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Obama in Black & White

Candidate as inkblot.

By Abigail Thernstrom & Stephan Thernstrom

Barack Obama, as he made evident in his speech Thursday night, doesn't need to spend a penny of political capital making sure his black supporters are emotionally on board. There was barely a mention, even, of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial 45 years ago to the day. African Americans, whatever he said Thursday night, would have been incredibly moved by a black man who is clearly a plausible president — eloquent, graceful, in his demeanor seemingly prepared for the high responsibilities for which he seeks office.

Rep. John Lewis, originally a Hillary supporter, let tears roll down his face listening to Michelle Obama on Tuesday night, and, again, later in a network interview. "This is what we fought for. This is what we almost died for, and some did die for," he told a *Washington Post* reporter.

But in making a skilled and determined play for Reagan Democrats — as he did at Invesco Field — he won't, in fact, be on the same page as many black voters, if survey data are any guide. Perhaps there will be no political price to pay for ignoring those voters' priorities — for the moment. But down the road, if he were to be elected, it seems highly likely that either many of his black constituents will come to feel, no, this is not "what we fought for," or the rest of the public will be shocked and dismayed.

A *Washington Post*-ABC News poll out this week suggests blacks full of uncharacteristic optimism. "Do you think Obama's nomination for president represents progress for all blacks in America more generally," respondents were asked. Seventy-six percent of blacks said, yes, progress for all. "Does Obama's nomination as the first black presidential candidate made you more proud to be an American," sixty-four percent of blacks said it did.

But as recently as a year ago (with no reason to believe events have permanently transformed the views of respondents), polling data suggested a high number of blacks were deeply alienated from American society and profoundly distrustful of the white majority. That sense of grievance has led them to embrace a political agenda most whites reject.

Thus a NAACP report — "Public Opinion in Black and White: The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same" — described a "a great divide" between "how blacks and whites view specific policies and racial equality in general." The survey it commissioned (the results of which were reported in August 2007) found:

- Nearly three fourths of blacks believed that African Americans would either never achieve racial equality, or at least not in their lifetime. Less than a third of whites shared this sentiment.

- Two thirds of blacks felt the federal government should make reparations payments to the descendants of slaves. A mere 7 percent of whites approved agreed with this radical demand.
- A clear, strong majority of African Americans (80 percent) said that they would “likely” or “definitely” support a candidate who defends affirmative action, while less than half of whites held this view. And when “racial preferences” is substituted for the vague feel-good term “affirmative action,” an overwhelming majority of whites are opposed.

These stark differences in policy preferences reflect a gulf in perceptions about the nature of American society, as other survey data show. For instance, a 2003 Gallup Poll found that only 38 percent of African Americans believed they were treated “fairly” or “somewhat fairly” in our society today. For blacks who had attended college — those best equipped to take advantage of the opportunities opened up since the civil rights revolution — the figure was an even lower 26 percent. Three out of four whites, by contrast, believed that blacks were usually fairly treated.

Similar pessimism is apparent in black responses to a 2006 CNN survey. That poll found that 40 percent of African Americans believed that “many” or “almost all” white people dislike blacks. And in a *Washington Post*-Kaiser Foundation poll of black men conducted at the same time, half claimed to have been treated unfairly by the police, and a clear majority said the economic system is “stacked against blacks.” Sixty percent reported they often are the targets of racial slights or insults, two-thirds said they believe the courts are more likely to convict black men than whites, and a quarter claimed they have been physically threatened or attacked because they are black.

The overwhelming majority of blacks today clearly believe they live in a society that is fundamentally unfair to them — one that is systematically skewed in favor of whites. They may not agree with Reverend Jeremiah Wright’s wildest anti-American tirades, but alarmingly large numbers share this core perception with him. This despite the fact that white racial prejudice has declined enormously over the past half century, and African Americans have made a great deal of measurable progress on virtually every social and economic indicator.

On which side of the chasm between white and black perceptions does Obama stand? He’ll finesse the question, and take it off the table — if possible — before November 4. Nevertheless, it’s a ticking bomb that, if ignored, could deepen the already deep black alienation. Or, alternatively, if he signs on to the views of the Congressional Black Caucus, civil-rights groups, and most black voters, his grand racial alliance is likely to crumble.

Here’s a question, for instance, that could put him in a bit of a bind: Does he believe in reparations for slavery, one of Jesse Jackson’s principal demands in his presidential races in 1984 and 1988? In one of the early Democratic debates he flatly rejected the idea. More recently, though, he has been characteristically slippery, and has left the door at least a bit open.

He could easily close the door to reparations once and for all by stating his clear opposition to H.R. 40, Rep. John Conyers’s (D., Mich.) bill to fund a “study” of the question. If conducted as Mr. Conyers expects, such a study would undoubtedly call for a massive transfer of wealth to African Americans. Although it is hard to imagine a better test of whether an Obama presidency would lead to a “post racial” nation or ensnare us even deeper in the racial spoils system, his office refuses to answer queries on the subject. Indeed, Conyers told a reporter last year that he had not asked for Obama’s public endorsement of the bill because he didn’t want to “put him on the spot.” But he cannot indefinitely

ignore a bill that's coming up for a congressional vote.

His views on racially preferential affirmative action, the death penalty, ballots for convicted felons, and other race-related questions are also far from clear, but they all spell possible trouble ahead. He has spoken vaguely of restructuring affirmative action to make it available to economically disadvantaged whites, but is firmly opposed to anti-preference measures like California's Proposition 209, the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative, and the similar measures on the ballot in Colorado, Nebraska, and Oklahoma in November. At best, this amounts to a replay of Bill Clinton's fake "mend it, don't end it" policies. He does not overtly oppose the death penalty, as a majority of African Americans do, but in Illinois he worked to "reform" its administration to make it a dead letter in practice.

Does he see schools and housing as still "segregated" (a frequently reiterated NAACP charge), and if so, what policies does he propose to address these problems? Does he think whites today are unwilling to vote for black candidates because of racial prejudice (despite the millions of whites who casts their ballots for him), and that gerrymandered safe black districts are still needed to give African Americans political representation?

This is the dubious assumption the entire civil-rights community made in pushing for the reauthorization of the emergency provisions of the Voting Rights Act in 2006. Yet if he does agree with this, it is a pretty ironic position for a man who received — and hopes to earn again — millions of white votes.

Sen. Obama's words were very pretty Thursday — and reassuring. But if believes, as most African Americans do, that American society today is fundamentally warped by racism, he will appoint judges committed to race-conscious policies and propose a host of radical policies designed to promote "racial justice." Is endemic racism, in fact, the lens through which he views "the greatest country"? Today, he's a Rorschach inkblot; tomorrow, that inkblot may turn into a message — not so pretty and not so reassuring. To blacks or to whites, or perhaps to both.

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