

Race & Class: Obama Forgets Black Community

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WHAT I FOUND most striking about President Barack Obama's first "State of the Union" address before Congress on January 27 was what he didn't say. In his 70-minute speech on the economy as the first president of the United States of African heritage, I expected that Obama would highlight the special impact of the recession on Blacks.

The last Democratic president, Bill Clinton (once referred to as "the first Black president," even if this was initially a comedian's line), always spoke of the special concerns of African Americans — even when he didn't mean it. (Clinton, for example, adopted the conservatives' position, gutting the welfare system, which led to tens of thousands of poor African Americans losing their benefits.) Obama, however, decided not to mention the special problems of African Americans even in a situation where the blows of the Great Recession with its double digit unemployment are disproportionately hurting African Americans.

Obama talked instead about the "25 tax cuts" that his administration has already given to business (with more on the way). While saying his tax cuts did go to "95 percent of all Americans," he refused to note how discrimination is still alive and well, and its special impact on Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities.

Obama tells African Americans that the positive programs the government is working on will benefit equally all social groups. In other words, Obama accepts the conservatives' argument that by improving the situation for the "middle (and upper) class" in general, it will lift the poor, including African Americans — no need for special programs any more.

Thus he makes a proposal to add more money for education in rural and urban areas, which is good, but he doesn't deal with the inherent inequalities built into the market system. His populist attacks on big banks may play well but don't end discrimination, stop foreclosures or provide jobs.

Bottom line: Obama's speech was not in the tradition of Martin Luther King or Malcolm X. Booker T. Washington would have been proud. It was truly colorblind.

Who's Post-Racial?

A liberal Democratic pundit for MSNBC, Chris Matthews, said after president Obama's speech: "He is post-racial, by all appearances. I forgot he was Black tonight for an hour. You know, he's gone a long way to become a leader [!] of this country, and past so much history, in just a year or two. I

mean, it's something we don't even think about."

Who are the "we"? As Blair Kelley, an African-American associate professor at North Carolina State University put it after reading Matthews' comment:

"It's important for us to remember that everyone has a race. When you say we're going to transcend race, are white people called on to transcend their whiteness? When (Black people) transcend it, what do we become? Do we become white? Why would we have to stop being our race in order to solve a problem?"

Of course the point is obvious: To be Black is considered a handicap, especially if you are dark skinned.

Obama is fully aware of what he's doing when he doesn't mention race or racism. As someone who attended an African American church on the South Side of Chicago, listened to the weekly sermons of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright for years and knows his wife's working class family's origins, Obama decided that not talking about racial divisions, especially to Congress, is the "safe" way forward.

Instead, he advocates nonracial solutions aimed at lifting everyone up from one rung of the ladder to the next. It's not a new approach. And it will not work. Moreover, it is a false reading of race relations (even with the progress that has been achieved) where structural discrimination is at the root of racial tensions in the country.

It is an attempt to appeal to the right, with the expectation that the Black community will always back him no matter what. Yet the conservatives' political and economic agenda has no room for Obama. Their goal is to take back the government as the "tea baggers" openly proclaim, and put "one of their own" back in the White House.

The right is not just a party of "No." It firmly rejects special affirmative programs to help African Americans who have suffered from the legacy of slavery, legal discrimination, and institutional racism today.

The African-American community is Obama's strongest supporter and will never ever turn against him, no matter his policies. Because Obama and his team — especially his Black advisers — know this, they are letting African Americans down.

Obama is genuinely concerned about the sufferings of the Black community, but like all crossover Black elected officials who need the white vote to be in office, he downplays his "color" and the realities of racism. He even does so when speaking before mostly Black audiences.

Limits of Ethnic Black Nationalism

What also struck me about Obama's speech, and the responses to it, is both the solidarity and narrowness inherent in "Black nationalism." It is Black pride that explains the 80%+ support for Obama in the Black community.

But ethnic nationalism blinds critical thinking. Look at how the Black elites walk on egg shells when discussing what Obama does or does not do for the African American population. (In the 1960s and '70s we saw the same response when the first Black mayors were elected to office.)

What we have is a Black community "satisfied and proud" to have one of our own as the most powerful person in the country and the world, even if Obama gets little respect from the far right

that still challenges his birth certificate. It's why the criticisms, for the most part, tend to be polite when raised.

This sentimental "Black nationalism" is positive only in the sense of Black pride. But politically it indicates a weak awareness on how best to organize a campaign to pressure the government and employers to help the Black community acquire more jobs, get a better education and take on institutional discrimination. In some ways, we have taken one step forward and two back under a Black president.

Bob Herbert of The New York Times and Eugene Robinson of the Washington Post — two prominent African-American columnists — have called Obama and the administration out for failing to deal with the jobs issue and high unemployment as it impacts African Americans.

They are careful in how they criticize Obama and his failings because of the right wing attacks. Unfortunately, the end result of this concern among the educated elite (including leaders of the NAACP and the Congressional Black Caucus) is political inaction.

The failure of the Black leadership to push Obama and the government to act helps explain why the streets are empty of big protests, and why there hasn't been the revitalization of a new antiracist movement to respond to structural discrimination.

Many on the socialist left may consider the limitations of the nationalism of the oppressed as irrelevant or secondary to the issues of the rightwing attacks, two wars abroad and economic crisis at home. But Obama's failure to respond to the Black community, still his strongest base, reflects a deep political flaw.

Lack of leadership

Barack Obama's policies are more and more a reflection of the center of the two-party system (just as Clinton was a new "centrist"), even though the "tea baggers" of the far right see his presidency as illegitimate.

Blacks cannot achieve full equality under the false conservative theory that a rising tide lifts all racial groups equally. African Americans are still years behind whites in every economic field. The increase in education funding and opportunity will not change that without affirmative action and special steps being taken by the government, courts and employing class. The approach of Obama and his team (similar to that of Black conservatives) cannot solve the unique situation of working-class Blacks.

Obama's refusal to speak to this issue in the "State of the Union" is a setback to achieving full Black equality. The fact that the civil rights groups have not taken to the streets to demand jobs and other programs for the Black community lets the government and employers off the hook. The contradiction and oppression of "two Americas" is not yet a thing of the past.

Even President Johnson in the 1960s (the president who signed the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts) faced the Poor People's marches led by Martin Luther King Jr. King was assassinated in Memphis where he was supporting Black sanitation workers. He understood that legal equality alone would not lead to full equality. There must also be economic justice.

The Black Nationalism and identity politics of the past fought Jim Crow segregation and was progressive, militant and powerful because it took on legal and extralegal discrimination. Malcolm X

symbolized that anger and strength of the fight for “Black Power.”

What did the first year of the Obama presidency do for African Americans? He succeeded in giving hope to millions. But significantly, the end result is a demobilized community, one waiting for Obama instead of acting in our own self interests. The strategy, “Let’s not rock the boat as Obama carries out his agenda,” whether openly stated or not, is behind the lack of action.

Ethnic nationalism, in today’s context, by default helps advance the conservative viewpoint in the Black community. Narrow ethnic politics focuses on self help (e.g. as promoted by Bill Cosby) and not the reality of de facto discrimination.

The State of Black America

Obama’s speech to the country is a setback for the broader fight to end racism and white domination. It is simply not acceptable to say that it is okay that we have a Black president and “better him than a white guy like Bush.”

The political pundits focus on Obama’s tax cut proposals, war spending, plans to freeze certain programs and build nuclear power plants, and of course the Republicans’ obstructionism and resurgence.

I see Obama’s year one differently. What I see as decisive is the big failure to address the real problems of African Americans by a Black president who could make a difference today. What good is it being in the most powerful office and not using that power to advance the needs of the Black community and those who have suffered from racial discrimination?

The Black leadership and community should continue to salute and defend Obama’s legitimate election against the slanders of the right. But we must also press him to do what’s right.

We cannot accept his centrist “ethnic-less, class-less” solutions to end racism. African Americans — as we’ve done throughout history — need to press our demands aggressively on the government, Wall Street and the courts. Obama, like his predecessors, will respond to such agitation, or suffer the consequences.

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P.S.

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