

The International and Domestic Credibility Gap Facing Democracy in the U.S. Before the 2008 Presidential Elections

By Arnold August, October 2011

There were wide-scale concerns expressed regarding U.S. credibility in Egypt and Latin America. The U.S. approval rating polls in the last years of Bush were of concern. Gallup reported that, in Egypt in 2008, for example, only 6 percent reported positively to the question “Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of the United States?”¹ In Latin America, in 2006–08, the disapproval rating was only 30 percent, considered significant dissatisfaction by Gallup Poll standards.²

Domestically, the integrity and authority of the capitalist system is a source of distress. The Credibility Gap is most evident among African-Americans. The fissure is so wide given that it has its source in slavery and, later, in what one author thoroughly documents as “slavery by another name” from the Civil War to World War II.³ Given this deep crevice between reality and myth, “Credibility Gap” seems to be a term far too mild, a gross understatement. From slavery by another name up to World War II, a recent publication complements the above-mentioned book with a thorough investigation of mass incarceration of African-Americans. Michelle Alexander, an African-American civil rights advocate and Stanford (California) Law School professor, in one of the most impressive books on U.S. society and recent history that this author has ever read, brings the readers to the stark reality of African-Americans.⁴ Her thorough investigation deals with mass incarceration of African-Americans at present as the new Jim Crow. The latter refers to laws at the state and municipal levels enacted between 1876 and 1965 that allowed for de jure racial segregation in public facilities in the south while, in the north, segregation was de facto; the term “Jim Crow” originated as a nineteenth-century racist, pejorative word for an African-American. While economic concerns among the population in general, such as unemployment and poverty, are a major source of insecurity, the situation is magnified manifold among the African-American population. Taking into account mass incarceration of African-Americans as the main feature of Alexander’s volume, she writes:

No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.... One in three young

African-American men is currently under the control of the criminal justice system — in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole.... Poverty and unemployment statistics do not include people who are behind bars. Prisoners are literally erased from the nation's economic picture, leading standard estimates to underestimate the true jobless rate as much as 24 percentage points for less-educated black men.⁵

In 2007, a notorious case of racial discrimination took place against six African-American teenagers in Louisiana (known as the Jena 6). This resulted from the hanging of a noose from a tree in the high school courtyard. More than 10,000 people demonstrated in Jena in support of the falsely accused youth. Even the quite reserved and conservative civil rights leader, Reverend Al Sharpton, stated in Jena that “We’ve gone from plantations to penitentiaries.”⁶ There are many other examples to indicate that the situation was explosive among African-Americans at the time.

There are innumerable indications of apprehension concerning the incisive decline among African-Americans enlisting in the military. African-Americans not caught up in the incarceration system are seen as a target for recruitment in wars and other military adventures. Government agencies and major newspapers referred to military statistics and concerns, headlining that “Army Recruitment Goals Endangered as Percent of African-American Enlistees Declines”⁷ (2005), “Military Recruitment Sees Decline Among African-Americans” (2007). “Military Sees Big Decline in Black Enlistees.”⁸;⁹ In 2007, it was reported that the “Defense Department statistics show that the number of black enlistees has fallen more than 58% since fiscal year 2000.”

The concern stems from the fact that the military traditionally relies heavily on African-Americans, who, while they “make up only 16% of the same-age civilian population, in 2006 they represented about 22% of enlisted Army personnel.”¹⁰

Also on the domestic front, *Harper's Magazine* in 2008 inadvertently reflects the growing credibility gap among the working people regarding the system itself: “The financial debacles of the past decade ... have taught us ... that capitalists have done a remarkably poor job of safeguarding the future of capitalism.”¹¹ In the same sense, in addition to unintentionally exposing the real nature of the U.S. two-party competitive democracy, *U.S. News and World Report* wrote in 2008 regarding the candidates at the time (McCain, Hillary Clinton and Obama), “Big Government: It’s back — no matter who wins.” However, for the focus of this article on the Credibility Gap, what is revealing is

the need for the ruling circles to respond to the preoccupations of the people (or at least to give the impression to do so) in order to keep the lid on the pot, which threatens to boil over. Quoting from Yale University Political Science Professor Jacob S. Hacker, whose 2006 book won praise from Senator John Edwards, “as an important book for anyone concerned about the continuing vitality of the American dream,”^{12; 13; 14} the *U.S. News and World Report* feature quotes Hacker as standing in favour of universally recognizing the need for “big government” irrespective of being Democrat or Republican: “People are more worried about Big Insecurity than Big Government.”¹⁵

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- ¹ Marlar, Jenny. 2010. “U.S. Approval Gains Nearly Erased in Middle East/North Africa.” Gallup (September 30). At <<http://gallup.com/poll/143294/approval-gains-nearly-erased-middle-east-north-africa.aspx>>.
- ² Brown, Ian T. 2009. “U.S. Leadership, Obama Winning Favor in Latin America: Significantly More Approve of U.S. Leadership than in Previous Years.” Gallup (December 1). At <<http://gallup.com/poll/124514/leadership-obama-winning-favor-latin-america.aspx>>.
- ³ Blackmon, Douglas A. 2008. *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II*. NY: Doubleday.
- ⁴ Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. NY: The New Press.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 216.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 209.
- ⁷ Williams, Joseph, and Kevin Baron. 2007. “Military Sees Big Decline in Black Enlistees.” Boston Globe (October 7). At <http://boston.com/news/nation/washington/articles/2007/10/07/military_sees_big_decline_in_black_enlistees/>.
- ⁸ Segal, David R., and Mady Wechsler Segal. 2005. “Army Recruitment Goals Endangered as Percent of African American Enlistees Declines.” Population Reference Bureau (November). At <<http://prb.org/Articles/2005/ArmyRecruitmentGoalsEndangeredasPercentofAfricanAmericanEnlisteesDeclines.aspx>>.
- ⁹ Martin, Michel. 2007. “Military Recruitment Sees Decline Among African-Americans.” NPR (Transcript: July 16). At <<http://npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12001746>>.
- ¹⁰ Ross, Sherwood. 2008. “Pentagon Targets African-American and Hispanic Kids to Fight Its Wars: Third in a Three-Part Series.” LA Progressive (December 3). At <<http://laprogressive.com/war-and-peace/pentagon-targets-african-american-and-hispanic-kids-to-fight-its-wars-third-in-a-three-part-series/>>.
- ¹¹ *Harper’s Magazine*. 2008. “How to Save Capitalism: Fundamental Fixes for a Collapsing System.” (November), 317:1902, p. 35.

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- ¹² Hacker, Jacob S. 2006. *The Great Risk Shift: The Assault on American Jobs, Families, Health Care and Retirement — And How You Can Fight Back*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- ¹³ New America Foundation. n.d. “The Great Risk Shift: The Assault on American Jobs, Families, Health Care and Retirement — And How You Can Fight Back.” At http://newamerica.net/publications/books/the_great_risk_shift.
- ¹⁴ Pethokoulis, James. 2008. “Big Government, It’s Back — No Matter Who Wins.” *U.S. News and World Report* (April 21).
- ¹⁵ Ibid.