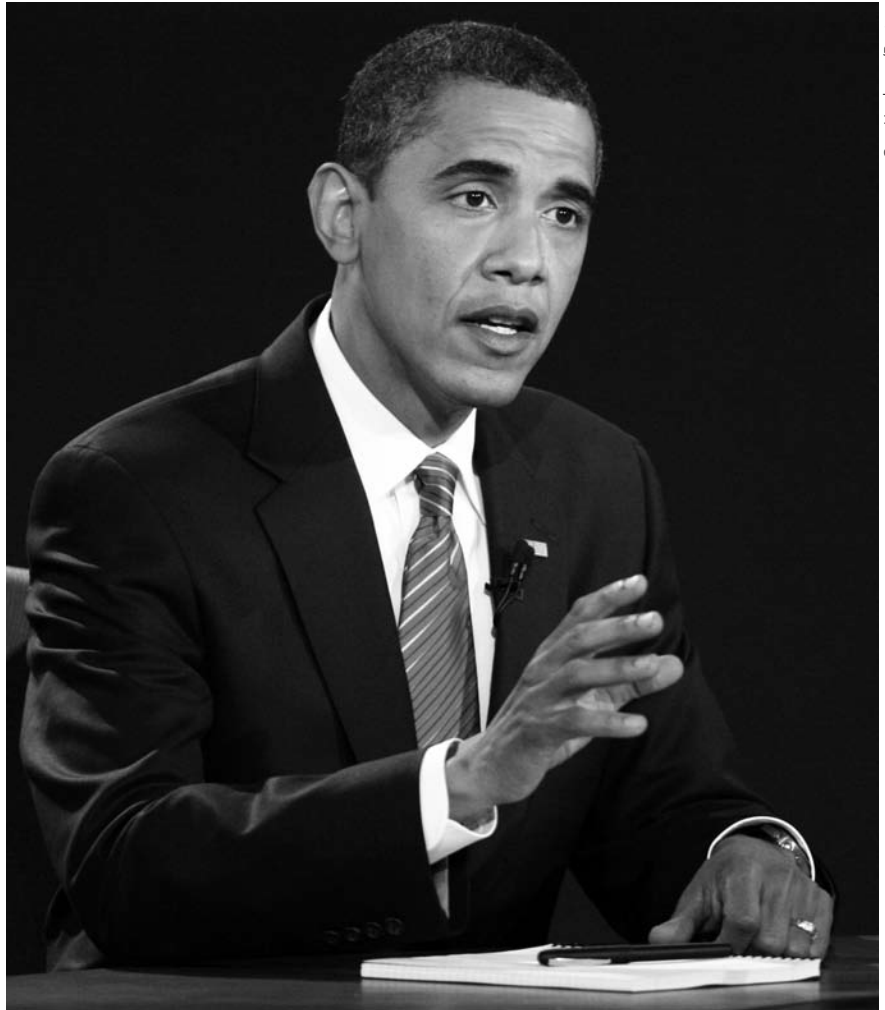


# Is Obama Black?

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Gary Hershorn/Reuters

## INTRODUCTION

Race and ethnicity have never stopped occupying center stage in all the U.S. presidential hopefuls' most intimate discourses or that of other actors involved in the campaigns, especially since the Reverend Jeremiah Wright (Obama's pastor for the last 20 years at the Trinity United Church in

Southside Chicago) forced on the Democratic candidate his agenda of domestic debate about the nature of his own candidacy;<sup>1</sup> since Obama insisted on defining himself as a post-racial candidate; since Hillary Clinton played the race card as a (knee-jerk) response to the supposedly sexist insinuations made during the campaign by her black opponent and above all in the U.S. TV media establishment. This is particularly the case since, after the Democratic Party contest for the nomination ended with Obama's victory, the final confrontation began with McCain and his party, which never stopped hovering around ethnic issues.<sup>2</sup>

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Certainly, what Obama proposed explicitly as a post-racial campaign has implied nevertheless an emphasis on the matter of the color of the “other” much more than in the cases of Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson, just to mention the two best known black leaders in U.S. history. From the gender sphere (Clinton), we journeyed to the ethnic sphere (Obama) of the volcanic politics of the United States today. We must ask ourselves if all this has heralded the dawn of a new moment in the political system, a modernization, the beginning of a post-racial era in U.S. politics, the end of the multi-culturalist debate, or, if on the contrary, what we are seeing is a repetition of U.S. racist policies, that today have a clear but complex target in Obama.

I

For the purpose of constructing the symbolic real and virtual discourse, is Obama a black, Afro-American or a person of color? I think that, despite all the semiological, semantic, ontological, sociological, cultural, political and other kinds of drawbacks this issue has, Obama has to be considered “black”. He is black despite being of mixed blood (he was born in Honolulu, the son of Ann Dunham, a Kansas-born anthropologist, who besides being white, was an atheist, and a black Kenyan Muslim Harvard-trained economist).<sup>3</sup> This is because it is among *blacks*—and particularly one with a real chance of becoming the first head of state in the developed world who comes from a traditionally marginalized ethnic minority—where his identity is most and best defined; much better than in any other place in the United States’ socio-ethnic territory.<sup>4</sup>

His inclusive discourse, then, has uniquely awakened the interest of broad, diverse sectors of the population, above all among disillusioned young people. This is not only because he has convinced them of his non-Negritude, but mainly because he is a charismatic leader and brilliant orator—just how effective he is in turning his proposals into reality is as

yet unclear—who has captured the imagination of a broad audience, mainly young and reactive, anxiously looking for ways out of the neo-conservative morass.

In this sense, he is a “black” leader who can talk to white people because of his ability to deal with the big problems all U.S. citizens face, not just blacks and other minorities. He is “black” because his history situates him far from the universe of the politically correct, so-called “Afro-American”. His is not a past of slavery, nor is he one of the Afro-Americans who define their identity after a long tradition of fighting for civil rights.

He is also an “other” that is extremely strange *vis-à-vis* the usual standards historically practiced in the United States for negating the “other”. Barack Hussein Obama has an exotic name inherited from his father and grandfather, and an equally exotic background. For all these reasons, Obama is beginning to be turned into just another “un-American” by the recalcitrant establishment. In his passionate attempts to stop being black, Obama confirms himself as a black man facing a contender who is really white and becomes even *whiter* because he is opposing a representative of the very intolerable, ungraspable “otherness”, singular to the U.S. Obama, a Negro with universalist pretensions—“a cosmopolitan!” as Rudolph Giuliani has called him—was a real rival who seriously has aspired to state power as no other “anomalous” actor has in the past. Under these circumstances, the ethnic card is recharged: Obama is *blacker* because he is more dangerous for McCain and for the most conspicuous and traditional U.S. racism (quite well represented historically by the Republican Party) in that he seemed to seriously threaten to take power. It is a matter of presenting the anti-war senator, the impeccable orator, the social leader as “a black candidate,” but without paying the price or assuming the responsibility this implies. Instead Obama has been turned by the GOP into a terrorist—an “un-American” threat? It is worth quoting some of Sarah Palin’s thoughts on this taken from one of her electoral rallies:

“So, I was reading *The New York Times* and I was really interested to read about Barack’s friends from Chicago. I was reading my copy of the *New York Times* the other day,” she said. “Booooo!” replied the crowd.

“I knew you guys would react that way, okay,” she continued. “So, I was reading the *New York Times* and I was really interested to read about Barack’s friends from Chicago.”

It was time to revive the allegation, made over the weekend, that Obama “pals around” with terrorists, in this case Bill Ayers, late of the Weather Underground. Many independent observers say Palin’s allegations are a stretch; Obama served on a Chicago charitable board with Ayers, now an education professor, and has condemned his past activities.

“Now it turns out, one of his earliest supporters is a man named Bill Ayers,” Palin said. “Boooo!” said the crowd.

“And, according to *The New York Times*, he was a domestic terrorist and part of a group that, quote, ‘launched a campaign of bombings that would target the Pentagon and our U.S. Capitol,’” she continued. “Boooo!” the crowd repeated.

small-town America (as opposed to, say, Chicago and its community organizers) from Westbrook Pegler, the mid-century Hearst columnist famous for his anti-Semitism, racism and violent rhetorical excess. After an assassin tried to kill F.D.R. at a Florida rally and murdered Chicago’s mayor instead in 1933, Pegler wrote that it was “regrettable that Giuseppe Zangara shot the wrong man.” In the ‘60s, Pegler had a wish for Bobby Kennedy: “Some white patriot of the Southern tier will spatter his spoonful of brains in public premises before the snow falls.” This is the writer who found his way into a speech by a potential vice president at a national political convention. It’s astonishing there’s been no demand for a public accounting from the McCain campaign. Imagine if Obama had quoted a Black Panther or Louis Farrakhan —or William Ayers— in Denver.<sup>6</sup>

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Being the “black” opponent is the sole responsibility or fault of Obama and the Democratic Party, and is also the result, naturally, of his stubbornness and audacity in daring, from his unacceptable “otherness,” to represent the interest of “all” Americans as the head of the executive.

“Kill him!” proposed one man in the audience.

Palin went on to say that “Obama held one of the first meetings of his political career in Bill Ayers’s living room, and they’ve worked together on various projects in Chicago.” Here, Palin began to connect the dots. “These are the same guys who think that patriotism is paying higher taxes —remember that’s what Joe Biden had said. And,” —she paused and sighed— “I am just so fearful that this is not a man who sees America the way you and I see America, as the greatest force for good in the world. I’m afraid this is someone who sees America as ‘imperfect enough’ to work with a former domestic terrorist who had targeted his own country.” “Boooo!” said the audience.<sup>5</sup>

Frank Rich has complained about this demonstration of vernacular racism:

No less disconcerting was a still-unexplained passage of Palin’s convention speech: her use of an unattributed quote praising

or of the racist prejudice that some have tried to put between Obama and the electorate. It is also the result, naturally, of his stubbornness and audacity in daring, from his unacceptable “otherness,” to represent the interest of “all” Americans as the head of the executive. “I don’t look like all those presidents on the dollar bills,” he answered his rival when McCain accused him of playing the race card in his favor; his stubbornness and audacity in daring to represent those who are against the war, those who aspire to comprehensive, better quality health and educational systems; his stubbornness and audacity in daring to be ahead of McCain, as he was ahead of Clinton, in almost all the opinion polls, especially after testing his suitability for the job in the presidential debates, proving that McCain’s argument about Obama’s lack of experience and preparedness is irrelevant, not to mention untrue.

That is, it is a fight for power and an ideological debate in which Obama opponents subtly have resorted to using blows that have discriminatory effects, making him respon-

sible for it, for this discrimination involuntarily created by the force and personality of the Democratic candidate, by accusing him of being irresponsible, rash or inexperienced for proposing, for example, pulling the U.S. out of Iraq in 16 months—McCain has accused him of preferring to lose the war that “we are winning” than to lose the election.

How does an un-American anomaly of the dimensions of a Barack Obama dare talk seriously about *real politik*? It is he—and not us—who represents the past (which is doubly anomalous), backwardness and the denial of progress—the audacity of rejecting a war when “it’s being won”! His opponents seem to be saying that for this very reason, he is even more black: because he is irresponsible and unpatriotic. He made the mistake of fighting for power and whatever bad things might befall him are the result of his being anomalous—he is not an equal. He has faced all the obstacles in order to become an uncomfortable contender.

In this campaign, McCain and Palin have played the patriotism card dangerously. It is a direct association between, on the one hand, the lack of patriotism, using as the main argument his desire to end the war, and, on the other, the supposed zero right to patriotism, affirming that Obama’s lack

Afro-Americans, and not to mention the Latin American peoples: like minors, incapable of thinking or acting for themselves. This is why the United States has been accused of exercising a kind of semi-apartheid, palatable because it is subsumed in the prevalence of a melting pot. Obviously, this kind of *very white* intolerance cannot even be compared to the black supremacism typical of the struggles of the 1960s, more or less represented by Jeremiah Wright and his incendiary rhetoric.

What we have here is the possibility of a post-Bush sharpening of the neo-conservative discourse, including its worse vices, like the old racist practices that are—sometimes more and sometimes less intensely—authentically white supremacist.

## II

The enormous weakness of the (white) U.S. elite becomes obvious cyclically when it finds itself surrounded by “dangers” and submerges itself in a well-known discriminatory tradition. In the not-so-distant past (the nineteenth and twen-

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of experience does not lie in his political record, but rather in his non-existent right, according to the white supremacist view, of being a first-class citizen.

How can a second-class citizen usurp a place reserved for centuries for the white race? White conservative Sarah Palin’s nomination and the unsustainable aforementioned association between Obama, the “non-patriot,” and the Vietnam War-era radical William Ayers, “the terrorist,” seem to be reiterating this belief. Therefore, he is even blacker because he has dared to seriously aspire to power, and we will make sure we emphasize that every time he tries or dares to stop being black.

Obama is treated by the traditional U.S. white discourse in exactly the way the white Calvinist tradition requires and as it always did with the native population, then with the

tieth centuries), this happened mainly when faced with external threats: the enemies of the U.S. order. Like when the loyalists confronted the reprobates and won the day; the virtuous against the perverse; or the privileged against the unfortunate; the Protestants against the Papists; and, in the United States, the Anglo-Americans against the Spanish; the democrats against the Fascists; and, finally, the democrats against the Communists. But, relatively speaking, not since the infamous massacre of old men, women and children in Chief Black Kettle’s Sand Creek camp, November 29, 1864, led by Colonel John Chivington; the Washita River massacre of peaceful southern Cheyenne on November 27, 1868; and, of course, not since Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890; or, more recently, My Lai, Vietnam, in March 1968,<sup>7</sup> had we seen the discourse of “common sense,” which

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becomes discriminatory, be applied with so much emphasis in electoral campaigns as it is in the case of Obama.

This obsessive vision of U.S. “common sense” has distinguished itself as a link with a fundamental value of its culture: racism. In this regard, Michael Hunt points to three basic principles that motivate U.S. domestic and foreign policy: 1) race hierarchy; 2) the idea of American Destiny; and 3) U.S. aversion to revolution.<sup>8</sup> These vigorously social Darwinian traits would significantly influence the U.S. struggle for “the waste places of the earth,” inside and outside its borders.<sup>9</sup>

In the United States, the notion of “race” as a concept and a point of departure on the road to virtuosity started up a hierarchical attitude and an entire conception of reality. It was also always linked closely to exceptionalism. This extraordinary concept of Americans themselves as “the exceptional society,” “the society of destiny,” “the new Israel,” “the new Jerusalem” or “the nation to be,” as John Winthrop called it when he was with the pilgrims on the Massachusetts coast in 1630, or “the city on the hill”:<sup>10</sup> these were all the components of the highest importance in creating a new civic religion in the United States, whose objective ultimately would be to achieve national greatness for that country. In this context, national greatness meant the beginning and the end of a new time in the nation’s history, in which “under the protection of the heavens,” it was called upon to be the instrument for the moral and political regeneration of the world.<sup>11</sup>

All of this, linked to the notion of “common sense,” led to an atmosphere of intolerance that, seemingly, has had an impact on the political climate in which our character, Barack Obama, finds himself. About all of this, Augelli and Murphy have the following to say:

Colonial religion can be understood as the source of three sets of ideas that are common sense to most Americans. One idea has to do with identity, with who Americans are, with the view that many Americans have of their own exceptionalism and destiny, the idea of Americans as a chosen people. The second has to do with how to deal with dissent, how to deal with peo-

ple whose views differ from your own. For many Americans the only way to deal with people whose ideas differ from your own is to isolate yourself from them (or them from you), convert them, or destroy them... Finally, we look at the limited American idea of charity which is bound up with assumptions about the exceptionalism of the American people.<sup>12</sup>

But above all, it is U.S. intolerance which recurs historically. Again Augelli and Murphy explain it like this:

Americans, especially those who identify themselves as more religious, are not particularly tolerant of behaviour that deviates from relatively narrow norms, even though the same people are likely to profess an adherence to an abstract principle of “liberty for all”. As a result, many Americans accept a relatively authoritarian concept of “community”, one that entails indoctrination and little real dissent. For many Americans it is the only concept of “community” they understand. Yet, many Americans remain frightened by those who limit a dissenter’s alternatives to reconversion or repression, and they fight against every manifestation of this impulse in American political life... “Calvinism’s original force comes from this ability to impose a legitimate, authoritarian order on a confused world.”<sup>13</sup>

Is this part of the United States’ twentieth-century past still alive? Is Obama a dissident, a pagan of U.S. politics? Or, will he be capable of becoming the first actor in a post-racial era? In winning the presidency, it will very possibly be a step toward achieving a deep transformation of the polity. If he had lost by a wide margin, if the prejudices of the political establishment represented by McCain defeat him and he is the victim of a witch-hunt, it might mean the biggest step backward for the country since the 1960s. All of this would polarize U.S. society even more, perhaps more than if he won.

An Obama loss as the result of having been presented by his opponent and his spokespersons as an expendable anomaly —“that one” in McCain’s words; it would mean that white racism and social backwardness in the United

States will have, as never before, put the noose around the neck of democracy in their country and will take the enormous risk of not making timely use of the impulse for renovation that has been visible there for the last two years. What will happen is that race will become a matter for shame and interminable recriminations. The opportunity for demonstrating whether Obama's political discourse and his campaign promises were baseless or not will also be lost. In short, what would be lost is the opportunity of seeing whether a president in the United States, who is also black, can inaugurate a new post-racial era, a more democratic and just society, a new society and whether he can, once and for all, bring civilization to the European-American savage living under the white skin of the all-powerful elite, represented by an aged politician and an ineffective, war-mongering party in decline that will leave Americans, after suffering under the most shameful presidency of U.S. history, a legacy of social, political and economic decline the likes of which have not been witnessed since the Nixon era. At the end of the day, it is a matter of seeing whether it is possible to apply the maxim of the famous Afro-American writer, James Baldwin, who said that the white man cannot free himself from racism by himself, so the very salvation of this idea of democracy lies in the hands of the most dispossessed.<sup>14</sup> Today, the entire power structure of the state in the United States is waiting for a definition on this issue.

An Obama victory will be also an opportunity for the U.S. to show to what extent its society, especially the side that decided not to support Obama, is able to renovate and face the challenges of its future, namely: the reconfiguration of its political system in that it has lost relative credibility and strength; the loss of legitimacy as a world leader within the international order and the struggle between unilateralism and multilateralism, and the dramatic questioning of the international political economy paradigm; not to mention the need to rebuild the fractured social consensus and overcome the moral discontent which apparently will become George W. Bush's most ominous legacy. ■■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On September 16, 2001, Reverend Wright preached a sermon to his congregation, saying that the United States had brought on al Qaeda's attacks because of its own terrorism and foreign policy. "We have supported state terrorism 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." That same day, he said, "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 (God damn America)". However, he delivered his most controversial sermon in 2003, a severe affront to U.S. patriotism, in which he denounced U.S. treatment of its African-American population, saying, "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." "Obama's Pastor: God Damn America, U.S. to Blame for 9/11," *ABC News*, March 13, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> In October, the McCain-Palin campaign has made incendiary statements about Obama that are apparently part of a strategy to show Obama as a dangerous anomaly — "terrorist?", "socialist?", "Arab?", "Muslim?", "black?" These are, by the way, the same dirty, Rove-like practices that made McCain drop out of the race in 2000.

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, Sr. was born in Nyangoma Kogela, in rural West Kenya. In the book *The Risks of Knowledge*, he is described as a Harvard-trained economist. The authors detail a paper he wrote for the *East Africa Journal* in which he attacked the economic proposals of pro-Western "third way" leader Tom Mboya and sided with the communist-allied leader Oginga Odinga. PrestoPundit located a copy of the paper titled "Problems Facing Our Socialism," published in July 1965, in which the author's name is given as Barak H. Obama. See [maggiesnotebook.blogspot.com/2008/04/barack-obamas-father-why-it-matters.html](http://maggiesnotebook.blogspot.com/2008/04/barack-obamas-father-why-it-matters.html).

<sup>4</sup> However, it is worth noting that Obama has refused to use the self-victimized narrative black leaders have resorted to in the past in order to become politicians. The difference between them and Obama is that he decided to become a politician before considering himself "black".

<sup>5</sup> "In Fla., Palin Goes for the Rough Stuff as Audience Boos Obama," *The Washington Post*, October 6, 2008, [WashingtonPost.com](http://WashingtonPost.com)

<sup>6</sup> Frank Rich, "The Terrorist Barack Hussein Obama," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2008.

<sup>7</sup> See U.S. Senate, "Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders," Senate Reports, vols. 3-8 (Report no. 94-465), 94th Congress, 1st Session (November 20, 1975) (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office). This is a documented Senate hearing that demonstrates the involvement of leaders like Central Intelligence Agency Director Alan Dulles, CIA official Richard Bissel, and Presidents Eisenhower and Nixon in complicated conspiratorial attempts to destroy both governments and leaders with which the U.S. government was dissatisfied.

<sup>8</sup> Michael H. Hunt, *Ideology and US Foreign Policy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), Chapters 2 and 4.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Cabot Lodge, quoted by Michael H. Hunt, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> The idea Winthrop expressed is that "Men shall say of succeeding plantations: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us." Quoted in L. Baritz, *City on a Hill: A History of Ideas and Myths in America* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1964), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Chapters 1, 2, 11 and 12 of A.P. Whitaker, *The US and the Independence of Latin America, 1800/1830* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1941).

<sup>12</sup> E. Augelli and C. Murphy, *America's Quest for Supremacy and the Third World: A Gramscian Analysis* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1988), p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41, footnote 15.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Walters, "Race in America: Multiculturalism, Afrocentrism, and the New Democratic Framework," *Black Collegian* (April 1996), p. 5.