

Barack Obama in Historical Perspective

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The election of Barack Obama to the Presidency in 2008 enacted two changes that, on their face at least, represented major historical developments. Since the momentous victory of Ronald Reagan over Jimmy Carter in 1980, Republicans had been the dominant party in American national politics, winning five of seven presidential elections and, from 1995 through 2007, generally controlling both chambers of Congress as well. Republican presidents also appointed the majority of the Supreme Court and other federal judges during this period. The shift of the control of the House, Senate, and the White House to the Democrats raised the strong possibility that the era of the “Reagan Revolution” had come to an end.

Still more obviously, Obama’s election represented the first election of a person of modern African descent to the U.S. Presidency – indeed, the first election of such a person as leader of any predominantly European-descended nation anywhere in the world. If one believes that the ideologies and practices of racial inequality are rooted in the European imperial expansion beginning six centuries ago that created most of those European-descended nations, the election of Barack Obama was a genuinely world-historical event—and an event in which the first colony to rebel successfully against European imperial control, a former colony that was itself long an open practitioner of racial subordination and imperial rule, can rightfully take pride.

In this paper, I argue that these two historical developments are intimately related, because in the modern United States, the politics of partisan success has become more

intertwined with the politics of race than at any time in U.S. history, except for the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction. But though this intertwining helped make possible Obama's historic victory in 2008, it also poses major obstacles to his continued success, to the continued success of his Democratic Party, and to the kind of politics of racial progress that Obama champions.

Both within academia and in popular political discourse, many have debated whether that politics should be described as "post-racial" and whether it is the harbinger of a post-racial era in American politics (e.g. Connerly, 2008; Street, 2008; Bobo and Dawson, 2008, 1; Sinclair-Chapman and Price, 2008, 739). There is great skepticism, particularly in academia, about whether the 2008 election was quite that historic, and much doubt that the United States is moving beyond a politics that shapes and is shaped by racial divisions. But most accept that Obama tried to run a campaign that de-emphasized race or was at least "race-neutral" (Baiocchi, 2008; Sinclair-Chapman and Price, 741). And many believe that, if America should somehow move into a post-racial era, it will be an era in which the Democratic Party fares better than it has in the previous three decades.

Racial Institutional Orders and Partisan Orders. To assess these claims, we need to understand both the structure of American racial politics and the relationship of that structure to American partisan politics. In several articles, Desmond King and I have argued that historically, American racial politics has been structured in terms of what we call rival "racial institutional orders." These orders are durable alliances of political actors, activist groups, and governing institutions united by agreement on the central racial issue of the eras in American politics that their conflicts help to define. They seek

political power to resist or advance the measures to promote greater material racial equality that are politically pivotal in their eras (King and Smith 2005). And they have sought power in part through seeking to influence the positions of major political parties; but until the last third of the 20th century, ordinarily the opposed racial coalitions have been at least partly represented in both of the major parties of their day. Only in the last generation have the rival racial alliances come to overlap with the rival major parties as extensively as they do today.

There have so far been three eras of competing racial orders, interspersed with periods of transition. In each of these eras, one order has favored arrangements widely thought to protect certain interests of Americans then labeled “White,” while a rival order has sought to alter many of those arrangements. These are first, the *slavery era* from 1789 to 1865, when the maintenance and extension of slavery were the battleground issues; second, the *Jim Crow era*, consolidated in the mid-1890s after a transition period and lasting officially to 1954, when the maintenance and extension of de jure segregation and effective Black disfranchisement were the central issues; and third, the modern *era of race conscious controversies*, which consolidated after a transition by the mid-1970s and continues today, and in which the defining battles are over whether public policies should be “color-blind” or “race conscious” (King and Smith 2008, 686-688).

During the *slavery* and *Jim Crow* eras, the strength of the two contesting racial orders fluctuated over time but culminated in a decisive and enduring victory by one side on the battleground issues of the day. During most of the slavery era, there were pro-slavery and anti-slavery components to each of the two major parties, first the Jeffersonian Republicans and the Federalists, then the Jacksonian Democrats and the

Whigs, though the Jeffersonians and Jacksonians tended more toward the pro-slavery side. When the more evenly divided Whigs broke apart over slavery, and a new partisan alignment pitted even more overwhelmingly pro-slavery Democrats against the anti-slavery Republicans, forged from a coalition of former Whigs and Free Soil Democrats, it became impossible for southern Democrats to accept the rise of the Republican Party to national power; and the Civil War came.

In its wake, slavery was constitutionally banned. Then a transition period followed in which southern Democrats rebuilt their strength by persuading most northern Democrats and many white Republicans that national harmony could be restored through the establishment of a new form of white supremacy, the putatively equal Jim Crow system of local, state, and national segregation policies. By the late 1890s, most though not all Republicans had ceased to oppose those measures. Throughout the ensuing Jim Crow era, however, there were anti-segregation as well as pro-segregation components in both the Democratic and Republican parties. Over time, in response both to domestic pressures and foreign policy considerations, political leaders in both parties outside the south shifted to the anti-segregation side (Klinkner with Smith 1999). When northern Democrats finally placed their party firmly in the anti-segregation camp by the mid-1960s, the formal system of Jim Crow laws toppled at last.

Then a new transition period followed in which proponents of greater material racial equality came to believe that further progress could not be achieved without direct race-targeted measures—measures that were attacked as reverse racism, even by many who had opposed segregation laws. By the mid-1970s, the modern structure of American racial politics emerged, with a coalition of political actors and institutions promoting

race-conscious policies and a rival coalition insisting that public measures and institutions should be as “color-blind” as possible.

Note that each time a new structure of rival racial alliances has arisen after the issues that defined a previous era have been resolved, both the new racial alliances have professed allegiance to the nation’s resolution of those older issues. The proponents of Jim Crow did not seek to restore slavery, which they conceded to be inefficient and immoral. Today no one calls for a return to the Jim Crow system. Instead, both advocates of color-blind policies and modern proponents of race conscious policies present themselves as the true heirs of the triumphant anti-segregation civil rights movement. Both criticize their opponents for betraying its aims. For color-blind alliance members, the civil rights movement centered on Martin Luther King’s famed hope that persons would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. They believe that race conscious measures violate that aspiration and perpetuate racial divisions. Race conscious alliance members believe instead that the central aim of the civil rights movement was to reduce deeply entrenched, unjust, material racial inequalities. They see the color-blind alliance’s rejection of race-targeted policies as operating to perpetuate and even exacerbate pervasive inherited white advantages, whether or not that outcome is intended.

These two modern alliances emerged initially over issues of affirmative action in employment, but King and I argue that they can be found largely intact in legislative and judicial struggles over a wide range of other issues. Their basic structure is as follows:

Color-Blind Order, 1978-2006:

Most Republican Party officeholders and members after 1976;
President, 1980-1992, 2001-2006;

Some conservative, neo-conservative Democrats;
Majority of Supreme Court after 1980;
Most lower federal court judges, many state judges after 1980;
Some White-owned businesses and business lobbyists;
Conservative think tanks/advocacy groups: e.g.
Center for Individual Rights, Cato Institute;
Fringe White supremacist groups;
Christian Right groups, e.g. Family Research Council;
Conservative foundations: e.g. Bradley Foundation.

Race Conscious Order, 1978-2006:

Most Democratic Party officeholders and members;
President (mixed support), 1993-2000;
Some liberal, pro-corporate Republicans;
Some federal, state judges;
Many civil service members of executive agencies;
Many large businesses, minority-owned businesses;
Most labor unions;
Military leadership;
Liberal advocacy groups, e.g. ACLU;
Most non-White advocacy groups: NAACP, La Raza,
Asian American Legal Defense fund;
Liberal religious groups, e.g. National Council of Churches;
Liberal foundations: Soros, Ford

Note that some members of the color-blind order, such as white supremacists, clearly support color-blind policies such as affirmative action strictly tactically, as politically potent means to preserve white advantages, while others undoubtedly do so sincerely. We are unable to judge the proportions or motives, so we presume most proponents of color-blind policies genuinely believe these measures are best for both racial progress and justice.

Note also that these modern coalitions cannot be adequately grasped in class terms: the business sector is divided on race conscious measures, while most unions, formerly frequent opponents of civil rights reforms, now largely support them. But in sharp contrast to the racial alliances that comprised the Jim Crow era, the modern rival

racial institutional orders are much more closely identified with the two major political parties. Whereas both parties before 1954 contained segregationists and anti-segregationists, today Republicans overwhelmingly favor color-blind policies, even if some do so more ardently and consistently than others; and the great majority of Democrats favor race conscious measures, even if some do so somewhat half-heartedly. These contrasting positions are stated explicitly in their official party platforms from 1976 to the present (but not earlier) (King and Smith 2008, 691). This partisan polarization on racial issues is consistent with and may indeed be a significant contributor to the heightened partisan polarization documented by many political scientists (e.g. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). And primarily because most American voters are white and most whites oppose race conscious policies, this extensive fusion of the modern racial alliances with the two major parties has contributed to the GOP's predominance in national elections since the mid-1970s (692).

Thought the ideologies of the modern racial alliances were not yet visible, that partisan result was foreseen in the mid-1960s. Most famously, Lyndon Johnson is said to have remarked when he signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act that the Democrats had "lost the south for a generation." He meant, of course, the white south, along with many other white voters. And indeed, according to exit polls, no Democratic presidential candidate has won more white votes than the Republican candidate in any national election since 1964, not even the two successful southern white Democratic candidates, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.¹ Yet if it is true that the civil rights laws of the 1960s set the stage for an era of Republican predominance in national elections, it is also true, as Philip Klinkner

and Thomas Schaller have argued, that Great Society legislation transformed the American electorate over time in ways that made Obama's victory possible.

They note that the 1964 Civil Rights Act and, particularly, the 1965 Voting Rights Act resulted in the enfranchisement of and expanded political opportunities for millions of African-American and, eventually, Latino voters as well. Without these measures, the Obama campaign would have been inconceivable. They also observe that the 1965 Immigration and National Act, which ended the race-based national origins quota system and led to greatly heightened Latino and Asian immigration over the next several decades, transformed the American electorate from one which was in 1964 over 90% non-Hispanic whites to one that was in 2008 just under 75% non-Hispanic whites. And they add that the 1965 Higher Education Act, providing funding for low- and middle-income students, increased voters with college degrees from 13% in 1964 to 46% in 2008. Obama's greater popularity with college-educated voters was a particular asset in his primary campaigns against Hillary Clinton, and he also won this group in the general election (Klinkner and Schaller 2009, 1, 3). There Obama lost among white voters by 55% to 43%, but he won 95% of the black vote, 67% of the Latino vote, and 62% of the Asian-American vote, super-majorities that made his victory possible.² A number of analysts suggest, moreover, that although Obama did better nationally among white voters than John Kerry did in 2004, he did worse among southern whites and among whites with high racial resentment scores than Kerry or any other white Democrat would likely have done under the circumstances of 2008 (e.g. Persily, Ansolabehere, Stewart III 2009, 3, 17-22; Klinkner 2009).

Obama, Race, and the 2008 Election. The fact that Obama nonetheless won might be interpreted as indicating that despite these patterns, most voters were most concerned with the economic crisis and the overall poor performance of the Bush administration, and that race played little role in the election. The fact that neither candidate placed any emphasis on racial issues might seem to support this interpretation; and there is no doubt that the economy and Bush's unpopularity (along with, toward the end, doubts about Sarah Palin) all contributed to the vote totals of Obama and the Democrats. Still, the fact that Obama lost substantially among whites and won hugely among non-whites makes it difficult if not impossible to deny that race was also a significant factor. King and I have argued that the structure of partisan-allied racial alliances helps clarify both why neither candidate stressed race and why racial concerns were nonetheless at work (Smith and King 2009).

Senator John McCain, as the champion of the color-blind alliance, could not openly express concern about the race of his opponent: after all, the ideology of his coalition was that race should be treated as politically irrelevant. At the same time, simply because Barack Obama appears black to most Americans and accepts identification as black, his candidacy undoubtedly raised worries among many in the color-blind order that a President Obama would expand pro-black racial preferences in many ways. But unless Obama provided an opening by strongly advocating such policies, which he was careful not to do, the McCain campaign had the challenge of making those concerns salient to voters without explicitly speaking of race. This may account for the McCain ads asking, "Who is the real Barack Obama?" and saying that McCain was in contrast "the American President Americans have been waiting for"

(Kurtz 2008; Raasch 2008). And at its close the McCain campaign spotlighted Joe the Plumber, who repeatedly urged the electorate to “Vote for a real American, John McCain” (Bash 2008). All these tropes represent efforts to arouse doubts and to plant fears about Obama, and for at least some of those who favor color-blind policies, those fears must have included concerns that he would champion racial preferences.

Obama faced complementary strategic challenges when campaigning for the Presidency as a black American at a time when most voters leaned toward color-blind policies. Press coverage based on interviews with white working class voters suggest that it would have been enormously difficult for him to speak extensively about race and racial issues without triggering widespread concerns that he would indeed support more expansive race-targeted programs, concerns that might well have insured his defeat (Wallsten 2008; Simkins 2008). At the same time, his racial identity and his background as a civil rights lawyer meant that many proponents of race conscious measures were willing to presume he would be far more sympathetic to their positions than his opponent, without Obama having to articulate a specifically racial agenda. Even so, Obama would have alienated important segments of his core supporters if he had explicitly repudiated race conscious programs and policies. Hence his best option was to campaign in ways that were largely “race-neutral” in the policies he foregrounded, while retaining in the background indications of constrained but continuing support for race conscious measures like affirmative action.

Obama made very clear in his book of policy and campaign positions, The Audacity of Hope, that he did indeed favor this strategy, for these reasons. In his chapter on “Race,” Obama offered “a word of caution” about whether “we have arrived

at a ‘postracial’ politics” or “already live in a color-blind society” (Obama 2006, 232). He referred briefly to well-known, stark statistics on persisting material racial inequalities, as well as to his own personal experiences of racism. Obama then argued, in accord with moderate race conscious proponents, that “Affirmative action programs, when properly structured, can open up opportunities otherwise close to qualified minorities without diminishing opportunities for white students,” and he added that “where there’s strong evidence of prolonged and systematic discrimination by large corporations, trade unions, or branches of municipal government, goals and timetables for minority hiring may be the only meaningful remedy available” (244). But Obama also stressed his understanding of the arguments of those who favor color-blind measures. He advocated an “emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific programs” as not only “good policy” but also as “good politics” (247). He concluded that “proposals that solely benefit minorities and dissect Americans into ‘us’ and ‘them’ may generate a few short-term concessions when the costs to whites aren’t too high, but they can’t serve as the basis for the kinds of sustained, broad-based political coalitions needed to transform America” (248).

In so arguing, Obama in his book and his campaign sought to build a new, broader racial alliance that joined those Americans who predominantly favor color-blind policies, but who do want to see real material racial progress and can tolerate a few race conscious measures, with those who think substantial race conscious measures are needed, but who are willing to see them put on the back burner if progress is indeed being achieved through other means. Because few on the race conscious left were likely to reject a black candidate, the opposition to such alliance would have to consist primarily of those openly opposed to further progress toward material racial equality altogether--a

coalition that Obama expected to be a small one in 21st century America. He pursued this strategy, for the most part, simply by not talking about race and by minimizing its likely impact on the election, thereby permitting color-blind and race conscious advocates to interpret his rhetorical emphases on both unity and change in terms congenial to them. But Obama did feel compelled by the controversy over the racial views of his longtime pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, to address race directly in his National Constitution Center speech on March 18, 2008.

There, in contrast to his usual campaign style, Obama stated, “race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now.” He called attention again to persisting material racial “disparities,” many of which, he argued, “can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.” To the dissatisfaction of some critics, Obama suggested only briefly that “current incidents of discrimination” were also sources of those inequalities. But he did argue, as I have here, that anger “over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition;” and he contended that conservative politicians and commentators “exploited fears of crime” and built careers “unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice.”³

Nonetheless, Obama counseled against labeling “the resentments of white Americans” as “misguided or even racist.” Instead, Obama urged “the African-American community” to bind “our particular grievances” with “the larger aspirations of all Americans” by focusing on “investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable to previous

generations.” He urged “all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.”⁴

In these ways Obama adroitly restated the central theme of his campaign, indeed of his entire political career, one embodied in his own life story: that the nation must continue to strive to achieve the promise of *e pluribus unum*, “that out of many, we are truly one.”⁵ He did not minimize the persistence of racial inequalities nor did he repudiate all race conscious measures, but his emphasis remained on programs, principles, and purposes designed to further the shared values and goals of all Americans. This is the message that Obama has sounded most persistently--from his breakthrough convention speech in 2004, where he said that “alongside our famous individualism, there’s another ingredient in the American saga, a belief that we’re all connected as one people...as one American family,” so that Americans are each others’ keepers;⁶ through his announcement speech in February 2007, where he said his campaign was “about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose;”⁷ to his campaign’s closing statement in October 2008, where he said “Each of us has a responsibility work and look after ourselves and our families and each of us has a responsibility to our fellow citizens;”⁸ to his Inaugural Address, in which he insisted “we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world... This is the price and promise of citizenship;”⁹ to his speech on Lincoln’s 200th Birthday in 2009, when he said “our individual liberty is served, not negated by a recognition of the common good,” by “shared sacrifice and responsibility—for ourselves and one another;”¹⁰ to his health care speech in September 2009, where he insisted “that concern and regard for the plight of

others...is part of the American character. A recognition that we are all in this together; that when fortune turns against one of us, others are there to lend a helping hand...and...sometimes government has to step in to help deliver on that promise.”¹¹

Along with the economy, Bush, Palin, and other deficiencies of his opponents, it is this persistent theme, not of racial grievance, assertion, or any strong form of race consciousness, but instead of the importance of shared commitments to fellow Americans, that helped Obama overcome concerns that long made it seem impossible that a black candidate could be elected President of the United States.

The Prospects for an Age of Obama. Can this general theme of finding common grounds of unity and mutual service, even while respecting diversity, and the attendant strategy of stressing universalistic measures while not rejecting all race conscious ones, also enable Obama to govern in ways that will sustain a coalition broad deep and enough to predominate in American politics for years to come? At the time of this writing, fall 2009, it is too soon to tell. Obama’s meteoric rise and exceptional talents counsel particularly against rushing to negative judgments. It is possible, however, to identify the main obstacles he must as yet overcome.

First, it is already evident that the strategy of stressing color-blind or race-neutral approaches without rejecting all race-conscious policies calls for continual walking of a tightrope from which it is easy to fall. The Obama administration has been buffeted by controversies over the race-conscious remarks of his Supreme Court nominee, Sonia Sotomayor, suggesting that at least in some cases, a “wise Latina” might be able to reach better decisions than a white man (Bash and Sherman 2009). It has also seen a bare majority of the Supreme Court, but probably a larger segment of the public, reject the

position of its amicus brief in the Ricci v. DeStefano case (557 U.S. ____ [2009]).

Consonant with Obama's approach to race, the Obama Justice Department argued there that, in order to avoid lawsuits that would be reasonable under Title VII of the revered 1964 Civil Rights Act, it is permissible for a public employer to abandon one race-neutral test for promotion in favor of another race-neutral test that is preferable on race-conscious grounds, because it is likely to produce a more diverse workforce and, in this case, fire department leadership.¹² The Supreme Court, whose Republican-appointed majority has moved the institution into the ranks of the color-blind alliance, adopted a new "strong-basis-in-evidence" standard to assess the city's claim that it would be vulnerable to a lawsuit if it used its original written test for promotion. The majority did not see such a strong basis (25). Justice Ruth Ginsburg in dissent criticized this novel standard and insisted that the city could use a test that produced a racially disparate pattern of promotions only if that test was a business necessity. The record here indicated that other tests that actually identified merit better would also be more racially inclusive (9, 19-20). But both the Court's ruling and public discussions of the case showed that even this fairly limited degree of openness to race conscious public policies continues to face strong judicial and political opposition.

But if municipalities henceforth choose to avoid such litigation by adopting in advance the sorts of alternative observational, "assessment center" tests for promotion to which New Haven wished to turn, tests which are indeed likely to produce more racially diverse outcomes, the general strategy preferred by the Obama administration, race neutral means chosen on race conscious grounds, may prove more acceptable as a quietly routine practice than it was when held up to judicial and political scrutiny. Furthermore,

despite her comments, Sonia Sotomayor was confirmed, though in the hearings she did sharply qualify, rather than defend, her earlier endorsement of race conscious judging (Goldstein, Barnes, and Kane, 2009). These early experiences suggest that Obama's approach to racial issues may sometimes embroil him and his coalition in the very sorts of controversies that he wishes to avoid, but the strategy may nonetheless still form part of endeavors that on balance succeed both politically and as policy.

A more fundamental question is whether Obama's approach to race, and his more general strategy of seeking "e pluribus unum" solutions, can succeed in actually reducing the nation's material racial inequalities in so many spheres of life, as well as its economic problems more generally, especially in a period of severe recession. As Obama himself acknowledges, as long as severe racial disparities persist, it is a virtual certainty that racial divisions will be visible in American politics as well. If toward the end of Obama's first term the nation's economy appears at least to be moving in the right direction, he may be able to sustain and even broaden his coalition, making a second term and further change possible. But both history and logic indicate that "universal" programs often fail to be extensive enough to reduce material racial disparities substantially. More often, they reduce some material suffering but leave racial gaps largely intact. Given the depth of the nation's current economic and racial hardships, the notion that Americans will make enough advances in reducing racial inequalities to foster a post-racial politics, even at the end of a second Obama term, seems utopian.

There is also a third, somewhat less obvious reason that Obama's election and his program are not likely to usher in a post-racial American political future. This reason might be termed "the multicultural challenge." It is a challenge that goes to the heart of

Obama's core promise: to embrace the diversity of Americans and yet to find ways to "bridge our differences and unite in common effort—black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American; Democrat and Republican, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, disabled or not," as he put it in his Ohio "closing statement" near the end of the campaign. All Americans are to come to feel and act politically as "one nation, and one people" who will together "once more choose our better history."¹³

One reason this promise is so challenging is that Americans do not agree on what constitutes their "better history." Some see the spread of religious diversity and considerable secularity, for example, as advances for freedom. Others see those developments as a retreat from America's true calling to be a shining "Christian nation." Some believe their country's "best history" centers on the realization of ideals arising in historically Anglo-American cultural traditions. Others see those cultural traditions as historically responsible for the repression of communities and identities that they regard as most valuable and most their own. Put more broadly, the difficulty is that it may well be impossible both to give any specific content to the putative shared, unifying values and purposes of Americans, without appearing to fail to recognize and accommodate adequately the diversity of values and purposes Americans in fact exhibit. For many more multiculturally-minded Americans, that diversity of community identities, both sub-national and trans-national, should be not only tolerated but actively assisted in public systems of political representation, public aid programs, educational curriculum, legally recognized group rights, and much more. Even if by some miracle severe racial inequalities were sharply alleviated during an Obama administration, controversies will likely still remain over whether the kind of unity out of diversity that he offers as a shared

national ideal really fulfills the aspirations of all or even most of the persons and communities whose differences he seeks to bridge. And because those diverse aspirations include differing visions among members of existing racial groups, it is likely that a United States marked by such controversies will still not be an America whose politics can credibly be deemed post-racial. Nor is it at all clear that it should be: multicultural ideals have force in part because there are good reasons to doubt the propriety of a strongly unified sense of American national identity and purpose.

Related to this multicultural challenge is a fourth difficulty, which might be termed the “cosmopolitan” challenge. Obama, of course, presents his own identity as a preeminent example of how unity can be forged from a background encompassing a remarkably broad mix of races, religions, nationalities, geographic residences, educational systems, and economic statuses. But his identity has arguably been forged most of all by his choices to embrace much that characterizes dominant but contested forms of American identity, including Christianity over Islam or secularity, American patriotism over either cosmopolitanism or foreign allegiances, and a stress on unity across the races over racial separatism. He has contended, “coming together, all of us” to “do the work that must be done in this country” is “the very definition of being American.”¹⁴ But among the domestic coalition that is Obama’s political base, as well as among the international leaders and movements with whom he seeks to forge alliances in pursuit of his goals, there are many who see this kind of stress on the primacy of national identity as retrograde, archaic in an age of globalization, a barrier to desirable multilateral and international arrangements, and a rhetoric capable of being deployed on behalf of indefensible chauvinism. Obama’s vision again requires him to walk a tightrope between

those who see his conception of Americanism as far too open to surrenders of national sovereignty, and those who see it as a stance that refuses to accept that the era of sovereign nation-states, much less the United States as the hegemonic nation-state, is and ought to be coming to an end.

Obama is anything but oblivious to all these challenges. In response to them, he has defended in principle, and to all appearances he is pursuing in practice a path that is largely expressive of the philosophic and political pragmatism historically associated with the University of Chicago, where he long taught. In The Audacity of Hope, Obama interpreted the U.S. Constitution as “one that sees our democracy, not as a house to be built, but as a conversation to be had”—a conversation that rests on “a rejection of...the infallibility of any idea or ideology or theology or ‘ism’” that might stand in the way of finding practical means to meet as many partly conflicting, partly common aspirations as possible (Obama 2006, 92-93). Obama recognized that the politics of “democratic deliberation” he applauded and saw as at the heart of the American constitutional system “seems to champion compromise, modesty, and muddling through; to justify logrolling, deal-making, self-interest, pork barrels, paralysis, and inefficiency.” But he insisted it involved processes of “information gathering, analysis, and argument” that allowed Americans “to make better, if not perfect, choices, not only about the means to our ends but also about the ends themselves” (94).

Yet Obama then went on to recognize the limits of deliberation and the need not just for ‘the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise,’ but also the “unbinding idealist” who demands true “justice,” like William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman. He lamented, “I am robbed even of the certainty of

uncertainty—for sometimes absolute truths may well be absolute” (97). In response to this dilemma, Obama invoked “Lincoln, who like no man before or since understood both the deliberative function of our democracy and the limit of such deliberations.” Lincoln displayed “firmness and depth” in his convictions, according to Obama, but he was also “guided by a practicality that would distress us today, a practicality that led him to test various bargains with the South in order to maintain the Union” and then “to stretch the Constitution to the breaking point in order to see the war through to a successful conclusion” (97-98). Obama argued, however, that Lincoln had never abandoned conviction for expediency. “Rather, it was a matter of maintaining within himself the balance between two contradictory ideas—that we must talk and reach for common understandings, precisely because all of us are imperfect and can never act with the certainty that God is on our side; and yet at times we must act nonetheless, as if we are certain, protected from error only by providence” (98).

Rarely has a modern political figure written more eloquently or insightfully about the dilemmas of effective statesmanship. Yet the question remains: will Obama’s eloquence and insight translate into actual effective statesmanship on his part, in ways that will enable his politics of democratic deliberation and pragmatic accommodation to achieve the sorts of substantial reforms and more broadly shared common goods he seeks? In this regard, Obama’s preferred model, Lincoln, provides a disquieting contrast. Lincoln’s practicality did not succumb either to expediency or to immoral compromise because he had a concrete policy that embodied his vision of the principles and purposes of the Constitution, both symbolically and practically. He understood those purposes to be the realization of the principles of the Declaration of Independence, and that meant, he

believed, that the national government had to ban slavery in its territories, in order to put slavery on the path toward eventual extinction. That position provided Lincoln's "absolute," the commitment that determined what sorts of compromises and accommodations were acceptable and what sorts were not (Jacobsohn 1993, 3).

What, in contrast, is the concrete issue or policy that is central to the realization of Obama's vision of "e pluribus unum," that symbolizes his "absolute" and clearly advances his sense of moral purpose? The answer is not obvious; and it is probably true that his vision points not so much to any single issue or policy as to a politics that constantly strives to use processes of democratic deliberation and pragmatic accommodation to discover and implement measures that can assist more and more Americans to share equitably in a variety of goods, including education, health care, employment, ample energy sources and a clean environment, as well as freedom from invidious discrimination. If Obama can during the first three years of his administration lead a democratic politics that manages to achieve progress on a number of these fronts, despite the challenges I have sketched, then it is plausible to think that he will win re-election, Democrats will recover from their likely losses in the midyear election of 2010, and the 2008 election will be seen in retrospect as the beginning of a new period of partisan dominance in America, one devoted to the sort of social reform agenda that Obama has often sketched, if in general terms. And if that happens, Obama will be seen in historical perspective as one of the nation's most important, perhaps even one of its greatest Presidents. But the obstacles standing in the way of that outcome are also of historic proportions. If Obama is to approach it, he must now show that his pragmatic politics of democratic and deliberation can be as successful in forging effective, widely

beneficial policies as it was in elevating this remarkable black man to America's White House.

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