



White America Lives in Vicious Racial Denial - The Obama Phenomenon Is Making It Worse

October, 03 2008

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Source: Black Agenda Report

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I'd like to suggest a different headline for USA Today's recent cover story on racial attitudes in the United States: "White America's Head Still Up Ass on Race: Obama Not Helping."

The "nation's newspaper's" story is titled "Beyond Black and White: Obama's Rise Spotlights Gains in Race Relations." It is based on a USA TODAY/ABC News/Columbia University poll of 1,941 adults (1032 blacks, 543 non-Hispanic whites, and 315 Hispanics) conducted between September 11 and 14, 2008 [1].

Below, I present some of the survey's not-so "beyond black and white" findings and reflect on the difference between the American racial terrain as it really is and how most whites see it.

WHITE AMERICA: RACIAL EQUALITY HAS BEEN ACHIEVED OR WILL BE SOON

By USA TODAY's findings, fully 39 percent of whites think blacks have achieved racial equality in the U.S. , compared to just 11 percent of blacks. Seventy-five percent of white Americans believe that "equality for blacks has been achieved already or will be achieved in the foreseeable future."

Reality Check: The current racial wealth gap is so bad that median black household wealth is equivalent to seven cents on the median white household dollar. Blacks get 56 cents on the white dollar when it comes to income. Black poverty and unemployment rates are more than double those of whites. Blacks are very disproportionately concentrated at the bottom of all the United States ' steep social and economic hierarchies. That is why 63 percent of blacks think that addressing poverty should be one of the next president's highest priorities, compared to just 38 percent (!) of whites.

The notion that blacks have achieved equality or are on the cusp of achieving it is preposterous. It is on par with thinking that $2 + 2 = 5$ or will soon.

DENYING THAT RACISM WOULD BE THE MAIN REASON FOR AN OBAMA DEFEAT

Just 5 percent of the 50 percent of whites surveyed who told USA TODAY that John McCain will win in November think that racism will be the main reason (blacks who think McCain will prevail cite racism as the leading factor).

Reality Check: If Obama loses next November, racism will not be the only reason but it will certainly be

the leading factor. Given the recent record and massive unpopularity of the Republican Party and the dangerous inadequacy of its stupid and vicious presidential ticket (its blustering militarist, misogynist, and moronic standard-bearer voted 90 percent of the time with the Worst President Ever and its hard right evangelical vice presidential nominee is an open imbecile), it is clear that a reasonably articulate and moderately inspiring white-male Democratic presidential candidate (a John Edwards minus affair) would be leading John McCain by at least 20 points and preparing for a landslide victory. Instead the candidates have been running close to even for most of the general election race.

A recent Yahoo/Associated Press/Stanford survey found that white prejudice is costing Obama six percentage points in national polls. Six points sounds low to those like me who are canvassing in the white, small-town field [2].

Consistent with my suspicions at least, the USA TODAY poll finds that whites prefer the atrocious, decrepit, miserable misogynist and war monger John McCain over the outwardly hyper-eloquent centrist Obama by 56 to 36 percent!

But even 6 points could be enough to de-rail Obama given the closely divided nature of the U.S. electorate. The last two presidential elections have essentially been statistical ties.

The GOP ticket is so malicious and dim-witted and the conjuncture is so poor for the Republicans that Obama may win anyway, but his margin of victory will be far below what a Caucasian Democratic candidate could reasonably expect.

BLAMING BLACKS, OPPOSING AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

By 56 to 29 percent, USA TODAY found, white Americans think that "lack of initiative" is a bigger factor than racism in producing black difficulties in the U.S. USA TODAY encapsulates dominant white sentiment on deepening black misery by providing the following quote from Caucasian retiree Tom McKenna, who lives in Aurora, Indiana: "You have a lot of [black] people who want something for nothing."

Consistent with the sentiment, USA TODAY found that 61 percent of white Americans reject affirmative action programs (supported by 76 percent of black Americans) that give preference to racial minorities in such areas as hiring, promotions, and college admissions. Consistent with that number, just 8 percent of whites, compared to 24 percent of blacks, think reparations for slavery should be a priority for the next U.S. president.

Reality Check: numerous studies and endless personal testimony and observation reveal the widespread, persistent, and ubiquitous presence and practice of anti-black institutional racism and cultural prejudice in the United States. Institutional racism remains deeply entrenched in how U.S. real estate and labor markets operate, how the U.S. education system functions, how home mortgages are marketed, how credit is extended, how the U.S. criminal justice system works, how economic development is directed, how health care is structured, and much more [3].

At the same time, numerous polls show that Black Americans strongly uphold the so-called "American work ethic" and very much prefer "work" (wage labor) over idleness and "welfare." Thanks to inherited, deeply entrenched and living historical forms of class-race discrimination and privilege, whites are much more likely than blacks to enjoy "something for nothing." Blacks exert inordinate amounts of "personal responsibility" just to keep their heads above water while many whites are free to exercise minimal or negative effort at little or no cost to their economic status.

If Tom McKenna wants to see Americans who "want something for nothing," he should visit any number of American universities. There he can witness masses of middle- and upper-class young white adults acting on the belief that they are entitled by birth to remunerative, high-status occupations without having to work hard or maintain basic personal decorum and decency, much less any sense of social responsibility.

I once stood in front of a Northern Illinois University lecture hall and heard sneering Caucasian collegians from Chicago's lily-white northwest suburbs instruct me on how "blacks'" supposed "bad culture" and "dysfunctional behavior" was the reason that tens of thousands of African-Americans were marooned in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina [4]. I received this counsel from derelict white students who could not bother to read simple and modest assignments in American History, who could not provide elementary identifications for historical personalities like Abe Lincoln, and who were often too hung-over to stay awake through sparkling presentations on the history of American Indian Removal, American Slavery, the American Revolution, the rise of early industrial capitalism, and the causes of the Civil War.

This sort of racial double standard - I give one example among thousands I have witnessed over many years - goes back to the deeply racist origins of British North America and the United States, founded largely on the basis of a slave system that continues to cast a powerful influence on contemporary U.S. "race relations." Most white Americans object strenuously to the idea that "past racial discrimination matters in the present." But, as anyone who examines capitalism in an honest way knows, what people get from the present and future so-called "free market" is very much about what and how much they bring to that market from the past. Supposedly "ancient" racism continues to exact a major cost on current-day black Americans, raising the question of whether unresolved historical inequity is really "past." Slavery and then Jim Crow segregation in the South and for that matter the open racial terrorism, discrimination and apartheid imposed on black northerners in places like Chicago and Detroit "long ago" continue to shape present-day racial inequality.

As Michael K. Brown and his colleagues note in their book *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*, racial "inequalities are cumulative, a fact adherents of the new public wisdom on race ignore in their rush to celebrate [racial] progress." Because the "inequalities accumulate over time," the authors argue, the distinction frequently made by "racial conservatives" between "past and present racism" is often inadequate and deceptive" [5].

OBAMA MAKING IT WORSE?

There is irony in the possibility that Obama will lose the election because of his color. As USA TODAY noted in its cover story, "Obama usually hasn't chosen to emphasize his race, focusing instead on winning over white voters critical in the Democratic primaries earlier this year and in general election Nov. 4."

That's an understatement. Obama has gone to great lengths to downplay his technical half-blackness and above all to distance himself from specifically black grievances and the supposedly obsolete notion that the U.S. continues to be deeply scarred by anti-black racism. In calling for Americans to put race aside in pursuit of shared solutions to social and economic problems, Obama's instantly famous Philadelphia Race Speech last March drastically low-balled the nation's racial disparities by saying that "race" is "a part of our union that we have yet to perfect." "Yet to perfect" was more than a bit mild in a nation where an shocking 1-to-11 black-to-white wealth gap afflicts black American households and one in three black males possess a felony record and blacks make up 12 percent of the population but nearly half of its more than 2 million prisoners. This statement was reminiscent of Obama's claim the previous March (in Selma Alabama 's historic Brown Chapel) that blacks had come "90 percent" of the way to equality in the U.S. [6].

The other disturbing aspect of Obama's Philadelphia speech was its portrayal of the racism that created his former pastor Jeremiah Wright and other black Americans' anger as a function mainly of "memories" of the past. This was profoundly misleading and insulting. and revealing. The racial oppression that angers Wright and many other black Americans, young and old, is more than an overhang from the bad old past.. Black resentment and bitterness is being generated within the U.S. by racist policies and practices in the present, not just the past. New "memories" of racial tyranny are being created right now, beneath the national self congratulation over white folks' readiness to vote for a certain kind of black presidential candidate. As Bill Fletcher noted, Obama spoke "as if Rev. Wright is stuck in a time warp," deleting the fact "that Rev. Wright's anger about the domestic and foreign policies of the USA

are well rooted - and documented - in the current reality of the USA ." [7].

Along his path to the presidential election, Obama has bent over backwards to align himself with mainstream white hostility to blacks who "carp" about racial disparities and (in black Left writer and activist Glen Ford's words) "to paint young Black men with the broad brush of irresponsibility" [8]. Obama has offered blacks nothing in the way of any specific anti-racist agenda, only the simply fact of his color. He has said nothing to address or avert the danger that his political success so far has given white America yet another chance to congratulate itself over its alleged and mythical transcendence of racism and to claim that blacks have only themselves to blame for whatever persistent racial inequality white America is still willing to acknowledge.

Here's a question USA TODAY might have asked: "Doesn't the rise of Barack Obama - the Obama phenomenon - show that white racism is no longer a serious obstacle to black advancement and racial equality and that blacks should therefore finally once and for all time stop complaining?"

Take your guess on the percentage of whites - including a number who will vote for the "good black" Obama while fearing and hating poor and "bad blacks" in their local communities - who would answer that question with a resounding "Yes, Yes, Yes!"

Obama has won the gratitude of millions of white Americans (Democrats as well as Republicans) for gladly (it works) playing along with their vicious racial denial and for refusing to call white America on the racist policies, practices, beliefs, and structures that live on beneath and beyond the carefully calibrated corporate-crafted colored-lights clash of candidate brands.

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NOTES

1. Susan Page and William Risher, "Beyond Black And White: Obama's Rise Spotlights Gains in Race Relations - and How Ethnicity Remains a Dividing Line on Some Issues," USA TODAY, September 23, 2008, pp. 1A, 8A. Note the soft language in the sub-title: "race relations," not "racism," and "ethnicity" in the place of the much sharper and more on-point reality of skin color - race.
2. Ron Fournier and Trevor Tompson, "Poll: Racial Views Steer Some Dems Away From Obama," Associated Press (reporting on a poll of 2,227 adults conducted Aug. 27 to Sep.5), read at http://news.yahoo.com/page/election-2008-political-pulse-obama-race;_ylt=AuUiy9V8FO8yifIVm.lfIJ12KY54.
3. For useful background and sources, see Paul Street, *Racial Oppression in the Global Metropolis: A Living Black Chicago History* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), Chapter 8 ("What's Racism Got to Do With It?") and Michael Brown et al., *Whitewashing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California-Berkeley Press, 2003).
4. For my first-hand real-time account, see Paul Street , "Race, Place, and Freedom: A Katrina Classroom Memoir," *Black Commentator* (April 6, 2006): www.blackcommentator.com/178/178_think_katrina_street.html, partly updated and contextualized in Street, *Racial Oppression*, pp. 159-160.
5. Brown et al., *Whitewashing Race*.
6. Barack Obama, "Selma Voting Rights Commemoration," March 4, 2007, read at www.barackobama.com/2007/03/04/selma_voting_rights_march_comm.php
7. See Bill Fletcher, "Obama Race Speech Analysis," *Black Commentator*, March 20, 2008), read at

www.blackcommentator.com/269/269_cover_obama_race_speech_analysis_ed_bd.html;
Paul Street, "Obama's Latest 'Beautiful Speech,'" ZNet Magazine, March 20, 2008, read at
<http://www.zcommunications.org/znet/viewArticle/16947>.

8. Glen Ford, "Deep Racism Revealed in Poll," Black Agenda Report (September 24, 2008), read at
http://www.blackagendareport.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=796&Itemid=1

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