

## Competitive Democracy Goes Far: Manipulation of Race

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By Arnold August, April 2012

In one of his presidential candidate speeches, having secured the Democratic nomination, Obama stated in a church address on Father's Day in 2008 that "too many fathers are also missing — missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men."<sup>1</sup> African-American writer and civil rights organizer Gray provides a frank analysis of this speech. It allows those of us who are not fully aware of the "codes" used and understood among African-Americans to have an inside perception of Obama's words. Gray compared this Obama speech with a 1992 campaign speech by Bill Clinton, who

tried to reassure whites that he wasn't too cozy with blacks by denouncing a rapper, [while] Obama was appealing to whites by condemning his own. Even so, I wasn't surprised to hear him referred [sic] to black men as "boys." Obama has often taken up to "playin' blacks." Playin' in black speak means to fool or use a person or persons. (George Bush's selling of a war on the Iraqi people to America is an example of that [which] readily comes to mind or — 'Bush played us a cheap' or 'he played us for fools.')

<sup>2</sup>

Gray provides other similar examples from the Obama campaign trail while noticing that, on the Father's Day speech, much of the media across the country headlined that

Obama tells black men to shape up or Obama calls black men irresponsible or he's saying things people don't want to hear.... "Playin' folk on any day is bad enough. But, as a father, grandfather and a black person, I see playin' black men on Father's Day as even more repulsive."<sup>3</sup>

African-American civil rights lawyer and author Michelle Alexander also noticed the Father's Day speech. Even though the Obama stereotyped message had been delivered previously by other African-American personalities, the event was treated as big news. This confirmed Gray's contention. Alexander goes further

and asks a very pertinent question by asserting that “the media did not ask — and Obama did not tell — where the missing fathers might be found.” She goes on to document how “thousands of black men have disappeared into prisons and jails, locked away for drug crimes that are largely ignored when committed by whites.” She has found that more African-American adults are in prison, jail, probation or parole than were slaves in pre-Civil War 1850; mass incarceration or the New Jim Crow is “a big part of the reason that a black child born today is less likely to be raised by both parents than a black child during slavery.” She cites Georgetown University Professor Michael Eric Dyson, author of several books on Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and well-known radio and TV commentator. He pointed out right after Obama’s Father’s Day speech, and based on research,

that black fathers not living at home are more likely to keep in contact with their children than fathers of any other ethnic or racial group.... Dyson chided Obama for evoking a black stereotype for political gain, pointing out that “Obama’s words may have been spoken to black folk, but were aimed at those whites still on the fence about whom to send to the White House.”<sup>4</sup>

However, Alexander remains firm in her conviction when she charges that even this TV-radio commentator and all the mainstream media (and, of course, Obama) remain silent on the crucial issue: “Not a word was said about prisons.”<sup>5</sup>

Obama’s well-known “Race Speech” supports this blind spot (March 18, 2008), in which he publicly disowns Reverend Jeremiah Wright. The candidate first creates the illusions that the correction to the “nation’s original sin of slavery was already embedded within our Constitution ... [that is,] equal citizenship under the law.”<sup>6</sup> In fact, however, it is slavery that is embedded in the Constitution, and not freedom. Furthermore, since the end of formal slavery, it continued by another name until World War II, as documented by Blackmon and cited in my book and other articles in this website. The heritage of slavery persists today in the form of the New Jim Crow mass incarceration, as argued irrefutably by Alexander. It perseveres through the effects on the right to vote, as detailed in the section entitled “Founding Fathers’ Heritage and Voter Turnout” in Chapter 2 of my book. Yet, Obama speaks of the “brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow” as characteristics of the past, while he leads into his theme of moving “beyond some of

our old racial wounds,” or the post-racial colour blindness that will supposedly come about with his election.<sup>7</sup>

Obama’s use of racist stereotypes, the promotion of illusions about the true legacy of slavery in the U.S. and the purportedly forthcoming demise of racism in America constitute conscious co-optation for individual ambitions. Obama’s views are what the “military–industrial complex” would like to have people believe. However, it is more disturbing coming from an African-American. Looking at it from another angle, the most important optic, only an African-American can get away with promoting these illusions with a certain level of credibility. This view is key because it explains how the U.S. two-party democracy has the built-in twin secrets to its success (to date): first, the capacity to co-opt, and second, the access to a small pool of individuals willing to fully play the role in exchange for becoming president of the U.S.

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<sup>1</sup> Político. 2008. “[Text of Obama’s Fatherhood Speech.](http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0608/11094.html)” (June 15). At <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0608/11094.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Gray, Kevin Alexander. 2008. “Waiting for Lightning to Strike: The Fundamentals of Black Politics.” *CounterPunch*. Petrolia, California, p. 241–42.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. NY: The New Press, p. 173–75.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Obama, Barack. 2009. “A More Perfect Union: ‘The Race Speech,’ March 18, 2008.” In Jaclyn Easton (ed.), *Inspire a Nation: Barack Obama’s Most Electrifying Speeches from Day One of His Campaign Through His Inauguration*. Publishing 180, p. 56.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 62.