

Racism without Racists

Color-Blind Racism
and the Persistence of
Racial Inequality in America

Fourth Edition

2014

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK



Race Matters in Obamerica¹

The Sweet (but Deadly) Enchantment of Color Blindness in Black Face

Madness is rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

Four years ago, when I wrote the first draft of this chapter, many Americans (mostly white but also some confused people of color) believed that the election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the nation was truly a foundational event. My critical views on Obama, on his centrism, and particularly on his color blindness were not appreciated by most. I was accused of all sorts of things; I still am, albeit with less emphasis given that we have four years of data on Obama. But I maintained my stand that we needed to explain why, in a country where race matters at all levels, a black man was elected president. It was not enough to postulate that Obama could not be elected, as many race commentators did, or to suggest his election meant we were close to the end of racism (I remind readers that only 43 percent of whites voted for Obama in 2008 and 39 percent in 2012, and not all who did were “beyond race”). Hence, now that Obama was reelected so narrowly, we must revisit how he was elected president in the first place, what he did as president, and what is the meaning of eight years of *Obamerica*. This chapter is my effort to remain engaged in the politics of race in the so-called post-racial moment we live in.

**“WE ARE ALL MAD HERE”:
ON MADNESS IN THE AMERICAN WONDERLAND**

In this chapter, I explain the “miracle” that happened in 2008 and its continuation in 2012: the election (and now, reelection) of a black man as president of the United States. My explanation runs counter to those who believe his victories represent the “end of racism” and the beginning of the era of “no more excuses”² for people of color. I contend Obama’s ascendancy to the presidency is part and parcel of the “new racism” in the United States since the early 1970s. We have seen the rise of a few, carefully chosen minorities who are willing to propound a happy version of the American story, and the elevation of these minority politicians as “evidence” that America has overcome. This fairy tale is the most popular way to explain American racial politics, despite the depressing statistics telling a different story about what it means to be a minority in America in 2011.

This chapter is also a call to progressives and liberals who believed in Obama’s message of hope and change to get serious. In 2013, we now have four years of Obama’s presidential record to scrutinize, as we have done with all prior presidents. As I was involved in debates about Obama leading up to the 2008 election, I revisit my predictions to evaluate whether the president has delivered on his promises, or whether, as I predicted, he has been far more moderate (centrist) than progressives were willing to admit in 2008.

But before I begin, several clarifications are needed to avoid unnecessary confusion. First, my criticism of Obama is neither of all he stands for nor of all of his actions in office. Second, although I will criticize President Obama’s image, politics, and policies, I want to be absolutely clear on one important point: in comparison to the president he replaced in 2008 and the Republican candidates he has faced, Obama seems like pure gold. Third, since Obama emerged as a viable candidate, the bulk of the American intelligentsia ceased its critical mission. Being critical is part of the job of intellectuals in any society, and when they are not critical, they abdicate their responsibility.

**“DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE”:
THE REAL QUESTION POSED BY OBAMA’S VICTORY**

George Orwell stated a long time ago that “to see what is in front of one’s nose needs constant struggle.”³ In the 2008 election cycle, Americans did not see what was in front of their noses; they saw what they wanted and longed to see. Whereas blacks and other people of color saw in Obama the

impossible dream come true, whites saw the confirmation of their belief that America is indeed a color-blind nation. But facts are, as John Adams said, “stubborn things,”⁴ and astute social analysts know that since the late 1970s, racial progress in the United States has stagnated and, in many areas, regressed. The evidence of such a state of affairs is, as the title of a report of the early 1990s put it, “clear and convincing.”⁵ All socioeconomic indicators reveal severe racial gaps in income, wealth, housing, and educational and occupational standing. Since I have addressed these inequalities in previous work,⁶ I will review here some economic disparities as documented for 2008—the year Obama was elected president. All the statistics I cite, unless otherwise specified, come from the report “State of the Dream 2009: The Silent Depression,”⁷ a very useful compendium of information from sources such as the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

- The black unemployment rate in 2008 was 11.9 percent. Among young black males aged sixteen to nineteen, unemployment was 32.8 percent (v). (Unemployment for whites in 2008 was 5.8 percent.) The median household incomes of blacks and Latinos were \$38,269 and \$40,000, respectively, while the median household income of whites was \$61,280 (v).
- Blacks and Latinos had poverty rates of 24 percent and 21 percent, respectively, compared to a 10 percent poverty rate for whites (v).
- People of color were more likely to be poor (24.5 percent), remain poor (54 percent), and move back into poverty from any income class status than their white counterparts (vi).
- Nearly 30 percent of blacks had zero or negative worth, versus 15 percent of whites (vi).

Citing data from the “State of Black America 2009” report by the Urban League, Earl Graves Jr., from *Black Enterprise*, said the following on the wealth disparity:

- Nationally, the typical African American family in 2008 possessed less than 10 percent of the net worth of the average white family. Almost 30 percent of black families had zero or negative net worth. And far fewer blacks than whites benefit from inherited wealth or assets.
- Only 18 percent of people of color had retirement accounts, compared to 43.4 percent of their white counterparts.
- On *average*, people of color had 8 cents for every dollar of white wealth.⁸

When we look at the most recent available statistics, blacks and Latinos have not made up for the gap in employment, income, and wealth. In fact, they have actually fallen further behind whites under Obama. In the month before the 2012 election, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the overall unemployment rate was at 7.9 percent. While whites' unemployment was at 6.6 percent, Latinos experienced higher unemployment (11 percent), and blacks were more than twice as likely as whites to be unemployed (14.3 percent).⁹ And 40.9 percent of uninstitutionalized (i.e., not incarcerated) black men and women between ages sixteen and nineteen were unemployed.¹⁰

This growing racial disparity is also starkly visible in statistics on poverty. Although the media and Wall Street reported an early recovery from the recession, in 2010 the Census reported the poverty rate had increased to 15.1 percent, a fifty-two-year high.¹¹ While 12.8 percent of whites were poor (an increase of 2.8 percent), 27.6 percent of blacks and 25.3 percent of Latinos were poor in 2011, a respective increase of 3.6 percent and 4.2 percent in only three years.¹² In other words, the already-substantial racial poverty gap increased after the recession. Black average income decreased to \$32,229 in 2011, a loss of \$6,000 or 18 percent of income from 2008. While whites' incomes also decreased by a significant amount, they still earned \$20,000 more than blacks, on average.¹³

These statistics are frightening indicators of the worsening economic well-being of blacks, but they do not tell the true extent of the story—as we have seen, the racial wealth disparity can be even more important than income differences.¹⁴ Perhaps most sobering is the doubling of the wealth gap between blacks and whites in only four years, between 2005 and 2009. Where the gap used to be ten-to-one, whites now possess on average *twenty* times the wealth of blacks and *eighteen* times that of Latinos.¹⁵ Much of this huge jump in wealth disparity comes from the racialized effects of the housing market crash. The Center for Responsible Lending reported that by the end of the crash, almost a quarter of black homeowners would lose their homes due to foreclosure, although whites experienced more foreclosures.¹⁶ Several major banks (Wells Fargo, Bank of America, and SunTrust) have already agreed to settlements for their targeting of black and Latino customers and communities for subprime mortgages and higher rates,¹⁷ but it is not clear that these practices will be stopped.

The racial inequality that persists today is not the product of “impersonal market forces”¹⁸ or due to the presumed cultural, moral, ethical, intellectual, or family “deficiencies” of people of color, as conservative commentators have argued. Racial inequality today is due to the “continuing significance” of racial discrimination.¹⁹ The scholarly community has documented the persistence of discrimination in the labor and hous-

ing markets and has uncovered the coexistence of old-fashioned as well as subtle “smiling discrimination.”²⁰

But racial discrimination is not just about jobs and housing: discrimination affects almost every aspect of the lives of people of color. It affects them in hospitals,²¹ restaurants,²² trying to buy cars or hail a cab,²³ driving,²⁴ flying,²⁵ or doing almost anything in America. Indeed, “living while black [or brown]”²⁶ is quite hard and affects the health (physical and mental) of people of color tremendously, as they seem to always be in “fight or flight” mode.²⁷

Despite the continuing significance of racism in minorities' lives, whites' racial policy attitudes in 2008 had not changed significantly since the 1980s.²⁸ Instead, most²⁹ contemporary researchers believe that since the 1970s, whites have developed new ways of justifying the racial status quo distinct from the “in your face” prejudice of the past. Analysts have labeled whites' post-civil rights racial attitudes as “modern racism,” “subtle racism,” “aversive racism,” “social dominance,” “competitive racism,” or the term I prefer, “color-blind racism.” But regardless of the name given to whites' new way of framing race matters, their switch from Jim Crow racism to color-blind racism did not change the basics, as the new version is as good as the old one, if not better, in safeguarding the racial order.

Misrecognizing the nature of the current racial regime, too many liberal and progressive commentators dug a deep hole for themselves in the 2008 election, as they either went with the flow and assumed Obama was truly about social and racial change, or they took the stand that white racism would prevent Obama from getting elected.³⁰ But there is a more fitting, historically accurate, and sociologically viable explanation. The “miracle”—the fact that race matters in America tremendously, yet we elected a black man as our president—is but an apparent one. Obama, his campaign, and his “success” are the outcome of forty years of racial transition from the Jim Crow racial order to the racial regime I have referred to as the “new racism.” In the new America that presumably began on November 4, 2008, and was extended in 2012, racism has remained firmly in place and, even worse, is becoming a more daunting obstacle. The apparent blessing of having a black man in the White House is likely to become a curse for black and brown folks.

In the remainder of this chapter I do three things. First, I describe the context that made it possible for someone like Obama to be elected president. Second, I discuss what Obama did in order to be elected president. Finally, I review Obama's policies in the first half of his presidency, to show how we have been delivered the same old politics in a new package.

FROM JIM CROW TO THE NEW RACISM REGIME

The Obama phenomenon is the product of the fundamental racial transformation that transpired in America in the 1960s and 1970s. Unlike Jim Crow, the new racial order that emerged—the “new racism”—reproduces racial domination mostly through subtle and covert practices that are often institutionalized, defended with coded language (“those urban people”), and bonded by the racial ideology of color-blind racism. Compared to Jim Crow, this new system seems genteel, but it is extremely effective in preserving systemic advantages for whites. The new regime is, in the immortal lyrics of Roberta Flack’s song, of the “killing me softly” variety.

In chapter 2, I have described in detail how the new racial practices for maintaining white privilege operate ideologically, socially, and economically. Given the focus of this chapter, I will just briefly present my analysis of political developments. These days, several major factors limit the advancement of people of color in the political arena. There are multiple structural barriers to the election of black and minority politicians including racial gerrymandering, multimember legislative districts, and the like. Despite some progress in the 1970s, people of color are still severely underrepresented among elected (whites still show a preference to vote for white candidates) and appointed officials. And because most minority politicians must either “compromise” to get elected or are dependent upon local white elites, their capacity to enact policies that benefit the minority masses is quite limited.

More significantly, in my early analysis on these matters I mentioned the emergence of a new type of minority politician. By the early 1990s it was clear that both major political parties (but the Democratic Party in particular) had learned from the perils of trying to incorporate veteran civil rights leaders such as Jesse Jackson. Regardless of the limitations of Jackson as a leader and of his “rainbow coalition” strategy of the 1980s, he and his coalition proved to be too much of a challenge to the “powers that be.”³¹ Hence, both parties and their corporate masters developed a new process for selecting and vetting minority politicians. After the Democratic Party co-opted civil rights leaders such as John Lewis, Andrew Young, and the like, they began manufacturing a new kind of minority politician (the Republican Party followed suit later). Today’s electorally oriented minority politician is not the product of social movements, usually joins the party of choice while in college, moves up quickly through the party ranks, and, most importantly, is not a race rebel.³² The new minority politicians, unlike their predecessors, are not radicals talking about “the revolution” and “uprooting systemic racism.” If Republican, they are antimorality conservatives such as Michael Steele (the former chairman of the Republican National Committee), Allen West (former U.S.

representative from Florida), Marco Rubio (senator from Florida), Susana Martinez (governor of New Mexico), Bobby Jindal (governor of Louisiana), and Nikki Haley (governor of South Carolina). If a Democrat, they are post-racial leaders with center to center-right politics such as Harold Ford (former congressman from Tennessee and former head of the now-defunct conservative Democratic Leadership Council and an MSNBC commentator), Cory Booker (Newark’s mayor since 2006), Deval Patrick (governor of Massachusetts since 2006), Adrian Fenty (D.C.’s mayor from 2006 to 2010) and, of course, Barack Obama. Plutocrats love these kinds of minority politicians because, whether Republican or Democrat, neither represents a threat to the “power structure of America,”³³ instead representing Booker T. Washington-style accommodationism.

Obama’s case is illustrative. Although during his carefully orchestrated presidential campaign he and his team touted his credentials as a “community organizer,” Obama’s real story at the moment of his political conception is quite different. During the campaign Obama said “community organizing is ‘something I carry with me when I think about politics today—obviously at a different level and in a different place, but the same principle still applies.’”³⁴ His wife, Michelle Obama, added, “Barack is not a politician first and foremost” and that “he’s a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change.”³⁵ But the historical record is quite different. First, Obama accomplished quite little in his two years as a *paid*³⁶ community organizer: all reports, including Obama’s own account in *The Audacity of Hope*, reveal he was very disappointed with the pace of change. Second, by 1987 he had all but abandoned Saul Alinsky’s ideal of the community organizer and was dreaming of getting elected to office. Hence, in the same article, which is sympathetic to Obama, the author states that “Obama . . . has become exactly the kind of politician his mentors might have warned against.”³⁷

The record also shows that by the time Obama ran for office in 1996, he had already acquired many of the typical characteristics of post-civil rights minority politicians. After he won the Illinois state race in 1996, Adolph Reed, a black political science professor and contributor to various progressive magazines, said the following about Obama:

In Chicago, for instance, we’ve gotten a foretaste of the new breed of foundation-hatched black communitarian voices; one of them, a smooth Harvard lawyer with impeccable do-good credentials and vacuous-to-repressive neo-liberal politics, has won a state senate seat on a base mainly in the liberal foundation and development worlds. His fundamentally bootstrap line was softened by a patina of the rhetoric of authentic community, talk about meeting in kitchens, small-scale solutions to social problems, and the predictable elevation of process over program—the point where identity politics converges with old-fashioned middle-class reform in favoring form

over substance. I suspect that his ilk is the wave of the future in U.S. black politics, as in Haiti and wherever else the *International Monetary Fund* has sway. So far the black activist response hasn't been up to the challenge. We have to do better.³⁸

Obama negotiated Chicago Democratic politics quickly and successfully, and by 2002, he had become the darling of the city's black elite, and soon, the white elite. Christopher Drew and Mike McIntire, in a 2007 article in the *New York Times*, state that Obama "improbably" raised fifteen million dollars for his senate campaign.³⁹ But their characterization of this quick turnaround (from having problems settling his campaign debt from his loss to Congressman Bobby Rush in 2000 to the success of his campaign in 2004) as "improbable" is inaccurate, because by 2003 Obama had already received the blessing from the Democratic Party elders and financiers, beginning with a fundraiser held at the home of Vernon Jordan, according to Paul Street. Street states that "Obama passed this preliminary trial with *flying colors*."⁴⁰ The people in the meeting liked his academic background, suave and cool style, and political outlook. Attendees such as Gregory Craig (big-time attorney and former special counsel to Bill Clinton), Mike Williams (legislative director of the Bond Market Association), and other big wheelers appreciated that Obama was not a "racial polarizer" (that is, that he was not Jesse Jackson-like) and that he was not "anti-business." This explains the seemingly "improbable" victory of Obama in the 2004 senate race and the 700 million dollars he was able to raise in the 2008 presidential campaign. According to an investigative report by Ken Silverstein⁴¹ and a book by David Mendell,⁴² Obama rose quickly beyond the confines of Illinois because the American elite resolutely loved his "reasonable tone."

Therefore, post-civil rights minority politicians like Obama are not truly about deep change, but about compromise. If they were about fundamental changes to the American social order, they would not be the darlings of the two mainstream parties. Although some post-civil rights minority politicians may, from time to time, "talk the talk," their talk is rather abstract almost to the point of being meaningless, and they seldom if ever "walk the walk." For instance, Obama talked during the campaign about corporate lobbyists, but said nothing about *corporate power*; complained about "big money" in politics yet raised more money than *any* politician in American history; subscribed to the Republican lie about a crisis in Social Security and is likely to follow through with policies to "save" a program that is solvent;⁴³ and talked about alternative energy sources and clean energy yet was in bed with folks in the "clean coal" and "safe nuclear energy" camp.⁴⁴

Based on all the information at hand, there is no question that politicians like Obama are "accommodationist"⁴⁵ *par excellence* and teach the

"wretched of the earth" the wrong political lesson: that electoral, rather than social-movement, politics⁴⁶ is *the* vehicle for achieving social justice. In the next section we show that Obama's political road to the (still) White House perfectly fits the practices and tone of post-civil rights minority politicians.

"WHO ARE YOU?" SAID THE CATERPILLAR": ON THE MEANING OF OBAMA'S POLITICS

When questions arose during the campaign about Obama's progressiveness due to his support of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA)⁴⁷ and other reactionary positions he held, Obama said in an interview with the *New York Times* that "I am someone who is no doubt progressive."⁴⁸ However, true to the style of post-civil rights minority politicians, he insisted he did not like to be "labeled" as right or left and preferred to be regarded as a "nonideological" and "pragmatic" politician. As the campaign advanced, Obama's nonideological stand betrayed a conservative bent, and some commentators questioned his commitment to "progressiveness." For instance, in harsh yet prophetic words, *Huffington Post* blogger Taylor Marsh labeled Obama's brand of progressiveness as "progressive cannibalism." He was referring to Obama's willingness "to do whatever he can to get elected, cannibalizing his own and our ideals as he goes; bringing as many people along as he can, including conservatives who will have no allegiance to what progressives have worked for over decades to achieve."⁴⁹ And indeed, as Glen Ford has argued, far from representing the "lesser of two evils," Obama in 2012 is actually "the more effective evil,"⁵⁰ because the left is not prepared to fight his policies.

In this section I restate doubts I raised about Obama during the 2008 campaign and argue that his politics and tone were not, as so many liberals and progressives believed, *tactical* maneuvers to get elected, but represented who Obama truly was and how he has governed. Because the concerns I expressed about the Obama phenomenon during the 2008 and 2012 campaigns were borne out by subsequent events in his first term, I reproduce them here almost verbatim. I maintain the present tense used in the original, but the statements are formatted as extracts to distinguish them from the brief (and contemporary) discussion that appears after each one.

The first concern I have is that Obama does not represent a true social movement, but an undercurrent of various actors and contradictory forces that did not necessarily agree on fundamental issues. Lacking a social movement with a common agenda, I believe his presidency will

become problematic as we have no way of predicting his actions and will not have people "in the streets" to curb them if needed.

When I wrote this, some commentators thought Obama had a "grass-roots" approach to politics.⁵¹ However, all his political praxis during the campaign was in line with mainstream party politics (in fact, all he did was *through* the Democratic Party) and did not emanate from or create a social movement. The massive rallies and the 700 million-plus dollars he raised in the campaign did not emanate from the organized (or unorganized, as many social movements follow a more spontaneous path⁵²) movements created by the efforts of activists with a common agenda. The mantra of his campaign, "Change we can believe in," was so abstract that almost anything and anyone could have fit in. The most significant matter, however, was that Obama supporters lacked a common agenda and belief system. What I argued during the campaign—that white support was not indicative of post-racialism—has now been corroborated in post-election studies. Noted survey researchers Professor Tom Pettigrew from UC-Santa Cruz and Professor Vincent Hutchings from the University of Michigan found that Obama's white voters were just slightly less prejudiced than McCain's white voters. And because Obama's white voters were younger than McCain's, as they age and face real-life issues (e.g., getting a job, getting married, selecting a neighborhood and schools for their kids, etc.), they are likely to regress to their racial mean—that is, will develop views similar to those of older whites today.⁵³

Second, none of the policies Obama has offered on the crucial issues of our time (health care, NAFTA, the economy, immigration, racism, the Wars, etc.) are truly radical and likely to accomplish the empty yet savvy slogan he adopted as the core of his campaign: change.

Few of Obama's ardent supporters had a clue about his policy proposals and even about his positions on crucial issues. As Ashley Doane has pointed out, this phenomenon among otherwise well-informed people resembles Goffman's phenomenon of "studied nonobservance," where everyone pretends not to notice a violation of norms for the sake of getting along. For instance, while on vacation in the summer of 2008, I had a discussion with several minority professors about Obama in which they told me I was "too harsh" on Obama. As the discussion proceeded, I said, "I cannot not believe you are all for Obama so blindly given his support for the death penalty." One of them laughed and told me that Obama was not for the death penalty. I urged the colleague to check the matter on the Internet, and, a minute later, the person said, "Well, but Obama has a *nu-*

anced position," to which I replied, "When one is *dead* there is no *nuance*." Later, I will discuss some of these policies and how they do not represent change, but more of the same.

Third, Obama has reached the level of success he has in large measure because he has made a strategic move toward racelessness and adopted a post-racial persona and political stance. He has distanced himself from most leaders of the civil rights movement, from his own reverend, from his church, and from anything or anyone who made him look "too black" or "too political." Heck, Obama and his campaign even retooled Michelle Obama⁵⁴ to make her seem less black, less strong, and more white-lady-like for the white electorate!

Throughout Obama's first term, Obama has always tried to avoid seeming *too* black. (For instance, press aides apparently refused to put the Obamas on BET for the first six months of Obama's presidency.⁵⁵) Such careful dancing around reminding the electorate of his blackness has also limited Obama's responses to racist events, sometimes farcically (as in the infamous "beer summit" with Skip Gates and the white police officer who arrested him in his home). But this also has important ramifications for Obama's policy, as I will show below. Indeed, political scientist Daniel Gillion has found that in the first half of Obama's term, the president has said less about race than *any* president since 1961.⁵⁶

President Obama's "race lite" stand was vital during the campaign and remains so. He has avoided any serious discussion on race and, when forced to talk about it, has remained frustratingly vague. For instance, in a 2008 interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, he took seemingly all sides on affirmative action. He talked about the importance of *how* affirmative action is carried out, mentioned that race still matters, said his daughters probably will not need affirmative action, and hinted at a class-based program.⁵⁷ In a comment on Obama's performance in the interview, Peter S. Canellos observed in the *Boston Globe* that Obama rarely deals with the substance of the policies, but focuses on the values, a tactic that seems to go well with his supporters.⁵⁸

Obama's post-racial stand during the campaign was not a new thing. Those who have read his books *Dreams of My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope* are familiar with his long-standing attempt to be if not *beyond* race at least *above* the racial fray. Hence, it was not the least surprising when President Obama answered the only question he was asked about race in his first press conference by suggesting race was a factor in life but that he was dealing with America's "real" problems.⁵⁹ It was also not surprising when in his second press conference he answered a question by Andre Showell, a black journalist, about what specific policies he had enacted to

benefit minority communities, with ideas reminiscent of how conservatives frame race matters.

So my general approach is that if the economy is strong, that will lift all boats as long as it is also supported by, for example, strategies around college affordability and job training, tax cuts for working families as opposed to the wealthiest that level the playing field and ensure bottom-up economic growth. And I'm confident that that will help the African-American community live out the American dream at the same time that it's helping communities all across the country.⁶⁰

As part of his post-racialism, Obama avoided the term "racism" in his campaign until he was forced to talk about race. And in that "race speech" that so many commentators heralded and compared to speeches by MLK (a truly heretical view), he said Reverend Wright's statements "expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country—a view that sees white racism as endemic" and classified them as "divisive." This should be surprising to race scholars across the nation who regard racism as indeed "endemic" and know that race has been a "divisive" matter in America since the seventeenth century!

For readers who are familiar with my work,⁶¹ it should not be surprising to learn that I agree with Reverend Wright about his claim that racism is endemic to America. Thus, I do not believe his statements were "divisive." Our nation has been deeply divided by race (and class and gender as well) since colonial times! Obama's speech was clearly a *political* speech intended to appease the concerns of his white supporters riled by the media-driven frenzy in March of 2008 based on a snippet of a sermon given by Reverend Wright.⁶²

Obama's speech had three serious problems. First, Obama assumed racism is a moral problem (he called it a "sin") that can be overcome through goodwill. In contrast, I have argued that racism forms a structure and, accordingly, the struggle against racism must be fundamentally geared toward the removal of the practices, mechanisms, and institutions that maintain systemic white privilege. Second, Obama conceived "racism" (in his view, prejudice) as a two-way street. In the speech he stated that *both* blacks and whites have legitimate claims against one another, that is, that blacks have a real beef against whites because of the continuing existence of discrimination and whites against blacks because of the "excesses" of programs such as affirmative action. Obama was wrong on this point because blacks do not have the institutional power to implement a pro-black agenda, whereas whites have had this kind of power from the moment this country was born.⁶³ He was also wrong because whites' claims of "reverse discrimination" do not hold much water empirically.⁶⁴ And when he hints at the "excesses" of the 1960s, which he did

in this speech, he is truly talking nonsense! The data show that affirmative action has been at best a Band-Aid approach to deal with the hemorrhage of racial inequality. Third, Obama's post-racial call for everyone to "just get along"⁶⁵ so that we can deal with America's real problems shows the Achilles heel of his stand: he truly does not believe racism is a serious structural problem in America. Otherwise he would not insist—and he has continued this line of argument—that we must get on with America's *real* problems such as the economy, health care, the wars, and the like. Yet the speech accomplished its mission: it placated his white supporters who, from then on, hardly showed more concerns about Obama's racial views.⁶⁶ The speech, accordingly, can be classified as a "neoslave narrative," as sociologist Tamara K. Nopper has aptly suggested:⁶⁷ an accounting of America's progress through the iniquities of slavery to the bright days of emancipation.

Fourth, as Glen Ford, executive editor of the *Black Agenda Report*; Adolph Reed; Angela Davis; Paul Street; and a few other analysts suggested, Obamania was (and still somewhat is) a "craze."⁶⁸ His supporters refused (and many still refuse) to even listen to facts or acknowledge some very problematic positions Obama has, such as his support for the death penalty. Although there is a larger space today than in 2008 to criticize Obama from the left, that space is still very limited, particularly in the black community. I was severely stung by the nationalist bee in presentations before minority audiences in 2008 and again in 2012.

Obama's liberal and progressive supporters wanted to believe, in ahistorical fashion, that Obama was a stealth progressive who once elected would turn left.⁶⁹ But, paraphrasing Martin Luther King Jr., "leaders should not be judged by the color of their skin but by the *content of their politics*" and the content of Obama's politics was (and is) center to center-right. Black and progressive America, unfortunately, seems destined to learn this lesson after this "neo-mulatto"⁷⁰ rents the White House for a short while and does not do any meaningful renovation.

Anyone who lived in the United States during the 2008 presidential campaign knows that the entire country was captivated by Obama, who, despite my criticisms, is a truly outstanding orator, astute politician, and remarkably charismatic man. The problem, however, remains. If Obama's charisma and charming smile prevent us from asking the hard questions, probing his record, and acknowledging his actual positions on issues, then we risk endorsing style over substance and flowery rhetoric over truly progressive positions. As Conor Friedersdorf recently put it, "Obama soothes with rhetoric and kills people in secret."⁷¹

Lastly, perhaps the most important factor behind Obama's success, and my biggest concern, is that he and his campaign mean and evoke different things and feelings for his white and nonwhite supporters. For his white supporters, he is the first "black" leader they feel comfortable supporting because he does not talk about racism; because he reminds them every time he has a chance he is half-white; because he is so "articulate" or, in Senator (now Vice-President) Biden's words, echoed later by Karl Rove, Obama was "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy"⁷² because Obama keeps talking about national unity; and because he, unlike black leaders hated by whites such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, does not make them feel guilty about the state of racial affairs in the country.⁷³

Since very early on in Obama's campaign, his white supporters were *not* on the same page as his minority supporters. He quickly became for whites an Oprah- or Tiger Woods-like figure, that is, a black person who has "transcended" his blackness and become a symbol.⁷⁴ For instance, Katie Lang, a white woman profiled in a *Washington Post* article, stated that "'Obama speaks to everyone. He doesn't just speak to one race, one group,' and added, 'He is what is good about this nation.'"⁷⁵ And many whites, like Joyce Heran in the article I cite above, said without much hesitation that if Obama were like Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton, they "probably wouldn't like him as much."⁷⁶

In sharp contrast, for many nonwhites, and blacks particularly, Obama became a symbol of their possibilities. He was indeed, as Obama said of himself, their Joshua⁷⁷—the leader they hoped would take them to the Promised Land of milk and honey. They read between the lines and thought Obama had a strong stance on race matters. For the old generation desperate to see change before they die,⁷⁸ and for many post-Reagan generation blacks and minorities who have seen very little racial progress during their lifetimes, Obama became the new messiah of the civil rights movement.

In a country with a racial history such as ours and where successful black leaders end up killed (Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X), vilified (Malcolm X, Minister Farrakhan, and Reverend Al Sharpton), or ridiculed (almost all black politicians), one understands why the possibility of a having a black president became a symbol of the aspirations of the entire black community. In interviews with dozens of blacks from across the nation after the Iowa victory, the *New York Times* reported they "voiced pride and amazement over his victory [in the caucus] and the message it sent."⁷⁹

The love fest between blacks and Obama that began in January 2009 after an initial period of doubt has not ended. A Pew poll conducted in

late 2009 showed that blacks' perceptions of racial progress had dramatically improved in the past few years, a jump attributable to Obama's election.⁸⁰ Two years further into Obama's presidency, 85 percent of blacks said they were optimistic about their future, and 65 percent were happy with their financial situation.⁸¹ Given the stark economic disparities I laid out earlier in this chapter, these are unexpected findings, to say the least. Although blacks' nationalist moment has a *raison d'être*, people ultimately do not eat pride, cannot find a job by feeling good about themselves, or fight discrimination by telling white folks, "We have a black president so you better behave" (would this have helped Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates?).⁸² The recently deceased Professor Ronald Walters, a black political scientist at Maryland, wisely said immediately after Obama was elected president that "one should not let the honeymoon that President Obama is enjoying among blacks and their leaders extend too far into the future."⁸³

Since I first wrote this chapter, there are some hints that this honeymoon is souring in some quarters. While only a few black commentators and public figures who had supported Obama had turned to critique in the first few years of his presidency,⁸⁴ by the last months of the 2012 election there was a thread of more nuanced debate about what Obama offers black voters. A former Obama supporter, Tavis Smiley, recently told the *Times* that "African-Americans will have lost ground in the Obama era." And Fredrick Harris wrote about blacks' declining fortunes under Obama in the *New York Times* just before the 2012 election. He found it to be a "tragedy" that "black elites—from intellectuals and civil rights leaders to politicians and clergy members—have acquiesced to this decline, seeing it as the necessary price for the pride and satisfaction of having a black family in the White House."⁸⁵

"WELL! WHAT ARE YOU?" SAID THE PIGEON. 'I CAN SEE YOU'RE TRYING TO INVENT SOMETHING!': MY PREDICTIONS DURING THE CAMPAIGN AND MY SCORECARD

Social scientists must always verify how their analyses hold up over time. In this section, I restate predictions I made during the presidential campaign and assess my "batting average." I made two large predictions. First, I predicted the voices of those who contend that race fractures America profoundly would be silenced. Obama's blackness, I suggested, would become an obstacle for people of color, as whites would throw it back at them—as well as his words and actions (and even Michelle's)⁸⁶—as evidence that race was no longer a big deal in America.⁸⁷ Second, I argued Obama's election would bring the nation closer to my prediction about racial stratification in the United States becoming Latin America-like

(see chapter 9 of this book). Obama's presidency, I claimed, would accelerate the pace toward *symbolic* unity without the nation enacting the social policies needed for all of us to be truly "all Americans." And like in Latin American countries, Obama's nationalist stance ("There's not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America; there's the United States of America"⁸⁸) might shut the door for the recognition of race as a central factor of life. *Obamerica* may bring us closer than ever to a "multiracial white supremacy"⁸⁹ regime similar to those in Latin America and the Caribbean where "racially mixed" folks are elected to positions of power without that altering the racial order of things or how goods and services are distributed.

These are two broad predictions, and we will need to see how history plays out in assessing them. However, early studies have shown some support for my prediction that Obama's election would lead to the perception that racism is over, with potentially harmful consequences for people of color. For instance, Valentino and Brader⁹⁰ found that a good number of whites perceived less racial discrimination immediately after the election; importantly, these people also now had worse opinions of blacks and greater opposition to affirmative action and immigration. And Tesler⁹¹ found that even the supposedly neutral issue of health care gained racial relevance when associated with Obama. Both studies indicate whites are experiencing racial resentment around Obama and his policies. Furthermore, there is some evidence that whites' resentment is translating into increased individual racism. A set of Associated Press surveys published in 2012 showed that whites demonstrated more racism than in 2008 when Obama was elected, whether measured through explicit views or implicit biases.⁹²

All this should come as no surprise to those of us who have been following the events following Obama's election. Indeed, since 2009 we have seen the resurgence of old-fashioned, overt racism in response to the country's election of a black president. So many people rushed to racist forums immediately following Obama's election that the website Stormfront had to be temporarily shut down.⁹³ This was soon followed by the birth of the Tea Party Movement, whose white supporters frequently voiced racist opposition to Obama. He was challenged by the emergence of the "birther" movement, playing on Obama's "difference," which alleged Obama was not born in the United States and therefore ineligible to be president. Although he eventually produced his "long form" certificate proving he was born in Hawaii, one in four Americans (and more than half of all Republicans) still believe Obama was born outside the country.⁹⁴ And the absurdity continued: in October 2012, Donald Trump offered to donate \$5 million to a charity of Obama's choice if he would release his passport history and college records.⁹⁵

Obama's opponents have used a similar racializing tactic by developing the narrative that Obama is a Muslim. This story has been so successful that by the end of his first term, a third of Republicans thought Obama is a Muslim, double the number who thought so in 2008; and a third of all registered voters said they didn't know what religion he was, according to a Pew poll.⁹⁶

These narratives of Obama as a foreigner or a Muslim were reinforced by racist imagery. The *New York Post* ran a cartoon of Obama as a chimpanzee shot dead by the NYPD.⁹⁷ This was just one of many popular racist images, many of which were altered to depict Barack or Michelle Obama with watermelon and KFC buckets. Just after Obama's inauguration, a California mayor e-mailed a picture to his friends showing the White House lawn turned into a watermelon patch. A Republican official in Orange County sent a picture depicting Obama as a chimpanzee with chimpanzee parents, captioned, "Now you know why—no birth certificate."⁹⁸

In the lead-up to the 2012 election, several Romney supporters got attention for racist displays. One man, who lynched a chair in his yard after Clint Eastwood's infamous speech delivered to an empty chair representing Obama, said, "People say that I'm racist. Well, maybe I am a little toward this president. I'm not toward black people, I am toward the President of the United States."⁹⁹ Another man put an Obama mask on a monkey statue in his yard with a sign reading "NOBAMA." But even here, there's color blindness or racism denial: according to CBS, "Caldwell said the set-up had nothing to do with race."¹⁰⁰ In October, a man in New Jersey set up a storefront display with a picture of Obama as a "witch doctor" in loincloth and bone through his nose. He gave interviews where he said the following:

- "It always comes down to the race card."¹⁰¹
- "If you want to call me a racist then go ahead. I can assure you I am not a racist; I just really want to see Obama go. . . . This is a good example of where race relations are under this guy's administration. . . . This has absolutely nothing to do with race."¹⁰²
- "I don't even see color."¹⁰³

My point here, to be clear, is that within the overall development of the new racism regime and the new phase where minority politicians can be in power, it is possible for more crude forms of racism to reemerge and even to remain in place. Hence, new racism and old-fashioned racism may coexist somewhat happily in *Obamerica*.

I now review more targeted predictions I made during the election based on President Obama's first four years in office. First, based on promises and remarks Obama made during the campaign, I predicted

he would increase the size of the military, wait longer than planned for withdrawing from Iraq, increase the scope of the military intervention in Afghanistan, and, more problematically, bomb Pakistan if he got "actionable intelligence." Here I was wrong only in failing to predict the true scope of the president's involvement in the Middle East and other regions. While millions of leftists mobilized to end Bush's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, there has been very little challenge, or even discussion, of Obama's imperial foreign policy. In past versions of this chapter, I discussed Obama's slow withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and referred to the possibility of further military involvement in Pakistan. Since then, we have learned much more about the extent of the president's foreign involvement in a wide array of countries. In several respects, Obama has gone beyond his Republican predecessor, particularly in his redefinition of executive power to wage war, kill any person deemed an enemy (including Americans) without trial, use unmanned drones to terrorize populations in multiple countries, detain people indefinitely, and spy on American citizens.

We have entered a new era of the "War on Terror" in which our engagements have no defined beginning or end, nor are we clear on how many countries we are bombing (by September 2012, the count included Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and threats of strikes in Syria and Iran). Even in Iraq, where Obama finally removed all combat troops in December 2011, there is already discussion of sending some units back to that country.¹⁰⁴ Obama's "surge" (escalation) of the Afghanistan war tripled the number of troops in the country. Even now that he has sent thirty thousand troops back home, there are still sixty-six thousand American soldiers there, eleven years into our longest war ever. Obama plans to shift the war to a "support" mission by 2014, but this is not the same as ending the war and bringing all troops home. In fact, Obama and Afghan president Karzai quietly signed a deal in April 2012 agreeing to the United States' continued presence in the country until at least 2024¹⁰⁵ with as many as twenty-five thousand troops,¹⁰⁶ only eight thousand fewer than when Bush left office in 2009.¹⁰⁷ We must also note Obama's 2011 war in Libya, widely regarded as a success on the left, but which was waged without congressional approval (and Obama was threatening to renew drone strikes in October 2012).¹⁰⁸

Progressives, who loudly decried hints of war with Iran in the Bush years, are also quiet as the media continues to breathlessly report Obama's and Netanyahu's threats against Iran. Obama set the stage for war, increasing Bush's cyber-attacks on Iran (the first time a country has waged this attack on another country),¹⁰⁹ building a missile-defense system in Qatar,¹¹⁰ having his national security adviser brief Netanyahu on his contingency plans for an Iran strike,¹¹¹ allowing the DNC to call

Jerusalem the capital of Israel in its party platform,¹¹² and refusing to take a military strike off the table as he repeatedly expressed his support for Israel. In September 2012, the United States and Britain even sent warships into the Persian Gulf (in Iranian and Omani waters) to practice breaking a potential Iran blockade.¹¹³ As Glenn Greenwald has pointed out,¹¹⁴ we should also be considering the impact of nonmilitary campaigns against Iranian citizens. According to reports,¹¹⁵ the United States' economic sanctions on Iran, begun in 2010, are causing medicine and food shortages and leading to riots.

Any assessment of Obama's military policy must also take into account his dramatically stepped-up use of unmanned drones for "military strikes" wielded both by the military and the CIA.¹¹⁶ While the administration has claimed that civilian losses are minimal, this is not the case. A reanalysis of casualty figures for twenty-four drone strikes in Pakistan based on interviews with victims' families and other information found a systematic underestimate of the number of civilian deaths when using media reports. This underestimating has grown even worse under Obama, who solved the problem of civilian deaths by redefining any strike victim as a "combatant" if male and over fourteen.¹¹⁷ But beyond arguing over the number of deaths, we must also pay attention to the impact of the drones on the living. An NYU/Stanford report¹¹⁸ details the costs to those living in the area of Pakistan most targeted by drones: beyond the property damage, the psychological costs are severe. Unsure when the next attack will strike, parents keep their children out of school. People fear to assist victims of drone strikes because a second strike has been known to target rescuers, a potential war crime.¹¹⁹ Far from making us safer, Pakistan's foreign minister has attributed her country's anti-Americanism to these attacks.¹²⁰ As opposition Pakistan politician Imran Khan put it, "The war on terror has become a war of terror."¹²¹

Beyond his attacks on the Middle East, President Obama's drastic expansion of executive power in order to wage this undefined war is beyond frightening. FISA requests and an NSA whistleblower have shown that electronic surveillance has dramatically risen under Obama.¹²² The administration is also resisting a judge's hold on its program of indefinite detention of terrorism suspects (defined as any person who "substantially supported al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or associated forces") without trial; this program was challenged by reporters who feared the law was broad enough to potentially include them. Most frightening was the *New York Times's* 2012 disclosure of Obama's "kill list," where individuals, including U.S. citizens, are targeted for assassination, usually by drone strike, before any accusations of guilt were made.¹²³ In a recent article on how Obama's approach is setting us up for a "permanent war," Greg Miller writes, "Targeted killing is now so routine that the Obama Administration

has spent much of the past year codifying and streamlining the processes that sustain it."¹²⁴ He notes that the CIA has requested more drones in its budget, turning it into a "paramilitary force."¹²⁵

Put together, Obama's foreign policy is extremely concerning for its abuse of executive power to engage in unchecked military actions. If these policies were being implemented by a Republican president, the left would be in a continuous uproar.¹²⁶ But as I predicted, the resistance to these terrible policies has been anemic: no matter what he has done, Obama is still considered to be a "nice guy." Where they are not simply silent, some liberals either justify supporting Obama's actions against the alternative (as Rebecca Solnit did in a recent piece in *The Nation*), or actually celebrate them, as did a *Huffington Post* reporter, who claimed "Obama must be doing something really right" with foreign policy since the Republicans were avoiding the topic in their convention.¹²⁷

And the international community, with few exceptions, has given Obama a pass no matter what. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 and has not been rebuked by the European leaders or by the European left on his foreign policy. For instance, during the Bush years (2000–2008), the European community was up in arms against his interventionism and militarism, and even in 2011 Bush had to cancel a planned trip to Switzerland over concerns about protests.¹²⁸ However, this same community has not said anything about Obama's Bush-Lite foreign policy, and Obama still enjoys sky-high approval ratings in many European countries.¹²⁹

Second, I suggested Obama was going to put together a very conservative cabinet. As predicted, the conservative people who advised him during the campaign are now the core of his cabinet. His advisers have included Hillary Clinton, Robert Gates (kept on from the G. W. Bush administration), Larry Summers (a Clinton-era holdout infamous for his famous sexist speech at Harvard), Paul Volker (who served under Carter and Reagan), and Timothy Geithner (who has followed the interests of Wall Street). President Obama does not have a *single* radical voice on his team. And let's not forget that Obama's cabinet is not as diverse as one would expect,¹³⁰ and that the few people of color in his cabinet are in secondary positions.

Any turnover in staff would be an opportunity to move in a leftward direction, if Obama's progressive supporters were right that his early centrist talk was setting up a future turn to the left, but instead Obama reinforced ties to previous administrations and financial interests. Since Rahm Emanuel left as chief of staff in 2011 to run for mayor of Chicago, for instance, he has been succeeded by William Daley and Jack Lew, both Clinton advisors. All three men are former investment bankers, and Lew, the current chief, last worked in Citigroup's "proprietary trading" department, betting against the housing market just before the recession.¹³¹ And

Obama's second-term cabinet nominations have been even more disappointing. Obama nominated a Republican, Chuck Hagel, to the position of secretary of defense. Perhaps his most offensive decision was to nominate John Brennan, who supported extraordinary rendition and torture under Bush, the "key architect" of Obama's drone wars,¹³² to head up the CIA. Obama had to withdraw Brennan's name in his first term due to a (rare) uproar from the left over Brennan's history. His decision to choose Brennan again, now that Obama has been safely reelected, is a huge insult to his base (and should chasten those who told us that Obama just had to get elected, and then reelected, before he could bring out his hidden, progressive side).

Third, I suggested Obama was going to compromise on his promise of taxing the rich. In his first term, Obama unequivocally did so, extending the tax cuts for those making over \$250,000 for another two years and revising the estate tax according to Republican demands, in a so-called compromise. The president claimed this compromise was necessary to insure unemployment benefits: in exchange, he won the extension of unemployment insurance benefits (for only one year), and other tax credits designed to stimulate the economy and return money to middle-class Americans. But the small-business benefits Obama has touted as making this "compromise" worthwhile are smokescreens. The *New York Times* cites government and nonpartisan analyses stating that "less than 3 percent of filers with small-business income pay at the top two income tax rates, and many of those are doctors and lawyers in partnerships."¹³³ When one considers only small businesses with actual employees, these businesses would have been responsible for only 12 percent of the new income taxes. Besides, not all these small businesses are actually small: 20,000 of the businesses filing in 2011 under this category made over \$50 million.¹³⁴ In other words, even the liberal policies obtained as "concessions" primarily benefitted the wealthy. Delaying taxing the rich if the economy is not doing well indicates that President Obama's economic views are in line with the "Chicago School."¹³⁵

At the beginning of Obama's second term, Obama doubled down on his poor tax "compromises." Rather inexplicably, as his opponents were in disarray and failed to produce a coherent alternative, Obama broke his oft-repeated promise to raise taxes on families earning more than \$250,000 in annual income, moving the line to those making over \$400,000 per year (only the richest 1.5 percent). When one combines this change with Obama's decision not to extend the payroll tax cut (which helped lower- and middle-income families), and the cuts in Social Security (no longer tying rate increases to inflation), it's clear that Obama is willing to bargain away most progressive values without gaining much in return. Jonathan Chait compared Obama's negotiation to the "tight-weak" style

of poker playing, where the player loses weak hands and fails to take advantage of strong ones.¹³⁶ But such a criticism still presumes that Obama actually shared our progressive values in the first place.

Fourth, I suggested Obama's health care plan was weak and that his "pragmatism" was going to make it even weaker. Specifically, I argued that Obama's proposed reform was far off from what the country needed: a universal, single-payer health care plan.¹³⁷ This was a bone of contention during the campaign, as independent observers commented that Obama had the weakest health care plan of all the contenders for the Democratic Party's nomination. While Obama did pass a health-care reform bill in 2009 that included some fixes, the bill ultimately passed without the "public option" to buy insurance directly from the government. The debate left a bad taste in the mouths of progressives as Health and Human Services secretary Kathleen Sebelius, Max Baucus, and other Democrats emphasized that single-payer insurance was "not on the table."¹³⁸ Obama tried to exclude members of his own party such as Congressman John Conyers from Michigan, a leading proponent of a single-payer system, from meetings on health care reform. Conyers, after he threatened to picket outside the White House, was invited to the summit and, later on, in a presentation at Thomas Jefferson University described the attendees of the meeting as follows: "It was very heavy with corporate health care interests—Big Pharma, insurance companies—the people who don't want single payer."¹³⁹

Instead of single-payer, Obama's plan institutes a mandate forcing everyone to purchase private insurance, and subsidizing plans for those who can't afford insurance but don't qualify for Medicaid (constituting a giant payout to the insurance industry). We should remember that, despite Republican opposition to Obama's health care reform, the mandate was originally a Republican idea. As John Cassidy writes,

The problem is fundamental. Setting aside the expansion of Medicaid and some long-overdue restrictions on the egregious behavior of health insurers, this isn't really health-care "reform": it is a significant expansion of the current system of private insurance, with the taxpayer footing the bill. It is Mitt Romney's Massachusetts experiment writ large, a peculiar amalgam of egalitarian intent and corporate welfare: egalitarianism in the form of providing health care to those who can't afford it; corporate welfare in the form of paying corporations such as Aetna and Wellpoint generously to take on millions of new enrollees. If the average American doesn't realize this, people on Wall Street do. Since Obama's election, in November, 2008, Aetna's stock has gone from \$20 to \$35; Wellpoint's has gone from \$30 to \$63.¹⁴⁰

Fifth, I predicted that because of Obama's weak stand on race and his post-racial persona and appeal, he was not going to enact any meaningful

policies to ameliorate racial inequality. Obama's so-called middle-ground position on race can be examined in chapter 7 of his book, *The Audacity of Hope*. There he insists that although race still matters, "prejudice" is declining, and as proof he heralds the growth of the black elite, whose members do not "use race as a crutch or point to discrimination as an excuse for failure."¹⁴¹ He acknowledges the existence of significant gaps between whites and minorities in income, wealth, and other areas and voices only tepid support for affirmative action, yet engages in a Bill Cosby-like critique of blacks and states they watch "too much television," engage in "too much consumption of poisons," lack an "emphasis on educational achievement," and do not have two-parent households.¹⁴² So what is his solution to deal with racial inequality? "An emphasis on universal, as opposed to race-specific, programs," which he believes "isn't just good policy; it's also good politics."¹⁴³ He also discusses the problem of the black "underclass" and chastises those unwilling to accept the role of "values" in their predicament.¹⁴⁴ Although he mentions that "culture is shaped by circumstances,"¹⁴⁵ his emphasis is on behavior.¹⁴⁶

Since taking office, Obama has maintained this universalist position. I believe the \$789 billion stimulus package his administration passed in early 2009, which gave control to localities on how to use the funds, is a case in point. Giving money directly to localities without any controls is quite problematic, as localities have historically distributed funds in a way that preserves existing inequities.¹⁴⁷ Unless one adopts what John Powell labels "targeted universalism"—a perspective that takes into consideration that people are differently situated in the social order and, thus, that some may need more resources than others—"universal" efforts such as this one will not reduce racial inequities.¹⁴⁸

Obama's first term has indeed been notable for its lack of race-specific policies, even despite the staggering economic statistics I cited earlier. His inaction has been especially visible on the issue of black unemployment. Despite the severity of the problem, Obama said in 2009 he couldn't make policy specifically helping blacks find work: "I can't pass laws that say I'm just helping black folks. I'm president of the entire United States."¹⁴⁹ When the Congressional Black Caucus called him out for not doing enough for blacks in this area, Obama famously told the caucus to "take off your bedroom slippers. . . . Stop complaining, stop grumbling, stop crying."¹⁵⁰ To blacks who accuse him of not being aggressive on race, Mr. Obama has a reply: "I'm not the president of black America," he has said. "I'm the president of the United States of America."¹⁵¹

Obama's reticence on race has meant that he has avoided discussing even those issues that whites stereotypically associate with blacks. In the 2012 election debates, Romney and Ryan repeatedly talked about poverty and food stamps (in a racially pointed way), but Obama never mentioned

either of these.¹⁵² In 2011, he was the first president since 1948 who failed to acknowledge poverty or the poor in his State of the Union speech.¹⁵³ Amidst continued high unemployment and astronomical wealth inequality, our president seems unable to acknowledge, much less defend, the 46 million people living below the poverty line. Our “progressive” president’s refusal to strongly defend antipoverty programs will have reverberating effects for poor people of all races.

Obama’s refusal or inability to address race directly is also exacerbating the problem of voter suppression. In the lead-up to the 2012 election, as many states passed or introduced voter ID laws, people of color were purged from the polls, and vigilante groups further suppressed the vote with voter intimidation.¹⁵⁴ Obama was silent on the issue of voting rights. When Michelle Obama spoke to the CBC in September 2012, she said, “We cannot let anyone discourage us from casting our ballots”—but she did not directly address, much less criticize, states’ new voter ID laws.¹⁵⁵ This was especially embarrassing as even former RNC chairman Michael Steele, who is far from a racial progressive, spoke out against “frivolous or harmful laws” undermining Republicans’ attempts to woo voters of color.¹⁵⁶ When Jay Leno asked Obama directly about voter suppression two weeks before the election, he responded only that “it’s a problem” before refusing to comment on the voter ID lawsuits, saying only that we “should be thinking about ways to make it easier for folks to vote,” and then turned to praise early voting instead.¹⁵⁷

Obama’s single initiative directly targeted at blacks, conveniently announced in the summer before the 2012 election, is in the relatively uncontroversial area of education. While eliminating educational disparities is a laudable goal, the initiative seems cynically designed to allow Obama to point to the program as helping blacks, while announced with little fanfare and little funding so as to not attract attention from whites. But all in all, Obama has left us high and dry—and his campaign doesn’t even try to hide it. In 2012, some black donors were disappointed at a campaign meeting when Obama officials “handed out cards with talking points on the Administration’s achievements for various groups—women, Jews, gays and lesbians—and there was no card for African-Americans.”¹⁵⁸

In the 2012 election, Obama took support from blacks for granted, but he also seems to have been correct in assuming he could get away with it, enjoying both increased black voter turnout and 93 percent of black votes.¹⁵⁹ In September 2012, Representative Emanuel Cleaver of the Congressional Black Caucus acknowledged that black members of Congress had been holding Obama to a lower standard. Pointing to the historic level of African American unemployment, Cleaver said, “If we had a white president we’d be marching around the White House.”¹⁶⁰ In his article, Butler compares blacks’ easing up on Obama to the gay community’s

insistent pressure. When it looked like he was going to stall them early in his administration, they got him to overturn “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and express support for gay marriage. Where is the black community exerting similar pressure on Obama?

Sixth, I criticized the progressive and liberal community in America for being in “silly season,” to use Obama’s terminology, regarding the amount of money he raised, how he raised it (bundling), and for ignoring the implications this money would have in his administration.¹⁶¹ Are we not concerned that Wall Street and HMOs support Obama? Do we believe that 700 million dollars in donations did not affect his administration in 2008? I could not have predicted the Supreme Court’s decision on *Citizens United* and its huge impact on political campaigns, primarily by permitting unlimited spending on campaigns and the creation of super PACs that repackage anonymized donations. But although Obama has denounced the decision, he has taken advantage of *Citizens* by sending his campaign manager Rahm Emanuel to head the super PAC Priorities USA. As a campaign finance lawyer observed, “The real scandal in the 2012 election is the activities that are perfectly legal.”¹⁶² And reports coming in just after the 2012 election suggest that both sides are already actively fundraising for the next campaign.¹⁶³

A common argument on the left is that Obama is constrained in his policy efforts by a republican House (articulated recently by Michael Eric Dyson in his debate with Glen Ford in September 2012). But, as Ford replied, Obama is not a “victim of all these Republican forces, but in fact he is the initiator, from within the Democratic Party, of these austerity measures.”¹⁶⁴ In fact, many of Obama’s most dangerous policies—the expanded War on Terror or his doubling Bush’s number of deportations, did not come from Republican pressure. Most likely, they were instead motivated, if indirectly, by corporations whose military-industrial infrastructure needs more bodies for private prisons and more targets for our bombs. At the very least, we should consider who profits from these policies.

These were my predictions and arguments about Obama and, sadly, many have become a reality and others seem very likely. Obama is clearly not a stealth progressive, but a centrist, pro-market, traditional politician with a quasi-color-blind view about race matters in America. By early in his presidency, Obama himself had accepted part of this characterization as when, in a meeting with centrist members of his party in April of 2009, he described himself as a “new Democrat” and as a “pro-growth Democrat,”¹⁶⁵ both clear signifiers of his pro-business stance.

To be clear, my characterization of President Obama is political and policy-based rather than moral or personal. Like so many Americans, I also believe President Obama is a more capable, dignified, and shining

representative of this country in the world platform than his predecessor. There is little doubt that Obama projects to the world community a much better image of this nation and its possibilities. Even before he was elected, international polls showed that up to three-fourths of people in the world believed that "an Obama presidency would see improved U.S. relations with the rest of the world."¹⁶⁶

In past versions of this chapter, I cited several of Obama's policies I found relatively admirable, to clarify that I did not believe all of his policies are wrongheaded. Unfortunately, at the end of his first term, many of these have been weakened or undermined by other actions he has taken. Below I will provide brief updates on the policies I once applauded, to show that even where Obama has been good, he has rarely lived up to the hype.

Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act: While Obama deserves kudos for signing this act on his first day in office, it does not mandate equal pay for women (as he sometimes implies in campaign speeches)¹⁶⁷ but only facilitates litigation. Also, under Obama, the EEOC has brought only six sex-based pay lawsuits, as compared to eighteen under Bush at the same point in his presidency, and charges of sex-based discrimination have actually dropped slightly,¹⁶⁸ the reverse of what one would expect had the act succeeded. Indeed, he may have oversold the impact of the legislation to court women voters,¹⁶⁹ 55 percent of whom voted for him in 2012.¹⁷⁰

Cessation of so-called enhanced interrogation techniques (torture): Soon after his election, Obama reversed his promise of releasing pictures of prisoners who were tortured,¹⁷¹ successfully pressured Spain in 2009 to drop its indictments of top Bush officials for torture,¹⁷² reinstated "military tribunals,"¹⁷³ and, as I have noted above, defended his policy of indefinite detention for terrorism suspects and affiliates. Conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer argues that Obama's denunciation of torture should be weighed against his preference to simply kill potential enemies on his "kill list," without interrogation.¹⁷⁴ And as of late 2012, Guantanamo's prison remained open, despite Obama's repeated promises to close it, with 169 detainees awaiting trial and another 87 prisoners who have been exonerated, but not freed.¹⁷⁵

Public statements about wanting to extend a hand to leaders of "rival nations": While Obama has received a lot of criticism for his supposed love relationship with Chavez, his administration has been funding anti-Chavez resistance movements.¹⁷⁶ Under Obama's administration, USAID has continued to fund "pro-democracy" efforts against governments deemed unfriendly to the United States, as in Cuba, where a USAID employee was discovered to be clandestinely bringing technological equipment into the country and sentenced for undermining the government.¹⁷⁷

And Bolivia has just accused the U.S. embassy in that country of working to destabilize it.¹⁷⁸

The achievement of reform of our health care system (even if it ends up not delivering a single-payer system, a reformed bad system will be better than the current one): See my concerns above. Some features of this plan will improve lives for many Americans, despite my concerns above. But on the other hand, what does it mean that Obama's administration cannot even advertise its own "success?" At the 2012 Democratic National Convention, not a single person mentioned Obamacare's greatest achievement: providing an additional 30 million people with Medicaid coverage. As with Obama's refusal to even say the word "poverty," Democrats feared arousing prejudice with the very word "Medicaid."¹⁷⁹

Support of the "Employee Free Choice Act" which would facilitate workers' efforts to get unionized: Obama hesitated early in his first term on this policy and urged workers to find a "compromise" with the business community,¹⁸⁰ was absolutely quiet during the 2011 pro-union movement in Wisconsin and elsewhere, and surrounds himself with "education experts" (most notably Arne Duncan) who want to dismantle unions and increase charter schools.

*New emission and mileage standards:*¹⁸¹ While Obama has also made some good investments in clean energy, this is too little, too late, as he pledges to pursue an "all of the above" approach that involves nuclear energy, dangerous natural gas drilling or "fracking," coal, and, likely, approving the construction of a tar sands oil pipeline across part of the United States.

*Legislation to exert some control over the credit card industry:*¹⁸² While Obama's creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau is admirable, his appointment of Richard Cordray, rather than the more progressive Elizabeth Warren (who conceived of the bureau and did much of the work to set it up), is less so.¹⁸³

**“TUT, TUT, CHILD!” SAID THE DUCHESS.
‘EVERYTHING’S GOT A MORAL, IF ONLY YOU
CAN FIND IT’: LET SOCIAL JUSTICE NOT DIE AT THE
ALTAR OF “PRAGMATISM” AND COLOR BLINDNESS**

During the election, my overall claim was that the Obama phenomenon was not a "miracle" or an event that denotes how far we have come in the arena of "race relations,"¹⁸⁴ but the product of forty years of racial transition. As such, Obama's election as president may help bring to the fore a more powerful type of racial domination: a Latin America-like multiracial white supremacy order.¹⁸⁵ In *Obamerica* the space for talking

about race matters may dwindle, as whites have gained the upper hand symbolically. Although little has changed in the fundamentals of the racial order, having a black man "in charge" gives the impression of monumental change and allows whites to tell those who research, write, talk, and organize against racial inequality that they must be crazy. Whites can now say, "How can racism be important in a country that just elected a black man as its president?"

I also argued that Obama's politics and stand on racial matters epitomize the character of America's racial regime, which, among other things, brought forth the post-civil rights minority politician. Although Obama is the most successful exemplar of this new kind of politician, the Democratic and Republican landscape is dotted with them, and I forecast many will emerge as central political figures in the near future. Let us not forget, for example, that before Obama, former secretary of state General Colin Powell could have run for president in 1996.¹⁸⁶ In that year an exit poll conducted the day of the election revealed that had Powell, rather than Bob Dole, been the candidate for the Republicans, he would have won the election.¹⁸⁷

President Obama has emphasized his interest in "bipartisanship," on not being "ideological," and on his "pragmatic" approach to politics as policy.¹⁸⁸ But what does this mean and what does it imply? I argue that Obama's pragmatism and distaste for what he calls "ideology" betrays his center-right stand on most issues. This argument is not entirely original, as *New York Times* writer David Leonhardt dissected Obama's policy views in a piece titled "Obamanomics," where he described Obama as a "University of Chicago Democrat" and suggested that "Obama simply is more comfortable with the apparent successes of laissez-faire economics."¹⁸⁹ More tellingly, Leonhardt wrote that "invoking pragmatism doesn't help the average voter much; ideology, though it often gets a bad name, matters, because it offers insight into how a candidate might actually behave as president."¹⁹⁰

Interestingly, like all Democratic presidents and presidential candidates since Lyndon B. Johnson, Obama depends on strong electoral support from minority communities. If at some point black and Latino supporters, who were crucial for Obama's victories in 2008 and 2012,¹⁹¹ realize he is not enacting policies that have benefitted them, they may walk out of the Democratic Party's electoral coalition. But since there are no other electoral options at this juncture, what political options are there for people of color and progressives to make sure the change they were promised is delivered? In the concluding chapter of this book, I offer some advice to progressives who want to make "change you can believe in" more than a vacuous phrase.

NOTES

1. By Obamerica I mean the fact that Obama was elected without the backing of a social movement; hence, rather than a politician representing *change*, he represented *more of the same*.

2. Wornie L. Reed and Bertin M. Louis, "'No More Excuses': Problematic Responses to Barack Obama's Election," *Journal of African American Studies* 13, no. 1 (2009): 97–109. From Bill Cosby to Bill Bennett, from John Lewis to Will Smith, from the Obamas (both) to far too many black and white pundits, the profoundly conservative, outdated, and empirically wrong claim of "now blacks have no more excuses" has reemerged. For a refutation, see Reed and Louis, "'No More Excuses.'"

3. George Orwell, "In Front of Your Nose," in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 4, edited by S. Orwell and I. Angus (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1946).

4. The exact quote from the second president of the United States is "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence." The quote can be found in the website of Law Professor Douglas Linder, *Famous American Trials, "Boston Massacre Trials, 1770,"* at www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/bostonmassacre/bostonmassacre.html.

5. Michael Fix and Raymond J. Struyk, *Clear and Convincing Evidence: Measurement of Discrimination in America* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute, 1993).

6. Particularly in chapter 4 of my book, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

7. Amaad Rivera, Jeannette Huezo, Christina Kasica, and Dedrick Muhammad, "State of the Dream 2009: The Silent Depression," *United for a Fair Economy*, January 15, 2009, retrieved from www.faireconomy.org/files/pdf/state_of_dream_2009.pdf (accessed March 31, 2013).

8. Earl Graves, "State of Black America," *Black Enterprise*, April 8, 2009, retrieved from www.blackenterprise.com/blogs/2009/04/08/state-of-black-america-wealth-for-life (accessed March 21, 2013).

9. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Employment Situation—October 2012*, tables A2–A3, retrieved from www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_11022012.pdf (accessed January 16, 2013).

10. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *The Employment Situation*, table A4.

11. Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, and Jessica C. Smith, "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2011," U.S. Census Bureau, September 2012, retrieved from www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/p60-243.pdf (accessed March 31, 2013).

12. DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith, "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States."

13. DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith, "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States."

14. Melvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

15. Rakesh Kochhar, Richard Fry, and Paul Taylor, "Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs Between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2011, retrieved from <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/2069/housing-bubble-sub-prime-mortgages-hispanics-blacks-household-wealth-disparity> (accessed March 31, 2013).

16. Center for Responsible Lending, "Lost Ground, 2011: Disparities in Mortgage Lending and Foreclosures," November 17, 2011, retrieved from www.responsiblelending.org/mortgage-lending/policy-legislation/regulators/facing-the-foreclosure-crisis.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

17. Charlie Savage, "Wells Fargo Will Settle Mortgage Bias Charges," *New York Times*, July 12, 2012, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2012/07/13/business/wells-fargo-to-settle-mortgage-discrimination-charges.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

18. William Julius Wilson, *The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

19. Joe R. Feagin, "The Continuing Significance of Race: Antiblack Discrimination in Public Places," *American Sociological Review* 56, no. 1 (1991): 101–16.

20. Roy Brooks, *Integration or Separation? A Strategy for Racial Equality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996). For a great review of the contemporary landscape of discrimination, see Devah Pager and Hannah Sheppard, "The Sociology of Discrimination: Racial Discrimination in Employment, Housing, Credit, and Consumer Markets," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2008): 181–209.

21. Janice Blanchard and Nicole Lurie, "R-e-s-p-e-c-t: Patient Reports of Disrespect in the Health Care Setting and Its Impact on Care," *Journal of Family Practice* 53 (2004): 721–31; Louis A. Penner, John H. Dovidio, Donald Edmondson, Rhonda K. Dailey, Tsveti Markova, Terrance L. Albrecht, and Samuel L. Gaertner, "The Experience of Discrimination and Black-White Health Disparities in Medical Care," *Journal of Black Psychology* 35 (2009): 180–203.

22. Sarah E. Rusche and Zachary W. Brewster, "'Because They Tip for Shit!': The Social Psychology of Everyday Racism in Restaurants," *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 2008–29.

23. Ian Ayres, *Pervasive Prejudice?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Serge Kovalski and Sewell Chan, "D.C. Cabs Still Bypass Minorities, Study Finds: City Crackdown Called Sporadic, Inadequate," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2003, retrieved from www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-313833.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

24. Albert Meehan and Michael Ponder, "Race and Place: The Ecology of Racial Profiling African American Motorists," *Justice Quarterly* 19 (2002): 399–430.

25. Cathy Harris, *Flying While Black: A Whistleblower's Story* (Los Angeles: Miligan, 2001).

26. In the 1960s, sociologist Paul M. Siegel wrote a very influential paper titled "On the Cost of Being a Negro" (*Sociological Inquiry* 35, no. 1 [1965]: 41–57) documenting the multiple and deleterious impact of racism on blacks. This idea was updated in the 1990s with the notion of "living while black," "driving while black," and so on. In a recent paper, Shaun Gabbidon and Steven A. Peterson updated the evidence: "Living While Black: A State-Level Analysis of the Influence

of Select Social Stressors on the Quality of Life Among Black Americans" *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 1 (2008): 83–102. I added "brown" to the text in the quote, as many scholars have performed similar analyses for Latinos and Asians and have documented that racism affects them adversely, too.

27. Professor William A. Smith has worked tirelessly to demonstrate that racism produces the syndrome he calls "racial battle fatigue." The constant thinking, preparing, expecting, and being concerned about the potential for racial discrimination creates an almost-constant state of "fight or flight" in people of color, with deleterious health consequences. See William A. Smith, Walter Allen, and Lynnette Danley, "'Assume the Position . . . You Fit the Description': Psychosocial Experiences and Racial Battle Fatigue among African American Male College Students," *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 4 (2007): 551–78.

28. Steven Tuch and Michael Hughes, "Whites' Racial Policy Attitudes in the Twenty-First Century: The Continuing Significance of Racial Resentment," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634 (2011): 134.

29. Conservative race analysts, such as Hoover Institute senior fellow Paul Sniderman, have carried the academic torch for the white majority who insist that whites are mostly tolerant, that we still have a few bigots but they are few and far between, and that white views on crime, welfare, government intervention, and affirmative action are "principled" rather than race-based (see chapter 1). His latest book on race attitudes in the United States is *Black Pride and Black Prejudice* (Ewing, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

30. Most liberal and progressive commentators bought Obama's arguments, ideas, and even style. Noteworthy examples were black public intellectuals such as bell hooks, Michael Eric Dyson, Manning Marable, and Cornel West (after some initial hesitation), who supported Obama almost uncritically. An example of the analysts who thought Obama unlikely, or very difficult, to be elected is Joe R. Feagin. See his comments, as well as those of five other analysts including me, in "The Social Significance of Race," at www.contexts.org/obama (accessed March 31, 2013).

31. Manning Marable, "Jackson and the Rise of the Rainbow Coalition," *New Left Review* 1, no. 149 (1989), retrieved from <http://newleftreview.org/1/149/manning-marable-jackson-and-the-rise-of-the-rainbow-coalition> (accessed March 31, 2013).

32. Political scientists have been exploring this trend for a while and called it "deracialization." See, for example, Georgia Persons, *Dilemmas of Black Politics: Issues of Leadership and Strategy* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

33. Still one of the best books on the "power structure" of America and how the system works is the classic yet magnificently updated book by William G. Domhoff, *Who Rules America? Power, Politics, & Social Change*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006).

34. John B. Judis, "Creation Myth," *The New Republic*, September 10, 2008, retrieved from www.newrepublic.com/article/creation-myth-0 (accessed March 31, 2013).

35. Judis, "Creation Myth."

36. One must be careful not to equate the work and politics of paid "activists" with the work and politics of grassroots organizers. Although both may be

motivated by similar principles, unpaid work produces a totally different kind of political experience and generates a deeper political experience.

37. Judis, "Creation Myth."
38. Adolph Reed, "The Curse of Community," *Village Voice*, January 16, 1996—reprinted in *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: New Press, 2000), 13.
39. Christopher Drew and Mike McIntire, "After 2000 Loss, Obama Built Donor Network from Roots Up," *New York Times*, April 3, 2007, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2007/04/03/us/politics/03obama.html?_r1 (accessed March 31, 2013).
40. Paul Street, *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics* (Boulder, Colo.; and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), xxiii, my emphasis.
41. Ken Silverstein, "Barack Obama, Inc.: The Birth of a Washington Machine," *Harper's*, November 2006, retrieved from www.harpers.org/archive/2006/11/0081275 (accessed March 21, 2013).
42. David Mendell, *Obama: From Promise to Power* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
43. On this matter, see Dean Baker and Mark Weisbrot, *Social Security: The Phony Crisis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), and Paul Krugman, "Played for a Sucker," *New York Times*, November 16, 2007, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2007/11/16/opinion/16krugman.html?_r=0 (accessed March 31, 2013).
44. See chapter 1 in Street, *Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics*.
45. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945–1990* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1991).
46. Arguably the weight of the historical evidence shows that *fundamental* social change is the product of social protest. See Frances Fox Piven, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
47. FISA was originally enacted in 1978. This act became extremely problematic as President Bush reportedly used it in an abusive way in violation of the Fourth Amendment. In 2008, the act was going to be amended to make sure that those who provided information to the government (telecommunication giants) in violation of privacy rights could not be prosecuted, but Republicans derailed this by adding amendments to a bill sponsored by Senators Dodd and Feingold, which were supported by then-Senator Obama. For a blow-by-blow account, see Jack Tapper, "Obama's FISA Shift," ABC News, July 9, 2008, retrieved from <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2008/07/obamas-fisa-shi> (accessed March 31, 2013).
48. Michael Powell, "Obama Addresses Critics on 'Centrist' Moves," *New York Times*, July 8, 2008, retrieved from <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/07/08/obama-addresses-critics-on-centrist-moves> (accessed March 31, 2013).
49. Taylor Marsh, "Barack Obama's Progressive Cannibalism," *Huffington Post*, December 8, 2007, retrieved from www.huffingtonpost.com/taylor-marsh/barack-obamas-progressiv_b_75933.html (accessed March 31, 2013).
50. Democracy Now, "'Effective Evil' or Progressives' Best Hope? Glen Ford vs. Michael Eric Dyson on Obama Presidency," September 7, 2012, retrieved from

www.democracynow.org/2012/9/7/effective_evil_or_progressives_best_hope (accessed March 31, 2013).

51. For an example of this view, see Amy Sullivan, "A Leader of Obama's Grassroots Army," *Time*, April 21, 2008, retrieved from www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1834670,00.html (accessed March 31, 2013).
52. Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements* (New York: Vintage, 1978).
53. For research that shows that younger cohorts are not as racially "tolerant" as people believe, see Scott Blinder, "Dissonance Persists: Reproduction of Racial Attitudes among Post-Civil Rights Cohorts of White Americans," *American Politics Research* 35, no. 3 (2007): 299–335, and Tyrone A. Forman and Amanda E. Lewis, "Racial Apathy and Hurricane Katrina: The Social Anatomy of Prejudice in the Post-Civil Rights Era," *Du Bois Review* 3, no. 1 (2006): 175–202. We still need, however, systematic longitudinal studies on cohorts to assess how their attitudes vary throughout important milestones in the life course.
54. See AFP, "Michelle Obama Working Hard on New Image," *The Times*, June 24, 2008.
55. Jodi Kantor, "For President, a Complex Calculus of Race and Politics," *New York Times*, October 23, 2012, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2012/10/21/us/politics/for-president-obama-a-complex-calculus-of-race-and-politics.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1&smid=fb-share (accessed March 31, 2013).
56. Cited in Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Fear of a Black President," *The Atlantic*, September 2012, retrieved from www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/09/fear-of-a-black-president/309064 (accessed March 31, 2013).
57. Since taking office, Obama's administration has defended affirmative action to achieve increased diversity, but not to remedy past (or current) racial injustices.
58. Peter Canellos, "On Affirmative Action, Obama Intriguing but Vague," *Boston.com*, April 29, 2008, retrieved from www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/04/29/on_affirmative_action_obama_intriguing_but_vague (accessed March 31, 2013).
59. Here is the exchange between President Obama and the journalist Ann Compton:

President Obama: Ann Compton? Hey, Ann. You sound surprised.

Ann Compton: I am surprised. Could I ask you about race?

President Obama: You may.

Ann Compton: Yours is a rather historic presidency. And I'm just wondering whether, in any of the policy debates that you've had within the White House, the issue of race has come up or whether it has in the way you feel you've been perceived by other leaders or by the American people? Or has the last 64 days before [*sic*] a relatively color-blind time?

President Obama: I—I think that the last 64 days has been dominated by me trying to figure out how we're going to fix the economy, and that affects black, brown and white. And, you know, obviously, at the inauguration, I think that there was justifiable pride on the part of the country that we had taken a step to move us beyond some of the searing legacies of racial

discrimination in this country, but that lasted about a day. And—and, you know, right now, the American people are judging me exactly the way I should be judged. And that is: Are we taking the steps to improve liquidity in the financial markets, create jobs, get businesses to re-open, keep America safe? And that's what I've been spending my time thinking about.

The transcript of the press conference can be found at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/24/AR2009032403036.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

60. You can find the transcript of the press conference at www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/04/29/obama-100-days-press-conf_n_193283.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

61. Particularly in Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Rethinking Racism," *American Sociological Review* 62, no. 3 (1997): 465–80, and *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*.

62. History was made based on a snippet of a sermon (or perhaps, as I allude below, pasting snippets from several sermons) from a reverend, a church, a congregation, and a religious tradition white America knew almost nothing about. On March 21, CNN's Anderson Cooper in his blog exculpated Reverend Wright from most of the charges. Cooper listened to the entire sermon and found that the "chickens coming home to roost" comment was a quote from Edward Peck, the former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, and he did not find the "God damn America" statement in this sermon, which suggests that someone did a job on this reverend to hurt Obama's presidential chances. See Anderson Cooper's blog, "The Full Story Behind Rev. Jeremiah Wright's 9/11 Sermon," *AC360*, March 21, 2008, retrieved from <http://AC360.blogs.cnn.com/2008/03/21/the-full-story-behind-rev-jeremiah-wrights-911-sermon> (accessed March 31, 2013).

63. A truly wonderful book outlining the role of race from the moment this country was born through today is Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

64. See chapter 4 of this work, and Vincent J. Roscigno, *The Face of Discrimination: How Race and Gender Impact Work and Home Lives* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

65. Obama is cited in *Newsweek*, after the Wright controversy and the "race speech," saying the following:

Race is a central test of our belief that we're our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper. . . . There's a sense that if we are to get beyond our racial divides, that it should be neat and pretty, whereas part of my argument was that it's going to be hard and messy—and that's where faith comes in.

66. A few weeks after this speech, Obama threw Reverend Wright "under the bus" (this expression became very popular in this campaign) and, later on, renounced his affiliation to the Trinity United Church of Christ. And a few weeks after these actions by Obama, a poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press indicated that most Americans believed he had handled the controversy well and 48 percent of whites agreed with this stand (although 45 percent disagreed). See www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/407.pdf.

67. Tamara Nopper, "Barack Obama's Community Organizing as New Black Politics," special issue of *Political Power and Social Theory*, "Rethinking Obama," edited by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Louise Seamster, vol. 22 (2011): 51–73, retrieved from <http://tamaranopper.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/barack-obamas-community-organizing-as-new-black-politics-nopper-2011.pdf> (accessed March 31, 2013).

68. Collective behavior analysts define "crazes" as all-involving phenomena where participants seem fanatical and devoted to the craze whether it is in the religious, economic, aesthetic, or political realm. For a classic statement on this matter, see Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

69. On this point, Adolph Reed mockingly wrote in an article the following:

A friend of mine characterizes this as the "we'll come back for you" politics, the claim that they can't champion anything you want because they have to conciliate your enemies right now to get elected, but that, once they win, they'll be able to attend to the progressive agenda they have to reject now in order to win. This worked out so well with the Clinton presidency, didn't it? Remember his argument that he had to sign the hideous 1996 welfare reform bill to be able to come back and "fid" it later? Or NAFTA? Or two repressive and racist crime bills that flooded the prisons? Or the privatizing of Sallie Mae, which set the stage for the student debt crisis? Or ending the federal government's commitment to direct provision of housing for the poor?

Adolph Reed, "Sitting This One Out," *The Progressive*, November 2007, retrieved from www.progressive.org/mag_reed1107 (accessed March 31, 2013).

70. Hayward Derrick Horton and Lori Latrice Sykes, "Toward a Critical Demography of Neo-Mulattoes: Structural," in *Skin Deep: How Race and Complexion Matter in the "Color-Blind" Era*, edited by Cedric Herring, Verna Keith, and Hayward Derrick Horton, 159–73 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

71. Conor Friedersdorf, "Why I Refuse to Vote for Obama," *The Atlantic*, September 26, 2012, retrieved from www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/09/why-i-refuse-to-vote-for-barack-obama/262861 (accessed March 31, 2013).

72. Xuan Thai and Ted Barrett, "Biden's Description of Obama Draws Scrutiny," CNN, January 31, 2007, retrieved from http://articles.cnn.com/2007-01-31/politics/biden.obama_1_braun-and-al-sharpton-african-american-presidential-candidates-delaware-democrat?_s=PM:POLITICS (accessed March 31, 2013).

73. Many of the arguments I stated early in the campaign were articulated by other commentators. See David Greenberg's article in the *Washington Post*, "Why Obamania? Because He Runs as the Great White Hope," January 13, 2008, retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/01/11/AR2008011101414.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

74. Gary Kamiya, a writer for liberal journal *Salon*, wrote a provocative piece in February of 2008 titled "It's OK to Vote for Obama Because He's Black," retrieved from www.salon.com/opinion/kamiya/2009/04/29/race (accessed March 31, 2013). After he stipulated that his support for Obama was not exclusively based on his race, he bluntly stated,

But if Obama were a white junior senator from Illinois with the same impressive personal and professional qualities—the same intelligence, empathy, speaking skills,

legislative tenure and life story—there'd be no way he'd have the name recognition to mount a major campaign in the first place. And if he did manage to run, it's unlikely he would have inspired such a passionate and widespread following. Obama's charisma, which is his unique political strength, is real, but it cannot be separated from the fact that he's black. When Obama speaks of change and hope and healing divisions, his words carry an electric charge because of who he is: He *embodies his own message*, the very definition of charisma. As a black man offering reconciliation, he is making a deeply personal connection with whites, not merely a rhetorical one.

75. Lynne Duke, "How Big a Stretch? For Barack Obama, Winning the White House would Mean Bridging the Biggest Gap of All," *Washington Post*, May 7, 2007, retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/05/06/AR2007050601255.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

76. Duke, "How Big a Stretch?"

77. In his speech in Selma, Alabama, Obama spoke of the Moses generation (the civil rights generation) and thanked them for bringing them 90 percent on the road to equality (this pleased some in the audience, even though it was factually wrong). There he laid claim to the mantle of the Joshua generation, who is charged with bringing his people to the Promised Land. Although he talked of generations, he clearly did not mind the implications of talking in the singular about Joshua. The speech can be found at Lynn Sweet, "Obama's Selma Speech. Text as Delivered," *Chicago Sun Times*, March 5, 2007, retrieved from http://blogs.suntimes.com/sweet/2007/03/obamas_selma_speech_text_as_de.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

78. See the profile of Evelyn Glore Ashford, a ninety-three-year-old woman, by Thomas C. Fox in his piece for the *National Catholic Reporter* on April 28, 2009. There Mrs. Ashford said, like so many older African Americans, that "I'm just so glad I've lived to see this day. I've always had hope that blacks would be recognized for their achievements and contributions. Now I see it's finally happening." The article can be read at nronline.org/news/people/100-days-obama-leadership-black-pride-runs-high (accessed March 31, 2013).

79. See Diane Cardwell, "Daring to Believe, Blacks Savor Obama Victory," *New York Times*, January 5, 2008, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2008/01/05/us/politics/05race.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

80. Pew Research Center, "Blacks Upbeat about Racial Progress, Prospects a Year after Obama's Election," January 12, 2010, retrieved from www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/01/12/blacks-upbeat-about-black-progress-prospects (accessed March 31, 2013).

81. Michelle Singletary, "In Rough Economic Times, Black Americans Hold On to Their Optimism," *Washington Post*, February 19, 2011, retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2011/02/19/AR2011021903265.html (accessed November 5, 2012).

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182. Reddy Sudeep, "Obama Pushes for Legislation," *Wall Street Journal*, May 11, 2009, retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124186580127503661.html> (accessed March 31, 2013).

183. Adam Sorensen, "Obama Passes Over Warren, Names Deputy to Run Consumer Agency," *Time*, July 17, 2012, retrieved from <http://swamp.land.time.com/2011/07/17/obama-picks-former-ohio-ag-warren-deputy-to-head-consumer-bureau> (accessed March 31, 2013).

184. Since early on, some black commentators who supported Obama expressed their concerns about how whites were framing this situation. Professor Roderrick J. Harrison, a demographer from Howard University, stated, "Historic as this moment is, it does not signify a major victory in the ongoing, daily battle." See Rachel L. Swarns, "Blacks Debate Civil Rights Risk in Obama's Rise," *New York Times*, August 24, 2008, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2008/08/25/us/politics/25race.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

185. Rodríguez, "Inaugurating Multiculturalist White Supremacy."

186. Colin Powell fits many of the elements of the new type of post-civil rights minority politician. However, I must point out that on racial matters, Powell has maintained a decent record. Even during duress, he remained firm in his support for affirmative action and did not buy completely into the romantic view of America as a post-racial nation. See Colin L. Powell with Joseph E. Persico, *My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995).

187. Martin Plissner, "Ready for Obama Already," *New York Times*, February 7, 2007, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2007/02/07/opinion/07plissner.html?_r=1&_r=0 (accessed March 31, 2013).

188. In his books, speeches, and interviews, Obama has insisted on these three matters: the need for bipartisanship, the limits of ideologically driven politics, and the desire for a pragmatic view on policies concerned with outcomes. For an early assessment on Obama's pragmatism, see David Ignatius's article in the *Washington Post*, "The Pragmatic Obama: He's Shaping the Debate on Foreign Policy," retrieved from www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/22/AR20070822020400.html (accessed March 31, 2013).

189. Leonhardt wrote this piece in August of 2008 and has since written two more long pieces based on interviews with now-president Obama.

190. David Leonhardt, "After the Great Recession," *New York Times*, April 28, 2009, retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/magazine/03Obama-t.html?pagewanted=6 (accessed March 31, 2013).

191. Ninety-four percent of black voters and 67 percent of Latinos supported Obama. The latter vote was more crucial as almost all past Democratic candidates in the last elections received upwards of 88 percent support (e.g., John Kerry received 90 percent of the black vote in 2004). Furthermore, the Latino vote was decisive in the all-important battleground states such as Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Nevada. For superb data on the elections, see the report by conservative analyst Joseph Gimpel, "Latino Voting in the 2008 Election: Part of a Broader Electoral Movement," for the anti-immigrant Center For Immigration Studies, which can be located at www.cis.org/latinovoting (sometimes the data talks more loudly than the ideology of those who produce it).



"The (Color-Blind) Emperor Has No Clothes"

Exposing the Whiteness of Color Blindness

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, or it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

—Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*

"I thought racism died in the sixties? But you guys keep talking, and talking, and talking about racism. Please stop using racism as a crutch!"

"Don't you think the best way of dealing with America's racial problems is by not talking about them? By constantly talking about racism you guys add wood to the racial fire, which is almost extinguished!"

"Race is a myth, an invention, a socially constructed category. Therefore, we should not make it 'real' by using it in our analyses. People are people, not black, white, or Indian. White males are just people."¹

"A&M's tradition of focusing on race is a terrible mentality to teach a new generation. Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's book *White Supremacy & Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* is the latest evolution in this ritual that should have collapsed with the 1960s."²

"Is America's *main* problem still 'the color line' as W. E. B. DuBois put it 105 years ago? The very fact that the president is now black is a clear sign that it is no longer our *main* problem, and that we can, even as morally informed and socially concerned citizens, admit it."³