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The Obama We Need

The president should fulfill his promises of post-racial leadership.

By Abigail Thernstrom

Race consciousness is the enemy America seems unable to defeat — the enemy that has infiltrated almost every corner of American life. Even the Democrats' proposed health-care bill is laced with racial preferences.

The president and his policies, some hoped, would be above and beyond race. He would relieve Americans of their endless misery — their inability to escape the twin burdens of guilt and anger. He ran as “post-racial” — the not-Jesse candidate. Jackson, it should be recalled, won seven primaries and four caucuses in 1988, but was first and foremost America's black spokesman, despite his rainbow-coalition rhetoric.

Obama, on the other hand, would be the all-America president. “In the history of African-American politics in this country, there has always been some tension between speaking in universal terms and speaking in very race-specific terms about the plight of the African-American community,” he explained in an NPR campaign interview. “By virtue of my background, you know, I am more likely to speak in universal terms.”

He had struck the same note in his celebrated speech to the 2004 Democratic party convention. “There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America — there's the United States of America,” he had said. “We are one people.”

It was a politically winning strategy that, combined with his personal style, put voters at ease. He was, as his future running mate put it with typical Biden indiscretion, an “articulate and bright and clean and . . . nice-looking guy.”

Obama's beyond-race stance played well during the campaign, except when threatened by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. But there is no territory beyond race — as yet — and as president he is remarkably wobbly in dealing with the issue.

In his famous Philadelphia race speech in March 2008, he hit many of the right notes: Blacks must not “succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe they can write their own destiny.” And, working together, whites and blacks can “move beyond some of our old racial wounds.” And he hit, as well, many wrong notes: for instance, equating white resentment at racially preferential college admissions policies with the alienation and distrust that is rampant and poisonous in inner-city black communities.

It was a segregated speech, one half appealing to whites, the other half appealing to blacks. Obama knew full well that many members of the two groups were listening for quite separate messages — and that's precisely what he delivered. And now he's done it again, in a speech delivered to the NAACP centennial on July 16.

“We know that too many barriers still remain” blocking black achievement, he told the members of an organization that has elected as its chairman Julian Bond, a man who never wastes an opportunity to play the racial-grievance card. “African Americans are out of work more than just about anybody else — a gap that’s widening,” the president continued. “We know that even as we imprison more people of all races than any nation in the world, an African-American child is roughly five times as likely as a white child to see the inside of a prison.” Going forward, we need to “eradicate prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination among citizens of the United States. . . . Make no mistake: The pain of discrimination is still felt in America. By African-American women paid less for doing the same work as colleagues of a different color and a different gender.”

And so forth. But that was only half the speech.

After listing all his government programs that promise to solve all black problems, Obama added a big caveat: “Government programs alone,” he said, “won’t get our children to the Promised Land. We need a new mind set, a new set of attitudes. . . . We’ve got to say to our children, yes, if you’re African American, the odds of growing up amid crime and gangs are higher . . . but that’s not a reason to get bad grades, that’s not a reason to cut class. . . . Your destiny is in your hands — you cannot forget that. That’s what we have to teach all of our children. No excuses. No excuses. . . . Yes, government must be a force for opportunity. Yes, government must be a force for equality. But ultimately, if we are to be true to our past, then we also have to seize our own future, each and every day.”

Okay, that’s nice to hear from him. But as president, did he need to pander to the Julian Bond–infatuated audience — an audience that desperately needs to hear the “destiny in your hands” message? What would have happened had he turned into Bill Cosby or Juan Williams? What would have happened if he had turned presidential, that is?

I recently appeared on a black-run radio program based in North Carolina. The host was angry with the president, and asked, What is he doing for black America? I suggested that Obama did think the administration’s economic, health-care, and other policies were designed to help all Americans, including blacks. But my host insisted the president had to talk to blacks as a distinct people with distinct needs.

Old mindsets die hard. All the more reason for the president to become the “post-racial” voice his campaign promised, even if a “post-racial” America remains largely an aspiration.

— Abigail Thernstrom’s newest book, *Voting Rights — and Wrongs: The Elusive Quest for Racially Fair Elections*, was released last month. She is an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and vice-chair of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. National Review Online –

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