
Let Us by All Means Have an Honest Conversation About Race

Linda Chavez

ON APRIL 30, the day after Barack Obama issued his second and more definitive statement repudiating his spiritual mentor Jeremiah Wright, the editorial page of the *New York Times* warmly congratulated the Illinois Senator for making it clear “that the preacher does not represent him, his politics, or his campaign.” In almost its next breath, the paper went on to score the Republican John McCain for embracing “a white supporter, Pastor John Hagee, whose bigotry matches that of Mr. Wright,” to tar an anti-Obama commercial in North Carolina as “race-baiting,” and to call for a “serious, healthy, and much-needed discussion” on the sour state of racial relations in America.

In its manifest belief that the storm over Jeremiah Wright has given fresh evidence of a deep-seated and persistent racial stand-off in American society, and that prejudice resides to a more or less equal degree in the hearts of whites and blacks, the *Times* was simply following the lead of Obama himself. Both in his April 30 statement and in his heralded March 18 speech on race in Philadelphia, the candidate decried the enduring hold of our “old divisions”—divisions that, indeed, it has been the declared purpose of his campaign to heal and to transcend. He has also repeatedly referred to his

Philadelphia speech as an effort to open up an honest national “conversation.” But are the candidate and the *Times* right on this matter of our divisions? And are they attempting to facilitate such a conversation, or instead to foreclose the possibility of one?

II

TO PUT the truth plainly: far from there being a racial stand-off in the United States, relations between blacks and whites have never been better. According to virtually every survey of racial attitudes taken over the last several decades, only about 10 percent of whites report generally unfavorable views of blacks. In a 2007 Pew Research Center poll, the relevant figure stood at 8 percent—lower, interestingly enough, than the percentage of blacks reporting similarly negative views of their fellow blacks.

Because of the nation’s rapidly changing demography, the whole issue of race and ethnicity in America has become much more complicated and variegated. One thing remains clear, though: in surveys assessing racial attitudes among all groups, non-whites display consistently *less* favorable attitudes toward each other and toward whites than whites display toward blacks and other minority groups. One such survey, taken in the mid-1990’s, found blacks and Hispanics significantly more likely than whites to regard Asians as hostile to non-

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Asians and as “crafty in business,” while both Asians and Hispanics were likelier than whites to think that blacks “like living on welfare” and “can’t get ahead on their own.” Nor have inter-minority stereotypes changed much since then. A 2007 poll found that a plurality of blacks would rather do business with whites than with either Hispanics or Asians.

Of course, it may never be possible to eliminate every vestige of individual racial prejudice; we humans, after all, are imperfect creatures. The more important issue is whether lingering white racism plays a significant role in the *treatment* of blacks or other racial or ethnic minorities in the United States today. Here, the record is unmistakable and irrefutable.

By every measure, barriers based on race have essentially disappeared. We have myriad laws that guarantee equal treatment in education, employment, and housing, and we spend billions of dollars at the federal, state, and local level to enforce them. In addition, a plethora of well-funded private civil-rights organizations monitors whether government agencies are actually doing their job.

This does not mean that blacks never face discrimination. It does mean that we have put in place rigorous public policies to combat discrimination and to punish those who choose to ignore or violate them. Indeed, insofar as race still plays a role in setting government policy, it is now used for the exclusive purpose of granting *preference* to blacks—and, to a somewhat lesser degree, Hispanics—in employment, government contracting, and college admissions.

Because of all these efforts, opportunities that were once closed to blacks are now wide open, resulting in a thriving middle class and a growing upper-middle class. More than a quarter of American blacks work in professional or managerial positions, and more than a third of black families earn over \$50,000 a year. Almost half of all blacks own their own homes, and 27 percent of black married-couple families have incomes of \$75,000 or more.

III

THE POINT is this: the *New York Times* notwithstanding, the black-white racial divide is no longer the great fault line in American politics. To the contrary, the virtual disappearance of white racial hostility in America is *the* salient background reality that, skills and talent aside, explains the extraordinary success of Barack Obama’s own candidacy for the highest office in the land.

By the end of April, Obama had received nearly 15.3 million votes from the more than two score Democratic primaries and caucuses held so far, the largest number ever recorded in the history of the presidential nominating process. The only candidate ever to approach his total has been his rival, Hillary Clinton. By contrast, in 1996, Bob Dole received approximately 5.4 million votes; in 2000, George W. Bush received 6.7 million.

Obama has not only spoken passionately about his dream of reconciling the races but has implied that his candidacy might be the defining act of racial reconciliation in American history—the moment in time when the vision of human equality embedded in the Constitution will cease to be a utopian dream and instead become a daily reality.

According to Obama, his “American story” makes him the literal personification of this grand vision:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. . . . I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners—an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents. And for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on earth is my story even possible . . . a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts—that out of many, we are truly one.

These words testify to Obama’s remarkable eloquence. But they also reflect a deep truth—a much deeper truth than he has seemed prepared to acknowledge. Yes, his candidacy has altered the American political landscape; that is undeniable. But his candidacy was made possible by a political landscape that was *already* deeply altered, and whose new configuration has been waiting only to be tested by a plausible contender.

Until this election cycle, black candidacies for the presidency have been anomalies—either symbolic gestures, like Shirley Chisholm’s in 1972, or naked bids for power, like Jesse Jackson’s in 1984 and 1988, or stunts like Al Sharpton’s quest in 2004, or matters of personal eccentricity, like Alan Keyes’s races in 1996, 2000, and again this year. The fact

that the first serious campaign by a black American is likely to lead to the Democratic nomination, and might conclude with a victory in November, speaks volumes about America's progress in the matter of race.

So obviously true is this happy circumstance that the topic of race itself, except when briefly raised in a remark by Bill Clinton comparing Obama's victory in the South Carolina primary with Jesse Jackson's in the same state in 1984 and 1988, never surfaced as an issue in the campaign; clearly it mattered not at all to the millions of whites who voted for Obama in the primaries. Even among those relatively few who said race was important in deciding their vote, blacks were far more likely to support Obama than whites were to support his opponent. That changed only with the surfacing of tapes in which Jeremiah Wright was seen preaching radically anti-white and anti-American attitudes, and then with Wright's insistence on re-stating his view that, even if Barack Obama wins the presidency, America will still be a nation where white racism dictates policy:

And I said to Barack Obama, last year, "If you get elected, November the 5th, I'm coming after you, because you'll be representing a government whose policies grind under people." . . . [U]ntil racism and slavery are confessed and asked for forgiveness . . . until that apology comes, I'm not going to keep stepping on your foot and asking you, "Does this hurt? Do you forgive me for stepping on your foot?" if I'm still stepping on your foot.

IV

JEREMIAH WRIGHT is, of course, the Chicago clergyman whom Obama credits for inspiring his own religious awakening in his twenties, who served as Obama's pastor for two decades, who officiated at his wedding and baptized his two daughters, and who prayed with him and his wife Michelle just moments before Obama announced his run for the presidency in February 2007. Just as Obama has striven to present himself as the face of racial and political reconciliation in our time, Wright has emerged as his Janus-face—the face of a black America that rejects such reconciliation and regards it as tantamount to surrender.

It is universally acknowledged, even by the candidate's most passionate supporters, that Wright's sudden notoriety has posed a threat to Obama's political ambitions. Less frequently voiced is the reason. Wright's long-term proximity to Obama, and

Obama's lengthy initial refusal to separate himself from Wright—by offering the revealing excuse that to disown Wright would be akin to disowning the entire black community—has thrown a harsh light on another set of realities in America. Even as whites' attitudes toward blacks have undergone a sea change, a sizable number of blacks remain suspicious of and defiantly hostile to their fellow citizens and the government of the United States.

A single statistic tells the tale. As against the 10 percent or fewer of American whites who hold negative views of blacks, the same mid-1990's survey of intergroup attitudes cited above registered over three-quarters of blacks holding negative views of whites. To be sure, not all studies report such negative findings; nor do pollsters try, at least directly, to measure black attitudes toward whites as frequently as they do the reverse. But the handful of surveys that have indirectly probed black attitudes reveals a depressing and, as we shall see, indicative pattern.

To what can such hostility be attributed? It is true that, despite enormous gains, social and economic disparities between blacks and whites continue to exist—as Obama did not hesitate to point out at length in his March 18 speech in Philadelphia. Education is still one of the most important determinants of economic success for all Americans, and more so today than in the past. Even though blacks have considerably narrowed the education-achievement gap, they still lag far behind whites in college degrees earned (17 percent of blacks versus one third of whites). Worse, many black children attend abysmal public schools in inner cities across the nation.

But institutional racism explains little if any of this. Nor, despite what many critics claim, is the problem traceable to a lack of funding for predominantly black urban schools as opposed to the predominantly white schools of the suburbs. A recent General Accountability Office study found no consistent pattern of underfunded city schools. Boston, Chicago, and St. Louis, for example, spend more to educate their mostly black and Latino student populations than do the surrounding suburbs with their largely white student populations. Perhaps the most glaring example of the disconnection between funding levels and achievement is the school system of Washington, D.C., which spends more than \$15,000 annually per pupil—almost twice the national average—but produces among the lowest achievement scores of any school system in the country.

As in education, so in other areas of social and

economic life: the real culprit behind most of the disparities between whites and blacks is not lingering racism or the lack of spending on social programs but the decline of the black family. Over 40 years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary at the Department of Labor, warned that

the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling. A middle-class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class, the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated. . . . So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself.

Instead of embracing Moynihan's call to set as a national goal "the establishment of a stable Negro family structure," however, civil-rights leaders, social scientists, and government bureaucrats attacked the Moynihan report and vilified its author. Any hope that Moynihan's sober assessment would lead to changes in government policy evaporated, not to be revived until the welfare reform of the mid-90's.

When the Moynihan report was written, 25 percent of black children were being born out of wedlock—a shocking figure at the time. By 1980, the out-of-wedlock birthrate for blacks had more than doubled. It now stands at an astounding 70 percent. Marriage rates for blacks have also fallen to perilous levels; only 32 percent are currently married and living with their spouse. Today, the overwhelming majority of black children will spend most of their lives being raised by single mothers—or increasingly, like Barack Obama, by their grandparents.

High rates of single female-headed households, in turn, lead to much higher poverty rates for blacks: 37 percent for female-headed families, as compared with just 8 percent for two-parent families. And children raised in female-headed households are more likely to drop out of school, to get into trouble with the law, and to become single parents themselves.

V

OBAMA'S PHILADELPHIA speech was a perfect opportunity for him to address this obstinate reality, which, in order to provide a fuller picture, must be placed alongside the progressive march of so many blacks into the bastions of the American middle class. Here was an especially opportune

moment to talk about the consequences of black family breakdown, a subject Obama could have discussed with the compelling authority of one who himself experienced abandonment by his father but had refused to follow the same path and had become a model husband and father. He had even written about the issue with rare candor in his book, *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), acknowledging that the breakdown of the black family "reflects a casualness toward sex and child-rearing among black men that renders black children more vulnerable—and for which there is simply no excuse."

But instead of repeating this thoughtful assessment in Philadelphia, the candidate offered up only pious nostrums, linking the erosion of black families to "a lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that come from not being able to provide for one's family," before going on to blame a lack of parks, policemen walking the beat, garbage collection, and building-code enforcement—in brief, government policy—for helping to "create a cycle of violence, blight, and neglect." His formulation conspicuously avoided the issue of behavior—like dropping out of school and having children out of wedlock—that virtually guarantees the continuation of the cycle of poverty.

Nor was Obama any more candid on the issue of black crime. To the contrary, he played the race card. In the same passage of his speech in which he said he could no more disown Jeremiah Wright than he could disown the black community, he went on to say, stunningly, that he could no more disown Wright than he could disown his white grandmother—"a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe."

Obama's invocation of his grandmother did more than set up a false moral equivalence between a minister preaching hatred from the pulpit and an elderly white woman voicing her fears privately to her grandson. It grotesquely caricatured an actual incident about which he had written in the past, an incident that had quite rationally contributed to his grandmother's fears. In his memoir *Dreams from My Father* (1995), Obama described what happened when, waiting for a bus to take her to work, his grandmother had been accosted by a young black man who aggressively demanded money. "I

gave him a dollar and he kept asking,” Obama quotes his grandmother telling him. “If the bus hadn’t come, I think he might have hit me over the head.”

Obama’s grandmother is hardly alone in fearing young black men who behave aggressively or whose dress and demeanor suggest they are part of the underclass. Jesse Jackson famously remarked in 1993 that “there is nothing more painful to me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery—then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved.” In 1999, Stephen A. Holmes, a black *New York Times* reporter, recounted his own feelings as a New York City taxi driver who worked nights while attending college:

My sense of tolerance and racial solidarity was tested every time a casually dressed young black man, especially one in sneakers, tried to hail my cab. Most times, I drove right by. I sometimes wondered about their reaction, but I kept thinking that if I guessed wrong, I could pay for my mistake with my life.

Holmes’s fear was based not on mere “stereotyping” but on his own experience, in this case the experience of being robbed twice by young black men. As he wrote, “The nexus of race, crime, and stereotyping raises difficult questions that are often ignored.” Indeed it does raise such questions, and they are indeed often ignored, most recently and conspicuously by Barack Obama.

In 2003, according to Department of Justice statistics, 21 of every 1,000 black males aged eighteen and nineteen were in a U.S. prison, as were 70 out of 1,000 black males aged twenty to twenty-four. This is by far the highest rate for any group—three times the rate of Hispanics and seven times the rate of whites. In 2004, black males aged fourteen to twenty-four, making up only 1 percent of the U.S. population, committed 26 percent of homicides; moreover, 15 percent of homicide victims that year were other black males in the same age group.

Given these numbers, it can be no surprise that many Americans, and hardly whites alone, express fear about the “nexus” of blacks and crime: 44 percent of Hispanics in one recent poll said they were generally afraid of blacks “because they are responsible for most of the crime,” as did 47 percent of Asians. But instead of dealing honestly with the legitimate basis of this fear, Obama in his Philadelphia speech dismissed it with a piece of rhetorical legerdemain. First expressing sympathy with the “resentments” of whites over being accused of prej-

udice, he then blamed these same resentments for having shaped “the political landscape for at least a generation” by allowing politicians to distract attention “from the real culprits of the middle-class squeeze”—a charge followed by a predictable litany of corporate greed and malfeasance and “economic policies that favor the few over the many.”

In short, according to this analysis, whites and others are suffering from a kind of false consciousness. What they fail to understand, when confronted with the pathologies disproportionately afflicting the black community, is that the fault lies elsewhere than in persistent but remediable behavior. It lies in the capitalist system and in government.

Is it such condescending and conversation-stopping platitudes that the editors of the *New York Times*, echoing Obama himself, have in mind in calling for a “serious, healthy, and much-needed discussion” on race?

VI

IF SERIOUS discussion is to be had, one place to start is with the positions of Jeremiah Wright, who, to repeat, became a cause célèbre after video footage surfaced of sermons he had delivered from the pulpit of the Trinity United Church of Christ. In those videos, Wright is seen cursing the government of the United States for its alleged treatment of blacks—which includes, he says, the deliberate distribution of illegal narcotics:

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. . . . God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human.

In another sermon, Wright accuses the government of the United States of deliberately creating and propagating a murderous disease with the intention of eliminating the country’s black population. “The government,” he cries, “lied about inventing the HIV virus as a means of genocide against people of color.”

Nor, according to Wright, is the government satisfied with perpetrating genocide within its own borders; it has drenched the world in blood and death. As he said five days after the attacks of September 11:

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. . . . We have supported state ter-

rorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost.

Of course, when Wright uses the word "we" to describe the actions of the United States, he is not including himself or, by implication, his followers. Rather, he is separating himself and them both from "the government" and from the masses of Americans who, he implies, were unfeeling about the suffering of the Japanese (as he is not) and who responded to the unprovoked attacks of September 11 with indignation (as he, who knows America deserved to be attacked, does not). He is not "we." Rather, "we" are the oppressors, the very people, presumably white, whose government has chosen to inflict evil upon suffering peoples abroad and black people at home.

Wright is especially attuned to the issue of false consciousness. He sees it as a weapon of the strong against the weak. In fact, it is his mission to awaken his followers to the signs of this condition, and to train them to resist it. Among the particular injuries being visited upon black people, according to the website of Wright's Trinity United Church of Christ, is "the pursuit of 'middle-classness.'" In the view of Wright's church, the time-honored effort on the part of America's least fortunate to achieve some of the comforts of prosperity is but another and more insidious form of imprisonment:

Classic methodology on control of captives teaches that captors must keep the captive ignorant educationally, but trained sufficiently well to serve the system. Also, the captors must be able to identify the "talented tenth" of those subjugated, especially those who show promise of providing the kind of leadership that might threaten the captor's control.

Wright is thus the spokesman for a particularly perverse form of self-help. He speaks, as black preachers always have spoken, of the need for "self-discipline and self-respect" in the face of obstacles, but he rejects the promise offered by self-discipline and self-respect—the promise that a person who exercises them will lead a more fulfilling and prosperous life, or whose children will be enabled to do so. "It is permissible to chase 'middle-classness' with all our might," Wright's church declares, but any idea that blacks can actually change their socioeconomic status is illusory. If they attempt it, they will merely become slaves in a different garb.

VII

IN HIS March 18 speech in Philadelphia, seeking to minimize the damage done to his candidacy by the Wright sermons, Barack Obama tried to place the pastor's preachments in context. While condemning the footage uncovered by ABC News as showing a "profoundly distorted view of this country," he insisted that this was not "all I know of the man." Obama spoke of Wright instead as someone who had reached out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS, and of "our obligations to love one another; to care for the sick and lift up the poor."

In these sentences, we can see perhaps why his Philadelphia speech failed to calm the roil and had to be followed by a more forceful denunciation a month later. Obama's apologia rang hollow, and for good reason. Wright may well have reached out to those suffering from a deadly disease, as Obama insisted, but in doing so he told them their disease was inflicted upon them by the government of the United States. That was not only a lie but a form of spiritual attack, both on those sick from the disease, in whom it could only induce even deeper feelings of despair and abandonment, and on those uninfected by anything but Wright's profoundly venomous words.

Similarly, Wright surely did speak to Obama about "lifting up the poor." But what did the poor in the pews at the Trinity United Church of Christ hear from him? They heard that to do well in America is to do injury to oneself and, if one is a member of the "talented tenth" (a term first used by the radical black sociologist W.E.B. DuBois at the turn of the last century), to those of one's kith and kin who, according to Trinity's website, might be "identified" by the "captors" as threats to their control and killed off or put in concentration camps. The hostility Wright's church has displayed to the very notion of social mobility is the opposite of "uplift." It is soul-crushing.

As if Obama's ignoring of all this were not bad enough, in his Philadelphia speech he then asked Americans—ordinary Americans of any and every race and color—to accept his contention that the Trinity United Church of Christ is not unique but rather "embodies the black community in its entirety." Indeed, he went on, this fact might well also explain "my relationship with Reverend Wright. . . . He contains within him the contradictions—the good and the bad—of the community that he has served diligently for so many years."

AND THAT brings us at last to the real question raised by this transfixing episode in our national life, which is not whether Jeremiah Wright is pernicious and hateful in his views. Anyone who is not in thrall to an ideological loathing of America can see that plainly enough. It is whether Obama is right when he asserts that Wright and the Trinity United Church of Christ embody “the black community in its entirety.” If he is right, then there is a central flaw in the declared premise underlying his campaign for President—the premise that his election offers a way out of America’s disunity, including in matters racial. Judging from Obama’s astonishing electoral success, whites have already bridged this putative racial divide, which means that the primary obstacle to achieving a new American unity comes not from whites, but from blacks.

As I have already suggested, a dishearteningly large number of black Americans do indeed harbor extreme attitudes toward white America and toward other American ethnic groups. One of the most in-depth studies of this issue, conducted by Paul M. Sniderman and Thomas Piazza for their book *Black Pride and Black Prejudice* (2002), found blacks significantly more likely than whites to hold anti-Semitic views, a finding consistent with several other studies. Regarding whites in general, one-quarter of those surveyed said they believed white doctors had invented AIDS in the laboratory in order to commit genocide, and nearly half said that

the CIA and FBI had flooded black neighborhoods with drugs and guns so that blacks would harm one another—findings that suggest Jeremiah Wright is no outlier among blacks.

These wild conspiracy theories are themselves rooted in racial animus. Indeed, the data demonstrate that the greater the animus, the more likely an individual is to impute bigotry against himself and his group to others. In sum, Sniderman and Piazza conclude, “what encourages blacks to believe that others are prejudiced against them is their being prejudiced against others.”

Where does that leave Barack Obama? “This [American] union may never be perfect,” Obama said in Philadelphia, “but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected.” This statement about the essential goodness of America is one with which Jeremiah Wright violently disagrees. So, presumably, to a greater or lesser extent, do many of those for whom Wright speaks, including the 10,000 attendees at a conference of the once proudly integrationist NAACP who received him rapturously in late April. In Philadelphia in March, Obama showed he was still trying to play to both sides in this debate. Upon the willingness to come down forthrightly and unpatronizingly on the side embraced by most Americans may rest not only Obama’s personal future but the ability of the larger community of blacks to take full advantage of the American birthright that is theirs as much as it is his, or mine, or anyone’s.