008 <http://monthlyreview.org/080901herman-peterson.php> (accessed July 8, 2009).

²¹ Herman and Peterson.

²² Bill O’Reilly, “Honesty in the Public Arena,” FOXNews.com, May 2, 2008 <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,353981,00.html> (accessed July 1, 2009). O’Reilly similarly accused the late Dr. George Tiller, who was murdered by an anti-abortion extremist in May 2009, of profiteering. The FoxNews multimillionaire peppered his thirty-odd denunciations of Tiller between 2005 and the doctor’s assassination with such observations as “If you want to kill a baby, you hire Tiller, you’ve got to pay him 5,000 up front, and he’ll kill the baby” and “He aborts babies at any time for just about any reason if you pay him \$5,000.” <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2009/jun/05/bill-oreilly/bill-oreilly-called-george-tiller-baby-killer/> (accessed June 3, 2009).

Echoing the central theme of the unrelenting public criticism of Wright, Obama condemned “the divisive statements of Reverend Wright” and announced his resignation from Wright’s church on May 31.²³

What did the Rev. Wright say that was so utterly outlandish and unacceptable? The sermons that were featured in the original ABC story, and that continued to be the most circulated, were from September 16, 2001, and April 13, 2003. In the first of these—coming less than a week after the 9/11 attacks—Wright spoke at length about U.S.-perpetrated atrocities over the centuries, strongly suggesting that modern-day terrorism should be placed in a longer context: “We took this country, by terror, away from the Sioux, the Apache, the Arawak, the Comanche, the Arapaho, the Navajo. Terrorism—we took Africans from their country to build our way of ease and kept them enslaved and living in fear. Terrorism. We bombed Grenada and killed innocent civilians We bombed the black civilian community of Panama with Stealth Bombers and killed unarmed teenagers, and toddlers, pregnant mothers and hard-working fathers. We bombed Khadafi, his home and killed his child.... We bombed Iraq, we killed unarmed civilians trying to make a living.”

Wright also referred to the Clinton Administration’s 1998 bombing of Sudan’s chief pharmaceutical plant, which had lethal, long-lasting consequences. Wright concluded this portion of his speech: “We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never batted an eye... and now we are indignant, because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought back into our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost.”²⁴

²³ Jeremiah Wright had officially resigned from the Trinity United Church of Christ in February 2008, but was still closely associated with the church. The finality with which Obama distanced himself from Rev. Wright was consistent with the senator’s highly cautious career. As Ryan Lizza noted in a profile of the candidate for *The New Yorker*: “[P]erhaps the greatest misconception about Barack Obama is that he is some sort of anti-establishment revolutionary. Rather, every stage of his political career has been marked by an eagerness to accommodate himself to existing institutions rather than tear them down or replace them....he has always played politics by the rules as they exist, not as he would like them to exist. He runs as an outsider, but he has succeeded by mastering the inside game.” Ryan Lizza, “Making It: How Chicago Shaped Obama,” *The New Yorker*, July 21, 2008 http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/21/080721fa_fact_lizza (accessed June 10, 2009).

²⁴ The transcript of Wright’s September 16, 2001 speech is available here: http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2008/03/the-wright-post.html (accessed July 4, 2009).

In his April 2003 speech, Wright excoriated the United States government for a history of “lies”:

The government lied about the Tuskegee experiment. They purposely infected African American men with syphilis. Governments lie. The government lied about bombing Cambodia and Richard Nixon stood in front of the camera, ‘Let me make myself perfectly clear...’ Governments lie. The government lied about the drugs for arms Contra scheme orchestrated by Oliver North, and then the government pardoned all the perpetrators so they could get better jobs in the government. Governments lie.... The government lied about inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color. Governments lie. The government lied about a connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein and a connection between 9.11.01 and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Governments lie.”²⁵

Like many outspoken public figures, Reverend Wright has uttered more than one ill-considered or factually incorrect statement in his life, and the Malcolm X-inspired “chickens coming home to roost” remark was certainly provocative. The substance of these two speeches, though—while outside the boundaries of polite political discourse in this country—is difficult to dispute, and to the historian seem more accurate than the speeches of countless politicians lauding the humanitarianism of U.S. foreign policy or trivializing America’s history of racism. Wright’s reference to Tuskegee and implicit suggestion that the U.S. government was capable of engaging in often-deadly biological experiments with people of color, drew the loudest criticism. But this suspicion that Wright articulated is fairly widespread among African Americans, in large part because of knowledge of the infamous Tuskegee experiment and similar medical studies.²⁶ From 1932 to 1972, the U.S. Public Health Service conducted an experiment on some four hundred Black males, mostly poor sharecroppers from Alabama, “who were in the late stages of syphilis” and “were never told what disease they were suffering from or of its seriousness. Informed that they were

²⁵ This speech, as well as the September 2001 one, can be viewed here:

<http://a.abcnews.com/m/screen?id=4719157&pid=3029941> (accessed July 4, 2009).

²⁶ See *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 157-185.

being treated for 'bad blood,' their doctors had no intention of curing them of syphilis at all. The data for the experiment was [sic] to be collected from autopsies of the men, and they were thus deliberately left to degenerate under the ravages of tertiary syphilis—which can include tumors, heart disease, paralysis, blindness, insanity, and death. 'As I see it,' one of the doctors involved explained, 'we have no further interest in these patients until they die.'"²⁷

The dominant discourse that shaped the Wright Controversy (as it would become officially known) was not only incapable of recognizing these explicit double standards, but of soberly considering an African-American counter-narrative to the prevailing mythologies. As Bill Fletcher, Jr., pointed out, Wright's "mistake" had been "to challenge the myth of U.S. history":

U.S. history has a basic narrative: The settlers were heroes; the indigenous people were either heathens or naive primitives, but in either case they were in the way of progress. Slavery was an unfortunate episode that was cleaned up by the Civil War, though it has never been quite clear that the former slaves were ever meant to rule themselves, let alone anyone else. U.S. foreign policy has generally been benign.... Taking the standpoint of those who have seen the underside of the "American Dream", he [Wright] was prepared to speak to a counter-narrative that identifies the problematic nature of U.S. history. By doing so he opened himself to ridicule, but only when his counter-narrative was treated in sound-bites rather than taken as a whole.²⁸

As further testament to the racial double standards that guided the public discourse on Wright, outspoken figures on the Christian Right were spared this scrutiny and vitriol. Several religious leaders who are close to McCain, Giuliani, Hillary Clinton, and others have made public statements that, if uttered by Wright, would certainly be newsworthy. While Jesse Jackson's 1984 "Hymietown" comment is still brandished against him and any Black politician in his orbit, Hillary Clinton was free to associate with Billy Graham, who bandied about anti-Jewish quips with President Nixon and in 1993 stated, "Is AIDS a judgment of God? I could not say for sure, but I think so."

²⁷ James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

²⁸ Bill Fletcher, Jr., "Rev. 'Icarus,' The Obama Campaign, & The Left," *Zmag.org*, May 13, 2008 <http://www.zmag.org/zspace/commentaries/3489> (accessed July 9, 2009).

But the late Rev. Graham's political views were only mildly reactionary and apocalyptic in relation to some of the preachers associated with 2008 Republican candidates. A few weeks before the Wright Controversy began, John McCain proclaimed himself "very honored" to be endorsed by John Hagee, the Texas preacher and CEO of a multi-tiered religious-entrepreneurial empire. Hagee's condemnations of the Catholic Church as the "Great Whore" garnered some attention, but those were not his only – or most – offensive statements in recent years. In an interview on National Public Radio in 2006, he asserted that Hurricane Katrina was God's revenge for New Orleans's tolerance of homosexuality.²⁹ Hagee – whose theology is based upon a certain interpretation of the Book of Revelation, and who anxiously awaits the End Times – has also stated and written that the Holocaust was part of God's plan to chase the Jews "back to the only home God ever intended for the Jews to have – Israel."

[Then] God sent the hunters. The hunter is one who pursues his target with force and fear. No one could see the horror of the Holocaust coming, but the force and fear of Hitler's Nazis drive the Jewish people back to the only home God ever intended for the Jews to have – Israel.... I am stricken with awe and wonder at his boundless love for Israel and the Jewish people.³⁰

McCain was not the only Republican presidential candidate to align himself with highly "divisive" white ministers. In November 2007, Rudolph Giuliani gleefully accepted Pat Robertson's endorsement, unembarrassed by the aging minister's past assertions that "[Ariel] Sharon's stroke was God's punishment for giving up Gaza and the 9/11 attack was divine retribution against America ... for tolerating gays, feminists and the ACLU."³¹

This racially based hypocrisy was in sharp relief when, during the February 26 Democratic candidates' debate, Tim Russert grilled Obama,

²⁹ Hagee stated, "I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are – were recipients of the judgment of God for that. The newspaper carried the story in our local area, that was not carried nationally, that there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came." <http://mediamatters.org/research/200802280018> (accessed July 3, 2009).

³⁰ John Hagee, *Jerusalem Countdown: A Warning to the World* (Lake Mary, FL: Frontline, 2006), 97.

³¹ Glenn Greenwald, "Some hateful, radical ministers – white evangelicals – are acceptable," Salon.com, February 28, 2008 <http://www.salon.com/opinion/greenwald/2008/02/28/hagee/index.html> (accessed June 6, 2009); references to Robertson's statements can be found here.

demanding several times that the candidate denounce Louis Farrakhan—even though Obama had no political relationship with him and had neither sought nor received the Nation of Islam leader’s endorsement. A month earlier, Russert had, for no clear reason, asked Obama to comment on statements by the left-wing actor and activist Harry Belafonte. Apparently, Obama’s skin color obliged him to repudiate any and all Blacks who were deemed objectionable or irresponsible by the newsman.³²

“The working class is back ... and it’s white!”

In the midst of the Wright Controversy, Hillary Clinton—whose husband was sometimes referred to as the “first Black president,” for his presumed affinity with the African-American experience—began courting the vote of the “hard-working white working class,” a particularly strange appeal in a country in which social class is so rarely invoked.³³ As the Web site “The Black Commentator” quizzically noted, “the working class is back. And guess what: it’s white!”³⁴

The notion that there was a “white working class,” but that Blacks somehow had no class identity, was quickly absorbed and uncritically echoed by commentators of varying political stripes. “MSNBC’s Chris Matthews, for example, differentiated between ‘regular people’ and black people,” wrote columnist David Sirota. “Pundits refer separately to the ‘working class’ and to

³² It was also notable that Sarah Palin was never challenged by the mainstream news media for her repeated assertions that her hometown of Wasilla, Alaska—whose African-American population is roughly 0.6 percent—is a microcosm of America and a near-perfect example of American values. In her acceptance speech at the Republican Convention, Palin stated, “We grow good people in our small towns,” a phrase her speechwriters borrowed from Westbrook Pegler (1894-1969), a far-rightist and antisemite who, late in his life, was asked to resign from the John Birch Society because of his extreme views.

³³ For an insightful critique of Bill Clinton’s relationship with Black America, see Michael Eric Dyson, *I May Not Get There With You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 167 ff. “When it benefits him, Clinton reaches out to blacks; when he hurts him, he withdraws the hand of racial charity,” Dyson argued. “With Bill Clinton, blacks have lowered their guards, and have been repeatedly disappointed.” Dyson, 170.

³⁴ Carl Bloice, “The Working Class is Back. And Guess What. It’s White,” *The Black Commentator*, May 15, 2008 http://www.blackcommentator.com/277/277_lm_working_class_is_back_cover.html (accessed May 30, 2009).

African Americans—as if they are mutually exclusive.”³⁵ With the spirit of white solidarity in the air, it could not be long before Pat Buchanan chimed in. “What Hillary ... [is] saying is politically incorrect, but it is also patently true.” Buchanan then rhapsodized about “Hillary Democrats” who “are white, working- and middle-class, Catholic, small-town, rural, unionized, middle-age and seniors, and surviving on less than \$50,000 a year.”³⁶

In its final month, the McCain-Palin campaign would duplicate this desperate and ultimately ill-fated overture to the “white working class.” While the surreal saga of “Joe the Plumber,” aka “Sam the non-licensed non-tax payer,” might be easy to dismiss, it was a striking example of America’s deep confusion about race and class. “Joe” himself is all-too-typical in his complete disorientation—having no idea which class he belongs in or who will represent his interests. The “Joe the Plumber” *opera buffa* was particularly ironic in that it unfolded at the very moment when America’s genuine class divisions had been thrown into unusually sharp relief by the onset of a severe economic crisis.

Obama was campaigning in a neighborhood near Toledo, Ohio on October 12 when Samuel “Joe” Wurzelbacher approached him and complained that Obama’s tax plan was contrary to the “American dream.” Wurzelbacher claimed that he was “getting ready to buy a company that makes 250 to 280 thousand dollars a year. Your new tax plan's going to tax me more, isn't it?” After Obama attempted to overwhelm Joe with a string of statistics, Wurzelbacher responded, “the reason I ask you about the American dream, I mean I’ve worked hard. I’m a plumber. I work 10 to 12 hours a day and I'm buying this company and I’m going to continue working that way. I’m getting taxed more and more while fulfilling the American dream.”³⁷ “Joe” was immediately seized upon by pundits and journalists nationwide and celebrated as a rugged exemplar of the working and/or middle class (it was rarely clear which class he thought he was in, or that the news media believed he belonged to).

³⁵ David Sirota, “Acknowledging the Race Chasm,” <http://www.creators.com/opinion/david-sirota/acknowledging-the-race-chasm.html> (accessed June 5, 2009), quoted in Bloice, “The Working Class is Back.”

³⁶ Pat Buchanan, “The Hillary Democrats,” May 9, 2009 http://townhall.com/columnists/PatBuchanan/2008/05/09/the_hillary_democrats (accessed June 18, 2009).

³⁷ Dollars & Sense, “Spread the Wealth,” *Dollars & Sense Blog*, October 16, 2008 <http://www.dollarsandsense.org/blog/2008/10/spread-wealth.html> (accessed June 20, 2009).

Three days later, John McCain invoked the name of this working-class hero and aspiring businessman more than a dozen times in the opening minutes of the final presidential debate—at one point referring to the unlicensed “plumber” as “my old buddy.” Over the course of the debate, the moniker “Joe the Plumber” was mentioned more often than the first name of the vice-presidential candidate, Joe Biden. In one rambling monologue, McCain touched upon several shopworn conservative themes: the Democrats’ supposed predilection for wealth redistribution, which is dangerously akin to socialism; the evils of taxation; the notion that “class warfare” only exists when it is alluded to by Democrats; the ease with which Americans can rise to higher economic levels; and, odder still, the merits of our current, free-market health system, which would be endangered by any government intervention.³⁸

But was Joe a “worker,” a member of the middle class, an aspiring entrepreneur, or all of the above? The answer was unclear in the swirl of publicity that surrounded Wurzelbacher during the last three weeks of the campaign. In large part this was because, in American parlance, “middle class” and “working class” are virtually synonymous, and McCain—like many others—applied the terms interchangeably to Joe.³⁹ One has to go back several decades to begin to uncover America’s nebulous understanding of “class,” which contrasts so sharply with class discourses and consciousness in other industrialized societies. The advent and successful implementation of uniquely American industrial relations combining mass production, strict labor discipline, and mass consumption—Taylorism and Fordism—“conferred vastly expanded powers of domination.... Already by the end of the First World War, the capitalist class” in the United States was “perhaps a generation ahead of its

³⁸ Transcript of the October 15, 2008 presidential debate, *The New York Times*, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/third-presidential-debate.html> (accessed June 13, 2009).

³⁹ Sarah Palin herself is also often depicted as a product, somehow or other, of the working class. As Peggy Noonan wrote several months after the election, “I love her because she’s so working-class.’ This is a favorite of some [Republican] party intellectuals. She is not working class, never was, and even she, avid claimer of advantage that she is, never claimed to be and just lets others say it. Her father was a teacher and school track coach, her mother the school secretary. They were middle-class figures of respect, stability and local status. I think intellectuals call her working-class because they see the makeup, the hair, the heels and the sleds and think they’re working class ‘tropes.’ Because, you know, that’s what they teach in ‘Ways of the Working Class’ at Yale and Dartmouth.” Peggy Noonan, “A Farewell to Harms,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2009 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124716984620819351.html> (accessed July 11, 2009).

European competitors in the degree to which skilled labor had been subordinated and fragmented in the labor process,” argues Mike Davis in *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class*.⁴⁰ The inability of the U.S. working class to bridge the divisions between native-born and immigrant workers during the early twentieth century contributed to a series of defeats for the labor movement in the late 1910s and early 1920s, and helps explain why the militant unionism of the 1930s did not translate into support for socialist and communist movements, which thrived in other parts of the world. As Davis further explains, “Lacking any broad array of collective institutions” or agent of class consciousness, such as a labor party, the working class has been “disorganized and depoliticized.”⁴¹

The weakness of working-class consciousness and, in the broader culture, the deep confusion surrounding class is buttressed by certain mythologies that have been passed on for generations. As David Moberg noted in a 2005 article, “The myth of the self-made man is American culture’s own special heart of darkness, helping to explain both its infectious optimism and ruthless greed. The idea holds enough truth and seductiveness to make it easy to forget its delusional dangers.”⁴² It is this mythology, so deeply embedded in the American psyche through such tropes as “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps,” and the populist Horatio Alger novels of the nineteenth century, that lured many working- and lower-middle-class people into the “Joe the Plumber” tale. Here was someone like “us”: a hard-working fellow who strived to be his own boss, and who, with a bit of sacrifice, could quickly elevate himself into the upper echelons of society—if not, that is, for those nettlesome, un-American obstacles, such as taxes, imposed by “big government.” Astonishingly, 35 to 40 percent of American adults believe that they are either currently, or will soon be, among the ranks of the wealthiest citizens—another striking indicator of the deep confusion over social class in this country, and the

⁴⁰ Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1999), 51.

⁴¹ Davis, 8. See also Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of the American Working Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 135-263.

⁴² David Moberg, “Class Consciousness Matters,” *In These Times*, June 24, 2005 <http://www.inthesetimes.com/article/2175/> (accessed July 1, 2009).

accompanying tendency to denigrate manual labor, which is widely seen as less honorable than, for example, working as a lobbyist or a corporate lawyer.⁴³

Conclusions

What does the election of Obama portend for the fulfillment of African Americans' long struggle for equality and for the hope of a truly democratic United States? In the euphoria on the liberal and progressive left after November 4, it was difficult to gain any perspective or to render a sober judgment; even now, six months later, it is too early to make anything other than provisional conclusions.

It is important to emphasize that the United States has made limited but genuine progress in confronting racism and becoming a more civilized society. An African American could not have won enough support from white voters to come close to the White House in previous generations. The vote was made possible by a substantial, positive change in attitudes among white Americans over the previous four or five decades—the result, principally, of the Civil Rights Movement, which challenged whites to reconsider their views as they witnessed not only the violence and ugliness of white supremacy—manifested by the assassinations, police brutality, and obscenely unjust legal proceedings that were plain to see in the 1950s and 1960s—but also the dignity, strength, and resilience of Blacks as they asserted their long-denied human rights. In 1942, a majority of white Americans answered “Yes” to the question, “Do you think there should be separate sections for Negroes in street cars and busses?” In 1959, 86 percent of Southerners answered “Yes” to the question, “Would you object to having your children attend a school where half of the children are colored?”⁴⁴ Five decades later, Obama carried states such as Florida and North Carolina where Democrats and, later, Republicans had shamelessly exploited white racism throughout the post-Civil War epoch.

Yet it would be mistaken to take excessive comfort or solace in Obama's victory, and to interpret it as proof that we have conquered racial prejudice and oppression, which presumably are now simply archaic, negligible concerns, as young people in the United States are taught in school in recent years. Paradoxically, Obama's election has had the negative effect of buttressing the

⁴³ Moberg, “Class Consciousness Matters.”

⁴⁴ Hazel Gaudet Erskine, “The Polls: Race Relations,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26:1 (Spring 1962), 144, 141.

myth—one of more recent origin—that we now live in a “post-racial” society. The centuries-long struggle of Blacks in America has reached its victorious conclusion, according to Jim Hoagland of *The Washington Post*, who wrote shortly before the election: “Even before the votes have been cast, he [Obama] has written a glorious *coda* [emphasis added] for the civil rights struggle that provided this nation with many of the finest, and also most horrible, moments of its past 150 years.”⁴⁵ But these oft-heard claims that Obama’s victory heralded a “post-racial” era are no more convincing than the notion that “Joe the Plumber” was a hard-working Everyman, a typical worker, on the road to becoming a small businessman, a path all Americans could follow if not for the “tax and spend” policies of the Democrats.

The hysterical outrage inspired by Rev. Wright from normally even-tempered liberals, among others, suggests strongly that we are far from a “post-racial” society. But African Americans face more than just incomprehension of their experience: After gaining many legal rights, in the 1960s, that had been denied them, Blacks confront a continuing decline in day-to-day living standards. And today’s recession “promises to have depression-like effects” on Black communities, as Dedrick Muhammad wrote for the Institute for Policy Studies in May 2009. “Economic Policy Institute President Lawrence Mishel estimates that 40 percent of African Americans will have experienced unemployment or underemployment by 2010,” Muhammad continued. “According to this analysis, the rise in unemployment will disproportionately affect the community, increasing child poverty from one-third of African-American children to slightly over half.”⁴⁶

A racially unbalanced criminal-justice system is further evidence that we have yet to reach the “coda” — meaning a concluding or distinct section—in African-American history. A June 2008 study by the Department of Justice found that “the incarceration rate in state or federal prison ... for white men was 773 per 100,000, for black men 4,618 per 100,000.... The rate for white women was 95 per 100,000, for black women 348 per 100,000.”⁴⁷ Today, the number of

⁴⁵ Jim Hoagland, “The Post-Racial Election,” *The Washington Post*, November 2, 2008, Page B07.

⁴⁶ Dedrick Muhammad, “President Obama and the Harsh Racial Reality,” Institute for Policy Studies, May 26, 2009 http://www.ips-dc.org/articles/president_obama_and_the_harsh_racial_reality (accessed June 3, 2009).

⁴⁷ William Sabol and Heather Couture, “Prison Inmates at Midyear 2007,” Bureau of Justice Statistics, June 2008 <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/pim07.pdf> (accessed June 10, 2009).

Black males who are in prison—about 800,000—is roughly equal to the number who are attending college.

With his customary caustic wit, novelist and political writer Ishmael Reed reminded us that discrimination and prejudice did not vanish the day after the election:

What does this promised land look like? This Obamerica? Shortly after Obama is sworn in, the police, instead of subjecting blacks and Hispanics to capricious traffic stops, will only stop them to offer free tickets to the policeman's ball. Throughout the country, they will address blacks and Hispanics as sir and ma'am. The overcrowding prison problem will end, because all of the blacks and Hispanics who've been sent there as a result of prosecutorial and police misconduct—probably half—will be set free. And all of those police who have murdered unarmed blacks only to be acquitted by all-white juries will be retried. Blacks will have the freedom to shop in department stores without being watched.⁴⁸

If we are to begin to approach a “promised land” of greater racial understanding, justice, and equality, it will require a more honest and courageous effort on the part of the dominant culture and the relatively privileged non-minority citizenry.

John M. Cox is Assistant Professor of History at Florida Gulf Coast University, where he also directs the university's Center for Judaic, Holocaust, and Human Rights Studies. His first book, *Circles of Resistance: Jewish, Leftist, and Youth Dissidence in Nazi Germany*, was published in 2009 (Peter Lang Publishing). Cox has contracts with Pearson Prentice Hall for two upcoming books: a comparative analysis of four genocides (the Holocaust, Cambodia, Guatemala, and Rwanda), and a biography of Rosa Luxemburg. His recent publications also include, “Herbert Baum: Jewish Resistance to the Nazi Dictatorship,” in *The Human Tradition in Modern Europe, 1750 to the Present*, Cora Granata and Cheryl Koos, eds. (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), and “Lost Worlds: Genocide and Diego Rivera's ‘Tenochtitlán’” in *Evoking Genocide: Researchers and Activists Describe the Works of Art and Media That Shaped Their Lives*, Adam Jones, ed. (Key Publishing, 2009). Cox is a founding member of the editorial board of a new journal, the *Journal of Jewish Identities*. He earned his M.A. at Brandeis in 1998 and his PhD at the University of North Carolina in 2005.

⁴⁸ Ishmael Reed, “Morning in Obamaland,” *Counterpunch*, November 5, 2008 <http://www.counterpunch.org/reed11052008.htm> (accessed May 13, 2009).