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Analysis: Wright imbroglio exposes fissures among black voters

Jonathan Tilove Religion News Service | May. 5, 2008

WASHINGTON -- Barack Obama?s presidential campaign, until now, has benefited from a strong undercurrent of black nationalism among African-American voters, a racial pride and solidarity that have swelled support and muffled criticism.

But his repudiation this week of his longtime pastor, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., may unleash a more open debate in the black community, where even some who back Obama worry that he is vague or evasive in his approach to race matters.

?In some ways it?s a cathartic moment for African-Americans whose voices had been silenced,? said Andra Gillespie, a political scientist at Emory University.

There is no reason to think Obama won?t continue to roll up huge margins among blacks in the remaining Democratic primary contests -- beginning with Tuesday?s (May 6) primaries in North Carolina and Indiana. And most attention to the renewed Wright imbroglio will focus on its impact among whites. But this time, the controversy plainly exposes fissures that the black community had papered over with the common purpose of Obama?s historic candidacy.

To many, Gillespie among them, Obama?s problem is that he has never made explicit what, beyond symbolism, his election would do for black America. Now, he is rejecting Wright?s racial agenda without having clearly articulated his own.

?The whole thing with Barack?s campaign is making all the other black leadership be on mute,? said Kevin Alexander Gray, an activist and writer in South Carolina. ?The idea is that black people should just shut up and accept him as the prize of racial advancement with nothing given in return except him being the president.?

In an essay on TheRoot.com [1] back in February, University of Chicago political scientist Michael Dawson wrote, ?It is supremely ironic that Barack Obama, the candidate who seeks to bury race as an issue in this campaign season, owes his overwhelming support among blacks to the continued power of black nationalism.?

Black nationalism, Dawson explained, refers to a way of thinking that ?takes race as the fundamental dividing line in the U.S.? and the ?primary determinant for making political judgments.?

It is a collective identity that can hold the most pessimistic view of the prospects for full equality. That pessimism can tumble into what -- to whites at any rate -- appears paranoid, as in Wright?s avowal that the American government is not beyond intentionally inflicting AIDS on the black community.

Black nationalism can manifest itself in attending the Million Man March or in cheering the acquittal of O.J. Simpson -- a reaction that Obama, in an interview with ABC?s ?Nightline? in March, said made him ?ashamed for my own community.?

Black nationalism can also find expression in places like Trinity United Church of Christ on Chicago?s South Side, where Wright built a huge congregation, including Obama, that identified itself as ?Unashamedly Black.?

And, to borrow from Dawson, there is no small irony that Obama came to national prominence with a speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention that took as its theme the denial of the core black nationalist understanding of the world.

?There is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America. There?s the United States of America.? Obama declared in the line that, more than any, came to embody his appeal.

Nonetheless, Dawson said, blacks rallied to Obama at the polls by margins the Rev. Jesse Jackson didn?t achieve until his second run for president in 1988.

When the Wright controversy first broke in a big way in March, Obama actually enhanced his standing in more race-conscious black circles by delivering a major address on race. Speaking at Philadelphia?s Constitution Hall, the candidate disassociated himself from Wright?s more inflammatory words, but said, ?I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community.?

Then Wright had a second coming.

In the past week, he stormed back onto center stage, fleshing out his views in an interview with Bill Moyers, in a speech before the Detroit NAACP and then, most provocatively, in a sardonic, in-your-face appearance April 28 at the National Press Club.

There he played to a wildly receptive black audience and played off the mostly white press corps in the balcony. It was a preening, mocking performance that Obama said only served to further caricature Wright.

Gray agreed that it wasn?t Wright?s finest hour. Still, he said, for many on the political left, Wright?s analyses of the war on drugs, American empire, white supremacy and Middle East policy remain compelling.

Consider Dave Calderon, a 42-year-old physical therapist from New York who describes himself as a Puerto Rican with a black father and a Jewish wife.

In an e-mail to members of the Harlem for Obama group on Obama?s official Web site, my.barackobama.com, Calderon lamented the unease and disillusionment he felt watching Obama denounce a man whose Press Club appearance Calderon found to be eloquent, intelligent and -- most of all -- truthful.

?How much does Obama have to disavow before `America? sees him as a viable candidate for president?? Calderon wondered to the group. ?And a question for the senator himself ... How much is it worth for him to be president??

In an interview, Calderon said this was not to say Obama would lose his support. Perhaps, he mused, ?I was idealizing the man too much.?

But his e-mail identified something else he said made him uncomfortable.

?Some supporters are so focused on the importance of Sen. Obama being the Democratic nominee for president,? Calderon wrote, ?that they want to gloss over any controversy, with the attitude being, `Let?s get him nominated, then in office, and after that we?ll deal with the issue of race.??

Indeed, ?There?s a lot of winking going on in the Obama campaign,? said Glenn Loury, a Brown University

economist who writes frequently about race.

Loury supports Clinton because, he said, Obama?s candidacy ?is a place where the racial contract is being negotiated and renegotiated,? and he simply doesn?t want to entrust Obama with that power.

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[1] http://TheRoot.com