

Fear of a black president

Ben Carrington

In the US a barely concealed racist backlash is helping to undermine fragile moves towards progress.

‘I can’t trust Obama. I have read about him ... he’s an Arab’. It was at that moment, sensing the impending political fall-out, that Senator John McCain reached to take away the microphone from ‘the crazy lady’, as the comedy show *Saturday Night Live* would later dub her. ‘No mam’, replied a clearly embarrassed McCain. ‘He’s a decent, family man, citizen, that I just happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues, and that’s what this campaign is all about’.

The town hall meeting where ‘the crazy lady’ questioned Obama’s identity took place in Minnesota on 10 October 2008. The timing was significant. It came at a point in the election campaign when McCain had lost the lead that he had gained in September after picking Sarah Palin as his running mate. By early October it had become clear that the escalating financial crisis was more extensive than economists had predicted. Unemployment was rising, manufacturing output was down, and most of the world’s richest economies were contracting at an alarming rate, forcing coordinated efforts by central banks to slash interest rates. As the Democrats argued, it was time for change.

McCain was in a difficult position. On the one hand, the libertarian and fiscally conservative wing of the Republican Party were dismayed by his support for the bailout of the banking sector, and the continued expansion of federal government spending under Bush. On the other hand, the social conservatives remained deeply sceptical of McCain’s true commitment to their causes - eight years earlier McCain

Fear of a black president

had described key leaders of the religious right as 'agents of intolerance'. McCain's only hope of unifying the party and swinging the election back in his favour was to distance himself from Bush, while portraying his opponent as an unknown, potentially dangerous entity.

In her own words, Sarah Palin would become the pit bull (with lip stick) who would 'excite the base' and lead the personal attacks on Obama. On various stump speeches Palin would make the incendiary accusation that Obama was a terrorist sympathiser: 'Our opponent ... is someone who sees America, it seems, as being so imperfect, imperfect enough, that he's palling around with terrorists who would target their own country. This is not a man who sees America as you see America and as I see America'. McCain for the most part would remain above the fray. Seeking to present himself as a courageous leader who had personally endured and come through hard times, McCain invoked his war time experience and his years in captivity as the qualities now required.

The Republicans' goal was to reframe the debate away from 'Hope' and 'Change' and on to Obama's supposed key weakness: his unknown identity. The McCain-Palin ticket settled on a strategy that sought to cast doubt and uncertainty about Obama the man, and to suggest that he was somehow 'other' to American politics and society. Obama's supposed otherness to Middle America was invoked at every moment to produce not just uncertainty but actual *fear* in the American electorate. Conservatives would often refer to Obama's middle name - Barack *Hussein* Obama - and would sometimes 'accidentally' conflate his name with Osama Bin Laden - Obama Bin Laden - so as to raise the spectre of not 'merely' a Muslim but a potential radical Jihadist running the White House. And the key component that drove this strategy was *the metonymic invocation of race*.

Obama's counter-strategy was to construct a post-ideological, and therefore post-racial, pragmatist politics, through which he could avoid discussing race at all. During his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address he wowed the crowd with the line, 'there is not a liberal America and a conservative America, there is the *United States* of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America, there's the United States of America'. Obama would return to this universal theme during his Presidential campaign, when, towards the end of his rallies, he would again declare that there was no Red America or Blue America, only the United States of America. It

Soundings

normally brought the loudest cheer from the huddled masses.

Race was thus displaced into class, which was itself displaced into political ideology which, finally, became displaced into the nation. While his rhetorical flourishes invoked a utopian desire for social change and a better tomorrow, Obama would try to keep the terms of debate within this field of pragmatic nationalism - doing what is right for the nation, not what is liberal or conservative - so as to avoid the certain political death that the cliff edge of race presented. Obama would leave the fissile material of race well alone and largely refuse to confront white supremacist discourse and America's systemic racism.

It is worth recalling that the much heralded March 2008 Philadelphia speech, 'A More Perfect Union', in which Obama described the originary sin of slavery (assuming that the colonial genocide of Native Americans was somehow 'secondary') as marking America's Imperfect Union, was his only major speech addressed directly to the question of racism and only came about as pressure mounted on him to 'do something' in order to defuse *L'affaire Wright*.¹ Except for references to the civil rights struggles, which were always couched in terms of wider progressive movements for social change - anti-slavery, women's suffrage, worker's rights, gay and lesbian equality - or when speaking on the anniversaries of key civil rights moments, Obama avoided race as a topic. He had to make himself into the non-racial candidate in order for the myth of a post-racial America to last long enough for him to get through an implicitly racialised campaign - even as his opponents tried to portray him as a radical black nationalist who, if not quite an Arab, was still intent in turning America into a communist state.

It was heteronormativity wot won it

And yet, despite all of this, Obama won. Almost immediately a dominant narrative established itself as an explanation for Obama's victory. Both liberal and conservative commentators suggested that America was now 'post-racial'. That the historical scars of slavery, Jim Crow and post-civil rights racial violence, particularly against African Americans, had somehow been dissolved by the election itself. Shortly after the election, then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told an interviewer:

I was enormously proud of Americans for ... setting race aside. I

Fear of a black president

think what you really saw here was that race is no longer the factor in American identity and American life, and that's a huge step forward ... the message of America as a place that has overcome its wounds, America as a place where race didn't matter in preventing the election of the first African American President.²

The feared 'Bradley Effect' - the suggestion that whites would tell pollsters that they would vote for a black candidate but when it came to the secrecy of the booth vote against their stated political interests - had not materialised. As the *New York Times* front page lead emphatically put it on the day after the election: 'OBAMA: Racial barrier falls in decisive victory'. It appeared that white voters had in fact turned out in huge numbers to elect Obama. The Republican strategy of fear of a black President had seemingly failed.

However, a closer reading of the election reveals a more complex picture. Whites, as a voting constituency, *did not* vote for Obama. In line with most Republican candidates before him, McCain won about 55 per cent of the white vote, with white males voting for McCain by an even wider margin. Thus the narrative that whites voted for a black candidate, thereby signalling the advent of post-racial America, is simply not true. Some whites voted for Obama. Many millions in fact. And in some states Obama did get the majority of the white vote. But not a majority of whites nationwide. Whites under thirty years of age broke strongly for Obama, but they were the demographic exception. Even independent white voters favoured McCain over Obama.

What appeared to get Obama over the top were black, Hispanic and Asian Americans, who voted for Obama in overwhelming numbers - by approximately 95 per cent, 68 per cent and 62 per cent respectively. The Republicans were also hurt by a slightly reduced turn-out among their own base, and a demographically shifting electorate within which whites, and older white men in particular (the Republican's most solid constituency), have become an ever smaller percentage of the overall electorate, as well as an exceptional set of economic and political circumstances that combined to create a unique historical moment that made it possible for a figure such as Obama to be elected. In short, we might state that Obama won the election *despite* the voting patterns of whites.

What Obama did have - and this was something that his campaign worked

Soundings

hard to portray - was a photogenic and seemingly non-pathological family. His kids were cute and smiled. His wife was supportive and attractive. They may have been black. But they were married, with two kids (and a dog to come). The Obamas were the modern day Huxtables, the twenty-first-century rendition of *The Cosby Show* - which, more than any other, came to symbolise for neo-conservatives the advent of the colour-blind, post-racial society.³ Thus, unlike McCain, Obama hadn't committed adultery. Unlike the Palins, the Obamas hadn't brought up a teenage daughter impregnated by a teenage boy she wasn't even married to. White privilege allowed such contradictions to conservative morality to be overlooked, and even turned into 'learning experiences' for the nation. A similar revelation about Obama's family would have ended his campaign. The Obamas presented and projected an idealised image of familial heterosexual perfection - the black All-American family - that proved to be an important bulwark against the right's constant attacks.

It's worth reflecting on McCain's response to the 'crazy lady'. McCain was credited at the time for standing up for Obama's integrity and not letting the crowd's anti-Obama hysteria get out of control - despite the fact that he himself, and even more so Palin, were primarily responsible for stoking such fears in the first place. In response to the 'allegation' that Obama was an 'Arab' McCain stated that such an accusation was not true. That in fact Obama, far from being an Arab, was a decent, family man. It is an indication of the depth of everyday forms of anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment in America - and of how readily anti-black racism can slide into a generalised form of xenophobia - that this could even be considered an appropriate response. The implication of McCain's defence, that Obama couldn't be an Arab because he was a decent family man, was largely ignored by the mainstream media.

McCain's further comment, that in fact Obama was a 'citizen', revealed the extent to which the Republican strategy to 'other' Obama was predicated not just on the notion that he was somehow un-American, or even anti-American, but that he wasn't American at all. The unequivocal citizenship rights that have historically been denied to African Americans, both before and after the Dred Scott decision, were the spectre that haunted the campaign and continue to frame Obama's presidency. The theme of Obama's legal status re-emerged in 2009 with the so-called 'Birthers' movement, with the allegation that Obama's birth certificate was in fact a fake and that he was actually Kenyan, or maybe Indonesian, but not American by birth and

Fear of a black president

therefore unable to even be President.

It would be a mistake to simply dismiss the woman in Minnesota as 'crazy', as many have done. She had not lost her mind, as that pathologising discourse seems to imply. She was - as indeed were the Birthers after her, the tea party attendees, and other anti-Obama protesters since - reacting to a deliberate strategy created and sustained by the Republicans and many mainstream Conservative commentators. The 'crazy talk' is in fact a logical, perhaps 'rational', extension of the political right's intentional metonymic use of the atavistic anti-black feelings that are manifest in the seemingly benign forms of everyday white privilege. Such an approach will be successful for as long as enough white Americans remain fearful of the supposed loss of political power that a black man in the White House is seen to symbolise. Obama's declining approval numbers throughout 2009 were due almost entirely to the drop in support among whites.⁴ The election of Obama, and his presidency, may well turn out to signal not the moment of racial conciliation but the re-emergence - albeit in new and improved clothes - of some of the 'old' forms of racism that supposedly disappeared with the post-civil rights racial accommodation.

Fear for a black president

It was often said during the election campaign that Obama's greatest skill was to allow people to project their hopes and desires onto him. He then reflected back and amplified progressive yearnings for a better today and a more just tomorrow. Obama's rhetorical move in his speeches would be to suggest that Change did not come with himself but with 'the people' themselves - 'you' - in the audience. Obama became the great interpellator. People left his rallies feeling empowered as historical agents of change. Yes *we* can.

But if this was the case then Obama has also become an amplifier for the fear that the Republicans produced during the campaign. Just as millions celebrated The Age of Obama as signalling the chance and possibility for a more socially progressive, economically egalitarian and internationally engaged America, so did almost equal numbers see his election as the end of America itself. That fear did not dissipate with Obama's inauguration. It had to go somewhere. And it has gone, in part, into producing record gun sales across the US, driven by the belief that Obama is coming to take away gun-owners' semi-automatic weapons, rifles and handguns.

Soundings

Ammunition at gun shows and gun stores has run out in many States. In the midst of a recession, the trade in guns has become one of America's most profitable industries.

Anti-Obama meetings have sprung up across America. These so-called 'town hall meetings' have been organised and funded, in large part, by a fragile coalition of anti-state libertarians and pro-market Republican groups, mixed with elements from the anti-immigrant far-right and the Christian conservatives. Their discourse is driven by a fervent belief that Obama is a fascist, Muslim and/or socialist/Marxist, who is destroying America and turning the country into a communist state through his taxation and spending policies. The Obama administration is variously accused of 'taking over' the banking sector, car industry and health care system, while over-taxing 'the people' to pay for unwanted government subsidies to big business and handouts to the undeserving poor. The charges against Obama floated by McCain, and particularly by Palin, during the election - that Obama was a socialist, a terrorist sympathiser and a threat to America itself - have morphed into a pro-gun, anti-abortion, libertarian racism that has fuelled the revival of the anti-government militia organisations that once thrived during Clinton's administration, and found their terrible expression in the bombings of Oklahoma City in 1995 and Atlanta the following year.

While American politics has, historically speaking, always included a sizeable proportion of disaffected citizens, driven by populist forms of racism and anti-government rhetoric that often includes accusations of 'treason' and worse, what is significant about the current conjuncture is the level of influence it has within the mainstream of the Republican Party, and the public legitimation it is receiving from elements of the mass media, particularly Talk Radio and the Fox News Network. Talk of Obama as a black supremacist who has desires to enslave and intern white people as part of a secret Jihadist/communist plot is no longer restricted to fringe groups on the internet; it is allowed airtime within mainstream media outlets, and sometimes is actively encouraged and promoted by media pundits themselves. The Fox News host Glenn Beck has gone on record as stating that he believes Obama has a deep-seated hatred of white people and white culture, while leading Republican politicians openly talk about the American people being in a state of 'rebellion'. Right-wing protesters have been turning up at rallies and town hall meetings carrying loaded guns. Others have brought pictures of Obama depicted as Hitler, or

Fear of a black president

sometimes as an African witch doctor, and carry signs calling him a traitor.

By the end of the summer of 2009, as right-wing protests against Obama's health care reforms descended into a more generalized anti-government frenzy, mainstream political commentators were beginning to openly discuss what many in the black community had talked about from the day he announced his candidacy, namely the possibility of Obama's assination. In September 2009, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, said during a news conference: 'I have concerns about some of the language that is being used because ... I saw this myself in the late '70s in San Francisco. This kind of rhetoric is ... really frightening and it created a climate in which ... violence took place and ... I wish that we would all, again, curb our enthusiasm in some of the statements that are made'. Following on from Pelosi's comments, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman noted the parallels between contemporary American politics and the 'poisonous political environment' that existed in Israel in 1995 just before Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated: 'I have no problem with any of the substantive criticism of President Obama from the right or left. But something very dangerous is happening. Criticism from the far right has begun tipping over into delegitimation and creating the same kind of climate here that existed in Israel on the eve of the Rabin assassination'.⁵ Many on the right responded by rejecting this analysis, and instead upping their rhetoric to charge that Obama was now stifling free speech, just as the fascists had done in the past.

Conclusion: liberal, only in America

Race structured the 2008 election the moment Obama declared his candidacy. It saturated every debate he was in, every press conference he gave, and each speech he made, and never more so than when he avoided mentioning race altogether. The election campaign was remarkable for the ways in which Obama danced around and over questions of race, desperate not to be read as the black candidate 'fixated' on the tribulations of America's racist past and present. He worked tirelessly to put white America at ease and largely refused to confront the historical and present conditions of American white supremacy. He sought to negate the very notion of a 'rainbow coalition', which, despite its promise of reconciliation, still signified a sense of racial diversity and therefore of *difference*; instead he constructed a politics based upon a post-ideological pragmatist American nationalism.

Soundings

And yet, despite his post-racial campaign Obama's presidency has been dominated by a barely concealed racist backlash. As the US economy struggles to come out of recession, as home foreclosures continue to rise, as wages stagnate and unemployment reaches levels not seen since the early 1980s, Obama's policy proposals seem inadequate to the task of social and economic transformation.⁶ Yet even these limited and oftentimes conservative responses to the structural problems of America have been framed by his right-wing opponents as ideologically-driven revolutionary change that will transform America beyond recognition. If only.

Obama is a centrist. In political terms he should more accurately be described as a progressive Conservative: he believes in the right to bear arms, he supports the death penalty, not just for murderers but for rapists as well, he does not support a universal, single-payer health care system that is free at the point of delivery, and he opposes gay marriage. He would fit well within today's British Conservative Party. The prospects for progressive change seem unlikely. His appointments to key positions, such as that of Larry Summers as his key economic advisor, show a willingness to work with the very same establishment figures who were largely responsible for the deregulatory policies he campaigned against as a candidate. 'The result', as Naomi Klein has noted, 'may well leave minorities with the worst of all worlds: the pain of a full-scale racist backlash without the benefits of policies that alleviate daily hardships'.⁷

On foreign matters Obama has so far continued, more than he has discontinued, Bush's imperialist agenda. As the previous administration had done eight years earlier, the Obama administration shamefully boycotted the UN conference against racism (the Durban Review Conference) in Geneva in April 2009, citing the conference's alleged anti-semitism as a reason for pulling out; and they have looked to expand America's influence and military presence in Afghanistan under the mistaken rubric of the 'war on terror', albeit now couched in more progressive-friendly vernacular. Obama is a 'liberal' only in the American context, where the centre is already so far to the right as to make moderate conservatives into liberals and far right zealots into mainstream Republicans - or Fox News hosts.

Which makes the talk of Obama's 'radical' agenda all the more ludicrous. And dangerous. Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe Feagin have analysed the electoral map and concluded that, far from the 2008 Presidential election 'bringing America together' and achieving a post-racial, post-partisan consensus, America is in fact

Fear of a black president

more polarised, politically speaking, than ever before. The number of 'landslide states', in which one side won by a margin of 10 per cent or more, has increased from around 19 states in 1976 to 36 in 2008, with fewer states becoming genuinely 'competitive'. Wingfield and Feagin conclude that: 'the country came out of this election in several ways more polarized than it was a generation ago in the 1970s'.⁸

Rather than the false fears of what the first black presidency will mean for the existence of a 'free America', the current climate suggests that we should instead be fearful *for* the first black President and his family, and concerned about the deleterious social conditions that are confronting America's poor more generally - whose plight Obama invoked in 2008, but whose interests seem to have been lost within his overly cautious first period in office. Being a decent family man may not, in the end, be enough, in the face of the latest incarnation of white supremacist anti-black American racism. Whether Obama himself has the conviction in office to enact the progressive change he called for during his campaign remains to be seen.

Ben Carrington teaches sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, and is a Carnegie Visiting Research Fellow at Leeds Metropolitan University. He has published widely on the cultural politics of race, nation and identity and is the co-editor (with Ian McDonald) of *Marxism, Cultural Studies and Sport*, Routledge 2009.

Notes

1. In March 2008 tendentiously edited videos of sermons by Obama friend and mentor Reverend Jeremiah Wright were replayed endlessly on Fox News and other media outlets, with the aim of showing that Obama was allied to a black supremacist. For a discussion of Obama's speech and the Wright controversy see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting (ed), *The Speech: Race and Barack Obama's 'A more perfect union'*, Bloomsbury 2009.
2. Quoted in Adia Harvey Wingfield and Joe Feagin, *Yes We Can? White racial framing and the 2008 Presidential campaign*, Routledge 2010, p1.
3. Joy James (in 'The Dead Zone: Stumbling at the crossroads of party politics, genocide, and post-racial racism', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 108 (3)) notes that

Soundings

Ronald Regan claimed that the popularity of *The Cosby Show* among white audiences signalled the end point of the civil rights movement, and therefore the redundancy of affirmative action policies - a 'post-racial' argument that would become a central platform for neo-conservative attacks on anti-racist politics and policies from the 1980s to the present.

4. See Gabriel Winant, 'White voters and Obama's slide in the polls', 14.9.09, www.salon.com/news/feature/2009/09/14/poll_timeline/.

5. Thomas Friedman, 'Where Did "We" Go?', *New York Times*, 30.9.09, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/30/opinion/30friedman.html>.

6. It is worth noting that black and Hispanic unemployment remains considerably higher than white unemployment, and the disparities in wealth between blacks and whites have actually *grown* over the last decade or so. As Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out, for African Americans and to a large extent Latinos, the *recession* occurred between 2000 and 2007, what is happening now is a *depression*. See 'The Destruction of the Black Middle Class', 4.8.09, www.huffingtonpost.com/barbara-ehrenreich/the-destruction-of-the-bl_b_250828.html.

7. Naomi Klein, 'Obama's Big Silence: The race question', *Guardian*, 12.9.09, www.guardian.co.uk/global/2009/sep/12/barack-obama-the-race-question-naomi-klein.

8. In *Yes We Can?*, p198 (see note 2 for full reference). See also Tim Wise, *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and white denial in the Age of Obama*, City Lights Books 2009.